How do effective curriculum experiences contribute to narrowing achievement gaps for the most vulnerable children and young people?

QCDA PROBE 6 FINAL REPORT
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Introduction
This probe is the sixth in a series designed to illustrate and explore practice surrounding curriculum development in context. On this occasion we focus on how teachers, who are planning and enacting curriculum innovations, are able to design curriculum experiences that narrow gaps in outcomes for vulnerable learners.

The importance of exploring the curriculum experiences that narrow achievement gaps was, in the first instance, highlighted by the finding of the Year 2 staff survey about curriculum and its development, in which around half of the participants indicated that narrowing the gap was not an issue in their schools and a minority, including 10% of school leaders, did not have a definite view on the matter.

This seemed at odds with the national statistics and the nationwide focus on improving the outcomes of disadvantaged learners and suggested an area where making some illustrative links between curriculum developments in schools and the narrowing the gap agenda might be helpful to school practitioners.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that a broad and relevant curriculum, tailored to the needs of learners, can be one of the most effective ways of narrowing the gap for those who are vulnerable. There are also indications that an effective curriculum offer is linked to improved achievement of all learners, e.g.:

Of the schools inspected by Ofsted between 2005 and 2007, 1,663 had outstanding achievement and standards. Of these, 1,343 (81%) also had an outstanding curriculum. Only four (0.3%) had a curriculum which was less than good. In the same period, 4,391 schools were judged to have satisfactory achievement and standards. Of these, more than two-thirds also had a satisfactory curriculum, with only 12 (0.27%) having a curriculum that was outstanding.

This research project aimed to explore some effective curriculum development practices aimed at narrowing the gap in outcomes for vulnerable learners in primary and secondary contexts and to relate these examples of practice to wider evidence.

The report is in four sections. In section one a short description of each school is followed by an overview of the school’s approach to narrowing the gap through curriculum development. Section two offers an analysis and synthesis of the effective practices across the three schools. In section three we offer some conclusions, highlight challenges and suggest some tentative implications for policy and for practice. Finally, section four describes our method and includes references, and technical appendices.

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1 Conducted as part of the QCDA Building the Evidence Base project; available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/files/publication/1272027939/Staff%20Survey%20FINAL2.pdf
2 For example through government initiatives such as Narrowing the Gap (C4EO, 2009), the Extra mile (DCSF, 2008, 2009b and 2009c) and documents such as Breaking the link (DCSF, 2009d)
3 Deprivation and education (DCSF, 2009a); Ellis, E.S., Worthington., L. A. and Larkin, M.J. (1996) Research synthesis on effective teaching principles and the design of quality tools. Worthington National Centre to Improve the Tools of Educators; and the Extra mile (DCSF, 2009 b and 2009c)
Section 1: The case study schools and their approaches to curriculum development and narrowing the gap for vulnerable learners

In this section we provide an overview of the three case study schools. We describe their contexts and the challenges they face and offer insights into how they try to overcome such challenges through curriculum development and a variety of strategies aimed at narrowing gaps for vulnerable children and young people.

The schools were selected because they had of a track record of supporting vulnerable learners in achieving better outcomes. Further detailed scoping confirmed that their approaches to narrowing the gap were integrated into the curriculum. These schools are not therefore in any way representative, aside from the fact that they are in different parts of the country, serve different kinds of communities and address specific challenges to wellbeing and achievement.

Crown Hills Community College

Crown Hills Community College in Leicester is a mixed comprehensive secondary school for students aged 11-16, currently with 1215 students on roll. Nearly two thirds of the students are from Indian backgrounds and about half the students speak English as an additional language. According to Ofsted (2008), students at Crown Hills are able to ‘take good advantage of the planned and informal opportunities within the good curriculum to learn about other students’ cultures and backgrounds. This contributes to their good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’. The proportion of students eligible for free meals and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average. Crown Hills is on a gradual improvement trajectory with regards to attainment, the proportion of students achieving the equivalent of five or more GCSEs including English and mathematics has steadily increased in recent years. In 2009, 45% of students achieved this threshold, which was higher than the local authority average. The college is a specialist sports college and an associate training school and also has leading edge status.

The school’s approach to curriculum

The school’s approach to curriculum is centred on making it relevant and accessible to its students. In terms of the formal curriculum, at Key Stage 3 students take ten subject courses in mixed-ability groups including the Expressive Arts (Art, Dance, Drama and Music) and Life Skills (Careers, Citizenship and PSHE education). Key Stage 4 students take up to ten GCSEs (or equivalent), which may include BTECs in Performing Arts, Construction or Sport and a Diploma in Digital Applications (DiDA). Crown Hills’ Principal spoke of the importance of offering a mixture of academic and vocational subjects like this as a way of ‘responding to need’ for students at different levels. She also spoke of the importance of using the curriculum to ‘help them to believe in themselves’ and to raise their and their families’ expectations. The academic tutoring programme is one of a number of curriculum interventions taking place and is a useful example of how the school has moved on from the more commonly used school improvement strategies aimed at boosting the attainment of small groups of students to a more integrated approach to building the capacity of the school to innovate within the curriculum.

The school’s approach to narrowing the gap in outcomes

The academic tutoring programme for students is one of the key means by which Crown Hills is attempting to narrow the achievement gap for its disadvantaged students. The programme offers personalised support to vulnerable and underachieving students to enable them to access the curriculum and to explore cross curricular patterns in learning behaviours. It developed from a simple question about why their students from less advantaged homes and

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7 [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/id/100228](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/id/100228)
communities did not perform as well as students with similar prior attainment from more advantaged backgrounds. This led them to consider the depth and quality of the teacher-student learning relationships. They decided to invest in an academic tutoring programme in which students would experience a learning relationship with one member of staff marked by an increased level of challenge and support.

Positive feedback from students, their parents, guardians and carers and staff, as well as the improvement of the majority of target students’ GCSE results in comparison to their predicted grades, is indicative of the effectiveness of the programme for many students.

**Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre**

Kings Oak Primary\(^8\) is a learning centre for children aged 3 to 11 in a socially deprived area of Barnsley. The centre opened in 2005, following the closure of three schools. Currently the learning centre has over 350 children on roll, most of them of white British background. The proportion of children with disabilities and those entitled to free school meals is above the national average.

Many children (recent figures stand at 93%) enter the centre with lower levels of development than expected for their age. Despite the attainment at Key Stage 2 currently being slightly lower than the national averages, children make good progress during their time at Kings Oak (Ofsted, 2010\(^9\)). The school is particularly effective in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, whose progress is ‘outstanding’ (Ofsted, 2010) because they ‘receive regular high quality support in small groups and individually’.

**The school’s approach to curriculum**

Curriculum development in Kings Oak started about five years ago, when the learning centre opened as a result of an amalgamation of three smaller schools. There was a clear need to change a situation in which ‘children were not thinking’, ‘children were not applying their learning’ and 75% percent of learners were underachieving. The process ‘has been slow and is far from over’ (assistant head). The school’s leaders have sought to develop ‘a new skills based curriculum that nurtures creativity’, through which ‘pupils are motivated to learn and are clearly excited and enthusiastic’. Developing creativity, thinking skills, and learner independence are the key principles that underpin the curriculum in Kings Oak. The school leadership team are keen to build on their staff’s strengths and interests so even though these key principles are present across the school, they are emphasised and developed to varying degrees according to year group.

