# LEADERSHIP FOR CLOSING THE GAP

# Final report

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# Background

Responding to the national emphasis placed on improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners and reflecting the priorities of many school leaders, the National College (then NCSL) launched in 2008/09 an initiative on leadership for closing the gap. The original aims of the initiative were to:

> improve participants' leadership for closing the gap by increasing their capacity to act and their confidence and deepening their understanding of successful practice;
> demonstrate effective approaches to improving leadership for closing the gap; and
> 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 year 2 of the initiative, when more than 70 new groups joined the programme, making the total number of groups 142. They all developed their action plans, introduced closing the gap initiatives in their context, reviewed their work and reported on its outcomes. Each group received a grant from the National College to complete this work.

In June 2009 CUREE was commissioned by the National College to help develop a range of support for group leaders to enable groups to build an evidence base around effective leadership for closing gaps.

Support mechanisms which were made available to participating groups by the National College, its Regional Leaders and CUREE, included:

> Tools and pro formas (action plan, report etc);
> Regional and national events;
> Phone calls and visits from the Regional Leaders;
> Feedback on action plans;
> Resources on the website;
> Additional support and visit from the research team (11 'core' groups only); and
> Online seminars and hot seat discussions[1].

In June 2010, more than 90% of groups submitted the reports of their leadership for closing the gap work and its outcomes, which were synthesised in the current report. Where possible, the report findings were illustrated with the evidence collected by the research team through working with the 'core groups'.

The report is in five sections. Section one provides a descriptive map of all reports submitted by the groups supported by the National College through the Leadership for Closing the Gap programme. The map illustrates the contours of the groups' activities aimed at improving learner outcomes and indicates the types of impact they were linked to. Section two offers an analysis and synthesis of the leadership for closing the gap practices *across* the groups, whose reports (28 in total) were selected for in-depth data extraction. In section three we offer a discussion of our synthesis and explore

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

connections with the wider research evidence. Section four offers some tentative conclusions and implications for policy and for practice.  Finally, section five describes our method and includes references and short case studies of 11 groups.

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


# 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 their group, phase and background characteristics of their schools, location (local authority), stakeholders involved, extent to which schools and other agencies worked in partnership, nature of the gap they were trying to close, types of positive outcomes identified to-date and the evidence supporting them.

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 schools in group*

|            | N   | %    |
|------------|-----|------|
| 3 or less  | 72  | 55.8 |
| 4-7        | 42  | 32.5 |
| 8-11       | 14  | 10.8 |
| Unclear    | 1   | 0.8  |

The majority of the groups worked in small partnerships (up to 3) schools. Where only 1 school represented a partnership, they typically worked with one or more external agencies or were recently amalgamated i.e. had formerly comprised 2 or 3 schools.

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

*Table 2 Schools' background information*

|               | N   | %[2]  |
|---------------|-----|-------|
| High FSM      | 14  | 10.9  |
| High SEN      | 6   | 4.7   |
| High ESL/EAL  | 9   | 7     |

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[2] More than 1 option possible

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Area of social or economic deprivation | 39 | 30.2 |
| Other | 19 | 14.7 |
| None of the above | 9 | 7 |
| Not specified | 65 | 50.3 |

A significant minority of groups indicated that large numbers of their learners were disadvantaged (FSM, SEN, EAL or living in area of social and economic deprivation). 'Other' was selected to indicate local issues such as high mobility, high rate of teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, etc.

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

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

*Table 3 Phase*

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| 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 |

The majority of the participating colleagues were primary practitioners.

Twenty nine (22.5%) projects were cross-phase (EYFS/Primary, primary/secondary, EYFS/primary/secondary), which is reflected in colleagues' attention to transition issues.

*Table 4 Partnership working*

| | N | %[3] |
|---|---|---|
| Developed vision and approach together | 99 | 76.7 |
| Planned together | 95 | 73.6 |

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[3] More than 1 option possible

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Shared good practice and outcomes | 64 | 49.6 |
| Shared resources | 53 | 41.1 |
| Joint CPD | 43 | 33.3 |
| Joint delivery (staff and/or children from different schools working together) | 33 | 25.6 |
| One school cascaded previously developed approach to others | 4 | 3.1 |
| Other | 11 | 8.5 |

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 (interventions) and joint staff development programmes was less common. Reports were coded as 'other' when either no partnership work was present, i.e. only 1 school was involved, or when the degree to which the group worked in partnership was not clear.

