



Leading Learning through
Action-led Research and Innovation

Celebrating Research that gets Results

A collection of evidence-based research

2025

Volume 4

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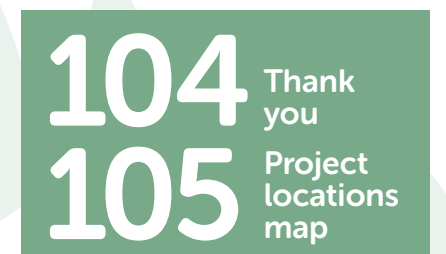
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The Laurel Trust is an exciting educational charity founded to support research and innovation in schools and academies in areas of multiple deprivation through the creation of partnerships with them to secure improvement.

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Welcome

BILL GODDARD | CHAIR OF TRUSTEES

Welcome to Celebrating Research that Gets Results, Volume 4; a collection of innovative, evidence-based projects that exemplify the transformative power of educational research in practice.



This volume brings together an inspiring array of initiatives that not only demonstrate academic rigour but also highlight a shared commitment to improving the lives of children and young people, especially those facing additional barriers to success.

At the heart of this volume lies a strong focus on inclusion, particularly through a diverse set

of research projects connected to Special Educational Needs (SEN). From Somerset to Sunderland, schools and educators are rethinking conventional practices to support the aspirations of young people with SEND. In Somerset, research is addressing the critical issue of post-education employment for young people with special educational needs. Through focused strategies, these efforts aim to unlock greater access to paid employment, thereby enhancing life chances and fostering long-term independence.

In Greater Manchester, an innovative relational inclusion approach is challenging traditional behaviour management systems by prioritising empathy, understanding, and connection. By focusing on the underlying causes of behavioural challenges, rather than punitive responses, schools are seeing improvements in attendance, engagement and overall school culture. Meanwhile, Sunderland is exploring the power of play to help children with SEN build tolerance for uncertainty and demand – key areas often linked to anxiety and avoidance – and make meaningful strides toward ambitious learning and developmental goals. In Sheffield, a city-wide commitment to improving outcomes for children with learning difficulties is demonstrating how targeted research can be translated into practical, scalable interventions. Together, these projects show that when educators engage with research as a tool for action, real and lasting change is possible.

Another prominent thread running through this volume is the theme of literacy and oracy development. In Dagenham, a timely investigation into the impact of short-term reading interventions is shedding light on how to close attainment gaps in Years 7 and 8, while a project in Eccles, Greater Manchester, creatively integrates outdoor learning to foster oracy and language development – proving that the classroom doesn't always need four walls to be effective.

This edition also highlights innovative pedagogical research that seeks to improve classroom practice and student wellbeing. In Devon, two academy trusts are working collaboratively to embed instructional coaching as a lever for pedagogical improvement and, ultimately, better outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. In Doncaster, educators are exploring how a drama- and arts-based approach can influence Year 4 pupils' social and emotional development, making a powerful case for the role of creativity in education.

Finally, the volume turns its gaze to broader questions of educational purpose and partnership. On the Wirral, research is showing how a curriculum focused on learning competencies, such as resilience, collaboration, and reflection, combined with strong local community partnerships, can create more enriching and equitable learning experiences for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each of the projects presented here is grounded in local need, supported by reflective practitioners, and driven by a deep belief in the potential of every learner. Together, they reinforce the central message of this series of volumes: that when research is used not only to understand, but to act, it gets results.

We invite you to explore, reflect, and be inspired by the research showcased in this volume. Professor Philip Garner's thinkpiece also invites you to reflect on the processes engaged within these projects.

I thank all of my fellow Trustees for their expert advice, freely given, to the projects included in this volume. In particular, I thank Dame Pat Collarbone, Becky Greenhalgh, and Davinder Jhamat, who have recently retired from the Board of Trustees after many years of involvement.

Lastly, I could not possibly conclude this Introduction without paying tribute to our retiring Consultant Director, Maggie Roger. Maggie has been an inspirational foundation to the many projects with which The Laurel Trust has been associated, providing clear sighted challenge, knowledge, and encouragement. Maggie has had a distinguished career in education and her vast expertise has been shown to have been of benefit to all project participants. We wish her well in her retirement.



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Dirty work

If we get our hands dirty and our feet moving, will it get our brains working and help increase our oracy?

Project Lead | Clarendon Road Primary School

The Education Endowment Foundation (2021) stated that 'Language provides the foundation of thinking and learning and should be prioritised'.

CONTEXT

It has a pivotal role in children's cognitive and social development. However, recent research by the Sutton Trust in England has highlighted a significant vocabulary gap by age three between children from wealthier and poorer families. This disparity is compounded by parental reliance on technology for entertainment rather than interactive language development.

Pupils attending the project schools are more likely than many others to have been disadvantaged from birth. Many of the schools in the project cluster have yearly intakes with over 25% of their pupils living in one of the most deprived areas of the UK. Most schools have approximately 40% of their pupils entitled to Free School Meals, whilst one school has over 66% in receipt of Pupil Premium. Several of the schools have significant proportions of pupils with English as an Additional Language.

This project involves ten schools based across the Winton, Eccles and Barton (WEB) wards in Salford

...recent research by the Sutton Trust in England has highlighted a significant vocabulary gap by age three between children from wealthier and poorer families.

in the North-West of England. Most of the schools in the project serve communities where socio-

economic deprivation is pervasive with over 25% of pupils residing in the most disadvantaged areas of the UK, as defined by indices such as the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).

Most of the schools in the project serve communities where socio-economic deprivation is pervasive...

Although cultural diversity brings great benefits, it often means that more pupils experience a language deficit in English due to their disadvantaged status. For instance, many pupils in these project schools speak two or more languages though often, when they are at home, speak only the family's home language. Many of the project schools have a significant proportion of SEND pupils, and most of the schools involved had a high proportion of children eligible for the Pupil Premium. All the schools have experienced a rise in the need for mental health and early intervention support in recent years, an issue which is recognised as having a national impact.

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The teacher-researchers in the project sought to respond to a research dilemma which directly related to the challenging contexts in which they work. They were seeking insights into the question:



10

schools in the North-West of England took part in the project

25%

of pupils reside in the most disadvantaged areas of the UK

'Can structured outdoor learning enhance language acquisition, social skills, and personal development among EYFS and KS1 pupils from deprived backgrounds?'

They were seeking insights into the question: 'Can structured outdoor learning enhance language acquisition, social skills, and personal development among EYFS and KS1 pupils from deprived backgrounds?'

40%

of pupils entitled to Free School Meals

66%

of pupils at one school are in receipt of Pupil Premium

The project team recognised that Nursery and Reception class children in the partner schools had a significant language deficit. To address this, the team sought to ‘get the children outdoors’ using this approach to help close the vocabulary gap and increase the rate of language acquisition for EYFS and KS1 pupils:

“...talking and engaging in a very different learning context, with fresh air and new experiences was key to unlocking the language acquisition barrier for our pupils.”

Original proposal,
The Laurel Trust, 2021

The study was based on four principal aims:

- 1 To expose pupils to a variety of experiences and learning opportunities they would be unlikely to receive external to school
- 2 To give them opportunities to get outdoors, get their hands dirty and interact with adults and peers in an alternative learning environment
- 3 To increase the social skills and personal development of pupils through outdoor education and quality interactions in a different context
- 4 To allow pupils to apply the skills they had in a different context and over time, build stamina, resilience and independence

By exploring each of these the research participants could find out the extent to which outdoor settings provided an effective vehicle for children’s language acquisition and social development.

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?
There is abundant evidence to indicate that outdoor learning is a highly beneficial way of promoting engagement across a wide range of curriculum subjects. It is central to the development of happy, confident learners and provides diverse opportunities for children to enhance their language and social skills, thus helping them to become more resilient learners.

By immersing themselves in the supporting background literature, the research team recognised that there was an absence of studies specifically examining structured outdoor interventions as a systematic approach to enhance oracy and resilience among deprived urban primary pupils. Their commitment to taking learning outside provided a naturally occurring opportunity for these



teacher-researchers to explore pedagogy, practice and the impact of giving children opportunities to engage in enhancing their language development by using ‘real-life experiences’.

‘Outdoor learning boosts confidence, social skills, communication, motivation, physical skills, knowledge and understanding... [and]... an increase in children’s self-esteem, self-confidence, ability to work cooperatively and positive attitude to learning.’
National Literacy Trust

The significance of this approach is that it helps to lay the foundations for effective learning and, ultimately, the

development of young citizens who can take an active role in shaping their world. For too long, children who have encountered economic, and social disadvantages have struggled to progress. This *getting*

‘We believe that alongside reading, writing and arithmetic, oracy is the fourth ‘R’: an essential, foundational building block to support our young people on their journey towards living fulfilling adult lives.’
Oracy Education Commission,
October 2024

our hands dirty study is, a direct and practical response to Ofsted’s exhortation that ‘Schools should plan for progression in spoken language and writing with the same precision as progression in reading and literature, and teach the vocabulary, grammar and conventions of these’ (2024).

Their commitment to taking learning outside provided a naturally occurring opportunity...

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS
The team adopted a quasi-experimental design, enabling the participating teacher-researchers to explore language and social outcomes for pupils in structured outdoor learning sessions. The team was very committed to an action-research approach, which allowed findings to emerge from a set of planned outdoor practices (inductive approach). The experimental nature of the enquiry was given authenticity and validity by evaluating the progress that the children made against a set of established indicators (deductive approach).

The inductive element identified several emerging themes (for instance, children’s resilience), while a deductive analysis enabled the research team to ‘test’ their core hypothesis (that language progress would be stimulated by learning outside). The team made full use of established benchmarks in doing this, notably the Wellcomm toolkit.

- The Research Plan**
- Training & Baseline Assessments
 - Initial Implementation
 - Review & Internal Dissemination
 - Expansion to Parents
 - Community Collaboration
 - Final (Internal) Evaluation & Impact Measurement

Each participating school/setting selected a group of EYFS/KS1 pupils for the project. Following training of key staff, modelled sessions, team-teaching and peer observations were used to support whole staff teams in further disseminating the action across a wider number of learners. Parents were invited to training

sessions to equip them with the skills and knowledge to promote further learning at home, in the garden or park. A characteristic of the research effort was a production of numerous case studies, illustrating the project’s impact on individual pupils.

Ten schools based across the Winton, Eccles and Barton wards in Salford took part in the study. These were:

- St Andrew’s CoE Primary School
- Barton Moss Primary School
- Beech Street Primary School
- Westwood Park Primary School
- Monton Green Primary School
- Alderbrook Primary School
- Lewis Street Primary School
- Christchurch CoE Primary School
- Godfrey Ermen Memorial CoE Primary School
- Clarendon Road Primary School

All these schools have been working together as a cluster for several years. Most of the schools in the project serve families who experience high levels of deprivation, resulting in low entry points for pupils, a high need for Speech & Language intervention and a lack of parental engagement. In recent years, budget cuts, pressures on staffing and meeting an increasingly diverse range of additional needs had all impacted negatively on these schools and their ability to address these challengers. Hence the project focus adopted by the research team was of the utmost relevance.

IMPACT

The success of this intervention is signalled by its impact on its key stakeholders – the target group of children themselves. The team of teacher-researchers discovered that placing greater emphasis on outdoor learning resulted in the children being more connected as learners, with a notable improvement in their range and skill levels linked to communication.

Assessments indicated that 86% of the pupils who participated in the project improved, with 42% exceeding expected milestones. Vocabulary use increased by an average of 38%, with pupils being able to use subject specific vocabulary to name and describe natural elements such as ‘fern’, ‘oak’, ‘autumn’ and ‘turmeric’. Sentence complexity rose by 47% because of outdoor learning sessions with pupils able to transfer their language acquisition to the EYFS setting back in school. Storytelling tasks used by all the schools showed 40% higher retention of the language features required to orally retell a story with pupils applying language in context.

The project’s impacts extended to other areas of the children’s experience as learners. The teachers involved recognised evidence of personal growth, and readiness for future learning in pupils.

This was seen by the extent to which the children had become more articulate, resilient, and socially adept. The emergence of these skills in the targeted children was attributed to their involvement in outdoor learning: their confidence and problem-solving skills grew considerably because of their enjoyment of the outdoor learning sessions. It resulted in increased motivation and excitement for learning.



CASE STUDY

Child A had a specific language difficulty and was not communicating within the EYFS environment. He struggled with listening, attention and concentration, moving between areas of the provision frequently. He also struggled to engage with group discussions at the beginning of the outdoor learning project. Across the sessions, his engagement increased, and he interacted with adults, sharing what he had done at the end of sessions. His language use increased, and he transferred his increased interactions outdoors to the indoor environment in EYFS. Child A was thriving by the end of the year.

The team of teacher-researchers discovered that placing greater emphasis on outdoor learning resulted in the children being more connected as learners, with a notable improvement in their range and skill levels linked to communication.

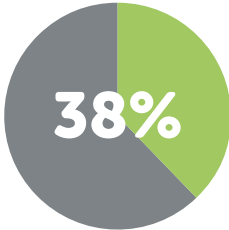


The impact of this Laurel Trust project has been significant for learners who are termed ‘vulnerable’, on account of the disadvantages they have encountered. The outdoor settings that were a key component in delivering the action research element of the project provided a rich, supportive context for these pupils to develop key skills in an environment that felt less restrictive than traditional classroom settings. The social and emotional learning

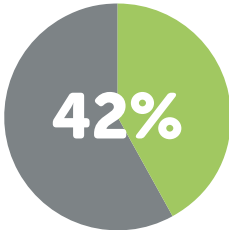
(SEL) of vulnerable learners has long been a concern in schools in England and is seen by the Education Endowment Foundation as an essential component in supporting children’s progress.

The project researchers thus gave a high priority to the needs of this group in their planned action research. As a result, the schools indicated that there was evidence of improvement in a repertoire of SEL skills.

The impact of this Laurel Trust project has been significant for learners who are termed ‘vulnerable’, on account of the disadvantages they have encountered.



average increase in pupil's vocabulary use



of pupils exceeded expected milestones



‘I learned lots of new things. I really want to do it again.’

Pupil



Project impact on all levels of stakeholder...

‘The children are much more vocal, and I think that’s because they’re a lot more sure of their place... and more confident.’

Teacher

‘I have seen a great improvement in X’s confidence whilst talking to her friends and new adults around her. She is so excited to share what she has learned outdoors.’

Parent

‘Some of our staff have very much connected with learning outdoors and many want to develop this part of their skill set.’

Headteacher

In summary, the project has fostered greater engagement, personal growth, and readiness for future learning in pupils, with notable improvements in levels of oracy and self-actualisation as young people.

Positive effects of outdoor learning on children in the project...

Enhanced articulation and social skills: pupils have become more articulate, resilient, and socially adept, equipping them with essential skills for future learning.

Increased enjoyment and engagement: pupils across the project schools enjoyed the outdoor sessions and demonstrated increased motivation and excitement for learning.

Developed key skills: outdoor learning helped pupils develop important skills such as communication, confidence, and problem-solving in a hands-on, engaging environment.

WHAT DID THE TEACHER PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

The benefits of participation in the ‘research process’ by this group of teachers has been highlighted under several inter-related themes, each of which has impacted on the professional learning of the participants.

Teachers reported an increased level of confidence and skills in their application of the principles and practices of outdoor learning, leaving them better equipped to deliver curriculum experiences in outdoor settings.

The shared approach to project organisation and delivery has been noticeably beneficial to the schools involved. The cluster type approach to professional learning has allowed schools to learn from each other, with one participant noting that

‘82% of staff [were] feeling more confident in their ability to deliver high-quality outdoor learning experiences, particularly those that maximize language acquisition opportunities.’

Final Project Report

‘We’ve all learned together... that has been exciting and enriching’. Involvement in a formal piece of collaborative research meant that the teachers saw the value of a ‘close to practice’ approach to enquiry, with the ultimate beneficiaries being the children. As one teacher observed, it was ‘enabling me to see a different side to the children... like opening a

window’. It was also apparent that the study acted as a catalyst in promoting the value of outdoor learning across the whole cluster of schools involved in the project.

‘The Laurel Trust project has sparked a renewed enthusiasm for outdoor learning across our settings. The need for resilience and robust delivery is clear, but the positive impact have been undeniably significant.’

WEB Cluster Headteacher



NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The team has been very active in ensuring that the results of the outdoor learning practices in all the project schools have been disseminated widely. As much of the project centred around practical interventions, and 'learning by doing', a feature of the dissemination was sharing of best practice, both amongst the WEB cluster schools and beyond. Lead practitioners in each of the partner schools took responsibility for embedding professional skills and knowledge based around outdoor learning.