Year 4 practitioners, for example, focus on creativity. They work in collaboration with Creative Partnerships to develop schemes of work and support children’s learning and progress through an emphasis on creativity. Young people are increasingly involved in shaping and conceptualising the curriculum. One of the themes in year 4 curriculum – *Gadgets* – was selected in consultation with the learners. Children have an opportunity to decide what they want to do and how, and are involved in the evaluation of the curriculum initiative. Year 4 practitioners’ experience and expertise will then be shared with other staff and embedded across the school.

The Year 5 and 6 teams are currently working on developing higher order thinking skills (based on Bloom’s taxonomy\(^10\)) and encouraging independence in learning. The latter is supported through the ‘7Rs’ approach. It was

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\(^9\) [http://www.ofsted.biz/oxedu_reports/display/(id)/116088](http://www.ofsted.biz/oxedu_reports/display/(id)/116088)

developed in school and was based on staff reflection and interpretation of various skills development approaches, including thinking skills and Building Learning Power (BLP)\(^\text{11}\). The ‘7Rs’ approach focuses on ‘reflectivity, relationships, resilience, resourcefulness, risk taking, reasoning and responsibility’ which are present in teachers’ planning, day-to-day delivery of curriculum experiences and in the school environment (e.g. via posters in every classroom).

**The school’s approach to narrowing the gap in outcomes**

Kings Oak staff are passionate about offering their learners the same life chances as those from more affluent backgrounds. The school aims to be fully inclusive, has high aspirations for all learners and offers them the opportunities and support they require to achieve the best possible outcomes (Teaching and Learning policy).

Kings Oak has a whole school focus on language and literacy as a lever to enable all children to access the curriculum both in primary school and beyond. Many children enter Kings Oak without being able to speak in sentences or make eye contact with the person they are talking with. The school believes in the importance of early intervention, so has introduced a range of speaking and listening development strategies alongside intensive literacy work in the early years and foundation stage classrooms. These have been effective in significantly improving children’s language skills: as a result of speaking and listening activities 66% of children are on track by KS1 compared with 93% being below their age related expectations on entry.

Alongside constant attention to language development and literacy, children’s progress in different areas of the curriculum in KS1 and KS2 is monitored very closely. In addition a range of interventions is in place to support vulnerable learners, for example via additional, often one-to-one, support in mathematics, development of gross and fine motor skills, or for children with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

Kings Oak also aims to narrow gaps by increasing motivation and participation through creativity and thinking skills as well as through learning outside the classroom. These approaches are applied particularly at KS2, where low motivation and disengagement from learning can be one of the major reasons for underachievement.

**Priestmead Primary School**

Priestmead Primary school\(^\text{12}\) was created in January 2010 following the amalgamation of the First and Middle schools (now referred to as Lower and Upper schools respectively). The school currently still has a Year 7 but this will change from September 2010 when children will move to local secondary schools at the end of Year 6. Priestmead is located in the London borough of Harrow and serves over 700 children, aged 3 to 12. Almost 70% of children are from minority ethnic backgrounds and speak English as an additional language.

KS2 results in Priestmead are consistently above the national and local authority averages (94% English, 89% mathematics, 96% science in 2009). In its most recent Ofsted inspection Priestmead Middle school was rated as a good school with its curriculum being outstanding (Ofsted, 2007).

**The school’s approach to curriculum**

Following the amalgamation of the lower and upper schools earlier this year, the staff are working towards a consistent and coherent approach to curriculum design. The school is looking to make the most of the curriculum

\(^\text{11}\) Building Learning Power is a commercially-produced programme of activities and resources, based on research and development work led by Professor Guy Claxton. It is designed to engage students more actively in their own learning. BLP has at its heart four Rs: resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and reciprocity; skills and attributes that are developed through programme activities. For more detail see: [http://www.tloltd.co.uk/](http://www.tloltd.co.uk/)

development expertise in both schools and share best practice across the new school. Teaching and learning teams covering core curriculum areas, consist of key team members from both schools and are working on curriculum continuity and development.

Creativity in the curriculum is a common theme in both upper and lower schools. In the upper school, BLP is well embedded and used by all the staff to support children’s skills development. All year group teachers plan schemes of work and include BLP elements and objectives into each lesson. Thematic learning is often used in school to enable children to make links and develop skills across curriculum areas. Focus weeks on topics such as sport, food or fairtrade, also offer an opportunity to make connections with children’s diverse backgrounds through a variety of languages, e.g. ‘Football in Farsi’.

The school’s approach to narrowing the gap in outcomes
Priestmead Primary school has adopted a range of approaches to ensure all learners achieve high outcomes. Some initiatives, such as the development of speaking and thinking skills are aimed at all children across the school. Others are aimed at certain groups, for example children of particular ethnic background. Several years ago the school was alerted by the local authority and Ofsted that children of black and Afro-Caribbean background could be prone to underachievement. To support its learners, Priestmead primary school implemented a number of strategies, such as additional progress monitoring for specific groups of learners, curriculum development aimed at increasing its relevance to different groups of learners, parent/carer and community work. The school’s Somali club is a good example. It was created to engage parents and carers of Somali children and counteract some of the prevailing negative stereotypes about Somalia which were having a negative impact on the children. Somali children running an assembly for over three hundred other children and Somali parents and carers communicating with staff and getting involved with their children’s learning are just two of the positive outcomes of the club’s activity.

Finally, the school offers group and one-to-one interventions to support children in particular subject areas or skills. A range of reading, writing, mathematics sessions address children’s needs and support academic progress. In addition SEAL\(^{13}\), life skills and transition interventions are directed at young people with emotional and behaviour difficulties and support ‘whole person’ development.

**Section 2: Curriculum and narrowing the gap: emerging themes and approaches**
Research about narrowing the gap indicates that transition is a particularly critical time for vulnerable children and young people because they are:

- less likely to make successful transitions between Key Stages and schools, and are at risk of falling behind as a result;
- more likely than others to change school during a school year or Key Stage, and this can have a significant impact on their attainment;
- less likely to make informed decisions about subject choices and qualification routes\(^{14}\).

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\(^{13}\) This is SEAL wave 2 intervention, i.e. a targeted intervention for a small group of learners aiming to develop their social and emotional skills in order to assist them in overcoming emotional and behavioural barriers to learning. National strategies waves of intervention model [http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/41795](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/41795).

\(^{14}\) DCSF (2009a) *Deprivation and education*, p 68.
Some of the strategies adopted by schools reported (e.g. Evangelou, et al, 2008) to be effective in facilitating KS2 to KS3 transition include informing the children and their parents about the new environment and the rules and procedures in their prospective secondary school through booklets and talks; allowing Year 6 children to experience the secondary school environment through visits, taster days and joint social events between the schools; and sharing information between the schools, etc.\(^\text{15}\)

In our project we wanted to look at transition from the point of view of curriculum continuity and additional support mechanisms that exist for disadvantaged young people. Thus, the original focus of our project was on transition and related changes in curriculum experiences. Established practices aimed at facilitating transition between key stages was one of the criteria for selecting case study schools.