*Table 5 Stakeholders involved*

| | N | %[4] |
|---|---|---|
| Learner | 105 | 81.4 |
| SLT | 93 | 72.1 |
| Headteacher | 92 | 71.3 |
| Class/subject teacher | 92 | 71.3 |
| Middle leaders | 66 | 51.1 |
| Parent | 52 | 40.3 |
| TA | 40 | 31 |
| LA advisor 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 |
| AST | 4 | 3.1 |

[4] More than 1 option possible

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Volunteer | 4 | 3.1 |
| Other | 39 | 30.2 |

Learners (81.4%), members of school senior leadership teams (72.1%), including headteachers (71.3%), and class/subject teachers (71.3%) were the main types of stakeholders involved in the project. Middle leaders (51.1%), parents (40.3%) and teaching/learning assistants (31%) were also involved in a large number of projects. Wider workforce colleagues and representatives from other agencies, were typically included as 'other' (30.2%)

*Table 6 Has a specific target group of young people been identified?*

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 60 | 46.5 |
| No | 69 | 53.5 |

Many of the groups, particularly those from cohort 1, tended to scale up their projects, i.e. transfer good practice linked to positive outcomes for vulnerable learners and make it available to all learners. This might help explain why, in the majority of cases, a target group of young people was not specified. This also tended to happen in schools serving particularly deprived areas: they often viewed most/all their learners as disadvantaged, e.g. for groups where 96% of children were below age related expectations in their speech and language development, 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 7 What precise problem(s) or issue(s) did the projects set out to tackle and how? What gap did they intend to close?*

| | N | %[5] |
|---|---|---|
| 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 of learners | 11 | 8.5 |
| ISV (in school variation) | 5 | 3.9 |
| Special educational needs | 4 | 3.1 |
| Ethnicity related issues | 3 | 2.3 |

[5] More than 1 option possible

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| EAL or ESL | 2 | 1.6 |
| Risk of falling into the NEET category | 1 | 0.77 |
| Other | 62 | 48.1 |
| Unclear | 12 | 9.3 |

Social and economic disadvantage, ethnicity and gender suggested in research[6] as primary indicators of possible disadvantage or risk of underachievement were the main coding criteria.

The majority of the groups (55.8%) chose underperformance as a focus of their project. Gender, social and emotional problems, SEN, EAL and ethnicity were typically additional foci, indicating the type of underperformance being tackled.

For 9.3% 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. 48.1% additional foci were classified as 'other'. Foci for projects appearing in this category included:

> learner wellbeing and self-esteem;
> learner engagement and motivation;
> attendance;
> transition between schools or key stages;
> involving  parents;
> language and communication in particular at EYFS;
> whole school development issues (curriculum development or embedding a new assessment approach, such as APP); and
> networking and CPD, e.g. activities planned to bring school staffs together, training for TAs.

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/programmes targeting revision and exam preparation;
> mentoring and coaching for students;
> transition events/programmes;
> language and literacy interventions such as guided talk/reading/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 development of learning resources, peer support, data collection);
> developing colleagues' leadership skills;
> staff development, including through coaching and observation;

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[6] Strand, S. (2010) Do some schools narrow the gap? Differential school effectiveness by ethnicity, gender, poverty and prior achievement. *School Effectiveness And School Improvement* 21 (3), 289 - 314

using APP and other assessment mechanisms; and

using ICT and media to increase student engagement and achievement.

*Table 8 Types of positive outcomes reported by groups*

| | | N | %[7] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leadership outcomes including leadership learning[8] | 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 of 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 |
| Learner outcomes | Improved learner motivation, engagement and enjoyment of learning | 64 | 49.6 |
| | Improved learner confidence and self-esteem | 33 | 25.6 |
| | Improved learner achievement in a particular area of learning | 31 | 24 |
| | Improved basic skills (esp. literacy, numeracy) | 20 | 15.5 |
| | Better attendance and behaviour | 12 | 9.3 |

Enhanced collaboration and communication between staff within and between partner schools and development of leadership skills were the two most frequently reported types of outcomes for leadership and wider school improvement. In terms of outcomes for children and young people, almost half (49.6%) of groups reported positive changes to learner motivation, engagement and

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[7] More than 1 option possible

[8] The subheadings are not mutually exclusive, e.g. 'use of data' can be seen as both leadership and staff outcome.

enjoyment of learning. Improved student confidence (25.6%) and academic progress in a particular area of learning (24%) were reported by about a quarter of the groups.

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

> better relationships: peer relationships between students, as well as the ones between students and staff, students and parents, parents and schools;
> richer and more stimulating learning environment;
> better staff understanding of student needs;
> bespoke teaching and learning;
> learners appropriately challenged;
> improved student wellbeing;
> students taking more ownership of their learning;
> development of student leadership skills; and
> reduction in racial incidents.