This was achieved by several measures, including:

- Direct Teaching & Coaching:** training staff on language-rich outdoor learning
- Modelled Lessons & Team-Teaching:** demonstration sessions to showcase effective techniques
- Peer Observations & Feedback Loops:** encouraged continuous learning and adaptation
- Parent & Community Workshops:** trained parents and community members to sustain learning beyond schools

The project's legacy is that a solid foundation has been created on which the project team has been able to support further research-related activity and transfer their knowledge of outdoor learning for the benefit of other practitioners. The schools have done this in several ways:

- 1. Embedding Outdoor Learning in Schools**
 - Integrate outdoor learning across all year groups.
 - Utilise local parks and natural spaces for outdoor activities.
 - Incorporate language-rich activities (e.g. storytelling, scavenger hunts) into daily curricula.
 - Ensure inclusivity for SEND & SEMH pupils.
 - Conduct regular evaluations to measure impact and improve strategies.
- 2. Strengthening Staff Development & Collaboration**
 - Expand training programs to build staff expertise in outdoor learning.
 - Encourage cluster networking & peer mentorship programs for knowledge sharing.
 - Implement regular peer observations and team-teaching to support new staff.

3. Community & Early Years Engagement

- Support parents with skills to facilitate outdoor learning at home.
- Expand toddler sessions to aid early language development.
- Form partnerships with local authorities & agencies like NHS for SEMH support.
- Foster community involvement to sustain long-term outdoor learning initiative.

As a result of this project, the participating children and teachers were immersed in a new way of learning and teaching. For both groups the experience has been one which has become a platform for the future. ●

'You'll definitely see a different side to the children... they have an experience which is unlike the learning that they have always had in the past.'

CASE STUDY

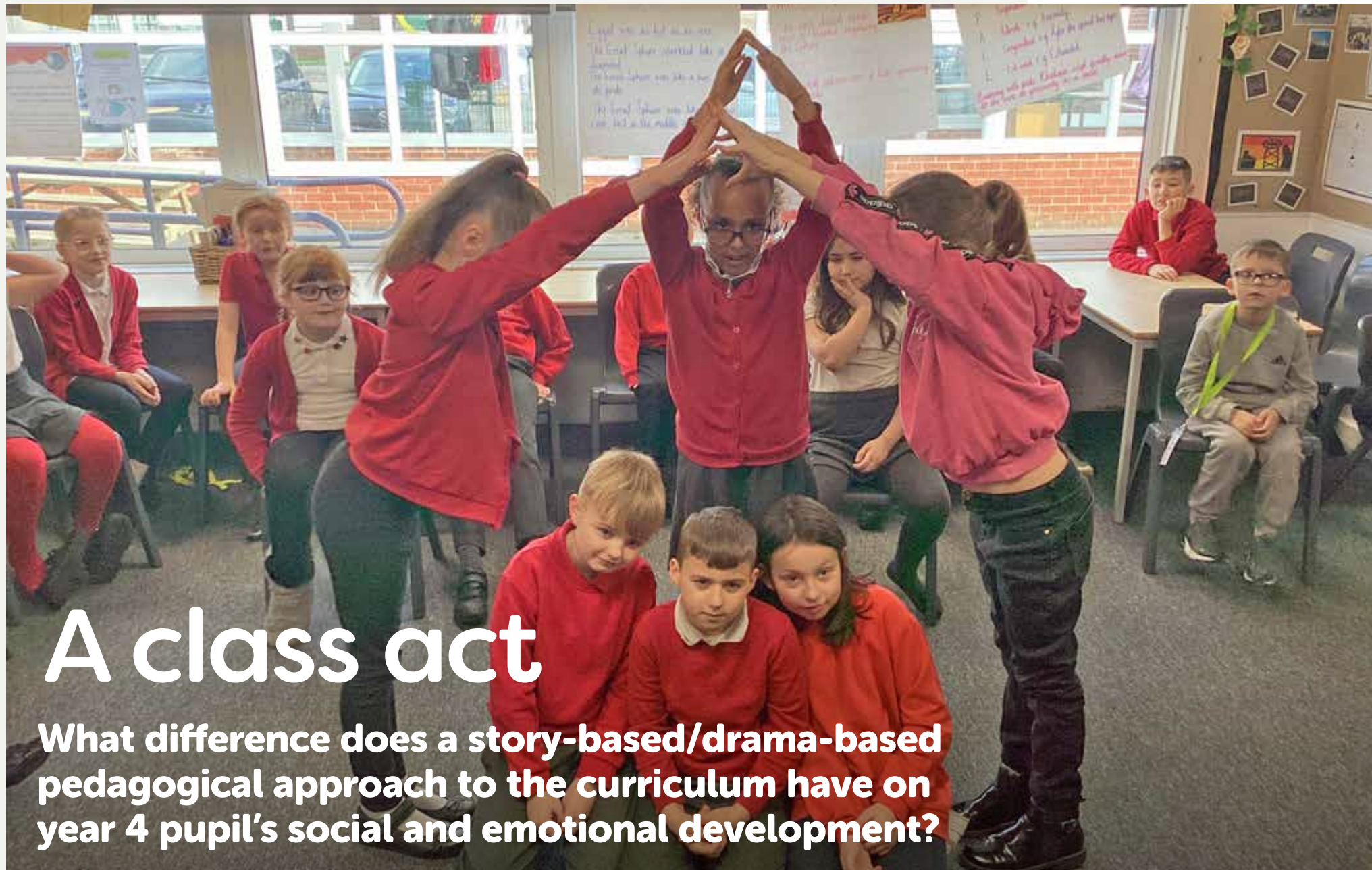
One partner school developed a gardening club in Year 3 to support language learning for the year group, providing outdoor opportunities to further embed the project's approach. Outdoor learning was also developed across school, with a focus on enrichment opportunities. It also became a focus of EYFS cluster meetings – supporting language development and raising awareness of outdoor learning as a way of doing this.

The partner school held more sessions of outdoor learning for other Year Groups, with links to the local community. Whole team training has also been taking place to embed an even greater understanding of the positive impact of outdoor learning.

In the school's Nursery, the language programme made use of outdoor settings to be used as much as possible.

'Some of our staff have very much connected with learning outdoors and many want to develop this part of their skill set.'





A class act

What difference does a story-based/drama-based pedagogical approach to the curriculum have on year 4 pupil's social and emotional development?

Project Lead | Bentley High Street School

There have been many indications of a significant rise in well-being and mental health challenges faced by children and young people in England. This has impacted on both their curriculum learning and social interactions.

CONTEXT

This project used storytelling and drama world building within the curriculum to address these issues. Co-planning will take place between paired teachers and creative artists to underpin curriculum planning with drama pedagogies.

School-aged children who experience significant economic

and social disadvantage are more likely to experience problems linked to well-being, with notable knock-on effects on their academic progress. This was illustrated by a Parliamentary Education Select Committee (2022), which stated that 'Disadvantaged pupils could be five, six, seven – in the worst-case scenarios – eight months behind – according to their regional data'.



These challenges have been most recently summarised in a Rowntree Foundation report of 2024, which indicated that '72% [of teachers] said there had been increased incidence of poor mental health [of pupils] because of hardship'.

The project involved 8 Primary Schools, all part of a single Multi-Academy Trust in Doncaster, South Yorkshire. These schools were in an area characterised by significant economic deprivation. The Trust's schools had over 30% of pupils classified as 'disadvantaged', almost 25% above the national average. Two of the schools served communities where over 50% of the pupils attending were

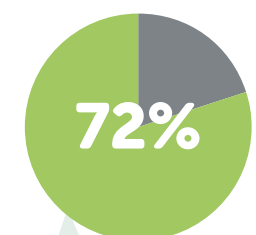


disadvantaged, including a high proportion of children in receipt of free school meals. A further distinguishing characteristic was that the project's lead school served a community with a diverse range of spoken languages, including Slovak, Polish, Turkish and Lithuanian. The Trust's own assessment indicated that most of its pupils experienced challenges relating to both social and language skills.

'Disadvantaged pupils could be five, six, seven – in the worst-case scenarios – eight months behind – according to their regional data'

Parliamentary Education Select Committee (2022)

8
the number of primary schools that took part in the project (all were part of a single Multi-Academy Trust)



the number of teachers who noticed an increase in poor mental health because of hardship

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS
The research team organised their actions to respond to a single research question: ‘What difference does a story-based/ drama-based pedagogical approach to the curriculum have on Year 4 pupils’ social and emotional development?’.

The emphatic focus of their project was on adapting the curriculum/ pedagogy of the partner schools so that story-based & drama-based approaches could be used to promote the social and emotional well-being of Year 4 children. It assessed the likely impact of these interventions on a group of children of which a high proportion experience significant disadvantage. The focus was highly relevant to the schools involved, as the project team had a clear vision of how the work undertaken would benefit the targeted pupils. It was anticipated

that the use of play- and drama-based approaches would enable the pupils to develop their confidence, oracy skills and critical thinking. The intention was that they would be better placed to ‘solve’ relationship challenges with a positive effect on their well-being and confidence because of the project’s inputs.

In addition, the project team strongly aligned its actions with a wider commitment to school improvement and developing colleagues at all levels through the strategic planning of effective professional development.

The project had a fundamental connection to the ethos of Exceed Learning Partnership, emphasising the powerful mantra of “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day,” which underscored the project team’s commitment to equity and opportunity for all pupils.

The project had a fundamental connection to the ethos of Exceed Learning Partnership, emphasising the powerful mantra of “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day,” which underscored the project team’s commitment to equity and opportunity for all pupils.



WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?
It has been firmly established that emotional health and well-being is more likely to be at risk amongst children who encounter social and economic disadvantage, as reported by the National Children’s Bureau in 2021. The emotional well-being of primary-age pupils has been a concern for educationalists for many years, of course and its importance has been brought into sharp focus by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The team involved demonstrated a strong link between the project’s focus and the needs of the pupils who were the principal target group in their study. Their original application to the Laurel Trust stated that ‘A majority of the 2,800 pupils enter early years with social and language skills that are well below national standards.’

The project team argued that, by adopting a structured input using drama, safe imaginary spaces linked to a curriculum theme can be created, in which pupils consider different scenarios, people and actions. By doing so they could better develop their confidence and oracy skills as learners, as well as their critical thinking and conflict resolution. The research team believed that the impact this would have on their well-being and self-actualisation would be huge. It would enable pupils to feel confident to lead and solve problems in other aspects of their lives beyond school, this being a life skill which has been recognised as a vital element in ‘social and emotional learning’.



- METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS**
The 8 schools in the project form part of a single Multi-Academy Trust comprised the following:
- Bentley High Street School (Lead)
 - Edlington Victoria Academy
 - Hill Top Academy
 - Sheep Dip Lane Academy
 - Carr Lodge Academy
 - Rosedale Primary School
 - Sandringham Primary School
 - Willow Primary School
 - Leeds Beckett University

Each school nominated a teacher to take part in the project. 8 coaches (1 per school) were identified, these being experienced practitioners/senior leaders. Each school was allocated an artist, selected by the project lead in association with the academic partner. The study eventually involved 300 Year 4 pupils. The project team comprised 13 teachers, 8 coaches, 4 artists, and 3 lead researchers.

The project adopted a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods to create a robust data collection, with teacher questionnaires, pupil questionnaires and Thrive questionnaires. Data were used during the project to assemble 25 case studies. These focussed on target pupils to observe the impact the project on their social and emotional development. Participating teachers were given autonomy to select the pupils they wanted to specifically observe based on their knowledge of the children.

An established model of ‘co-planning, co-teaching and co-

reflection’ was adopted. The co-planning stage involved Year 4 teachers and coaches in professional development sessions from an experienced university researcher (Dr Lisa Stephenson), who had created a model of ‘8 creative and well-being dispositions’. Teachers collaborated with professional artists to co-plan and deliver drama sessions embedded within the History and Geography curriculum. These sessions followed 3 structured stages (Invitation, Exploration, and Discovery)—to immerse pupils in fictional scenarios and encourage creative problem-solving. These practical sessions were used to explore story-based pedagogies and drama worldbuilding.

Co-planning was a feature of paired work between teachers and creative artists, to enable curriculum planning with drama pedagogies. The artists and teacher then co-taught the initial session, establishing the context and modelling the approach to be used during the project: storytelling within the curriculum was pre-eminent. The teachers then extended these drama-based pedagogies across humanities subjects. Reflection on the process was undertaken every fortnight, so that adaptations could be made where required.

At the end of term, all the coaches met to identify common themes from the process. A feature of this was that these discussions were used to inform subsequent professional development, thus confirming the ‘community of reflective practice’ approach which has become such an important characteristic in ongoing teacher development.

IMPACT

The experiences of various groups of participants in this project represent a considerable return for the schools concerned. Two groups benefitted: i) the target group of Year 4 learners and (ii) the participating teachers and teaching assistants.

The children were a principal focus, and the inputs they received throughout the project’s duration resulted in significant gains (validated by supporting metrics) in numerous aspects of their ‘learner well-being’.

- Increased engagement and transformation
- Specific gains in pupil’s Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Positive learning engagement by SEND learners
- Embedding creativity in learning
- Greater sense of identity and belonging
- Enhancing an increased range of communication skills
- Development of empowered and autonomous learners
- Increased self-confidence
- Ability to work as a team and sharing ideas.

‘Through the drama activities, pupils had a deeper understanding of different societies and places from the past and present because their imaginations were allowing them to feel like they were there and living it. They were able to show greater empathy and understanding of the dilemmas faced by others and the societies they lived in’.

Participating Teacher



The project’s impact was especially apparent on its target group of learners with SEND. For example, every case study reported that the pupils showed an increase in confidence, alongside dramatic improvements in participation and engagement. Their teachers commented that by using language of affirmation, the pupils quickly understood that there were no right or wrong answers. - all responses carried validity. This was a significant realisation for these pupils often struggle with academic learning in the classroom. They demonstrated increased confidence and were less likely to be ‘afraid to try’. They were also much more willing to share their ideas with others.

CASE STUDY

One teacher on the project, an Early Career Teacher, completed her own analysis around the retention of subject knowledge when teaching a lesson about Roman invasion in a traditional way compared to teaching the knowledge using drama-based pedagogies. Her findings demonstrate that when the learning was taught using traditional methods, 20% of SEN pupils could explain why the Romans invaded Britain compared to 67% when the lesson was delivered using storytelling techniques. This teacher has also noted how through these creative methods of teaching, some of the lower attaining pupils are able to work alongside their peers without a scaffold or change to input or task.

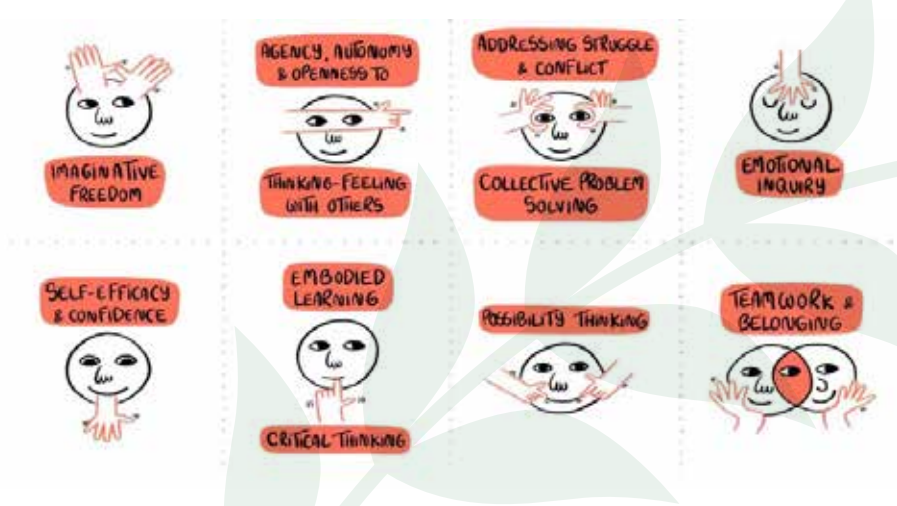
For the teachers involved in the project several areas were highlighted in which professional progression was evidenced in the data collected by the research team. Each of these held a clear connection to the focus of the project, being overtly linked with using creativity and imagination to generate a classroom world in which the children could feel that they could express themselves as active learners. This was built around the emerging professional knowledge regarding the ‘8 creative and well-being dispositions’ identified by Dr Stephenson (infographic - right).