The case study schools had a range of strategies in place, supporting learners at transition from one key stage to another. These included:

- **Cross phase teaching and collaboration**
  The case study schools reported that practitioners from one key stage supporting work in the next or previous key stage was a common way of facilitating transition. In Kings Oak, for example, foundation stage practitioners worked alongside KS1 colleagues at the beginning of the academic year to help their children adjust to different teaching and learning styles and demands on them as learners. In Priestmead, children at KS2 had a chance to work with a secondary teacher (modern foreign languages) whilst still in primary school. Team teaching by practitioners from different key stages was used with a varying degree of regularity and frequency in both primary schools.

- **Aligning teaching and learning approaches**
  Creating curriculum continuity through project work was common at KS2 to KS3 transition: Year 6 and 7 learners worked in groups, were not set by prior attainment, directed their own learning and made decisions about when and how they worked on their project.

- **Links through a common/similar approach to curriculum development**
  In our case studies there were some similarities in approaches to curriculum development between feeder primary and secondary schools. This included, for example, embedding BLP and a skills-based curriculum in both phases to both facilitate transition for children and young people in terms of similarity of curriculum organisation and to help ensure progression in developing particular skills.

- **Aligning demands on students**
  This strategy was employed at both EYFS to KS1 and KS2 to KS3 transition points. It included qualitative changes to homework, challenging learners to take more responsibility for their learning and to be more independent around the school.

- **Establishing peer support mechanisms**

The case study schools recognised the importance of peer support at transition points, especially at transfer from primary to secondary school. Peer support was implemented in the schools through cross key stage buddy schemes.

- **Targeted and personalised transition for SEN learners**
  There was a focus on ensuring continuity of provision and support for children with special educational needs. For example, both primary schools had established practices where the staff discussed the needs of each individual child with practitioners who would work with the child at the next key stage to ensure appropriate support strategies were in place to maintain progress.

- **Transition interventions**
  In addition to the strategies described above, one of the primary schools – Priestmead – offered specific ‘transition’ intervention programmes to small groups of young people with emotional and behaviour difficulties.

While each had specific measures in place to facilitate transition, the case study schools emphasised that their work on narrowing the gap spanned all year groups and key stages. We therefore decided to investigate the schools’ approaches more broadly than originally planned but target transition classes in particular (EYFS to KS1, KS2 to KS3), in order to observe the breadth and depth of strategies used by the schools.

Narrowing the gap, defined as reducing the difference (or deficit) between the outcomes (or results) for a specific group and the outcomes for the whole range of children of which the group forms a part, involves tailoring responses to the nature of the gap (or gaps) in a particular school. Many learners fall into several groups identified through research as likely to make below average progress at school. In addition to learners made vulnerable through poverty and social class, ethnicity and gender, which have been identified as the major factors that can result in relative underachievement, those who are more likely to fall behind than others belong to groups such as:

- children in care;
- children with disabilities and children with special educational needs (SEN);
- children excluded from school;
- children with poor school attendance;
- young offenders;
- young carers;
- children living with ‘vulnerable adults’, e.g. those with alcohol or drug dependency;
- children not fluent in English; and
- children who are asylum seekers/refugees, etc.

Research evidence suggests that schools that adopt a holistic and joined up approach and deal with a range of obstacles holding vulnerable learners behind are more likely to be effective. This joined up, ‘whole child’ approach was present in all our case study schools even though we observed a variety of its individual manifestations.

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16 C4EO (2009), section 1.2
17 C4EO (2009), section 1.3
The differences in approaches adopted by the case study schools were a result of a mixture of factors, such as learners’ background (e.g. EAL or those on free school meals or with learning difficulties); the phase (primary or secondary); and school culture and development priorities. This was consistent with the wider knowledge base, e.g. the evidence collected by the School Standards Advisors, which became the foundations of the Extra Mile project. It suggested that it was important for schools to select one or two of the activities, most relevant for their context and likely to be embedded in their school, from a list of those known to make a difference to vulnerable young people. Some activities, such as providing support at transition points and broadening learners’ horizons, were identical for primary and secondary schools. Others were more phase specific. Ensuring breadth in curriculum experiences, for instance, featured amongst recommendations for both primary and secondary schools, but the focus in primary was on speaking and listening whilst in secondary on relevance of the curriculum to vulnerable students. Partnerships with parents and carers were recommended amongst particularly effective approaches during the primary phase; listening to students, promoting a culture of mutual respect and achievement, and high aspirations were advised in secondary.

This primary-secondary difference in strategies aimed at narrowing the gap emerged clearly in our project. Facilitating and supporting access to the curriculum was a common intention and thread uniting primary and secondary schools, but they approached it in different ways. Primary schools focused on basic skills, language and literacy in particular, whereas the secondary school understandably, given the age of their learners, looked at motivation and learning habits, increasing learners’ responsibility for and ownership of their learning, and improving their understanding of learning and assessment processes to enable them to access the curriculum and thus improve their outcomes and life chances.

At the same time, the schools worked hard to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning, engage (or re-engage) all children and young people, increase the variety of learning experiences and encourage active learning and participation.

Below we explore in detail each of the findings that emerged from the analysis of the evidence collected in the case study schools.

2.1 Supporting vulnerable learners’ access to the curriculum

2.1.1 ‘Whole child’, highly personalised approach

Our case study schools recognised that they needed to offer their vulnerable learners holistic support in order to reduce barriers to learning, facilitate access to the curriculum and ultimately help improve their outcomes. The coaching programme leader in Crown Hills explicitly argued for a ‘whole child’ approach, integrating the development of subject knowledge and building students’ organisational skills.

‘I don’t think it’s about middle class expectations. It’s about being as good as you can be as a person, isn’t it?’

(Programme leader, Crown Hills)

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19 The Extra Mile project was launched by the Department in 2008 and started with the investigation by School Standards Advisers into the common features of schools which have succeeded in narrowing the gap despite adverse circumstances. The results of the investigation were distilled into a guidance document. Selected secondary (Phase 1 and 2) and primary (phase 2) schools around the country were then supported through guidance and resources to adopt some of the activities identified by the research. The evaluation of the project is currently in progress. [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectId=15712&type=1&resultspage=1](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectId=15712&type=1&resultspage=1)

20 See the *Extra mile* primary and secondary (DCSF, 2009b and DCSF, 2009c)
Practitioners from Kings Oak and Priestmead articulated the importance of life skills, and helping children to articulate and manage their emotions as essential to their success at school and beyond.

Children’s social and emotional skills were developed through SEAL\textsuperscript{21} frameworks in both primary schools. In Kings Oak these were offered to all learners; in Priestmead wave 2 SEAL interventions formed part of the support programmes for children with behavioural and emotional difficulties.

Another element of this ‘whole person’ approach involved ‘life skills’ sessions in Priestmead. ‘Life skills’ was a group intervention programme developed in Priestmead and aimed at particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

\begin{quote}
Some of the children have never been shopping, for example. They don’t know what you can buy with 50p, they don’t understand the value of money. They didn’t know that they have to pass the item they want to purchase to the shop assistant to scan it. (Life skills teacher, Priestmead)
\end{quote}

Sessions took place every three weeks and typically lasted the whole afternoon. Topics ranged from money and finance, personal safety, healthy eating, to time and organising different activities throughout the day. There were a lot of practical activities, such as cooking food, and opportunities for experiential learning, e.g. going on trips such as going shopping when discussing money.