*Table 9 Types of evidence of impact collected by participating groups*

|  | N | %[9] |
|---|---|---|
| Student perceptions (surveys, focus groups, interviews) | 69 | 53.5 |
| Test/assessment data | 65 | 50.4 |
| Teacher/TA  assessment data | 60 | 46.5 |
| Staff reflections (e.g. learning journals or logs) and perception data | 59 | 45.7 |
| Meetings notes | 55 | 42.9 |
| Parental perceptions data | 42 | 32.6 |
| Observation data | 36 | 27.9 |
| Review or consultation outcomes | 29 | 22.5 |
| Photo | 28 | 21.7 |
| Video/audio | 15 | 11.6 |
| Other | 56 | 43.4 |

Groups generally reported using a good range of evidence. Student perceptions, assessment data, and staff reflections and/or perceptions were amongst those mentioned most frequently. Additional types of evidence, coded as 'other' included samples of children's work, attendance and behaviour

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[9] More than 1 option possible

records, wellbeing matrices and checklists, case studies, staff development resources (PPTs created for CPD events), etc.

*Table 10 Project types, according to the quality of the evidence and analysis process*

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Research (relevant evidence from different sources, most of which is project specific, evidence is triangulated, pre and post intervention comparison) | 14 | 10.9 |
| Evaluation (there are at least 2-3 kinds of evidence from different sources, some specifically developed/adapted for the project, attempts to track changes in leadership practice) | 60 | 46.5 |
| Monitoring (evidence is from 1-2 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 |

The majority of the projects evidenced their outcomes well, and in 10.9% of the projects the quality of data collection and analysis met criteria that might be applied to small scale academic research. Twelve projects (9.3%) were classified as 'description'. Commonly, they either did not indicate the types of evidence or the evidence did not immediately relate to the reported outcomes (e.g. learner performance data and expansion of distributed leadership).

# Section 2 Synthesis of evidence

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

> identify, through filtering, the reports where quality of evaluation, description of leadership and closing the gap approaches were good;
> complete in-depth data extractions of the identified reports; and
> synthesise 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 the in-depth data extractions. The findings emerging from the analysis and syntheses across the sample 28 reports are presented in this section.

## 2.1 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 foci;

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

The findings related to the last sub-question – quality of the outcomes – are presented separately in section 2.2.

## Clarifying aims and foci

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 foci, beyond simply "closing it":

The '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 National College project. This seems pragmatic and smart in respect of resources, however foci identified in this way tended to be broad, whole school and more likely to centre on raising attainment at the end of key stage 2 or GCSE. Children and young people identified through this approach belonged to large unsegmented groups, for example boys, or 'gifted and talented'.

Examples of foci identified in this way included:

raising standards and achievement across the school, with a focus on boys' writing;
addressing spelling and handwriting, which were identified as barriers to achieving level 4+; and
extending opportunities for gifted and talented learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The '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 their 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 whole year group or the whole school. Large groups of children and young people tended to be identified in these projects e.g. girls in key stage 2 maths.

Example of foci identified using this approach included:

coaching and team building exercises to raise aspirations;
developing a dance project linked to dialogic learning to raise the self esteem; and
motivation of pupils, a key focus being girls in maths, particularly targeting L5.

The 'needs analysis' approach

A third group of groups turned their attention to the specific needs of different groups of students to help them to 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 vulnerable to underachievement. They then worked with others; colleagues in the school, partnership and local authority; the children and young people themselves 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 students on whose learning they intended to focus.

Examples of foci identified using this approach included:

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; and

collaborating across two schools and with the community to raise attainment of Somali children and Pakistani girls in maths at key stage 2.

## 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, or steps, which were:

Consultation within the group

usually a meeting of school or project leaders within the group to pool their knowledge and ideas and decide on a suitable approach.

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 was established as a way of helping schools to focus their strategy for closing the gap between FSM and attainment.(Almondbury case study)

Consultation beyond the group

talking to a wider group of colleagues in partnership schools and sometimes children and young people and their families. Other professionals, especially from the local authority, were occasionally involved too.

Investigating approaches in use elsewhere

proprietary programmes e.g. for coaching or for learning support programmes especially in connection with reading featured here. Programmatic approaches developed by and in use in other schools were also 'checked out' for suitability by some groups.

Research

ranging from reading research articles to piloting, using observation and interviewing, to gathering evidence from practicing to the test and refining their approach.