- The project prompted deep professional learning in 6 areas:
- Curriculum development and design
 - Deepening insight into Reading/ Literacy enhancement
 - Use of context and community in creating learning opportunity
 - Interdisciplinary learning
 - Direct action to address educational gaps
 - Shifts in teaching and assessment approaches.



‘I just think it’s been such a brilliant project because as a Trust we’ve all been through it together and even though we haven’t all worked with each other before we’re doing a similar curriculum.’

Participating Teacher



WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

Professional learning has been a salient feature throughout the duration of this project. It is apparent and demonstrable in the way the Project Team has been systematic in setting out its research intentions, and the degree to which these have informed high-level professional discussion, leading to curriculum interventions which have directly impacted the end-target audience (Year 4 pupils).

A notable feature of the study was that it has resulted in (i) the further development of a body of knowledge connected to a crucial aspect of learning and teaching for the project schools and (ii) embedded opportunities for teachers and others associated with the project to further enhance their practice. This fits well with recent trends in teacher professional development, in which collaborative enquiry is viewed as a vital way of stimulating teacher knowledge. They were able to do so because the project offered diverse ways in which this could take place, including:

1. Reinforcing a balance between knowledge and pedagogy
2. Introducing experiential and embedded learning
3. Recognising teacher development and pedagogical shifts
4. Connecting curriculum design and its role in equity

5. Celebrating theory-driven educational practice
6. Extending coaching & mentorship
7. Building teacher empowerment and trust
8. Contributing to critical reflection and adaptation
9. Utilising active leadership
10. Confirming a ‘community of practice’ approach

One teacher’s view...

‘We all got together and spent a day and (the actor/coach) walked us through the process of how to plan a session from scratch. We had a little get go at like acting out as if we were going to do it with the children. He gave us some tips and hints on how to improve that so that was very valuable. I just think it’s been such a brilliant project because as a Trust we’ve all been through it together and even though we haven’t all worked with each other before we’re doing a similar curriculum. I’ve gone and worked with (name of teacher) and even though we didn’t know each other, because we’ve both been through the same process in the project, we were able to get straight in together and know exactly what we needed to do which was really lovely’



- NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Alignment with the vision and principles of the Multi-Academy Trust has ensured that the work undertaken during the project is carried forward and developed further in the future.

 - Dissemination of story-based pedagogies across other schools/MATs
 - Provision of professional development opportunities
 - Involving schools, arts organisations and community groups in collaborative development of effective teaching approaches
 - Supporting school leaders to become champions of such creative approaches as story-based world-building
 - Sharing knowledge, skills and resources amongst schools
 - Piloting similar activity in other schools beyond the research partnership.

The sustainability effort has been underpinned by the defining features of this school-based enquiry – its organisational characteristics provide an aide-memoire for any school or setting embarking on a similar study. ●

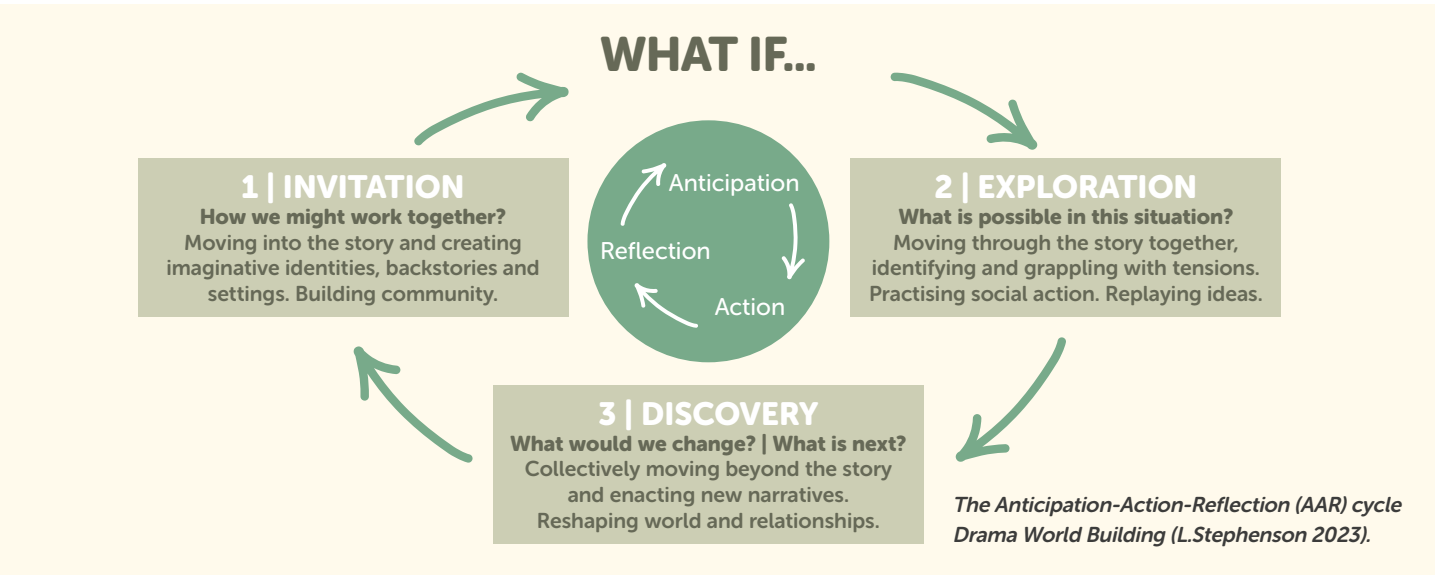
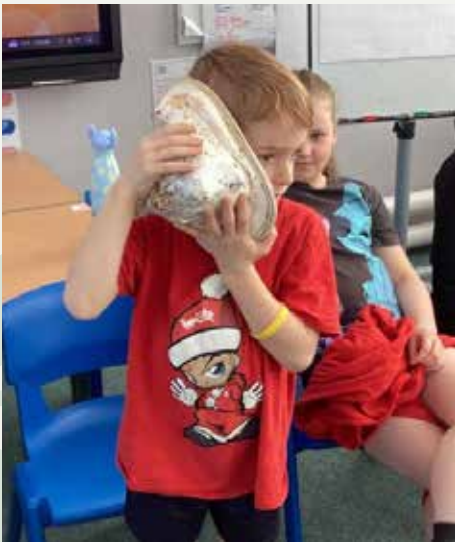
- Research leadership
 - Effective collaboration and sharing
 - Having a clear research plan
 - Focus on an agreed issue, problem or ‘gap’ in knowledge
 - Good communication amongst the research team
 - Connecting to everyday teaching

‘There is a lot of positive feedback and enthusiasm from leadership regarding the impact of the project so that it adds to our own feeling that we are doing something that is right at the heart of what the Trust is about.’

Project participant



‘...as a group of schools in the Exceed Partnership we have definitely valued the collaboration, sharing, working on a common idea which has then resulted in this being more embedded... it will definitely be continued because it connects to the mission of the Learning Partnership.’





Making friends with a book

Can a short-term reading intervention narrow the gap for Year 7 secondary students?

Project lead: Dagenham Park C of E Secondary School
Socio-economic disadvantage is positively related to literacy achievement in all English-speaking countries.

CONTEXT
Household income, parent education and parent occupation are known to be statistically significant predictors of school literacy achievement.

Crucially, fluency in reading is the gateway to learning. It is essential to students' future academic achievement and well-being, and those who struggle to read words accurately quickly fall behind their peers.

Learners who cannot read well are not able to access the curriculum and are disadvantaged for life. Ofsted has identified reading as a fundamental life skill and has made this a major focus within its inspection framework. For those children transitioning to secondary school, the ability to read is a determining factor in their ability to access all areas of the curriculum and thus their ability to learn effectively. Primary to secondary transfer is especially problematic for those children who struggle with reading. It is an underlying cause of their failure to access the curriculum, and it can result in anxiety and lead to

poor attendance. Inability to read fluently, and with understanding restricts opportunities for lifelong learning as well as the chance to read for pleasure.

New evidence also shows schools continue to face big challenges supporting socio-economically disadvantaged and low attaining students because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is according to a major piece of research published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2023, which tracked the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on younger students' reading and maths skills.

'Over 120,000 disadvantaged students made the transition from primary to secondary school below the expected standard for reading.'
Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools guidance report, EEF, 2023

This project was undertaken in London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, where 42% of children live in poverty, a figure which is significantly higher than the London average of 33%. The borough is ranked as the most deprived area in London according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Other challenges in the borough include a high crime rate, which is above the London average, and the highest rate of people claiming 'out of work' benefits compared to other London boroughs. These socio-economic challenges further exacerbate difficulties in developing literacy skills. Given this context, early intervention, particularly in secondary school, is critical to closing the literacy gap and ensuring academic success.

Dagenham Park School – the project lead - has a diverse student body, representing several ethnic groups. The largest ethnic groups include students of white British heritage, those from any other white background, and those from African descent. There is a much higher proportion of students who speak English as an additional language than in other schools in England. There are also elevated levels of pupil mobility due to the area having increased levels of international migration, with students joining and leaving the school throughout the year. To these can be added the significant



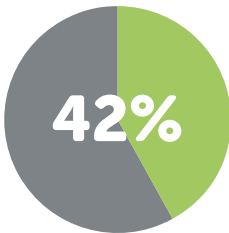
15
Literacy Mentors involved

socio-economic challenges which characterises this London borough.

The school recognised the vital role that reading interventions play in overcoming adversities and enabling students to access the full curriculum offer. The Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report showed that Year 7 students arriving in the school were below average in terms of reading and writing measures. Around 20% of students requiring literacy support with some students having reading ages as low

75
students involved

as 5 years old. A comprehensive programme of assessment and tiered intervention was urgently needed, which provided the impetus for the study.



of children live in poverty in London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

This practitioner research project has sought to add a further level of input to existing responses to the challenges of age-related under-performance in literacy. It directly explores the effectiveness of short-term, targeted reading interventions for Year 7 students whose reading levels fall below average. This is the group of students for whom already identified risk factors are compounded by their transition from primary to secondary phases of schooling. Accordingly, the study aimed to determine if these interventions could close the reading gap and improve literacy skills.

The project involved tailored reading support through small group (1:3) and one-on-one (1:1) sessions, focusing on reading fluency, comprehension, and overall literacy. The primary goal was to assess the impact of these interventions on academic performance, self-esteem, and confidence, with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged students,

The primary goal was to assess the impact of these interventions on academic performance, self-esteem, and confidence, with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged students.

many of whom face challenges such as poverty, educational disadvantage, and English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The curriculum at Dagenham Park has a tradition of actively responding to the disadvantaging features of its local context by attempting to create a culture of inclusion and aspiration to close the deprivation gap. The school therefore prioritises literacy, which is at the heart of the curriculum, so that learner engagement can be fostered, thereby improving the life chances of the students.

The study was built around two principal research questions:

- Will short term targeted reading interventions in Year 7 close the reading gap?
- Can schools develop their capacity to support students with reading difficulties?

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?
It is important that schools investigate and record exactly which aspect(s) of reading that students are struggling with – for example, whether weaker readers are having difficulty reading words accurately and/or automatically. This makes sure that extra support can be effectively targeted – a vital issue at a time of financial constraints. For example, students who can't read unfamiliar words accurately will need phonics teaching. Regardless of age, special educational need or background, the same knowledge of the alphabetic code and phonics

skills underpins all reading. Intensive practice can make sure that students can read age-appropriate texts accurately and automatically.

There is a wealth of evidence of the long-term effects of a failure to address poor literacy skills. The GL assessment report 'Read all about it- Why reading is key to GCSE success' examined reading ability and GCSE results of 370,000 secondary students in England. It reported that 20% of all 15-year-olds have a reading age of 11 years and below, and 10% a reading age of 9 years and below. The report concludes that 'given the importance of literacy to the whole school curriculum, it follows that those students who struggle with reading are at a significant disadvantage in every one of the GCSE examinations they take'.

There is also evidence that poor literacy skills have a big impact

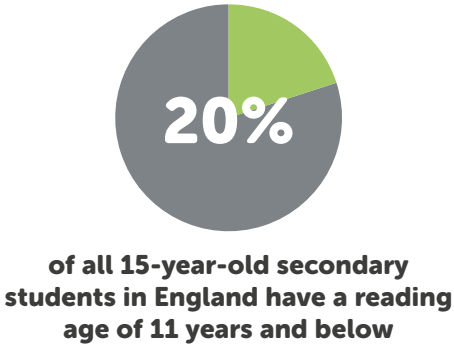
in achieving success in later life. Researchers have found that GCSE results have a significant impact on the lives of students long after they leave compulsory education. For instance, they indicated that literacy was a major factor in determining whether a 23 years-old was able to secure regular employment and a good income; it was also implicated in their wellbeing or the likelihood that they might become involved in crime or other forms of anti-social behaviour. School performance at 16 had the strongest impact on the lives of individuals from less affluent backgrounds.

Given this evidence of the importance of how essential literacy skills are it is important to take action to improve the situation, when students lack them, as soon as possible. At secondary level this means a programme focussed on Year 7. The use of a Reading Recovery approach, as adopted in this Laurel Trust project, is a recognised and effective tool in

'The report concludes that 'given the importance of literacy to the whole school curriculum, it follows that those students who struggle with reading are at a significant disadvantage in every one of the GCSE examinations they take.'

The GL assessment report

helping to achieve this in both the short and long term.



'The children's story-making and writing reflected their observations, experiences and understanding of the world around them, especially their recent experiences. The imagined worlds full of shops and hospitals, conflicts and struggles for power, as well as their family life.'

Research Lead, Final Project Report



METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

A mixed-methods approach, adopting both quantitative assessment of student progress in reading with qualitative feedback, provided an extensive dataset for the teacher researchers involved to examine their research questions. from students, staff, and teachers. The resulting study formed an action-based case study, with data contributed by all 5 schools involved in the project.

Quantitative data: regular assessments tracked improvements in students' reading ages.

The PM benchmark was taken before the student started the intervention and then again when they had finished.

Qualitative data: feedback from students, Literacy Mentors, and teachers was gathered through interviews, focus groups, and observations to assess impacts on confidence, self-esteem, and engagement.

The project made use of an established set of intervention tools specifically geared to meeting the needs of struggling readers. These provided both diagnostic assessment and a series of intervention strategies. The project first sought to identify a sample group of participants from Year 7, all of whom were under-performing in reading.

Students who had below-average reading levels were first identified by baseline assessments using school's own reading assessment. The students, a balance between boys and girls, were grouped according to performance levels: The bottom 25% were then assessed using the PM Benchmark kits. Students reading at level 22 and above (Reading Age 9) were placed in 1:3 groups and those scoring below this level had a 1:1 programme. There were 45 students initially in the 1:3 groups and 30 in the 1:1 groups.

The study comprised 4 phases:
1 Initial training, induction and selection of sample
2 Literacy interventions
3 Data collection & analysis

The project made use of an established set of intervention tools specifically geared to meeting the needs of struggling readers. These provided both diagnostic assessment and a series of intervention strategies.

4 Reporting results

A feature of the research process was that it was supported by ongoing professional development and support from literacy specialists. This ensured that workshops and training days focused on the literacy interventions and peer support and supervision was available throughout the duration of the project. This was vital because of the specialist nature of these inputs with students.



1:3 Group Intervention: Literacy Mentors would read a familiar book with small groups of students, then discuss the theme of the book and address new vocabulary and comprehension. The Learning Mentor would then introduce the new book, the students being asked to read the book aloud and at their own pace.

1:1 Intervention: Students (Reading Age <9 Years) received daily, intensive, 1:1 sessions.

- Familiar read - The student reads from a text that they have already read in previous lessons, reinforcing fluency and comprehension.

• Phonics and Word Work

- Phoneme-grapheme correspondence: The teacher may review letter-sound relationships, focusing on specific sounds or spelling patterns.
- Word building: Using magnetic letters or writing, the student practices building words, focusing on phonetic patterns or tricky words.
- Word recognition: The teacher helps the student recognize high-frequency or irregular words that do not follow typical spelling rules.

• Writing

- Students engage in writing activities to reinforce their learning and support literacy development. This typically includes:
- **Writing a sentence or a short story:** the teacher helps the student write a sentence related to the book they just read, emphasizing sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation.
- **Writing Strategies:** The teacher models how to form letters or words, guides the student in

sound-letter correspondence and encourages independent writing.