Primary and secondary school staff believed that the individual attention that children received during one-to-one and small group sessions helped vulnerable learners feel valued and was an important factor in raising their self-esteem and motivation to learn and do well.

\begin{quote}
I spend all my time boosting, bolstering, cajoling and convincing students of how fantastic they are. And that’s the secret of the success of it. I think if we take them as a deficit model then we’re never going to get to where we want to be. (Crown Hills programme leader)
\end{quote}

Interviewed children and young people highly valued and appreciated the personal attention and support. Secondary students, in particular, emphasised the importance of the learning relationship with their tutors. Two students from Crowns Hill illustrated their trust and approval of the quality of the learning relationships with their tutors through comments such as ‘being on my case the whole time’.

\subsection*{2.1.2 Primary: developing children’s language and literacy skills}

When describing their approach to narrowing the gap through equipping learners with basic skills in order to improve their access to the curriculum, colleagues in the primary case study schools listed several key aspects:

\begin{itemize}
\item Identifying learners with a low level of development of language and communication (and other basic) skills and putting appropriate support strategies in place as early as possible.
\item Working collaboratively, including across phases, to prioritise and support the development of learners’ language and literacy skills.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{21} SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme aims to develop children’s skills in ‘managing their feelings, working cooperatively in groups, motivating themselves and demonstrating resilience in the face of setbacks’ and helping them become effective learners (SEAL, National Strategies \url{http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal}).
• Consistent attention to developing children’s basic skills throughout their primary school career to ensure that positive outcomes of early interventions are sustained and that all learners’ skills continue to be appropriately developed.

The case study schools had systems in place ensuring a whole school focus on the development of language and literacy skills. Early interventions, particularly those in pre-school and during the early years and foundation stage, were seen as crucial.

In Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre, the early years foundation stage practitioners made the development of children’s speaking and listening skills their main priority – 93% of them were below their age related expectations on entry.

EYFS practitioners took a holistic approach to developing children’s skills. They modelled good communication and were relentless in challenging children to speak clearly and in sentences. They developed children’s speaking and listening skills not only during the formal literacy development sessions but all the time youngsters were in school. Practitioners had summarised their findings of learners’ communication ‘gaps’ and developed a set of ‘golden rules’ of good communication (such as listening when somebody else is talking) which were reinforced by pictures in a series of posters which were referred to regularly. Finally, the formal language and literacy sessions were run by all practitioners with small groups of children daily. The sessions differed every day of the week. A mix of different approaches (e.g. ‘Letters and Sounds’ or ECAT\(^{22}\)) was adopted by EYFS staff in order to offer a variety of activities and support learning and progress of all learners.

ECAT (‘every child a talker’) was one approach that was being piloted by the EYFS practitioners at Kings Oak. Some of the activities were familiar to staff as they were similar to activities from other schemes such as Letters and Sounds (rhyming activities, visual cards, stories about ‘Mr Tongue’ and learning to pronounce difficult sounds). Other activities were novel and motivated staff to reflect on their practice and develop it further. Teachers were encouraged for example to audit every area of the classroom for the frequency and type of communication.

In Priestmead, which has a very high proportion of children for whom English is an additional language (EAL), all learners were assessed by EAL practitioners on entry and their needs and background (such as the language spoken at home\(^{23}\)) were discussed with their parents or carers during an interview. Children who entered the school with poor or sometimes no English skills at all were offered additional support when they attended the ‘Rainbow room’ sessions. These were run by practitioners specialising in small group EAL sessions, where occasional translation could happen through peers or siblings, or practitioners themselves if they spoke the language in question. The ‘Rainbow team’ believed that working in small groups where children could see and celebrate their progress at every session was crucial for their success in acquiring language skills. The EAL practitioners stayed in close contact with classroom teachers to monitor collaboratively the children’s needs and development.

Collaboration and working together were frequently mentioned by all the primary school practitioners we interviewed. It took a variety of forms, such as team teaching, aligning approaches by classroom teachers and

\(^{22}\) 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

\(^{23}\) Children and their parents were consistently encouraged by Priestmead staff to use their first language at home alongside English, and connections with students’ diverse backgrounds, including multiple languages spoken at school, were frequently made across different areas of the curriculum.
colleagues leading specific interventions with children; and working with colleagues from different year groups and key stages to ensure continuity of support to vulnerable children.

Early years foundation stage practitioners from Kings Oak were particularly explicit about how collaboration was essential in their work on narrowing gaps in outcomes. Colleagues spoke of them all being collectively responsible for every child’s development through:

- practitioners supporting each other in collecting evidence (mainly through observation) about children’s progress that is recorded in their personal ‘learning journeys’;
- staff assessing and moderating children’s progress collectively and planning together to address any emerging needs; and
- rotating key workers every term to offer children an opportunity of working with different adults but also to ensure that children are supported by all EYFS practitioners.

Colleagues thought that this approach was further strengthened through the physical learning environment: the whole of the early years foundation stage was a free-flow area so staff took notice not only of the children they were working with but also those around them.

Building on the intensive language and literacy development programmes in EYFS, our case study schools then continued monitoring it at Key Stages 1 and 2 and had strategies in place to support the learners lacking basic skills to access the curriculum.

In Priestmead Upper school an EAL teacher worked alongside classroom teachers. Children were not taken out of the classroom for individual support (as was the case in Lower school) but received help from class and EAL teachers who team taught the whole class. Most children in KS2 were able to understand and express themselves in English reasonably well, so the emphasis of the EAL teacher’s work was on developing their vocabulary and pronunciation skills as well as supporting their writing (e.g. helping EAL children understand differences between homophones such as ‘there’ and ‘their’, and spell words appropriately).

Any primary children whose progress in language and literacy development caused concern at KS1 or KS2 were offered opportunities of one-to-one and small group support through relevant interventions.

In Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre such interventions were mainly one-to-one, lasted only 10-15 minutes and were very focused. The sessions were delivered by teaching assistants (TAs), who worked with classroom teachers to align their work with what was happening in mainstream lessons, and to ensure the consistency of support and continuity of learners’ progress. Some TAs had developed particular areas of expertise by working with specialists such as speech and language therapists.

When observing reading skills interventions in Kings Oak, we noted how skilful the TAs were at asking probing and challenging questions, making links to other curriculum areas and showing genuine interest in children. For example, a boy who was struggling to recognise and read words with ‘ow’ received a lot of praise when he finally managed it and was asked to come up with a sentence using ‘How’. He and the TA then discussed what a sentence was, how much money he had (his sentence was about money), in what ways he might get money at his age and solved a mathematical problem involving money. At the end of the short 15 minute session both the child and the TA
summarised what he had learnt that session and what he did particularly well, e.g. ‘You put a lot of expression in your reading’. They both obviously enjoyed the session and were very respectful of each other.

Similarly, the interventions observed in Priestmead were also focused on reading skills. During the session we observed, a teacher worked with a group of four children. Rather than basic word recognition skills we saw practiced in Kings Oak, the main objective here was on securing good understanding of the text, including reading ‘between the lines’. Again, skilful questioning was essential in challenging the children to go beyond their initially superficial understanding of the story and contextualise it for them:

*Why is Mum relying on her?*
*Why did she say ‘What chance have I got?’?*
*It says ‘Everyone was crying – well, mums were anyway.’ Do you think everyone was crying? Why?*
*(about double-decker buses) Do we have buses like these now? What are they called?*
*Is there a Paddington station now?*

The children's initial negative answers to the last two questions were a good indication of how well the teacher knew the limitations of the learners' background knowledge and also how useful the discussion was for improving their understanding of the context of the story.