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 out on 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 the first cohort student feedback, 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 case study)

Some groups moved faster than others towards making their decision i.e. 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 amongst key stakeholders including staff, students and parents. Other groups used the process to develop deeper relationships between partnership schools, for example by setting up visits to undertand 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 amongst teachers, middle and senior leaders in the school. Children and young people were involved as agents in some projects, as were familes, especially parents. A small number of projects also involved local authority personnel.

Two distinctive models capture the different arrangements that groups set up to lead their projects:

The leadership group model
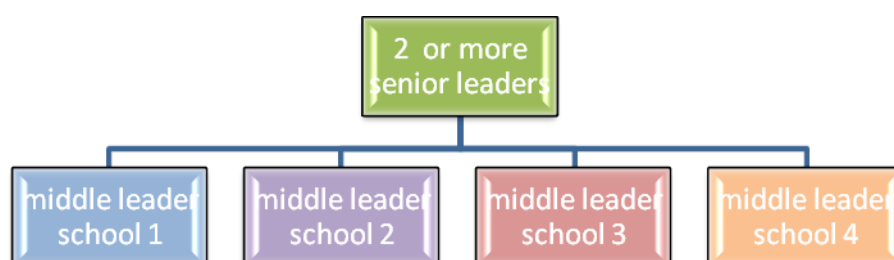


Groups adopting this approach, essentially replicated existing school leadership arrangements in their project by appointing representatives in each participating school, and making overall leadership of the project the responsibility of a small group. Most frequently this was two headteachers or deputy headteachers. Often these were the same pair or group who had made the initial application to take part in the National College programme.

The middle leader representatives in participating schools were usually nominated by their own headteacher or were a natural choice relevant to the focus of the project i.e. key stage or subject leaders, SENCO etc. Others were chosen because they had a leadership role in professional development as lead learners or coaches.

Middle leaders were responsible for involving their colleagues and students and their families in their own schools. Some group leaders also led the project in their own school. Others appointed from amongst their own middle leaders to undertake this role.

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:
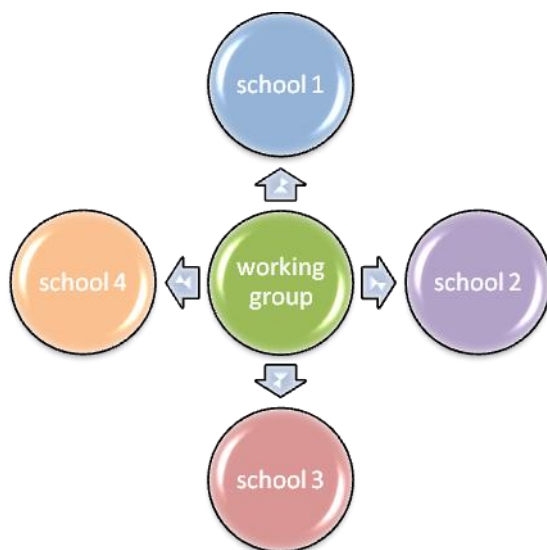
identifying groups for tracking and interventions;

identifying and implementing appropriate interventions;

monitoring pupils' performance through tracking; and

monitoring attitudes through pupil voice. (Blackpool case study)

The working group model



In partnerships with working groups, representatives, usually individuals or pairs, 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 for their context.

Participants in the working group were either nominated by their headteacher to take part, or volunteered on the basis of a general invitation to staff or a smaller group of 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 were 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 different materials were in use they were shared amongst partner schools; and

**Workshops**, for example where student work and other evidence from practice was shared and interpreted.

Group leaders identified a range of benefits, which they attributed to working in partnership with others. They said that partnership brought them:

specialist knowledge and expertise from other schools, from parents and from the local authority;

new and different ideas; and

critical friendship.

Some specifically 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."*

## Identifying and solving problems

As well as creating opportunities to raise achievement, unsurprisingly, tackling a challenging issue like closing the gap and working in partnership in order to achieve this occasionally threw up problems on the way. An important role of group leaders in the projects was to understand and then sort out problems as they arose. The following table summarises issues that group leaders highlighted as problematic for them and some of the solutions that they found:

| Problem identified | Solution(s) found |
|---|---|
| Motivating staff to get involved and change their practice | Providing 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 |
| | Providing a range of different ways for staff to engage with the |