• New Book Reading

- The core of the lesson is reading a new book that is slightly above the student's current reading level. During this part of the lesson there is:
- **Teacher-guided reading:** The teacher may assist the student in sounding out words.
- Comprehension and fluency focus: The teacher encourages the student to read with expression and monitor their own understanding.
- **Reading strategies:** The teacher provides explicit instruction in strategies such as phonics, predicting, self-correcting, or using context clues.

- **Error analysis:** If the student makes a mistake, the teacher uses prompts to help them figure out the correct word, promoting critical thinking skills.

Five large secondary schools from the Borough of Dagenham, participated in the research:

Dagenham Park C of E Secondary School (Lead)

All Saints Secondary School

Eastbury Secondary School

Greatfields Secondary School

Robert Clack Secondary School

Altogether 15 Literacy Mentors, and 75 students were involved.

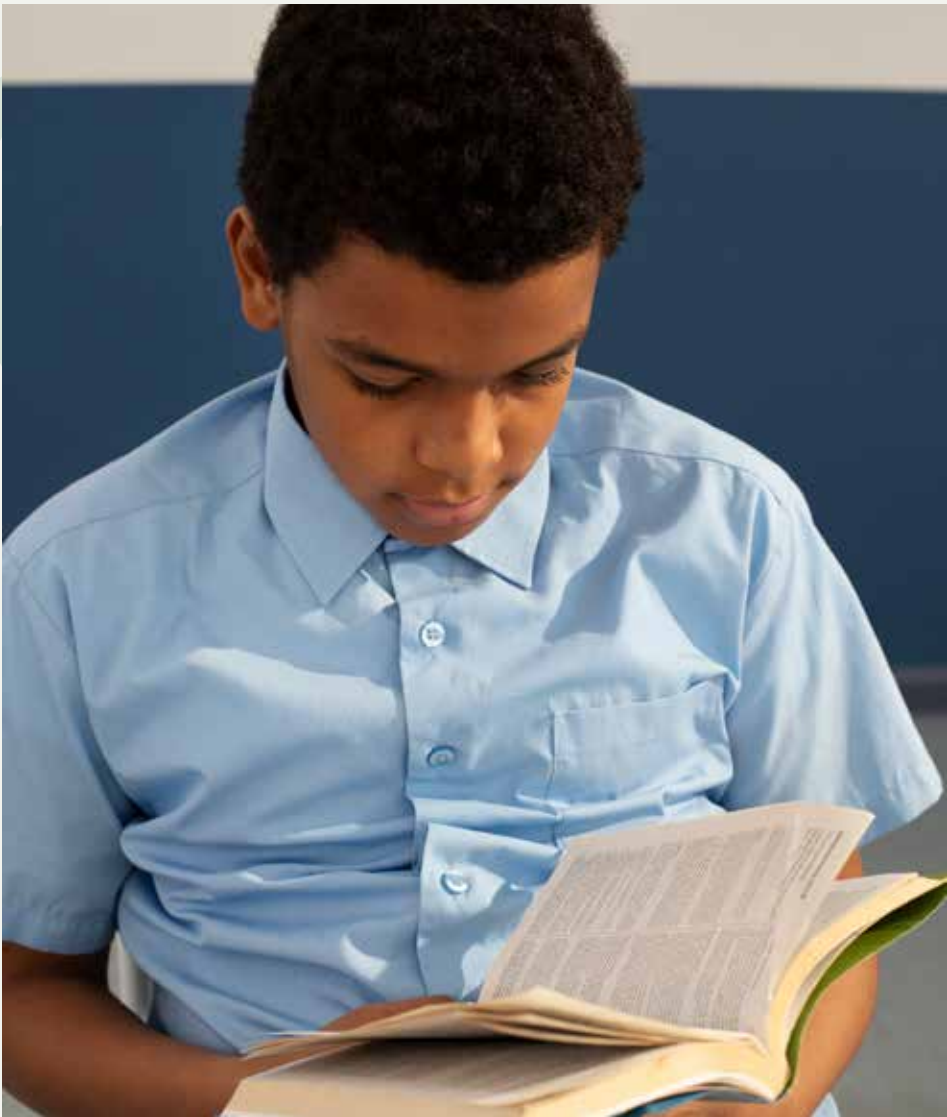


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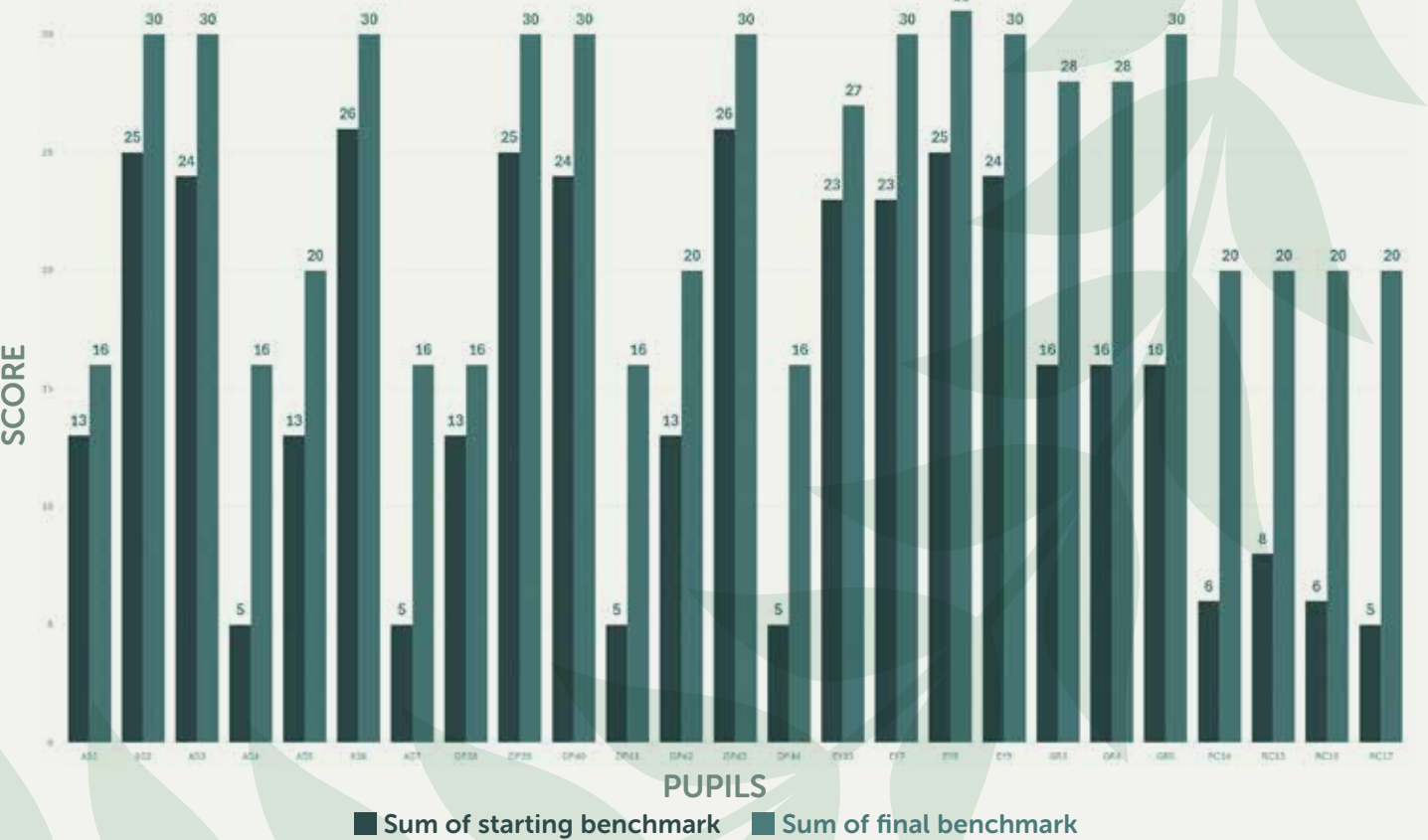
The impact of the work was evaluated by synthesising all sources of evidence. Quantitative data were collected on reading throughout the interventions, whilst qualitative data were obtained from the staff delivering the programme and participating students. A series of individual case studies were assembled. As a result of this composite dataset, the project team was able to point towards strong evidence of the effectiveness of the project, relating to both g1:1 and group interventions.

1 One-to-One Interventions

- Students in one-to-one sessions showed the most substantial progress, with an average improvement of nine levels in their benchmark scores.
- These sessions were particularly effective for students with the lowest starting benchmarks, enabling rapid and significant gains in reading fluency and comprehension.



ONE-TO-ONE INTERVENTIONS



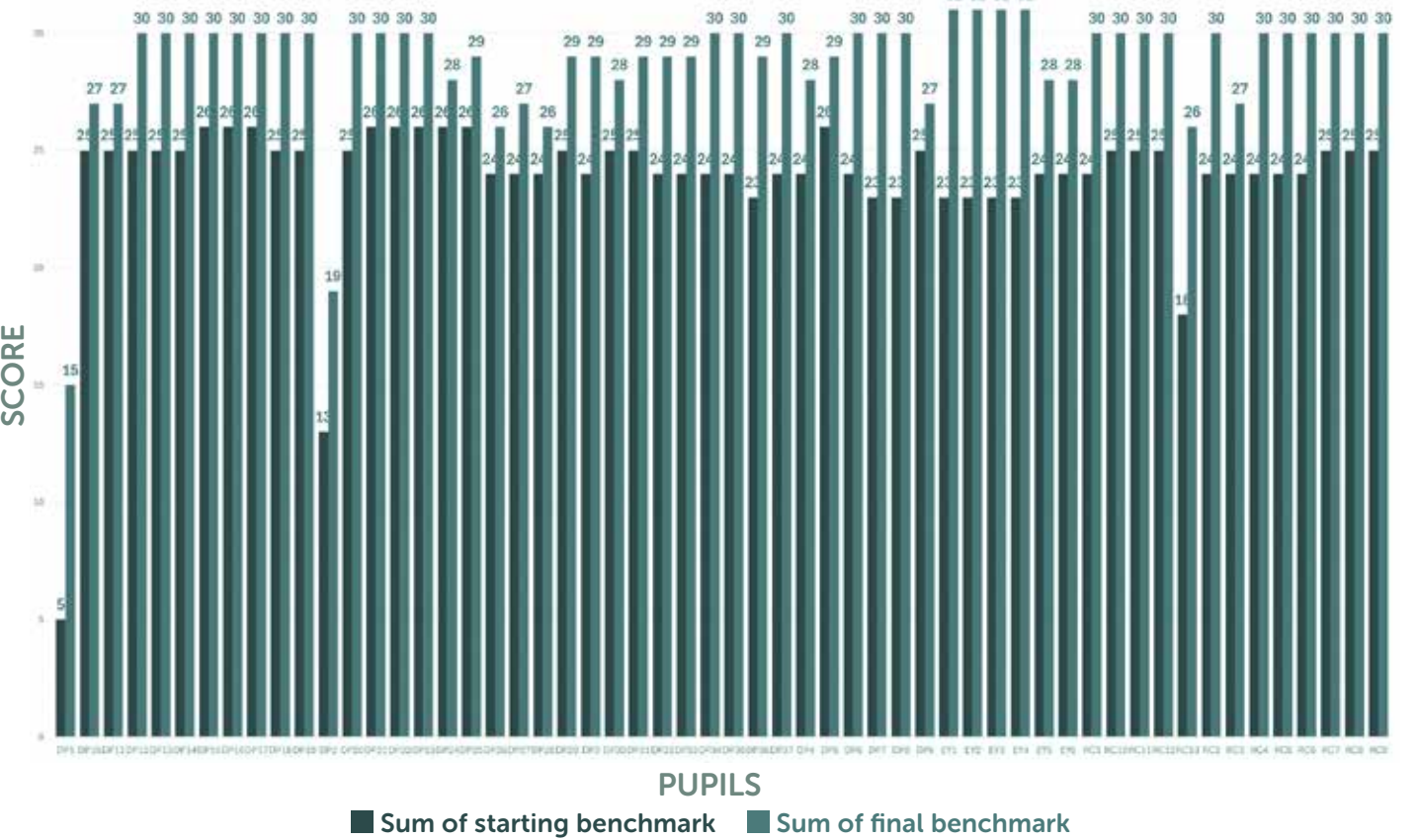
2 Group Interventions

- Students in small group sessions (1:3) achieved an average improvement of 5 levels
- These sessions fostered peer learning and collaboration, helping students engage with reading in a supportive environment.

In addition, the project team were able to quantify the success of the initiative by highlighting the overall programme effectiveness as well as the students' completion rate of the intervention programme.



GROUP INTERVENTIONS



- Overall Programme Effectiveness**
- For all intervention types, the average improvement in benchmark scores was 7 levels,
 - 50% of students improved their reading scores by at least 5 levels
 - 75% achieved an improvement of 7 levels or more.
 - The maximum recorded improvement was 15 levels.

Student Completion Rates
Out of the total participants, 7 students successfully completed the programme without interruptions.

CASE STUDY
Student 'A' entered the literacy intervention in September 2023, with a reading age of 6.06. He had an interest in reading, but it was mostly manga and easier to read books. He struggled with fluency and phrasing when reading aloud and struggled to organise his thoughts when answering questions. Throughout the intervention, he was exposed to assorted topics in reading which helped increase his knowledge of the world. By the end of the school year in July 2024, his reading age score jumped to 11.11. When asked about the programme, his response is adjacent, right:

'At the start of the reading group, I didn't know how to read fluently but eventually I started to pick up the way I read. I got more fluent, and I knew how to understand the text described in the book. I enjoyed the reading programme.'
Pupil A.S.

WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

The project’s focus on Reading Support Programme has resulted in both direct and indirect benefits for teachers/teaching assistants, for the students and for their parents.

Project benefits: TEACHERS AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS

- Staff Engagement & Collaboration**

 - High praise for training and regular cross-school meetings.
 - Collaborative observation and shared best practices.
- Improved Pedagogical Practice**

 - Staff reported enhanced diagnostic skills in reading.
 - Wider range of strategies to address student needs.
- Personalised Student Support**

 - Emphasis on tailoring approaches to diverse student needs.
 - Encouraged deeper reflection on teaching methods.
- Increased School Capacity**

 - Senior leaders recognised a boost in reading improvement capability.
 - Teaching Assistants and Librarians felt valued and empowered.
- Professional Growth**

 - Quality CPD led to increased pedagogical knowledge.
 - Skills gained extended to other areas of their work.
- Wider Positive Impact**

 - Teachers noticed clear student progress in subject learning.
 - Improved reading helped students access curriculum content more effectively.

Literacy Mentors would read a familiar book with small groups of students, then discuss the theme of the book and address new vocabulary and comprehension. The Learning Mentor would then introduce the new book, the students being asked to read the book aloud and at their own pace.



Project benefits: CHILDREN

- Improved Literacy & Learning**

 - Significant gains in students’ literacy skills.
 - Better access to the wider curriculum and enhanced overall learning.
- Boosted Confidence & Engagement**

 - Noticeable increase in self-esteem and confidence.
 - Students began participating more actively in class discussions.
- Positive Student Experience**

 - Initial reluctance was quickly overcome.
 - Students enjoyed the programme and recognised their progress.
 - Many were reluctant to stop even after achieving their goals.
- Empowered Student Voice**

 - “I like reading now.”
 - “Helps me get more interested in reading.”
 - “I enjoyed it so much.”
- Effective for EAL Students**

 - Structured approach proved especially beneficial for learners with English as an Additional Language.
- Observed Classroom Benefits**

 - Students asked more questions.
 - Demonstrated greater confidence and reduced anxiety in class.

Senior leaders recognised a boost in reading improvement capability.



Project benefits: PARENTS

- Parental Awareness**

 - All parents were informed of their child’s participation in the reading interventions.
- Targeted Engagement**

 - Direct involvement with Students with ECHPs.
 - Direct involvement with EAL students.
- Active EAL Parent Support**

 - EAL parents became actively involved.
 - Some improved their own literacy skills while supporting their children.
- Progress for EHCP Students**

 - Intervention outcomes contributed to their documented progress in EHCPs.

The project’s focus centred on two reading intervention programmes: ‘Literacy Skills for Secondary’ which gave one-to-one support to students and ‘Developing Reading for Pleasure’ for groups of three students. Both programmes resulted in direct and indirect benefits for the children and their parents/carers and for teachers and teaching assistants.

NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The success of the project has led the Borough of Barking and Dagenham to fund the training of more Literacy Mentors and to continue to provide CPD for the original Literacy Mentors from the project. Some schools are putting in place follow-up meetings between Literacy Mentors and students to monitor future progress in reading. Others are training their teachers in the 1:3 intervention strategy to build additional capacity to address reading recovery. Finally, some schools want to look at using the strategy for other Year Groups in addition to Year 7 and have already piloted the approach in Year 8.