2.1.3 Secondary: improving motivation, equipping students with learning habits and skills
In the secondary school the focus of narrowing the gap work was on study skills as the means of securing access to the curriculum.

The academic tutoring programme began five years ago as a short term, remedial personal tutoring intervention which aimed to help underachieving and vulnerable students to improve their GCSE grades. Since then, it has expanded to run throughout the year and encompass a broader range of students.

Students, selected for the intervention, were often highly unreflective about the impact of their low level of participation in class and the effect this had on their learning. They found many of the assessment frameworks and associated course work daunting and needed support in managing this. They lacked skills that would make them effective and independent learners, from speed reading and note taking to review and revision techniques.

The academic tutoring programme at Crown Hills aimed to:
- provide students with a detailed review of their progress;
- support them to manage their workload;
- get students to consider their lifestyle and its impact on their learning; and
- develop students' study skills and learning how to learn strategies.

The academic tutoring programme provided students with more in-depth and extensive reviews of themselves as learners and more holistic evaluation of their progress than could be provided by individual teachers within subject areas. The initial assessment and needs analysis, involving questionnaires with staff and students, helped tutors build individual learning plans with students. They were personalised and involved setting targets for revision, coursework and participation in classroom lessons across a range of curriculum areas.

To provide academic support, the Programme Leader had built up knowledge of syllabuses and marking schemes in many curriculum areas such as PE which was often chosen by underachieving boys who then struggled with its
theoretical content: ‘I took the PE syllabus and made it into a brain frame type thing. I made up lots of revision materials that were visual... they really liked that.’

Alongside providing curriculum support materials, the programme regularly used external expertise in the form of a motivational speaker, who worked on expanding students’ notions of learning and its uses. For example external trainers in brain-based learning worked with students on activities such as speed-reading and arithmetic drills, which had proved both popular and successful with students. Such reading recovery-based interventions were popular with boys who typically had struggled to get through long texts. Impressed by students’ sometimes dramatic improvements in achievement, staff outside the programme became increasingly interested in the strategies and techniques being used. This had started to influence the curriculum on offer within subject areas as staff incorporated similar techniques and strategies into their lesson plans, advice on study skills, and revision guidelines.

Apart from the improved GCSE results, which we highlighted earlier, Crown Hills staff saw some qualitative changes as a result of the programme. In particular, they spoke about changes in the school’s ethos, such as the development of effective learning habits and self-management skills which had become much more engrained for students throughout the school. Indeed, the Programme Leader felt that the cultural change in school could be summed up by her impression that ‘learning’s become cooler’ among students in general.

By highlighting the foreground approaches to narrowing the gap in primary and secondary schools we do not wish to indicate that specific foci (i.e. language and literacy in primary and study skills, learning habits, etc. in secondary) were observed or indeed effective solely in the respective phases. In fact, the opposite is true. For example, learning to learn and thinking skills were recognised as crucial for narrowing the gap in primary schools too. The development of skills such as learner resilience and reflectiveness24, and higher order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, analysis and problem solving, were on the curriculum agenda in both primary schools. Similarly, reading recovery interventions in the secondary school were indicative of the importance it placed on literacy as a key skill that helped learners access the curriculum and be successful at school and beyond. The phase differences described above related to changes in learner challenges and needs at different phases in their life: communication was seen as a crucial skill to master particularly during early years; in later years the focus moved on to refining specific subsets of skills or the application of communication skills to particular tasks and contexts.

2.2 Making curriculum experiences more relevant and engaging25

All the case study schools felt that making connections with the outside world was essential for engaging vulnerable young people and encouraging them to achieve as highly as possible. Teachers in the secondary school brought in outside experts and motivational speakers to broaden students’ understanding of learning and success. The primary schools invited local people to speak with children in order to make connections with the community and make learning more ‘real’. Visitors included a second world war veteran and a fire station officer (Priestmead).

Organising learning outside the classroom, be it trips, residential or vocational experiences, was a priority for the schools. For example, Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre made an explicit commitment of offering its learners, often from disadvantaged families, at least one educational visit every term.

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24 Building the learning power (BLP). BLP frameworks were embedded across the curriculum in both Kings Oak and the upper school at Priestmead
25 We explored the links between student engagement and the curriculum in one of the earlier probes of this series, available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/files/publication/1271161579/Probe%204%20FINAL%20from%20QCDA%20website.pdf
Both primary schools take learners on residentials during which the focus shifts from acquiring subject knowledge and skills to the development of personal and social skills, team work qualities and cross-curricular project work.

For children from Outer London Priestmead, a residential experience in Castleton in the Peak District provided a good contrast with their everyday environment: ‘Even having dinner is different: some of the children don’t ever have dinner at a table, for others taking plates away and washing them up is a new experience. You suddenly realise just how many different environments these children come from.’ (residential coordinator, Priestmead)

During the residential the children participated in a range of activities that require them to apply their current knowledge and skills in real contexts. One such activity, ‘River Study’, included getting into the river, looking at the flow, doing measurements and talking through the process. Learning to work collaboratively was one of the main objectives of the residential:

_We don’t do reading and writing, instead we rely on experiences. PSHE education is one of the main foci: they learn how to build relationships with people when they are away from their parents, they learn how to talk to one another, how to cooperate._’ (residential coordinator, Priestmead)

The development of teamwork skills was supported by giving children an opportunity to work in different groups. Whilst bedrooms were allocated on a friendship basis, during all activities learners were grouped by the teacher in order to develop different skills and understandings. Children found themselves at times in a group with peers they were familiar with and at other times with children from different classes.

Constantly challenging the children – both cognitively (working in teams on ‘How not to break an egg when throwing it from a certain height’) and physically (climbing a steep and slippery hill) – helped them realise that to succeed they have to communicate and work together effectively. The learning was reinforced through ‘circle time’ sessions once they returned to school, during which the children reflected on what they had learnt and generally evaluated their residential experience.

The need to challenge students was also a strong feature of the Crown Hills’ approach. Based on their detailed knowledge of young people and their needs, the tutors were able to identify truly challenging targets for the learners. This then prompted other colleagues across the curriculum to adjust their target setting and align it with the students’ zone of proximal development.

In Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre residentials were seen as an opportunity for children to get involved in curriculum design and shape their own learning. The staff’s role was to identify the aim of the next residential – to support the development of children’s enterprise skills and understanding. Next, the young people got involved in the planning of their future experience: they worked with teachers to agree on the foci, form and type of the activities that would help achieve the aims and objectives and at the same time be interesting and meaningful to children.