| | project, noticing anyone who was struggling and providing extra support |
| | Involving staff in identifying target groups and selecting interventions |
|---|---|
| Attending to individual and group learning needs | Offering coaching for individuals alongside more generalised CPD opportunities |
| Differentiating the project approach for different school contexts | Choosing a big picture focus/intervention and then encouraging each school to adapt for their context |
| | Valuing a range of sources of evidence.  This was  especially important where agencies outside of school were involved |
| Keeping everyone involved in larger groups | Holding within school as well as between school meetings |
| Making suitable practical arrangements especially space and time for partnership working | Having an explicit project plan that made visible the problem and then engaging a wide range of people in finding solutions |
| | Ensuring good general communication so that staff are informed and up to date and to foster goodwill towards the project |
| Involving parents | Creating opportunities for parents to learn and work alongside their children in school on project activities |
| | Providing a range of different ways for parents to engage with the project, for example home visits and 1-1 meetings to build confidence |
| | Producing a project plan and online diary and sharing them with/explaining them to parents so they knew what was going on in the project and why |
| | Recruiting volunteer advocates from amongst parents to work in the community to secure involvement from hard to reach parents |
| Working within different school cultures and differences in leadership styles | Making 'learning about being in a partnership' an explicit strand of the project so that differences in approach were made visible and could be tackled and learned from as they arose |

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 fix it. Another group completed a risk analysis at the beginning of their project in which they identified all the things that could possibly go wrong and came up with contingency plans for responding if and when the things they predicted might happen, happened.

The vignettes below illustrate how some of the challenges were tackled by the case study groups.

The main leadership challenges for the Hillingdon Improvement Project were due to the nature of the group 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 to leading the group. To combat this, leading the group as a whole fell to the Hillingdon Improvement Partnership Leadership and Learning Programme. This leadership role mainly took the form of oversight of the project; making sure the group met regularly to discuss the project and progress so far. The challenge for the Hillingdon Improvement Partnership Leadership and Learning Programme has been to get the schools together at regular intervals, and to get the information needed from them to be able to put together all that was necessary for the NCSL and the Narrowing the Gap project. The individual schools were responsible for leading their own projects, and each had their own challenges. For most it was getting other members of staff involved in the project and delegating roles and responsibilities to them to ensure the project ran smoothly. All four schools had their deputy heads as leads in the project, so balancing workloads was another key area to keep on top of.(Hillingdon 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 the project, monitored the project, coached other project members, managed staff, and organised assessment every 6-8 weeks. The co-ordinators were identified by the group leaders in the individual school. For example in the group leader's school a recent 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 case study)

All four schools had similar problems, such as the presence in school of students who underachieved, students at risk of becoming de-motivated, the pressure to raise achievement overall, and the group leader felt the key to making progress was to identify and build on existing good practice. Key unifying points were that they all had experience of earlier efforts to raise attainment and overcome barriers to learning for vulnerable learners 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 case study)

## Providing leadership development and CPD

Many groups used leadership development and continuing professional development (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 closing the gap project. For example:

> programmes for middle leaders aspiring to become senior leaders including secondments to other partnership schools;
> workshops outlining skills required for various leadership, middle and senior, roles; and
> a partnership masters programme.

CPD opportunities on the other hand tended to focus much more on skills directly relevant to project aims and foci 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; and
> the use of phonics.

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

> workshops that focused on sharing existing practice;
> workshops that focused on developing new practice;
> peer and specialist observation; and
> peer and specialist coaching.

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

> a headteacher conducting classroom observations on relevant practice through learning walks; and
> assistant headteachers leading a partnership wide CPD day.

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

## Developing plans for roll out

Plans to roll out the project fell into 3 distinct categories.

Some groups aimed to transfer the new practice to:

> a wider group of schools, expanding the size of the partnership; or

between subject areas or departments within partnership schools e.g. science to maths, maths to English or similar.

A second group 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'; and
all children in a key stage or year group.

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 their project.

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

### Knowledge, skills and attributes for leading 'closing the gap'

Some group leaders reflected on leadership attributes, knowledge and skills which they felt helped them succeed in overcoming problems or were required of them generally whilst working on closing the gap. To surface these, individual group reports were coded using the framework developed by the National College as part of the Leading for Outcomes research project[10].

### *Attributes*

In almost 80% of sample reports, group leaders reflected on the leadership attributes required for successfully leading a closing the gap project. Half of these leaders felt that *moral purpose/values* were essential attributes for closing the gap. *Determination* was advocated by almost 20% of the colleagues. Qualities such as *credibility* and *rigor*, and *tenacity* were highlighted in one-two reports. Examples of some of these attributes (moral purpose and rigor) 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.'
'The monitoring process has been rigorous to ensure that all staff involved across the 4 schools were on track and were fully supported.'