The project team compiled a set of recommendations so that the project schools could maintain the momentum created by the project. In addition, the project team highlighted some key messages for any school wanting to embark on a similar intervention programme. ●

Some schools are putting in place follow-up meetings between Literacy Mentors and students to monitor future progress in reading.



‘It’s been incredible to watch our students gain confidence in reading. The intervention didn’t just help them meet their reading targets—it created a shift in how they approach learning. The consistency of strategies between mentors and teachers helped us work more cohesively, and I can see the positive impact in every part of the classroom. Not only have the students progressed academically, but their enthusiasm for reading has transformed the entire dynamic of our lessons.’

Teacher participant

Recommendations for the Current Project Schools

- Extend the programme to other year groups
- Enhance training and staff development
- Use the 1:3 intervention strategy to reduce the need to withdraw students from lessons.
- Continue to refine assessments to develop bespoke tools for assessing comprehension
- Focus on EAL students with targeted support in comprehension and language acquisition.

Recommendations for Schools Embarking on a similar Research Project

- Select your partner schools carefully ensuring commitment of heads and governors/trustees.
- Ensure that there is high quality initial training by an experienced/ knowledgeable facilitator
- Consider the timescale, the criteria for selecting the targeted children or young people
- Selection & support of Literacy Mentors.
- Ensure that time and conditions for effective implementation are in place.

The project team compiled a set of recommendations so that the project schools could maintain the momentum created by the project.





Literacy lessons

Improving outcomes for children with literacy specific learning difficulties

Project Lead | Shortbrook Primary School

Over 20 years ago Ofsted noted that ‘one of the key determinants to meeting the challenge to raise standards sharply in disadvantaged areas is to place an emphasis on literacy. It is argued that this is one of the key factors in raising attainment and attendance’.

CONTEXT

This issue has continued to preoccupy teachers for many years and has persisted as a topic of critical concern for schools and policy makers right up to the present day.

The project schools are in the south-east of Sheffield, an increasingly diverse part of the city, culturally and socio-economically. The city is divided into 7 administrative ‘Localities’. Locality D contains some of the highest levels of deprivation within Sheffield, with over 40% of

young people defined as living in poverty. The housing stock is poor, with several ‘priority estates’ in the locality, with one being recognised as the most deprived, according to official Indices of Deprivation 2019.

Within such challenging contexts, many of the children in the project schools, either with or without an identified learning difficulty, find making progress with their learning problematic. The project schools have recognised, for instance, that this is especially the case in English, with several explanations being

apparent, including:

- difficulties with verbal memory skills
- weak phonological skills
- difficulties with verbal processing speed
- missed education through the Covid Pandemic.

Additionally, many children have associated difficulties, including motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation – all of which are barriers to their language acquisition.



STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The research conducted by this cluster of schools emphasized the importance of early intervention to support the development of language fluency. The project team was committed to taking preventative and supportive steps early, as it is widely acknowledged that attempts to remedy this problem become less effective as the child grows older.

The project team identified children who are working below age related expectations in English. These were learners who experienced barriers in accessing literacy-based tasks which prevented them from progressing. The team’s intention was to unravel the possible reasons why this was the case.

To do this the project highlighted 4 interrelated research questions:

1. How confident are you as a parent or educational professional at understanding a SpLD learning profile and offering appropriate support around this profile?
2. What interventions or programmes support the young person with identified literacy difficulties to make the most progress possible?
3. Are there specific interventions or programmes to support specific areas of a literacy difficulties profile that work better than others?
4. What are the barriers to offering this support to a young person and are there ways we can help work to overcome this in schools/localities/across Sheffield?

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

One of the key determinants to meeting the challenge to raise standards in disadvantaged areas is to place an emphasis on literacy – intervention in this is a major factor in raising attainment and attendance. The project represents a contribution to early intervention in literacy for the target group of children.

The project being evaluated represents a contribution to early intervention in literacy, whose advantages have been described by EEF as:

- Early literacy approaches typically increase children’s learning by about four months. Approaches that develop literacy skills and knowledge can have an important effect on early reading. The evidence for the positive impact of early literacy approaches is extensive.
- Early literacy interventions seem to have impacts that transfer to other areas of the curriculum such as mathematics, where the average impact is + two months progress.
- Targeted small group interventions may be particularly effective, especially for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (EEF, 2023).

Importantly, the research team acknowledged the connection between poor emotional wellbeing and permanent school exclusions within Sheffield over recent years. Often a learning difficulty was a feature of the profile for these children.

Of further significance in the project was the opportunity for the teachers involved to be able to further develop their knowledge and pedagogy regarding specific learning difficulties. This was an important added value to emerge from the project.



“It’s so complex you know and there’s so much more to know and it’s like you know you’re doing your own work in Specific Learning Difficulties and Dyslexia and you’re uncovering new stuff... I mean, it’s layers of an onion stuff you know. It’s never ending.”

Teacher participant

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The target group for the planned intervention was those children who were working below age related expectations in English in each of the project schools situated in Locality D. Baseline performance measures were systematically established for the children in this group, to ensure that their progression could be accurately monitored throughout. This enabled the project participants to assemble each child’s learning profile, as well as an indication of their self-confidence and enjoyment levels in English and especially whether they felt that they are good at it.

The first part of the project comprised training for SENCOs and the class teachers of the children identified. The training provided inputs on learner profiles, interventions, alongside ways of enhancing learner self-esteem and confidence. Inputs regarding the role of families were also provided.

Next, strategically planned support was put in place, considering the expertise of the staff delivering the programme, the amount of time available and the needs identified. The programmes were delivered with support and input as required from each school of the project leads. Updated assessments were completed at points during the length of the project and this information used to readjust the programmes being delivered, based on the progress of the children and any other factors that had changed within the school setting.

The Project targeted 64 children and their parents, together with the 6 SENCOs from their schools. The overall management of the research team was the Lead SEND Headteacher for Locality D. 17 class teachers, and 8 Teaching Assistants were also involved. A range of other city-wide SENCOs interacted with the Project’s work at various points along the project together with a senior educational psychologist from the Local Authority (LA). The assessments of the children were completed by a Learning Support Teacher and Locality SENCO at each point.



- The project group comprised 6 Primary schools in ‘Locality D’, a designated area of the City of Sheffield:
- Shortbrook Primary School (Lead)
- Reignhead Primary School
- Birley Primary School
- Birley Secondary Academy
- Intake Primary School
- Woodthorpe Primary School

The schools worked with 4 ‘Locality SENCOs’ from elsewhere in the city, as well as the Educational Psychology Team. Each of the 6 project’s schools was distinguished by different contextual and organisational differences. These ranged from their school size and staffing structure, the levels of SEN they dealt with, their socio-economic differences, including variations in the levels of deprivation and crime in the areas surrounding each school.

The project schools had the flexibility to use the information they had obtained through baseline assessments to identify an area of focus for subsequent intervention. Thus, 2 schools felt that spelling was the key area to develop, whilst 2 others wanted their focus to be placed on all areas of basic skills in English. Another participating school wanted to use the opportunity to provide high quality and consistent support for its sample of children to help them determine whether their individual difficulties constituted an additional need or whether their failure to progress was due to the impact of COVID19.

64

children and their parents took part in the project

17

class teachers

8

teaching assistants



“...the kids are loving doing literacy work at home, even if they don’t even know that it’s literacy. I’m making it into a little bit of a competition...”
Teacher participant

IMPACT

The evidence collated by the project team indicates that the intervention has been highly effective, this being apparent for each of the stakeholders – children, teachers and parents. 4 area of success are highlighted using project participant’s own words:

- (i) Positive progress made by many children in their development of Literacy skills, illustrated by the comment that ‘I’ve definitely noticed that these children talk more to each other, actually give their opinions much more than they did before and that’s great to see...I think some have definitely reached a point where we’re not worried for them’
- (ii) Increased confidence of parents about how to support their child, illustrated by the comment that ‘...the kids are loving doing literacy work at home, even if they don’t even

The project schools had the flexibility to use the information they had obtained through baseline assessments to identify an area of focus for subsequent intervention.

know that it’s literacy. I’m making it into a little bit of a competition... and they get a certificate every week in assembly they’re being rewarded for their achievements what they’re doing at home it’s not ignored, and the kids are then going home and telling their parents all about it’

- (iii) Growing professional confidence of teachers in the project schools, illustrated by the comment that ‘Our Project is a professional space in which we can explore in a supportive

2 schools felt that spelling was the key area to develop

2 schools wanted their focus to be placed on all areas of basic skills

way how best we can help our children, especially when we problem-solve about the best way of meeting needs’

- (iv) Specific understanding of how to further plan to meet ongoing gaps in Literacy learning, illustrated by the comment that ‘I know I’m now a lot more aware of multiple ways of gathering information and that we must be proactive in gathering and presenting this in our reporting to make sure that support continues.’

10 Project Outcomes: Children/Parents/Teachers

- 1. Embedding consistency in support
- 2. Utilising mixed interventions (one size doesn't fit all etc...)
- 3. Building strong parent involvement as partners
- 4. Recognising and positively addressing shortfall in teacher knowledge
- 5. Staff engagement and belonging
- 6. Increases in phonic knowledge of children
- 7. Connecting with and supporting school & LA processes (e.g. graduated approach & EHCPs)
- 8. Refinements to the City-wide assessment toolkit
- 9. Increases in pupils' self-confidence and independence
- 10. Growing a 'toolbox of researcher skills'

“I know I’m now a lot more aware of multiple ways of gathering information and that we must be proactive in gathering and presenting this in our reporting to make sure that support continues.”

Positive progress by children: a case-example

CASE STUDY

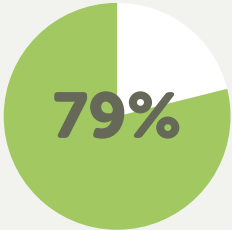
At one project school, the focus was on developing basic skills amongst the sample children, several of whom were already known to have identified SENDs (linked to Developmental Language Disorder, poor language skills, attendance issues and previous trauma and attachment needs). Baseline assessments were completed, and a programme was written which the children worked on each day. It covered a range of strategies, including:

- **creating an Alphabet Arc**
- **blending and segmenting skills**
- **learning and recapping on phonic knowledge**
- **developing phonological awareness skills**
- **on-sight word recognition.**

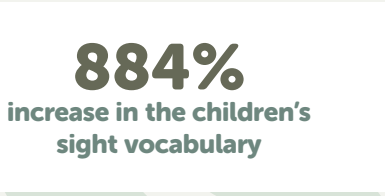
The children were assessed in all these areas at 4 points during the project.

The data show that children increased their phonic knowledge by 79%. They increased their ability to write the graphemes (letters) when they heard the corresponding sound by 112%. They increased their sight vocabulary by 884% and could apply their phonic knowledge to decode unfamiliar words by 130% over the life of the project.

The Alphabet Arc



of the children increased their phonic knowledge



WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?
All the participants involved in this Laurel Trust Project (teaching staff, children, parents & families) have benefited in diverse, affective ways. There is thus some powerful narrative and documentary evidence to illustrate the educational and social impact experienced by all three of the Project's stakeholders and target audiences.

- Recognising and valuing skills
- Building collaboration, networking and relationships through enquiry
- Exploring complexities
- Supporting & deepening parent/teacher engagement
- Recognising the importance of evidence and data in justifying educational support
- Children as active research participants

These learnings resulted from the stimulus that the project gave to supported reflection based on a collaborative approach. In this, close working between the children, staff and parents allowed opportunities to share aspects of the child's profile that had emerged during assessments and teaching. This generated a culture of curiosity amongst teachers and parents, with the child right at its centre.



“I can do this now, I’m amazing aren’t I?”
Girl pupil who achieved success

‘I always try to feedback at the end of the week and say they’ve done brilliantly and ideally ask the parents how the children are doing. I think it’s because I have got that relationship with parents that I can speak to them about how their children are finding it and to ask them ‘is there anything I can do to support you?’



NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY
The Project Team has always been insistent on the need to promote the longer-term effects of its work. There is a strong emphasis on upscaling, to make both the Language-specific products of the project as well as its related professional knowledge available beyond Sheffield's Locality D context of the study. The Team has planned and delivered numerous initiatives to support their intentions:

- Training programme for SENCOs/ HLTAs in Sheffield, with a focus on SpLD (Dyslexia)
- Upskilling staff in key aspects of Literacy
- Coaching support for teaching staff
- Networking opportunities between schools to share good practice
- Development of digitally based programmes linked to Language barriers.

The project's biggest success in futureproofing is best evidenced by the language foundations it has helped to establish amongst the children it has targeted. ●

A good example of this is one of our little girls hadn't ever been in education until Year Two but the progress she has made with the school and her grandparents supporting has just been phenomenal. Watching her from this time last year to now actually it's magical. The other day she just came in and said she's looked after by grandparents, and she shared this with us. She'd never really spoke about it in school before... and she just said, 'I don't live with my mum' and it was like wow! Where's this coming from? But obviously the confidence that she felt to be able to share that was there. She knew hardly anything at the start of the Project, very little... and now she's in class accessing a lot more than she did this time last. So, this is exactly what she needed and she's still loving it'.



Relational Inclusion

A Primary Pilot

Project lead: Victorious Academies Trust

Tameside is a metropolitan borough in Greater Manchester, bordering the Pennines. It comprises nine towns and is the 28th most deprived Local Authority in England.

CONTEXT
A chronic issue is that of poor attendance, lack of engagement and inappropriate behaviour leading to school exclusion. The area has 17.6% of children growing up in low-income families. Pupil attainment at age 16 is below the national average (64.9% getting L4 in English and 68.8% L4 in Maths). A range of factors influence these figures, including SEND, including social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, poverty, low attainment, life trauma and challenges in their home lives.

Although Tameside’s schools are increasingly meeting the needs of a diverse community of learners, the social, economic and cultural determinants present in the region mean that challenges remain, particularly in addressing the educational attainment gap linked to socioeconomic deprivation. Tameside faces significant challenges related to poverty and deprivation. Recent figures indicate that over a third of children in the borough live in poverty, with the rate rising from 30.9% in 2014/15 to 36.1% in 2021/22. Additionally, 54 out of 141 areas in Tameside are among the 20% most income-deprived in England.

These socioeconomic challenges have been exacerbated by welfare reforms and austerity measures over the past decade

In the period 5th September - 16th May 2023 Tameside children and young people across all settings and phases missed 4842.5 days of schooling because of fixed term exclusions. These data came from 52 children across the borough, suggesting that suspensions are repeated and end, for some, eventually in permanent exclusion or persistent absence.

The challenges faced by schools, and all those within their



‘We wanted to change the way our schools operated so that our approach became centred around relationships and truly inclusive practice. We wanted this to improve the health and wellbeing of all our stakeholders. We wanted to improve attendance and reduce suspensions and exclusions. We wanted our staff and our children and young people to have a happier experience of school and learning. We wanted to help them improve their self-worth and have a reflective attitude and approach, even when things were difficult.’

Project Internal Report, 2024

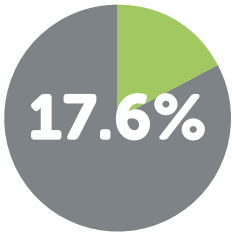
communities, in areas with a significant level of disadvantage have been well-reported for many years. Despite significant efforts to address these, some massive inequalities prevail, as being experienced by many young people in the schools participating in this project. Recognising this, the two Trusts involved in the project, the Victorious Academies Trust and the

Ambition Community Trust, decided to take action.

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS
The research study devised by this group of schools has sought to address the challenges outlined in a forthright and evidence-informed way. The project leads demonstrated a strong personal and professional commitment in

adopting a proactive approach, based on their experience and skills in relational inclusion and its role in responding to trauma amongst school children. The need for such a practical, action-based initiative was apparent to the project leaders, and it had formed a core feature of the educational response to the impact of trauma on the lives of learners.

In the period 5th September - 16th May 2023 Tameside children and young people across all settings and phases missed 4842.5 days of schooling because of fixed term exclusions. These data came from 52 children across the borough, suggesting that suspensions are repeated and end, for some, eventually in permanent exclusion or persistent absence.



of children in Tameside grow up in low-income families



Traumatic experiences can take various forms, including:

- physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- neglect, witnessing domestic violence
- discrimination, prejudice, and racism
- experiencing natural disasters
- involved in accidents
- serious illnesses

Traumatic events can result in a child or young person experiencing:

- difficulties forming and maintaining healthy relationships
- low self-esteem
- emotional and behavioural problems
- academic difficulties
- physical health issues

Relational Inclusion does not mean excusing poor behaviour, removing consequences, or eliminating rules and boundaries.