Increasingly, a similar approach has been adopted in Kings Oak’s mainstream curriculum. The Year 6 teacher spoke about developing children’s ownership of their learning and taking responsibility for it: ‘it’s about giving them the freedom to take the topic where they want to’. Teachers invited learners to come up with questions they wanted to

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26 The ‘zone of proximal development’ according to Lev Vygotsky (2003) is a way of thinking about the next steps that a learner can take with help, that they would be unable to take alone. It is a theory that informs the practice of ‘scaffolding’ learning. See GTC (2003) Social interaction as a means of constructing learning: The impact of Lev Vygotsky’s ideas on teaching and learning. RfT. London: GTC. Accessible at: [www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/vygotsky1203/20](http://www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/vygotsky1203/20)
research or things they wanted to learn about e.g. within the themes ‘Tudors’ or ‘Winter Olympics in Vancouver’. Teachers from Years 5 and 6 then collected all the questions and identified the common themes which were then used to define the range and content of learning. The staff were open about the difficulty such an approach created for them: ‘The uncertainty is a bit nerve-racking. We tried to predict what they might want to learn but even then we only had two weeks of planning in place, the rest had to be done weekly.’ The staff recognised it was worth the effort though: they were very impressed with the excitement and ‘buzz’ about learning that this approach generated amongst students, highlighting that those children who tended to be disengaged responded particularly well.

A teacher from Kings Oak described her strategy of narrowing the gap through engaging and active curriculum tasks in the following terms: ‘It all comes down to activities. Many of our kids get easily distracted, so hands on practical activities are great for them. For others it all depends on who they are working with in groups. I constantly look for what inspires them and motivates them.’

Similarly, Crown Hills’ principal linked access to a variety of academic and vocational curriculum opportunities with student motivation and engagement.

In Priestmead, the content of various curriculum areas such as literacy, music, history was adapted to reflect the cultural diversity of the school and thus make it more relevant to the learners. Introducing lessons with themes such as ‘Black people in Tudor and Victorian times’ helped to increase the involvement of Black and Afro-Caribbean children who used to be an underachieving group in Priestmead.

2.3 Assessment and monitoring children and young people’s progress

Using data to monitor progress and identify the needs of learners at individual, group and cohort level was emphasised by our case study schools as a prerequisite for narrowing the gap.

A mix of various methods was used in all three case study schools when it came to identification of vulnerable learners. In Crown Hills, for example, these would include referrals from Heads of Year, observations of lessons by the project team, questionnaires with staff and students, and assessment data. Both primary schools relied on a combination of the attainment and progress monitoring data and class teachers’ expertise in identifying learners who require some form of support. On entry into primary school initial assessment was supplemented by finding out more about a child’s background and pre-school development through questionnaires for parents to complete (Kings Oak) or direct interviews with parents and carers (Priestmead). The primary schools have some experience of involving parents and carers in tracking their children’s progress (e.g. children discussing their BLP targets with parents or carers in Priestmead), however both Kings Oak and Priestmead see this as a development area.

The identification of (potentially) underachieving and vulnerable children and young people was twofold and iterative.

All assessment data was centrally monitored using specialist software such as itrack27 (Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre) or SIMS Assessment28 (Priestmead) and allowed the school senior leadership team to identify children who were not making progress. In addition to monitoring the progress of the student population as a whole, school leaders tracked particular groups of learners known to be prone to underachievement, using criteria such as gender, FSM, SEN, ethnicity, etc or any particular intervention group: ‘I can look at the Black Afro Caribbean children or summer born boys or any other groups of children we are particularly tracking’ (assistant head, Priestmead, where different

27 itrack Primary is a web-based, commercially available application for monitoring primary learners’ progress.
http://www.lcp.co.uk/management/tracking-pupil-progress/itrack/

28
groups of EAL learners, e.g. Hindu or Somali were monitored separately). They then worked with classroom teachers to discuss possible reasons for underachievement and identify ways of supporting each learner. Similar practice was adopted at Crown Hills where tutors where involved in needs analysis and target setting, working increasingly closely with relevant subject teachers across the curriculum.

At the same time, classroom teachers and members of the SLT used their professional judgement to spot any issues, be they behavioural, emotional, motivational, learning skills or achievement related, and call on additional support for a particular learner. In Crown Hills, teachers’ perspectives were collected in a more formal and standardised way. In order to identify vulnerable and underachieving students, teachers were asked to complete questionnaires regarding students and their behaviour patterns.

The importance of what teachers know about children and their progress was recognised by all teaching staff and school leaders, who emphasised its role in providing a balanced account of children’s development and complementing ‘raw data’. All the case study schools were actively working on capturing this knowledge alongside progress tracking assessment data in a centralised way. For example, this involved entering teacher comments against children’s marks or levels of achievement into various track sheets or hyper linking the assessment data to relevant learners’ details (Priestmead, Kings Oak).

Priestmead Primary School linked its monitoring and assessment processes with assessing pupils’ progress (APP) approach in order to ‘track teacher assessment records and see a child’s progression through school life.’

In Priestmead, APP in writing and mathematics has been trialled at KS2 for most learners and is currently being piloted in reading. In Kings Oak the process was less smooth and perceived as time consuming and fairly complicated. The school leadership team is looking into providing additional training for its staff and deploying TAs to support teachers, for example, in collecting evidence.

Despite some concerns over the amount of time and level of training that APP requires, all primary practitioners were convinced that, when fully embedded in their schools, APP would provide an effective and rigorous process for assessment and progress tracking.

‘We are only doing a limited number this year; it’ll obviously get wider as people get familiar with APP grids and they become second nature’ (assistant head, Priestmead)

APP was seen by teachers and school leadership to have several benefits, including:

- involving learners in identifying their targets (through ‘I can’ statements);
- being very specific about their progress in particular skills; and
- being able to track learners’ progress through their school career.

In addition, Kings Oak colleagues thought APP offered continuity from the EYFS assessment in the way it backed up teachers’ assessment based on evidence moving away from an over-reliance on tests.

Assessment and tracking data was used by the case study schools as the basis of a discussion (typically termly) about the progress of all learners as well as particular groups of learners. Teachers also used the outcomes to assess the

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29 Known in Kings Oak learning centre as ‘learning journeys’, they contain records of observations, photographs, samples of work, etc taken at regular intervals and covering the six areas of EYFS curriculum.
effectiveness of their teaching and learning strategies and to reflect on their own practice and need for professional learning and development.

Section 3: Discussions and implications for policy and practice
In the case study schools we found that approaches to narrowing the gap in outcomes for vulnerable young people shared some important features.

Identification of vulnerable students and the skills they lacked to access the curriculum and achieve
Comprehensive learner assessment on entry allowed schools to identify gaps and issues that presented immediate barriers to curriculum access. This then continued as regular monitoring of progress of all learners and their particular groups, intensified when there was a risk of underachievement. Case study school staff employed their professional expertise and knowledge of the learners to complement the school progress monitoring systems in identifying those in need of support.

Our case study schools went beyond immediately obvious gaps, such as basic language and literacy skills, and looked at a range of skills their learners needed to develop in order to achieve and do well. These included, for example, study skills in the secondary school, and social and emotional skills in the primary ones.

Offering individual/group interventions and other support mechanisms to narrow gaps in outcomes
Support offered to vulnerable learners took a range of forms: coaching and mentoring programmes, catch-up and skills based interventions which were delivered by teachers, support staff or external specialists (such as speech and language specialists). The importance of early interventions was emphasised by the primary schools, where a lot of work was happening during the EYFS stage.