### *Knowledge*

Three quarters of the sample groups identified specific leadership knowledge that was important in closing gaps in outcomes. The *knowledge of local needs* and *working understanding of effective practice on the front line* were important for eight groups (38% of those who indicated the types of leadership knowledge in their reports). The latter included knowledge and understanding of interventions (e.g. reading or mathematics support programmes) that could be implemented in order to close the identified gaps. The knowledge of *what constitutes an effective system, professional knowledge and knowledge of current thinking* and of *political context* were highlighted by two groups. Examples included:

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[10] REF

understanding of how mentoring should be approached in the secondary context
understanding of the importance of putting a business case forward in order to establish viability of the 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 the groups, e.g.:

'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'.

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

## 2.2 Leadership for closing the gap: outcomes

Groups collected impact data via:

> tracking student progress;
> interviews with different stakeholders;
> observations,;
> meeting and consultation notes;
> case studies;
> leader reflection logs; and
> photographs and video footage.

In each case, there were at least 2-3 kinds of evidence from different sources, some of which were specifically developed/adapted for the project.  Some groups made explicit attempts to track changes in leadership practice.

### Impact on learners

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 in achievement*

Eighteen groups (almost 64% of the sample, compared to 24% for the programme as a whole) noted improved performance of their students learning a) across the curriculum or b) in specific areas of learning including basic skills

a) Across the curriculum

Mentoring and coaching programmes for *secondary* students, which aimed at development of learner 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 they were

researching a topic for coursework.  "It makes them feel a bit special" said one leader, with reference to the students involved in the project.  In one school most of the students improved their attainment by one GCSE predicted grade over the year.  The students recognised the positive effects the coaching was having on them: "The project helps me across subjects - I now ask questions in English and science." (Swindon group case study)

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

> focusing on the whole child, i.e. their  needs of nutrition, safety and emotional well-being alongside teaching and learning, and increasing through inter-school collaboration the number of strategies in place to meet some of these 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 students 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; and
> developing context-based, integrated curriculum aimed at improving engagement and facilitating transition

b) In a specific area of learning, including basic skills

Groups involving primary schools reported improvement of their children's basic skills (literacy and numeracy):

 "In Kings Oak primary learning centre, the development of speaking and listening skills of 66% of children is on track, compared with 93% being below their age related expectations on entry. Their partner school reported almost 100% improvement in the FS children's development of language and communication skills, compared to last year's cohort". (Kings Oak 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 of 8 (APS).  The other school did not anticipate a major impact on attainment within the first year of the project; however most pupils did progress by 4 APS". (Parkfield case study)

Some of the interventions aimed at improvement of primary learners' basic skills included:

> introducing a mathletics[11] programme complemented by creation of additional learning opportunities at school and pupils' homes and provision of learning resources; and
> modelling good communication skills and helping students develop them during child initiated play and through trialling new approaches (such as *ECAT[12], Special Time,* and *Time*

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[11] Commercial programme aimed at increasing pupil engagement and progress in mathematics through use of ICT and fun activities. More detail available at: http://www.mathletics.co.uk/

*to Talk*) focused on speech, language and communication needs of individual and small groups of children, and key workers personalising children's learning.

Secondary groups' interventions 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 the 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 (e.g. see Hope Valley case study).

All leaders who focused on improving their student attainment in a specific area of curriculum reported accelerated learner progress, which was evidenced by pre- and post-intervention comparisons:

"Year 2 writing results at the beginning of the project indicated that 47% of boys were on track to achieve their expected outcome of level 2 compared to 87% of girls. The latest assessment shows that 80% 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 net closure of the gap between academic ability and actual performance of 7 units (where 1 unit is equivalent to a grade between target and actual attainment grade), for the sample of eight female year ten students. The mean grade closure across the group was 0.875 of a grade per student." (group leader)

### *Affective benefits*
Twenty out of 28 sample groups (71%) 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; and
> better relationships with peers and staff and other improvements in student wellbeing.

The interventions which 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)

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

pupil voice activities and students' involvement in the co-construction of their learning experiences;

involvement of parents (e.g. as partners in their child's learning) and members of the community; and

curriculum development work, including the offer of extra-curricular opportunities and those for learning outside the classroom.

Observation and perception data as well as various self-esteem and well-being, effort and attitude indicators and scales were used by the groups to evidence the reported outcomes, e.g.:

"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] PASS[13] surveys indicates that the project had a positive impact on measured aspects of pupils' attitudes towards self and school"

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

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

peer support, including mentoring;

Assessment for Learning and involving students in assessment (AfL);

philosophy for children;

students co-constructing and leading (some aspects of) projects (e.g. working on issues important to the local community and producing a physical outcome, such as planting an orchard); and

curriculum development, particularly at transition stages.