Relational Inclusion as a school-wide response to trauma provided a way of helping to break the cycle of disadvantage which led to poor attainment and exclusion from school which they witnessed amongst a proportion of learners identified in the project schools.

Relational Inclusion is a preventative, supportive approach, where everyone from school leaders to support staff is involved in creating a nurturing environment. It contrasts with traditional approaches, which are compliance-driven, focused on discipline and potentially exacerbating distress among vulnerable learners.

Relational Inclusion does not mean excusing poor behaviour, removing consequences, or eliminating rules and boundaries. It promotes firm but fair boundaries applied with empathy and understanding. It aims to create a school environment that is supportive, responsive, and focused on helping children to thrive.

Although a trauma informed approach is recognised by some practitioners, its effectiveness is the subject of much debate. Similarly, inclusive education has been viewed as contrary to the task of 'raising

standards' in English schools, even though for a large majority of teachers it is a strongly legitimated way of addressing inequality and lack of opportunity. Both need further validation, and examples of their successful application at school level in locations where the socio-economic challenge is at its sharpest. The project team from the Victorious Academies Trust and the Ambition Community Trust took on this quest.

In doing so the project team identified 4 key areas of investigation, each of which had the potential to contribute important evidence regarding the effectiveness of Relational Inclusion.

- 1 The impact of Relational Inclusion training on pupils' learning behaviours.
- 2 Evidence of Relational Inclusion principles influencing teacher planning and classroom practices.
- 3 The influence of Relational Inclusion on staff relationships and collaboration.
- 4 Lessons learned to inform the future development and sustainability of the programme.

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

One in three children and young people are exposed to at least one potentially traumatic event by the time they are 18. Exposure to trauma can lead to toxic stress, which inhibits brain development which in turn impacts children's learning and behaviour, often at the same time. A large body of research has demonstrated negative effects of trauma on pupils' cognitive, academic, behavioural, and social-emotional functioning in schools.

For example, findings suggest that children who have experienced trauma are at significant risk of impairments across various cognitive functions. They included IQ, memory, attention and language/verbal ability; poorer academic performance and school-related behaviours such as discipline, dropout and attendance. They exhibit higher rates of behavioural problems and internalising symptoms.

Rooted in evidence, the Relational Approach offers a range of opportunities for children and young people to engage with missing early childhood experiences, giving them the social and emotional skills to do well at school, and develop their resilience and their capacity to deal more confidently with the trials and tribulations of life.

**Attachment Research
Community-ARC, 2025**



A Relational Inclusion approach in schools can help staff address learning and behaviour problems arising from trauma, and it can also help them address the well-being of the whole child. It can lead to teachers having more positive interactions with their pupils and colleagues, which has a correspondingly beneficial effect on their own well-being. A trauma-responsive approach, as an integral aspect of Relational Inclusion, brings benefits for the entire school community.

There are other advantages in adopting a whole school Relational Approach. This goes beyond teaching in the classroom to pervade all aspects of school life, to promote pupil wellbeing and behavioural change.

There is an important outcome to the Tameside project. It is that the benefits enjoyed by all stakeholders require further substantiation to ensure their successful widespread adoption because it has been pointed out that 'the process of developing a relational-based culture will be different for every school. It isn't about signing up to an off-the-shelf

programme, but about looking at a school's core beliefs, its knowledge of its pupils' needs, and its commitment to supporting them to achieve their very best' (ARC, 2025). This project has provided a massive opportunity to gather a large set of credible data directly from a cluster of schools for whom Relational Inclusion is a key approach in responding to disadvantage and difference.

Major studies have found that when children and young people have suffered multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), there is a significant risk of them developing mental health problems, behaviour problems, social and relationship difficulties and learning difficulties and engaging in criminal activity.

University of Canterbury, 2024

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The project was carefully constructed as a piece of action-research orientated study, with an emphasis on evaluating the efficacy of Relational Inclusion. Its various actions were formulated into an overall ‘implementation plan’, in which clear research roles were allocated. A feature of the plan was that leadership was distributed, with individual schools having a ‘research lead’, whilst the CEO and leadership team of the Trusts involved received an introductory two-hour training session on Relational Inclusion. A Relational Inclusion Trust lead was also appointed.

The research team recognised the importance of leadership support and that ‘buy in’ at all levels of each school would be vital to success – especially given the large number of partner schools involved. In each school all the staff received an Introduction to Relational Inclusion input and each school completed a Relational Inclusion School Audit.

Recognising that each participating school would adopt an individual focus, each was supported in developing an implementation plan. Support was provided to headteachers’ in termly meetings with the Trust Relational Inclusion lead and link therapist.

Given that the project had an emphasis on ‘action-based enquiry’, the staff in each school received training on the Relational Inclusion’s ‘5 key vocabularies.’ Which would subsequently form the basis of a programme to develop ‘core competencies’ in children, specifically focusing on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

A team of Relational Inclusion Champions (RICs) was developed across the trust. They comprised one member of staff from each school and received in depth training across several aspects including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Trauma, Attachment and Neuroscience.

The Role of the Relational Inclusion Champion

- To provide ongoing Relational Inclusion training to staff in their schools as well as induction training for new staff
- To use the pupil profile tool to help identify key cohorts of KS2 children
- To write and deliver the core competency units to be delivered weekly to the selected cohort
- To provide sustainability and ensure this project survived beyond the pilot

Subsequently the Relational Inclusion Project included a variety of interventions designed to support children with dysregulated behaviour. These interventions focussed on improving emotional regulation, social skills, and overall well-being and included:

- 1 Therapeutic Group Sessions
- 2 Social Skills Training
- 3 Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques
- 4 Behavioural Interventions.

Recognising the systemic nature of the intervention, support was provided to the other stakeholders in the project, including teaching and non-teaching staff and parents. In the case of the latter, workshops and resources were provided to help them support their children’s emotional and behavioural needs. Family therapy sessions were also available to help improve family dynamics and communication.

These interventions are tailored to meet the individual needs of each child, ensuring they receive the appropriate support to thrive both academically and emotionally. These were structured as inputs around the Relational Inclusion’s 5 key vocabularies.

Core competencies

- 1 Self-Awareness
- 2 Self-Management
- 3 Social Awareness
- 4 Relationship Skills
- 5 Responsible Decision Making

Integral to the intervention was the role of the SEMH (Social Emotional Mental Health) Positive Outcomes Toolkit developed specifically for use in schools. The tool is a quantitative assessment tool to help analyse behaviour, measure level of support needed and highlight specific areas that need further development. Moreover, it calibrates with the Assess, Plan, Do, Review (APDR) process of the Graduated Approach used across all areas of SEND provision.

The sample of participants for the project was identified using pupil profiling, involving a comprehensive assessment of various factors to ensure a well-rounded selection. The children selected for the cohort were those who could potentially display dysregulated behaviour and were more likely to benefit from the intervention groups provided by the project. 81 Key Stage 2 pupils were identified and received Relational Inclusion support through five core competencies. 72 pupils completed the full programme.

81

Key Stage 2 pupils identified

72

completed the full programme

The research was conducted across 14 schools of which 13 were primary schools, which were joined by one of Tameside’s pupil referral units (PRU). The primary schools are all members of Victorious Academies Trust whose prime focus for the academic year 2023/24 was the introduction and application of Relational Inclusion to improve standards of behaviour and academic achievement.

Participating Schools and Services

- Aldwyn Primary School
- Arundale Primary School
- Buckton Vale Primary School
- Discovery Academy
- Gamsley Primary School
- Greenside Primary School
- Holden Clough
- Inspire Academy
- Lyndhurst Primary School
- Pinfold Primary School
- Poplar Street Primary School
- Wild Bank Community School
- Yew Tree Primary School
- Tameside Pupil Referral Service



IMPACT

Four areas of impact have been identified, following the interventions in the project schools. Impact was measured by deep interrogation of both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, the project team devised numerous case-studies, based in each participating school, to illustrate how the findings from the study were being applied in real-time and in real-world contexts.

The Relational Inclusion programme demonstrated good alignment with the needs of the project schools in supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEND) and those impacted by trauma. The adoption of relational inclusion principles led to noticeable improvements in pupils’ learning behaviours. In addition, the teachers and other practitioners indicated that the training they had received as part of the project had influenced their planning and practice. A noticeable aspect relating to this

was the deepening awareness that positive relationships with children were further confirmed as the touchstone for their engagement and inclusion. Finally, analysis indicates that the entire programme had a highly beneficial impact on whole-school practice, contributing to increased empathy and connection because of the direct involvement of senior leaders, as well as stimulating collaboration between schools.

The Relational Inclusion programme demonstrated good alignment with the needs of the project schools in supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEND) and those impacted by trauma.

Summary of Key Impacts following a programme of Relational Inclusion

Impact on the project’s thematic focus

Addressed emotional and social well-being to foster a sense of belonging.

Prioritised relationships to meet both academic and non-academic needs.

Built trust and rapport within school communities to create inclusive environments.

Impact on Pupils’ Learning Behaviours

Pupils displayed increased emotional regulation and resilience.

Pupils improved engagement and participation in lessons.

Pupils increasingly able to express their feelings verbally.

Impact on Staff Practices

Tailored interventions to promote readiness for learning.

Modelling relational strategies in everyday interactions with pupils.

Consistent use of relational inclusion language by both staff and pupils.

Impact on Staff Relationships and School Culture

Increased collaboration and communication, fostering a unified approach by staff.

Self-reflection by participating staff resulting in increased use of relational inclusion.

Direct involvement of senior leaders reinforced a culture of empathy and support.

The Relational Inclusion Champion in each school, working with participating staff, helped to formulate a case study to highlight Relational Inclusion ‘in action’. This represented a valuable output, as teachers recognise the professional development value of learning from exemplification.



CASE STUDY

One of the project schools has been working to improve children’s emotional well-being and build stronger, more supportive relationships across the school. This included introducing practices to help pupils better understand and manage their emotions and supporting staff to create a more inclusive and empathetic school culture.

To provide ongoing training in Relational Inclusion, staff took part in workshops over 12 months, focused on the importance of empathy and relationships, discussions around moving away from traditional discipline approaches. Support for staff wellbeing was also provided.

A group of six children from Years 4 and 5 were then chosen to take part. These pupils had faced difficult life experiences (e.g., loss, anxiety, or family issues), and the project aimed to help them to:

- Become more socially aware
 - Manage their emotions better
 - Improve behaviour in the classroom.
- Progress was observed in several areas:
- Pupils became more aware of how their actions affect others
 - Relationships and emotional regulation improved
 - Classroom behaviour and independence improved.

Some staff found it emotionally challenging at first, but most responded positively over time. The school introduced several practical changes:

- New Behaviour Policy – more focused on relationships and empathy.
- Language Use – staff use more understanding, supportive language.
- Regulation Stations – quiet spaces for children to calm down.
- Well-being Room – a dedicated space for emotional support.
- Updated Reward System – using Class Dojo to recognise positive behaviour.



WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

The project’s research leadership team obtained evidence directly from the key stakeholders to substantiate a reflective view that the study had been highly effective in addressing the challenges to which they had set out to identify a practical and effective response. This was achieved through a series of focus group discussions. The evidence from these provides further confirmation that the impact of relational inclusion has had a tangible effect on all stakeholders. Several areas are highlighted in which project participation has enabled teachers, children or senior leaders to develop greater understanding of their experiences in education.

There is an increased recognition that school culture is directly affected by a Relational Inclusion approach. This has a knock-on effect on the way that teachers view the importance of inputs based on enhancing social skills, empathy, and conflict resolution abilities. Teachers are also more likely to link these kinds of interventions

The value of a Relational Inclusion approach has been validated because participants have directly observed greater engagement and participation in class activities.

with a reduction in behavioural issues – which is always a major professional concern amongst teachers nationally. They attribute this to the proactive relational strategies employed rather than reactive responses to dysregulated behaviours.

The value of a Relational Inclusion approach has been validated because participants have directly observed greater engagement and participation in class activities. Teachers in the project also were able to confirm that the children were more able to express their emotions. Importantly, it

has enabled teachers to adopt a new way of identifying and supporting learners who might otherwise be marginalised.

The emphasis on strategically planned professional development, in which the Relational Inclusion Champions received comprehensive training from the project leads, equipped them with the necessary skills to implement relational inclusion strategies effectively. In doing so it highlighted the importance of a ‘community of practice’ approach. In this, a shared concern is addressed via continuous engagement to ensure that strategies are consistently applied within and across all schools.

Finally, involvement in this Laurel Trust project has ensured that, whilst the teachers involved feel supported and their expertise celebrated, there remains an awareness that the challenges facing the project schools, and the teachers and children within them, need to be at the forefront of their professional activity.

NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY
The work undertaken in the Relational Inclusion project has resulted in some immediate actions in many of the project schools, as well as laying foundations for several practical ideas for future action. The success of the project has supported the cultivation of a strong sense of 'identity' amongst those taking part. This has provided an important evidence-base, acting as a catalyst for future planning for even more embedded Relational Inclusion to materialise.

‘The difference is more than just a feeling; it’s measurable. Exclusions are down, engagement is up, and there’s a renewed sense of belonging. Relational Inclusion isn’t just a strategy – it’s a way of being. And once you see its power, there’s no going back.’
Senior Leader

As a result of the confidence and self-actualisation of the project’s participants, further efforts are ongoing, ensuring that Relational Inclusion remains central to the schools’ approach to the regional challenge of disadvantage and marginalisation. ●



‘Through adopting the Relational Inclusion Approach across school, we have improved children’s social and emotional skills and developed their resilience and self-confidence. There has been a significant impact on behaviour with the introduction of a new behaviour policy which has resulted in a reduction in behaviour incidents and no suspensions or exclusions last year.’

Teacher

1. Enhancing Training and Support
Regular follow-up sessions and coaching to address gaps in understanding and consistency. Tailored training for specific groups, such as midday supervisors and families, to embed relational inclusion practices throughout the schools’ communities.

2. Strengthening Resource Allocation
Developing a comprehensive library of resources, including case studies, practical tools, and success stories, to support ongoing implementation. Allocating time for staff to reflect, plan, and adapt relational strategies as part of the professional routines of teachers.

3. Establishing Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms
Introducing robust systems to track the impact of the programme on pupil outcomes, behaviour, and school culture. Collecting and sharing anonymised case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of Relational Inclusion approaches and build staff buy-in.

4. Fostering Collaboration and Communication
Creating platforms for staff to share best practices and strategies, promoting a culture of continuous improvement. Strengthening communication channels to ensure that all staff are aware of effective interventions and approaches for specific pupils.



‘The workshops we have done with our friends has really helped us think about our emotions and how we can cope with feeling certain ways. We’ve learnt to understand that it’s ok to be upset and there’s things we can do to help us get back to green. (Zones of regulation) We’ve really enjoyed some of the grounding techniques work we’ve done with our teacher, and we feel more confident as a result’

Pupil



Creative connections

Engaging students through learning competencies and community partnerships

Project Lead | St John Plessington Catholic College

The educational progress of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has been the focus of consistent attention by policymakers and practitioners for many years.

CONTEXT

This is an understandable preoccupation: the Office for National Statistics reported that 'Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds to feel in control of their futures'.

Moreover, children from low-income backgrounds, and those with special educational needs and mental health issues are the most likely to miss out on formal learning. This situation has been accompanied by a chronic challenge regarding

transition to employment, education or training. There are consequently high numbers of young people who are categorised as so-called 'not in education, employment or training' (commonly referred to as NEET).

The associated depletion in the well-being and mental health of young people has been a major concern again expressed widely at national level and the impact of the COVID pandemic compounded an already worrying scenario. The Good Childhood Report (2024) highlights that 14% of children and young people report feeling unhappy with

'Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds to feel in control of their futures.'

Office for National Statistics

school, more than with any other aspect of their lives. Other studies show that over half of young people surveyed felt a strong connection to their local community. Their lack of

empowerment as learners resulted in lower motivation, disengagement from learning and a reduction in school attendance.