The case study schools carefully considered when it was most beneficial to take children out of the classroom for a short focused session aimed at supporting their basic skills development and when to provide additional support in the classroom, by deploying teaching assistants or through team teaching. Choice of either an individual or a group form of intervention was considered equally carefully and was primarily based on the characteristics of individual learners and the needs that needed to be addressed.

Increasing student motivation to learn and succeed
The case study schools recognised that lack of engagement and motivation was often the main reason for underachievement for many of their learners. Some of the strategies in which they tackled this included:

- broadening the range of curriculum opportunities by offering vocational opportunities, out-of-the-classroom learning experiences and inviting interesting people, such as a war veteran or a motivational speaker;
- enhancing classroom practice through, for example, embedding thinking skills or assessment for learning (AFL) approaches;
- setting challenging curriculum tasks; and
- increasing student ownership of their learning by involving them in discussions about what they would want to learn and how.
Providing support through positive learning relationships

"Somebody [being] on my case all the time" appeared to be important to all vulnerable learners who participated in our study. It created the conditions and environment in which they felt safe to learn and wanted to achieve. Members of staff consistently displayed their respect and high aspirations for learners and matched this with offering challenges and making clear their expectations that students would do well.

The research findings suggest several possible implications for policy and practice.

Implication 1

The outcomes of this probe indicate the importance of staff working collaboratively in providing support to vulnerable learners. There are at least two areas where practitioners might benefit from additional support and guidance:

- Working with colleagues from different key stages was crucial in ensuring continuity and consistency of curriculum and facilitating transition, especially for disadvantaged children and young people. Classroom practitioners may require support and guidance from school leaders and relevant agencies about how to initiate and sustain cross-phase staff collaboration to support vulnerable learners.

- Classroom teachers and support staff in our case study schools worked closely together to ensure individual and group interventions were linked to mainstream curriculum. Additional guidance around how connections between intervention programmes and the classroom curriculum can be embedded and monitored in a school might be helpful to school staff trying to provide a diverse and tailored, yet holistic, educational experience to each learner.

Implication 2

Teacher assessment approaches, such as APP, were recognised by the case study schools as having a great potential in involving learners in the assessment and related target setting processes, as well as monitoring students’ progress in developing very specific skills and thus being helpful for narrowing gaps in outcomes. There were indications that to support the embedding of this assessment approach in schools it might be helpful to offer:

- additional guidance and possibly training opportunities for teachers and support staff;

- clarification of the underpinning rationale of the approach; and

- suggestions about overcoming some practical difficulties.

Implication 3

The findings of this research point to the importance of maintaining a whole-school focus on narrowing the gap in outcomes. Despite the significance of an early intervention, particularly in addressing gaps in basis skills which might prevent learners’ full access to the curriculum, there were support strategies in place in all key stages of the case study schools. These aimed to build on the initial positive outcomes and to ensure progression. Clear progression strategies for learners identified by schools as vulnerable were rare and can be suggested as an area for development for policy and practice.
Section 4: Method, references and technical appendices

Purpose and aims of the research
Within the ‘building the evidence base’ project probes are designed to provide detailed analysis and understanding of the processes involved in curriculum change. Probes set out to:

- locate effective curriculum innovations with specific foci;
- describe in detail their component activities and processes and their outcomes; and
- identify what might be significant about the context within which they take place.

By triangulating the evidence gathered across the different sites of practice and referring to the wider research evidence base, probes then explore what might make the practice effective and offer tentative suggestions about ways that schools and practitioners might develop effective practice of their own.

There are significant implications with this approach for how probe research projects are set up and managed. For example, the project team needs to make sure that not only does effective practice in the specified area exist, but that it will stand up to detailed scrutiny and that in-depth questioning and feedback will be welcomed by and supportive of the practitioners involved. Scoping is therefore detailed and in depth and involves, for example, documentary analysis of recent Ofsted reports and advice from specialists in the field to complement school leaders’ perceptions of the security of relevant practice.

Because of the rigors of this selection process and because probes involve working in depth and detail and within a defined resource, a small number of schools (usually three or four) are involved. Obviously there is no opportunity to cast such a small group as a sample that is in any way representative of schools generally. However, we have tried to ensure a sufficiently diverse range of contexts and practices so that themes and issues emerging from the research, supported by references to a wider knowledge base, have the potential for application elsewhere.

Designing a probe methodology
Methods for each probe are individually tailored to suit the focus and the context of the specific research project. However, there are some underlying principles and characteristics that remain stable within an overall approach. Our methods have had to address two key challenges.

The first is that the curriculum is a complex entity. The research methods therefore needed to target evidence about a wide ranging and dynamically interacting set of variables.

Secondly, schools in England are currently intensely involved in policy-led curriculum and organisational reform. Researching practice in this context makes serious demands on schools’ confidence in navigating their way through these reforms and exposing for scrutiny their development work. It also makes extensive practical demands on already scarce time and resources. Recruitment to the research and participation therefore had to be managed in ways that paid close attention to the impact of the research on the development of the schools, their staff and their learners.

Probe 6 was conducted as an exploration of evidence within and across three sites using a range of research methods, such as interviews with a range of stakeholders, observations and documentary analysis.
The range of methods and resulting diverse data sets create an opportunity to understand in a short period of time the complexity of effective practice and how it plays out in context. By triangulating school leader, practitioner and student perspectives with evidence collected from policy documents and attainment data and observations, probe research can start to do justice to the interaction between behaviours and beliefs and espoused and actual practice.

Such diversity, however, poses a challenge to the all important alignment of research questions, designs and analysis. To enable the research team to read across from one site to another and to identify common themes and approaches we have chosen to select and use common research tools and protocols. Researchers were trained in the use of a shared set of enquiry questions, core definitions and the analytic framework to ensure consistency in data from different sites.

**Setting up the project**

Our starting point was an exploration of the research evidence concerning narrowing gaps in outcomes for vulnerable learners through curriculum development. Referring to the research evidence, we identified core aspects of practice that it would be possible to explore in a multi-site, multi-methods case study. From this process we produced:

- a concept map setting out the core aspects of practice that the literature and our scoping activities indicated we should investigate; and
- a set of enquiry questions to guide our evidence collection and analysis processes.

Both documents are included as Appendices 1 and 2 to this report. The colour coding indicates the connections between the core aspects of practice and the enquiry questions.

Using the enquiry questions we developed a straightforward database, set up as a spreadsheet, which we used to summarise and map the evidence collected in each of the schools. Copies of all items referred to in the database were also collected and coded for inclusion on Knowledge Tree, the ‘Building the Evidence Base’ project archive, in order to enable text-based searching and to feed into cumulative analysis between probes and between research strands during the final year of the project.

**Selecting case study schools**

In choosing schools we looked for sites where there was both visible curriculum development and consistent attention to closing the gap in outcomes, particularly achievement, of vulnerable learners. With only three schools involved, we needed to be confident of diversity and security of practice in both aspects of the research.

We selected the long list of possible case study schools based on our knowledge about development work in relation to narrowing the gap and curriculum design. Our long list included schools involved in the National College Narrowing the Gap programme, the DCSF Extra Mile programme and QCDA curriculum co-development networks.

We wanted to select a range of schools to illustrate different sizes of development in designing the curriculum for narrowing the gap. Therefore, schools were also scoped for diversity of context, socio-economic background, Ofsted rating and attainment.