Group leaders commonly saw the development of skills, attitudes and other affective benefits described above as foundations of future/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 learners." (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*:

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[13] PASS – pupil attitudes to self and school – survey was tailor-made for the project

**Partnership/collaborative** work on closing gaps in outcomes

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

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

"By working across the different settings the group gained a shared understanding 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 a number of stakeholders and members of local communities and recognising the benefits of such work through the positive project experiences were identified by some groups, e.g.:

"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/focus** of the work, i.e. closing the gap

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

Bespoke teaching and learning – both 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 further reported that teachers became more innovative in their practice and deployed a wider range of strategies aimed at engaging and challenging learners.

Identification of learners' 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 about making use of this data, e.g.:

"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 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 learners' 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 the student - and the school - such as improved behaviour and attitude to learning.  (Swindon case study)

> **Processes for** designing and implementing closing the gap interventions, **participation** in general leadership activities

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 on-going and multilayered processes, such as project management, distributed leadership or support of colleagues' and own professional development.

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"

"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."

Finally, colleagues often identified **opportunities** amongst 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; and
> a wide range of stakeholders to get involved in leadership

### Wider school/partnership impact

More than half (57%) 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:

> putting in place new systems and mechanisms;

development of ethos and culture;
better relationships; and
improved parental involvement.

*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 2/3 transition policies and practices; and teaching and learning strategies (such as a 'whole school hand-writing model). In one instance, colleagues reported the creation of a pre-school (due to open in September 2010), that they hoped would benefit not only their whole school but also the local community, as an output of their closing the gap work.

A number of sample groups (around 15%) reported positive changes to their *school culture and ethos.* This was manifested through:

there being 'significantly more conversations about student's learning amongst the wider workforce';
'profile of vulnerable children being raised across the rest of the school/setting';
establishing 'learning dialogue between all parties', and
'breaking down barriers and culture change to become more collaborative and open learning communities'.

*Better relationships,* particularly between staff and students, schools and parents, and schools within a community, were reported by 15 % of the sample groups.

Working with *parents* was an important priority for many groups; 32% of the sample reported improvements in parental involvement and better home-school links, e.g.:

'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.'

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

'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 foci, improved their skills of writing.'

# Section 3 Discussion

## Closing the gap: definitions and evaluation of outcomes

In their final reports most leaders have 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 leadership that 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%) 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 learners. In some instances, colleagues were able to link the reasons for underachievement and disengagement with students' background characteristics, such as gender, socio-economic disadvantage and less frequently ethnicity; and define their target groups accordingly, e.g. *boys who underachieve in writing.*

Just over half of the groups (53.5%) tended to focus on 'improvement for all'. Three trends emerged from this. For some groups, particularly those located in the areas of socio-economic deprivation (30% of the groups), the project was about closing the gap between the outcomes for their learners and the national averages. For instance leaders of schools, where more than 90% of learners start their formal education with language and literacy skills that are significantly lower than their peers' from more advantaged backgrounds, prioritised a specific area of learning, often a basic skill such as literacy. They worked with a whole cohort of students rather than just their target group. In other cases, colleagues who originally found it difficult to prioritise some learners over others developed their understanding of the concept of closing the gap through 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 learners 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 students, transferring practice and learning across the curriculum (e.g. between different departments) or school (from working with a small group of children with behavioural difficulties to 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 students with a control group of students, through reports of better performance of target students compared with their predicted/expected 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 students in specific skills than to tightly 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 (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 highlighted that they expected to see further benefits of their work in years to come. Whole school changes included increased involvement of all staff in learning and development, better use of data, targeting teaching to individual learner needs and considerable improvements in learner motivation and engagement. These suggest that the prospects for leaders' hopes of achieving better outcomes for their disadvantaged young people are good.

## Leadership for closing the gap: relationship between the findings and the wider evidence base

Several areas of leadership activity were consistently present across the initiative. Data analysis and use were highlighted by many groups as a pre-requisite 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. Through participating in the Leadership for Narrowing the Gap initiative large numbers of leaders have recognised the importance of involving students, their parents and (less frequently) the wider community in school life and learning and identified ways of achieving this that were new in 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 through 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 with  the six areas identified in prior research and guidance (C4EO, 2009)[14] as important *specifically 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[15]

In most of the project partnerships developing and motivating the workforce featured strongly and was also strongly linked with activities focused on developing a learning culture. As can be seen from the discussion about definitions of gaps, the 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

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[14] Martin, K., Lord, P., White, R. and Atkinson, M. (2009). *Narrowing the Gap in Outcomes: Leadership* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER.
[15] Ibid

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 another area which a number of groups found challenging (see the above analysis of the complexity of prioritising a target group of students for some leaders). Increased and/or deeper *awareness* frequently became a leadership development outcome for many participating colleagues. At the other end of the spectrum, those partnerships who had good evidence about both leadership and positive student outcomes prioritised moral purpose/value/social justice over other values and demonstrated a sophisticated level of awareness that was embedded in all their actions.