This school-based research project sought to address the educational challenges which are a characteristic outcome of such circumstances on children and young people. The project partners highlighted increases in exclusion rates in the local area, alongside low attendance rates in many of the schools comprising the Trust involved in the project – the Holy Family Catholic Multi Academy Trust (HFCMAT). The schools were in New Brighton on The Wirral, in an area of socio-economic disadvantage that has experienced a significant decline in opportunities and the life-chances of



The associated depletion in the well-being and mental health of young people has been a major concern again expressed widely at national level...

young people over the last 30 years. Whilst much has been said of the merits of creating more meaningful learning experiences for young people, there is less clarity on how these approaches have a positive impact on the longer-term academic outcomes of pupils, teacher retention, and whole-school culture transformation. This research undertaken at HFCMAT sought to investigate how a systematic approach to integrating learning competencies, authentic audience experiences, and community collaboration can enhance student engagement, confidence, and achievement whilst promoting a greater sense of professional self-actualisation amongst teachers.

Many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with 38% or more of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium.

Authentic audience means students creating work for someone beyond just their teacher

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The research team chose a single research question around which the study it proposed was to be developed: ‘How does a focus on learning competencies and local partnerships impact the education experience of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?’

The research undertaken highlights the importance of student agency, creative pedagogy, and community engagement on learning outcomes. The project team indicated how each of these was strongly validated by research evidence.

The project built these features into a work-plan which contained action relating to 2 inter-connected themes and their respective audiences:

- Professional development of teachers – this included creating training and resources to enable practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of learning competencies.
- Developing a more diverse and exciting curriculum offer – this was aimed especially towards those pupils on the fringes of education/at risk of permanent exclusion. It included creating opportunities for mainstream pupils to share their learning through authentic audiences.

The research team chose a single research question around which the study it proposed was to be developed: ‘How does a focus on learning competencies and local partnerships impact the education experience of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?’



WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

The HFCMAT study is important because it has sought to contribute evidence which builds on existing studies – most of which focus on small-scale interventions or individual schools. Fewer explore system-wide strategies for implementing these innovations in multi-academy trusts serving large numbers of disadvantaged students. The potential to provide a transferable model of intervention was very clear to the project team.

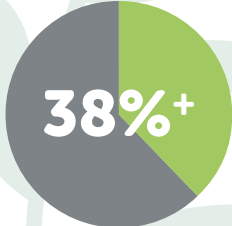
The team also identified that limited research existed on how creative learning frameworks can be adapted to different curriculum subjects and key stages. And while there was some evidence to highlight the benefits to learners of engaging

with authentic audiences, it is much less clear how this has an impact on long-term academic outcomes, teacher retention, and whole-school culture transformation.



The significance of this project for the participating HFCMAT schools was that it addressed 4 issues which impacted directly on the schools in the study:

- Many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with 38% or more of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium.
- Persistent absenteeism is a growing issue, particularly among SEND and FSM pupils, mirroring national trends.
- Teachers report a need for more professional development in designing engaging learning experiences that align with real-world contexts.
- Schools were seeking to strengthen partnerships with local businesses, cultural organisations, and parents to create more meaningful learning opportunities.



or more of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium

Persistent absenteeism is a growing issue, particularly among SEND and FSM pupils, mirroring national trends’



METHODS, PARTICIPANTS AND PROCESS

The study was designed by practitioners, undertaken by practitioners. It also presented significant attributes of ‘action-research’, in which ‘collaborative problem solving’ using an ‘inquiry framework’ was a powerful and consistent feature. A mixed approach to gathering evidence was adopted to secure evidence of project efficacy: this is consistent with current approaches to ensure data reliability and generalisability, in which a variety of data-sources are used to confirm a research ‘hunch’.

Diverse methods of data collection:

- SLT, Teacher and pupil surveys
- Pupil interviews
- Parent interviews
- Photos/videos of activities and work
- Interviews with community partners

The mixed methods approach has enabled both project-specific instruments to be used, alongside

those data relating to student progress which is collated on a regular basis for statutory reporting purposes.

As is the case with many schools, HFCMAT has been regularly engaged in research projects, so the project team has been able to draw on considerable prior experience – this being especially valuable in ensuring that a well-developed ethics policy was in place.

The initial part of the project sought to establish a relevant ‘theory of change’ model, for use in the intervention being considered, which highlighted key areas of challenge, and a corresponding set of outcomes planned for the project’s duration. The research team adopted a systematic approach to intervention to promote activities which enhanced the professional development of teachers and the creation of educational experiences which fostered a much closer connection between pupils and their community – a place-based approach to establishing ‘authentic audiences’ for their learning.

Monitoring and evaluation of the project’s various initiatives was

undertaken using the ‘Impact Ed’ platform, which enabled key indicators, including attendance, behaviour and exclusions to be interrogated and correlated with the project’s actions.

Effective project delivery was characterised by:

- Project and school leadership
- Inclusive approach to planning and project delivery
- Clear research plan and designated roles
- Focus on an agreed issue which had an impact across the local area
- Good communication amongst the research team
- Engagement and connection with all teaching staff in schools
- Connection to the overall mission of the MAT
- Embedded teacher development and contribution to professional self-efficacy
- Proactive involvement of pupils, parents and community
- Providing a ‘real world’ curriculum

7 schools took part

60 teachers took part

1,260 children and young people took part and many of their families

The project involved 5 primary schools and 2 secondary schools, a total of 60 teachers and 1,260 children. These schools worked alongside several community partners, including local businesses and organisations (for example, Chester Zoo and The Children’s Society).



IMPACT

The project’s actions have resulted in some important development opportunities for both pupils and teachers. Additional benefits for the Trust were identified by the project team, alongside added value to the communities surrounding the partner schools.

For the pupils: being part of this project has resulted in some notable shifts in their relationship with formal learning, leading to positive engagement and more optimistic view on what being part of a school community means for them. Being part of this school-based research has enabled pupils to deal with some long-term negative experiences being successfully addressed.

One pupil who was so inspired by an arts event delivered as part of the project that she spontaneously wrote and performed a poem, emphasising the power of creative expression and self-discovery; she commented:

“I felt very good because everyone listened, and I thought ‘did I just do that?’ ...I felt good...”



Numerous other examples showed how pupils had become far more confident, because they had a voice and were valued as learners: one pupil said that it showed people that ‘we’re more than just a mobile phone’.

‘We had *Granada Reports* on Tuesday with a Holocaust speaker. The Granada TV cameras were here. The reporter come up to me instead at the end of it and he said, ‘normally that would take two or three go’s, but they have done it in one’. The kids were just fab. Some of the questions they asked were just phenomenal. One of the kids asked the Holocaust speaker ‘have you forgiven what these people have done to your family?, and he was stumped by some of the questions because he hasn’t really been asked that before. The thought process around children being able to ask those deep questions ...one of them said was there any positive side of it and you could see him just being totally involved in thinking about it. So, you can see the impact on our young people. They’ll explain to you where they think things have moved on as well and the opportunities that they’ve been given because of what we’re doing here’.
Teacher Participant

Participating schools and colleges

- St John Plessington Catholic College, Bebington (Lead School)
- St Mary’s Catholic College, Wallasey
- Our Lady of Pity Catholic Primary School, Greasby
- St Alban’s R C Aided Primary School, Wallasey
- St Augustine’s Catholic Primary School & Nursery, Runcorn
- St Bernard’s RC Primary and Nursery School, Ellesmere Port
- St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School, Birkenhead

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Teacher participant

Increased in student agency: they were empowered to make choices, set goals, and reflect on their progress, fostering independence and lifelong learning skills.

Increased pupil confidence, pride and self esteem: all teachers surveyed saw an increase in confidence and pride in students involved in the project. They demonstrated a willingness to take risks and try new things- including taking part in public speaking.

Increased engagement in learning: the students showed much higher levels of engagement in their learning because of the use of authentic audiences – for example, a public ‘comedy night’.

Improved quality of work: many more students were motivated to produce higher-quality work because their outputs were more likely to be seen by more authentic audiences.



of teachers reported seeing an increase in the quality of work because of students engaging with an authentic audience

‘Children loved to share their work with as many different people as possible. They enjoy their learning much more and the effort they put into a task also increases when they know that someone other than their class teacher is going to look at it.’

Teacher participant



The teachers involved in the project: created a ‘community of practice’ which provided time and space for them to engage in new learning, reflect on their current classroom practice and develop ideas for new learning experiences for their students.

The project’s ‘community of practice’ is distinguished by:

- Training on the use of authentic audience and how to run cycles of inquiry
- Planning time for teachers to develop curriculum plans
- Training and resources to deepen the understanding of learning competencies based on the five creative habits model
- Half termly networking meetings to share good practice
- Online platform to share outcomes from the project.

Engagement in high-level professional discussion resulted in many tangible outputs. A critical mass of creative activity has produced notable outcomes for the two main target groups as well as having wider implications.

...all teachers surveyed saw an increase in confidence and pride in students involved in the project. They demonstrated a willingness to take risks and try new things including taking part in public speaking.

Pupils

- Dot Art School competition
- MAT Sustainability event
- Chester Zoo ‘takeover day’
- Community art gallery
- Permanent exhibitions of artwork in project schools
- New Brighton Arts Festival events
- Vocational/Creative visits (e.g. Salford University)
- Weapons Down, Gloves Up

Teacher Participants

- Assimilation of a range of research/project delivery skills
- Curriculum changes (e.g. ‘real world’ connection in subject content)
- Embedded understanding that teaching variation in pedagogy impacts directly on pupil learning

Schools

- Sharing of ideas/resources amongst project schools
- Cross-disciplinary developments

Community

- Increased parental engagement & support (e.g. ‘Stay & Play’)
- Direct involvement of parents in project activities
- Provision of community performance spaces

The project’s focus on learning competencies, authentic audiences and robust community partnerships, has significantly enhanced pupils’ educational experiences.

WHAT DID THE TEACHER PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

Considerable professional learning has taken place throughout the HFCMAT schools involved. The starting point for this project was that the learning it prompted would inform curriculum design across the Trust for years to come in both its mainstream and alternative settings. There has been a step change in the way the participating teachers are planning learning opportunities across the curriculum. They are using authentic audiences as a tool to increase engagement, develop self-confidence and make learning relevant for a diverse range of students. The project’s focus on learning competencies, authentic audiences and robust community partnerships, has significantly enhanced pupils’ educational experiences.

Distinctive professional learnings from Creative Connections

- Curriculum innovation
- Impact of creative pedagogies
- Scaling-up current work
- Refining communication strategies
- Commitment to project review and renewal
- Balancing traditional with new models of delivery
- Contribution to the culture & identity and to the MAT’s place within a community
- Extending teachers’ knowledge & skills
- Increased parental engagement
- Physical enhancement to the estate of the MAT



‘With our Laurel Trust hat on it was, like, right more kids need that opportunity to have an authentic learning experience and an authentic audience, so how can we change the curriculum? How can we tie it all into this event or that to create that a deeper way of demonstrating that?’

We also want to show how what you learn at school is what you’ll need in later life yes exactly what the kids themselves have said. So, we focus on transferable skills and the confidence they have now to take these skills and use them later in life”

Teacher participant





NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

There is a commitment on the part of the project team to finding ways to disseminate and reinforce the projects work, both across the local region and into the future. HFCMAT's own internal evaluation of its work states that:

'The Trust will disseminate project findings throughout the organisation. Additional opportunities will be established to exchange successful practices between schools and departments. Department leaders will be allocated dedicated time to collaborate on curriculum development, ensuring pupils receive consistent opportunities to demonstrate their academic achievements both within the educational environment and external settings. We will maintain our ongoing development of community partnerships and seek new ways of working with others to enhance the educational

experiences for our pupils. Toolkits are being developed to help other schools replicate the project's successes.'

This dynamic approach to ensuring that the project's work is future-proofed is captured by one research team member, who stated:

'Now we know people can ask themselves "How can I change my lesson, how can I adapt my curriculum plans so I can really get these young people engaged and develop their creative thinking habits?", so it has really engaged the teachers and built that culture. In turn that's built relationships between the teachers and the pupils and given them confidence to speak where they might not have had before. So, it's been amazing to bring everybody together around a collective mission that fits really strongly with our Trust 'strategic plan.'

'We will maintain our ongoing development of community partnerships and seek new ways of working with others to enhance the educational experiences for our pupils. Toolkits are being developed to help other schools replicate the project's successes'

HFCMAT





Bridging the Gap

How can an instructional coaching model be successfully developed across schools to raise academic outcomes for disadvantaged students by improving pedagogical approaches in the classroom?

Project lead: Oldway Primary School

The project involves two groups of South Devon schools, from the Riviera Education Trust and from the Ivy Education Trust, situated around the towns of Teignmouth and Paignton.

CONTEXT

Both schools are in an area which – despite its long-standing reputation as an attractive location for tourism and recreation – has significant challenges on account of economic and social disadvantage. Teignmouth South, the most deprived area in Teignbridge, has 61.39% of households living in deprivation. In 2022, of all Devon towns and villages, Paignton had the highest percentage of deprived households (66.98%), with 3359 households suffering deprivation on at least one of the official measures of deprivation (education, employment, health and housing).

Worryingly, as in other parts of England, there was growing evidence of an increasing gap between in access to these vital services, with local reports of a ‘Gulf between rich and poor widening in 10 areas of Devon’ (Devon Live, December 2022). The local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment in South Devon indicated that 27% of people in the project’s locality live in areas which are among the 20% most deprived in England. This correlates with a higher-than-average proportion of children eligible for the pupil



‘Our goal is for all teachers within our schools to have a highly trained instructional coach to move their teaching forward. Evidence-based research shows that this is the most impactful way to change pupil outcomes.’

premium grant and a significant gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

It was the project’s intention to mitigate the effects of these disadvantages: inspire the learners involved, and prepare them to contribute positively to society. This research intention echoed the collective vision of the Trusts involved is to ‘foster a culture where every individual can thrive’ through the provision of a ‘high quality, whole education with wider opportunities, unique experience and excellent outcomes.’ Its project team recognised that Instructional coaching is the best possible way to change the outcomes for all children, especially those who were economically and socially disadvantaged.



‘The impact of deprivation on the educational achievement of children and young people in English schools is well known and has been researched widely. The Child Poverty Action Group noted, for example that ‘The causal relationship between child poverty and educational outcomes is well established, with children from lower-income households less likely to achieve than their more affluent peers. This results in unequal life chances and futures, with children growing up in poverty earning less as adults.’

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), 2023

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The research question posed by the project team, ‘How can an instructional coaching model be successfully developed and implemented across schools to raise academic outcomes for disadvantaged students by improving pedagogical approaches in the classroom?’ addresses a crucial need in education. It relates directly to the local context and tackles a crucial aspect of education, one which researchers and practitioners have continued to highlight as a major challenge to the effectiveness of schools in delivering inclusive education.

Despite a wide range of efforts, resulting in some improvement, the disadvantage gap in England has persisted. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school attainment, behaviour and mental health was more sharply felt by those students who were already marginalised because of their socio-economic status.

Coaching has become an important tool in helping to improve teachers’ skills, whilst enhancing their motivation and job-satisfaction but also, their commitment. It is widely used in education systems and individual schools. Crucially, it is an intervention approach which can

‘Socio-economic disadvantage is characterised either by ‘a single indicator such as free school meal status or an index of multiple indicators including low parental educational qualifications, low-status occupation, etc. SED has been associated with lower outcomes in various domains, such as language skills, social-behavioural skills and academic attainment. This gap emerges early in life, persists well into adolescence and leads to reduced labour market success in adulthood.’

Joseph, Sylva, Sammons & Siraj, 2023



be adapted to the needs of diverse target audiences, whether school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, or students and their families.

Instructional coaching is widely acknowledged as a transformative approach to professional development with the potential to significantly enhance teaching quality and student outcomes. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) noted that

effective professional development embeds high-quality follow-on coaching, enabling teachers to acquire new skills and strategies through explicit upfront training, supported by ongoing expert guidance. The EEF also emphasised the need to employ skilled coaches, facilitating structured peer-to-peer collaboration. The resulting professional development enables teachers to better cater for the needs of marginalised learners by improving teachers’ pedagogical skills.



WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

A significant gap is still apparent in understanding the way that established teachers’ pedagogical skills are developed over time. Although there is substantial research on children’s learning and support for Early Career Teachers exists, there is a significant absence of knowledge and understanding regarding the continuous development of established teachers’ pedagogical skills. This research project placed its focus on instructional coaching as it encompasses those 4 mechanisms highlighted by EEF (2021) as characterising effective professional development: building knowledge, motivating staff, developing teaching techniques, and embedding practice.