**Developing research instruments**

We used the outcomes of the analysis of the research studies and reports about narrowing the gap in outcomes mentioned above, to create a concept map and a framework for developing tools and instruments to support research in the three case study schools. The framework was then used to create a simple database for accumulating and
coding evidence from a range of sources, enabling us to read across to find patterns and gaps in the data. The sources of evidence we included were:

- interviews with participating teachers;
- interviews with school senior and middle leaders;
- student voice and perception data;
- observation data; and
- school documentation relating to narrowing the gap and curriculum development policy and practice.

To ensure that evidence generated through this probe is compatible with the overall project data set, the research team has used the glossary of terms developed by the ‘Building the Evidence Base’ team at CUREE and the University of Wolverhampton during year 1 of the project.

**Case study visits**

Researchers made two to three visits to the case study schools over the period of February – March 2010 to collect the evidence. The outcomes of the visits were written up in the form of three standardised case studies, which were validated by the schools and are attached as Appendix 3 to this report.

**Analysis**

Evidence collected during visits was coded using the glossary, the concept map and the analytic framework developed during the conceptual and definitional stages of the project.

Once the data had been entered into a spreadsheet database, common practices, issues and themes were then read across the data set. These results were then tested against the full research evidence to explore key patterns and possible explanations for how and why things worked. The results of these processes form the basis of the conclusions of this report.
References


Appendix 1 Concept map

- Teaching and learning
  - Transition
  - Progression
  - Beliefs and values
  - Enablers and drivers

- Curriculum development for narrowing the gap
  - Staff development
  - Student voice

- Differentiation and other T&L approaches

- Skills development (basic and functional, PLTS, SEAL, etc)

- APP

- Assessment and diagnostics

- Identification and tracking of vulnerable learners
## Appendix 2 Enquiry questions

How do effective curriculum experiences at important transitions contribute to narrowing achievement gaps for the most vulnerable children and young people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching and learning</th>
<th>Assessment and diagnostics</th>
<th>Enablers and drivers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Progression</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the range of progression routes offered by the school/teacher for this particular key stage. What personalised progression routes were offered to the vulnerable learners?</td>
<td>Describe assessment practices adopted by school/teacher.</td>
<td>What is the school approach to curriculum development? Describe any curriculum innovations relating to NtG and transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What curriculum connections were made during transition to facilitate the process for vulnerable and other learners? What strategies were used (e.g. similar T&amp;L methods and approaches, content, etc)?</td>
<td>What were the opportunities for vulnerable learners to catch up with their peers through skills development interventions? What skills were being targeted?</td>
<td>How was APP used to monitor the progress of vulnerable children and other learners?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differentiation and other T&amp;L approaches</strong></td>
<td>Describe a (each) learning opportunity aimed at vulnerable students: 1) Who were the teacher/TA and learners, adult – student ratio, 2) What were the learning goals and whether they were achieved, 3) What was happening (approach to T&amp;L and how different it was from other curriculum experiences), 4) Frequency of sessions and length of the intervention, 5) What are the success criteria?</td>
<td>To what extent did teachers use APP to identify starting points effectively and build on them through challenging and supporting their learners?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills development (basic and functional, PLTS, SEAL, etc)</strong></td>
<td>To what extent did improving these skills have a positive impact on learner achievement and ability to access other curriculum areas? What evidence is there?</td>
<td>What data and evidence were used to identify vulnerable learners? Describe what group of learners was identified as vulnerable/target group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identification and tracking of vulnerable learners</strong></td>
<td>What opportunities were there for vulnerable learners to set up with their peers through skills development interventions? What skills were being targeted?</td>
<td>How was APP used to monitor the progress of vulnerable children and other learners?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### If there was a specific intervention aimed at vulnerable learners, what connections were made with broader curriculum?

- How relevant and important is curriculum development aimed at narrowing gaps in outcomes to school staff, including senior and middle leaders, classroom teachers, and TAs?
- To what extent are teachers involved in curriculum development and its evaluation?
- What pupil voice and peer support structures were in place at transition points?
- How is curriculum development evaluated?

### How did different kinds of curriculum opportunities, including learning outside the classroom and work-based learning, contribute to narrowing gaps and facilitate transition, particularly for vulnerable learners?

- How did colleagues from different key stages work collaboratively to ensure each student’s learning needs were diagnosed accurately and appropriate learning opportunities were offered?

### How did colleagues from different key stages work collaboratively to ensure each student’s learning needs were diagnosed accurately and appropriate learning opportunities were offered?

- Who were the teacher/TA and learners, adult – student ratio, 2) What were the learning goals and whether they were achieved, 3) What was happening (approach to T&L and how different it was from other curriculum experiences), 4) Frequency of sessions and length of the intervention, 5) What are the success criteria?

### How did different kinds of curriculum opportunities, including learning outside the classroom and work-based learning, contribute to narrowing gaps and facilitate transition, particularly for vulnerable learners?

- Describe a (each) learning opportunity aimed at vulnerable students: 1) Who were the teacher/TA and learners, adult – student ratio, 2) What were the learning goals and whether they were achieved, 3) What was happening (approach to T&L and how different it was from other curriculum experiences), 4) Frequency of sessions and length of the intervention, 5) What are the success criteria?

## Progression

- Describe the range of progression routes offered by the school/teacher for this particular key stage. What personalised progression routes were offered to the vulnerable learners?

## Transition

- What curriculum connections were made during transition to facilitate the process for vulnerable and other learners? What strategies were used (e.g. similar T&L methods and approaches, content, etc)?

## Differentiation and other T&L approaches

- Describe a (each) learning opportunity aimed at vulnerable students: 1) Who were the teacher/TA and learners, adult – student ratio, 2) What were the learning goals and whether they were achieved, 3) What was happening (approach to T&L and how different it was from other curriculum experiences), 4) Frequency of sessions and length of the intervention, 5) What are the success criteria?

## Skills development (basic and functional, PLTS, SEAL, etc)

- To what extent did improving these skills have a positive impact on learner achievement and ability to access other curriculum areas? What evidence is there?

## Identification and tracking of vulnerable learners

- What were the opportunities for vulnerable learners to catch up with their peers through skills development interventions? What skills were being targeted?

## APP

- How was APP used to monitor the progress of vulnerable children and other learners?

## Beliefs and values

- What is the school approach to curriculum development?

## Staff development

- Describe any curriculum innovations relating to NtG and transition.

## Student voice

- How relevant and important is curriculum development aimed at narrowing gaps in outcomes to school staff, including senior and middle leaders, classroom teachers, and TAs?

## If there was a specific intervention aimed at vulnerable learners, what connections were made with broader curriculum?

- How are teachers supported in using rigorous assessment techniques (e.g. APP) in order to identify learners at risk, challenge all learners and support their progress through the curriculum?

## To what extent did teachers use APP to identify starting points effectively and build on them through challenging and supporting their learners?

- What evidence is there?

## What data and evidence were used to identify vulnerable learners?

- Describe what group of learners was identified as vulnerable/target group.

## What is the school policy in relation to narrowing gaps, particularly at transition stages?

- How are teachers from different key stages (and schools) encouraged and supported to work collaboratively to facilitate transition?

## To what extent was peer support/mentoring used in the school in order to narrow gaps in ECM outcomes.

## To what extent were students involved in the curriculum development at school?