*Acceptance* that they/the school can be both part of the problem and contribute to its solution was present in some leaders' work. Such groups started their projects from 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" was an important element for the most effective groups. Leadership and professional development were seen as 'key drivers' for changing practice and inked strongly with advocacy. This resonates strongly with the findings from Robinson's best evidence synthesis (2009) which recalculates the effects, for pupil and student outcomes, of the full range of leadership contributions. This large scale review of evidence, like the work of the project partnerships, highlights the importance of leaders' own enquiry based learning, the effects of that as a model for colleagues and leaders' knowledge about and leadership of their colleagues' learning. *Analysis*, understood as "using data and other information to create a high definition picture of how an issue manifests itself locally", was an essential element in most groups' work. Not only did colleagues highlight the importance of data in their work and report improvements in their skills of collecting and utilising data, they also extended the range of sources of data they used. In their attempts to unveil barriers to learning that were causing their students' 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[16] which demonstrated the positive impact of the leadership of assessing and exploring the impact of interventions on learners for driving forward learning outcomes (Cordingley *et al*, 2010).

*Action* which focused "directly on the target group and the issue" was at the forefront of the leaders' minds. The groups spent time exploring and clarifying their aims in order to select appropriate interventions. The groups which had tightly defined target groups and issues found it easier to track

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[16] Cordingley, P., Bell, M. and Isham, C. (2010, forthcoming) Professional practitioner use of research review: practitioner engagement in and/or with research.

the impact on students. Leaders felt that determination, rigor and tenacity were the qualities required of them 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 at individual learners' needs was a common thread in the groups' reports. The important role of CPD was again highlighted in this activity. The CPD activities frequently involved leaders in 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 central focus in those projects that focussed specifically on pupils with parents from socio-economic backgrounds. More frequently, partnerships and schools made efforts to build relationships with parents, especially those 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 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 was another strong aspect of partnership activities. In the key action phases project work understandably became more focussed 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 multi layered nature of effective responses to what are inevitably complex leadership challenges. Where these projects had evidence of both processes and significant progress by the end of a quite short period of development, school leaders had been able to mount both a single minded focus on the needs of a specific group and a broad 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 v=creating moral and practical benefits for the school community as a whole – as Yrio Engestrom (1999) puts it " without tension there is no learning " and 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 focussing in depth on the needs of the core group to focussing 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 of relevance to possible developments in the future: the pupil premium; increased autonomy of schools and the increased 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 the partnerships to close the gap. All of the approaches to identifying and framing the achievement gap problem could be supported by the creation of a pupil premium. This would have the potential to close the gap for individual pupils. There is therefore an opportunity for adding operational value to the impact of the premium if policy makers at every level in the system consider the way in which collaboration, leadership and alignment of the sort described in this report is used to ensure that the additional resources are effectively spent.

## 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 capacity to act and their confidence, and deepening their understanding of successful practice;
>   demonstrate effective approaches to improving leadership for closing the gap; and
>   share the outcomes with a wider audience.

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

>   clarify aims and foci;
>   select suitable interventions and ways of collecting impact data;
>   work in partnership; and
>   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.

## Increased engagement of schools with research and evidence

The initiative is also interesting in so far 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 limited number of the schools had data to demonstrate the impact of their interventions but by the second year the vast majority of the schools had this data. A number of support mechanisms facilitated the schools' engagement with research. These included the provision of research tools, face to face workshops and online seminars. School leaders and policy makers may wish to consider ways in which schools can be supported in their engagement with research activities, particularly how they develop mechanisms for collecting the appropriate evidence to monitor the impact of interventions on pupil learning.

# Section 5 Methodology

### Final report methods

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

Following subsequent 3 stage filtering, 28 reports were selected for in-depth data extractions. The filters were:

> quality of the evidence;
> quality of the description of leadership work; and
> explicit focus on closing the gap 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 foci;
> > select interventions;
> > select which leaders and staff to involve;
> > identify and overcome obstacles;
> > work with partners;
> > fare re outcomes; and
> > approach CPD.
> What were the leadership
> > attributes;
> > knowledge;
> > skills; and
> > strategies and actions.

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

### 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 of the visits, 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.

Review of the groups' own evidence of impact and any other relevant documentation supplemented the data synthesised in the case studies.

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