This project aims to fill this gap by adopting an instructional coaching model tailored to the needs of schools within the Ivy Trust and Riviera Education Trust, and particularly an intention to focus on teaching those students who underachieve. The approach taken seeks to provide ongoing teacher support, focusing on improving pedagogical approaches and raising academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. There have

been many studies in previous years on instructional coaching and the effectiveness of this where findings showed positive effects on test scores (Allen et al, 2015).

The justification for this research lies in its potential to bridge educational disparities and promote equity. By implementing a structured, evidence-based coaching model, the project aims to enhance teaching practices and create a sustainable impact on student outcomes. The collaboration between the Ivy Trust and Riviera Education Trust facilitates resource and best practice sharing, fostering an environment conducive to educational innovation.

‘The top performing school systems recognise that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction: learning occurs when students and teachers interact, and thus to improve learning implies improving the quality of that interaction. They have understood which interventions are effective in achieving this: coaching classroom practice, moving teacher training to the classroom, developing stronger school leaders, and enabling teachers to learn from each other.’

The McKinsey Report, 2007, p.29

‘Studies show that Covid-related disruption has negatively impacted the attainment of all pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is evidence that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates has grown since the onset of the pandemic.’

EEF, 2022

In summary, this research addresses a critical gap in teacher development by focusing on the continuous professional growth of established educators. Through instructional coaching, the project aims to improve pedagogical approaches, enhance academic outcomes for disadvantaged students, and contribute to a more equitable educational landscape.

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

The research team decided on a mixed-method approach, involving the generation and use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were gathered using Steplab, a commercial software tool designed to track and support instructional improvements. This enabled the team to assess changes in teaching practices and outcomes by analysing pupil outcomes in core subjects.

Qualitative data was obtained from interviews with staff and questionnaires. They helped to provide a rich, three-dimensional insight regarding the experiences and perceptions of educators involved in the coaching process. Pupil well-being questionnaires

and subject-specific pupil voice surveys were also used to gather qualitative data on the views of the students in the project.

In analysing this mixed dataset, the project methodology incorporated both inductive and deductive reasoning to highlight themes and test the hypotheses. Inductive analysis in educational research means starting with specific observations (like interviews or classroom notes) and then identifying patterns or themes. It's like building a theory from the ground up. Deductive analysis means starting with a theory or hypothesis and then looking at the data to see if it supports or contradicts it. It's like testing a theory with real-world data.

Inductive = data → theory

Deductive = theory → data



It's like building a theory from the ground up. Deductive analysis means starting with a theory or hypothesis and then looking at the data to see if it supports or contradicts it. It's like testing a theory with real-world data.



The research team used purposeful sampling to select participants who were directly involved in the instructional coaching process, including both teachers and students, from the project's two partner trusts. This ensured that the data collected were relevant and representative of a school population directly affected by the coaching model.

The project involved two multi-academy trusts located in South Devon, comprising both primary and secondary schools. Support from two teaching school hubs and a research school was built into the study.

The project involved two multi-academy trusts located in South Devon, comprising both primary and secondary schools.

Ivy Trust participants

Teignmouth Community School
Dawlish College
Newton Abbot College
Kenn CoE Primary School
Cockwood Primary School
Kenton Primary School
Teignmouth Primary
Starcross Primary School

Riviera Education Trust participants

Oldway Primary School
Roselands Primary School
Shiphay Learning Academy (Primary)

Stage 1 of the programme ensured the structure was aligned to the dates of the school terms. The first stage of the study involved coaching of participants by Senior Leaders from the partner schools, all of whom had received training from Steplab, so that when they began working with their colleagues in schools the instructional focus

was firmly placed on elements of pedagogy and behaviour for learning. This phase in the project also ensured that a consistent approach was adopted by the coaches, who would each be responsible for coaching a group of teachers. Individual themes were identified as a topic for coaching, dependent on needs and priorities of each teacher/school. They included passive learners, learning attentions, quality paired talk, and curriculum planning issues.

Stage 2 involved inputs by the trained coach, started with an observation by the coach of a teaching session by a teacher (their 'coachee') which was followed by a discussion to identify an area to work on. Several small instructional 'steps' in changing the teacher's practice would then be identified and modelled by the coach, building toward a new approach for the teacher. Each small step was achieved during a two-week period, after which a further step was identified.



Stage 3 ensured that progress was recorded using specialised Steplab software, enabling an overview of progress to be monitored, including any record of outstanding practice. The focus chosen to work on was mostly related to the individual needs of the ‘coachee’, though occasionally a whole school focus was chosen such as Phonics or Oracy which all staff also focused on. The coaches within a school were able to meet and discuss issues related to their work and found this very supportive.

Finally, **Stage 4** looked at the evidence to show a link between the coaching undertaken and changes in teacher practice. Impact was largely demonstrated by school-based data, case studies, learning walks and qualitative feedback from participants. The Research school involved acted in a consultative capacity in this process.

IMPACT
Instructional coaching in the project schools has significantly enhanced pedagogical practices amongst teachers, leading to improved outcomes for disadvantaged students. Teachers involved reported that the instructional coaching model assisted them in developing a greater sense of ‘learner-informed pedagogy’, an approach which was validated by the metrics obtained



by the research team, indicating student progression in core subjects.

The teachers involved as coaches credited the work with improving their confidence, questioning skills and relationships. 76% of those involved felt their teaching had improved because of coaching and 70% felt more confident in their teaching practice. They talked of becoming more reflective and

able to identify underlying issues related to learning more effectively. Involvement in the project had signalled the importance of observing and analysing what went on in their classrooms. Instructional coaching was seen by these practitioners as a partnership for improvement. Teacher surveys illustrated these positive impacts.

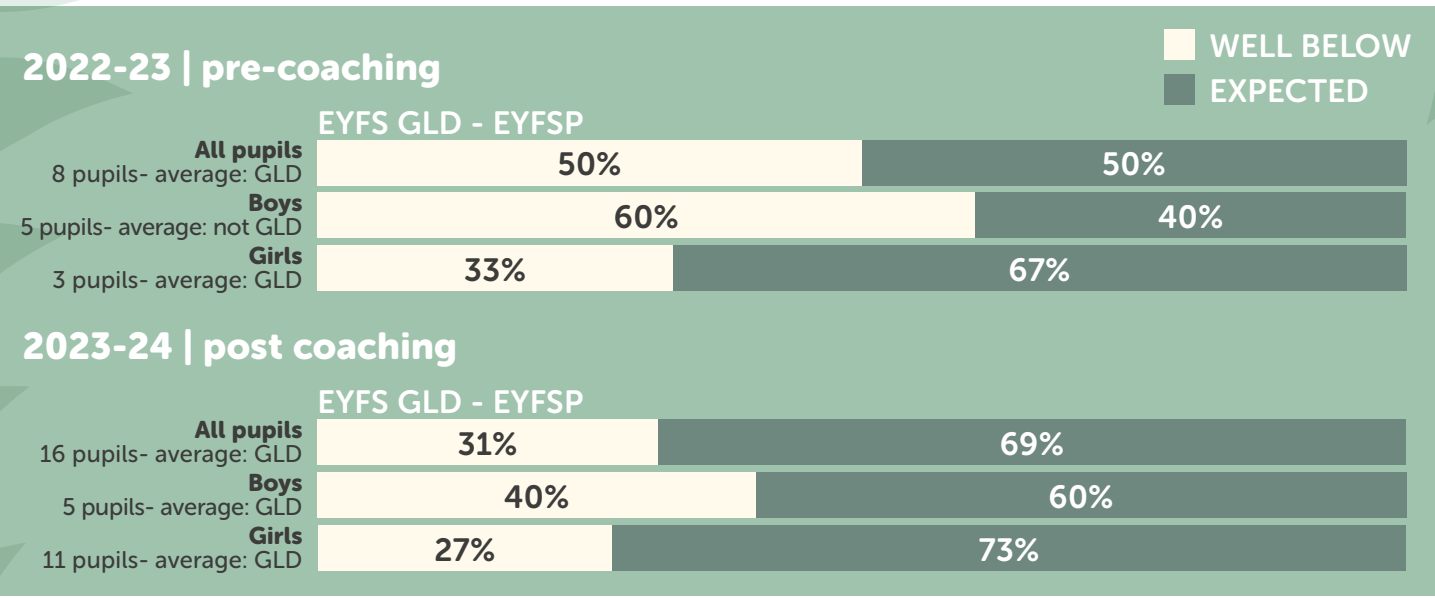
IMPACT OF COACHING ON YOUR TEACHING PRACTICE				
	Coaching has improved my classroom practice	I feel more confident in my teaching practice	Coaching has helped me to better understand pupil learning	Having models of practice on steplab is useful
Agree	12	12	9	15
Strongly agree	3	1	2	0
Neutral	5	6	8	7
Disagree	2	3	3	1
Strongly disagree	1	1	1	0
Total	23	23	23	23
Sub total	17.5	16	15	18.5
%	76	70	65	80



Quantitative data relating to pupils’ attainment levels corroborate these findings. A measurable improvement in student performance was noted in a range of curriculum areas. Notably, this was apparent for those students in receipt of the Pupil Premium Grant. Teachers who had been coached during the project outperformed those who had not taken part. Senior leaders in all the project schools believed

that Instructional Coaching had been positive for children’s learning. In one school, where there was a special focus on Phonics, there was direct evidence of improvement. Results in Reading Phonics going from 50% well below average and 50% expected to 13% well below average and 88% at expected. Other data extracts from all schools from one of the trusts illustrates more generic learning gains.

Senior leaders in all the project schools believed that Instructional Coaching had been positive for children’s learning.



WHAT DID THE TEACHER PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

Project involvement has resulted in significant shifts amongst teachers and their students. For teachers, participation has resulted in the development or further enhancement of their classroom practice. This has had a major effect on refining their professional response to the needs of their learners.

The Positive Impact of Instructional Coaching

- Helped them to improve on specific teaching strategies and classroom management
- Supported them in seeing and sharing best practice across the school
- Enabled them to work on small, manageable action steps with the support of a coach
- Impacted positively on the children within their classroom
- Enabled them to receive regular praise for what is going well within their classrooms

Evidence gathered directly from the children involved in the project was conclusive. It showed that the coaching received by their teachers had enabled them to be more engaged and confident learners.

Project involvement has resulted in significant shifts amongst teachers and their students. For teachers, participation has resulted in the development or further enhancement of their classroom practice.

Pupil well-being questionnaires and subject-specific pupil voice surveys were used to gather qualitative data on student experiences and viewpoints. Learner well-being is identified by psychologists as one of the key determinants of learning success: as the National Children’s Bureau (2016) commented: ‘The effect of interventions has routinely proved to be dramatically greater in higher-risk children’. The project was able to nurture a powerful sense of belonging and self-actualisation amongst its student participants, as illustrated in a data extract from one of the student well-being surveys.

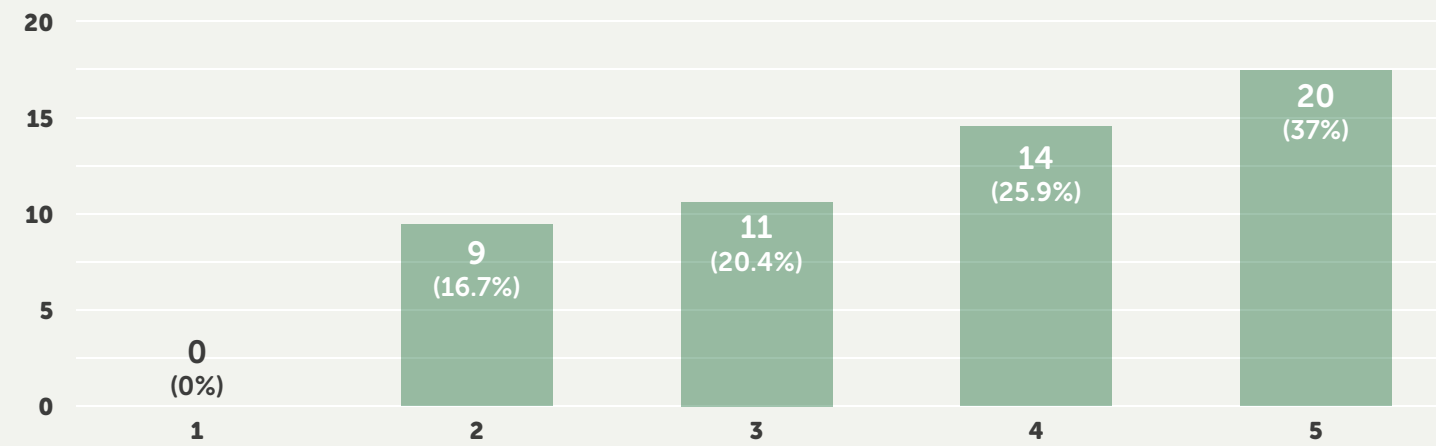
‘The effect of interventions has routinely proved to be dramatically greater in higher-risk children.’

National Children’s Bureau (2016)



Learner well-being is identified by psychologists as one of the key determinants of learning success.

I feel I achieve at home and at school | 54 responses



NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The research team have taken very practical steps to ensure the findings and insights from this Laurel Trust study become deeply embedded in the approach used in the partner schools. They have also established a clear plan to reach a broad audience and foster widespread adoption of the instructional coaching model.

To identify the most effective way of ensuring the project’s legacy

in the existing schools of the partnership, the project team made use of the template from the EEF’s Guide to Implementation (2018) which emphasises the importance of planning for sustainability from the outset.





Strategies to promote sustainability of the instructional coaching model

- Continuous Professional Development
- Regular Evaluation
- Secure Allocation of Resource Allocation
- Institutional Recognition and Support

But the research team also sought to provide guidance and support to other schools who might wish to adopt instructional coaching as a way of supporting their teachers and teaching assistants. In this instance, the team assembled an 8-step guide, based on their experience of conducting this school-based research project. This provides a valuable way of ensuring that the lessons learned in Devon around the significance of Instructional Coaching can be more easily transferrable elsewhere. ●

1. **Begin with a structured rollout plan** – select school(s)/ department(s) carefully; introduce the model gradually; allow time to embed within the school culture and individual mindset; use a pilot phase first then take to scale.
2. **Provide high quality professional development** for coaches to ensure relevance of coaching practices and validate QA.
3. **Allocate dedicated time for coaching sessions** within the school timetable to support consistent engagement and counteract workload challenge.
4. **Customise coaching strategies** to meet the unique needs of individuals and schools.
5. **Establish a robust framework for monitoring and evaluation**, using qualitative and quantitative data, to assess impact and identify areas for improvement.
6. **Develop strategies for long-term sustainability**, such as securing funding and a strategy/timeline for embedding coaching in school policies.
7. **Maintain a focus** on reducing educational disparities by aligning coaching strategies with the goal of improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.
8. **Adapt teacher appraisal policies** to reflect the coaching approach to professional development, to move away from target driven performance management.



Power play

Unlocking potential through play utilising engagement driven play to teach children with Complex Learning Difficulties to tolerate demand and uncertainty

Project lead: Sunningdale School

UNICEF (2018) has stated that 'Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills'.

CONTEXT

For teachers working in the Early Years this has long been viewed as an essential element of their pedagogy. Those directly involved with children with complex learning needs have sought to use play-based learning, informed by a growing body of research evidence.

It has been shown to significantly benefit children with Complex Learning Difficulties (CLD) by promoting engagement, motivation, and the development of crucial life skills. It helps children explore their world, develop a sense of self, and build confidence through hands-on experiences and positive interaction.

Of crucial importance for this group of learners is a recognition that the world is often a place characterised by uncertainty, absence of structure

and open to widely different interpretations of the same event or object. Many children with CLD have grown up in contexts in which structure, routines and regulation in the pursuance of compliance and conformity have been predominant. They have had little chance to develop as autonomous learners rather than active thinkers who can adapt to new circumstances.

The research at the two schools involved in this project sought to

explore this territory more deeply. Building on established knowledge, it seeks to develop independence and 'agency' for learners with CLD by making use of play. Play is regarded as a key approach in developing agency, enabling children to take on an active role and ownership in their experiences, as well as helping them to have ownership of their own learning.

Tolerating uncertainty (along with tolerating demand) is one of the key attributes we want our pupils with Complex Learning Difficulties, those accessing the Informal Explore Pathway at Sunningdale School or the Engagement Pathway at KTS Academy, to develop.

The lead school in this project, Sunningdale School, is a specialist school for children with severe, profound and multiple learning disabilities including those with autism, aged between 2 and 11 years old. It is situated in Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, in the North-East of England. Its project partner, Kilton Thorpe Specialist (KTS) Academy, is located nearby, in a semi-rural location of East Cleveland in the village of Brotton and is a 3-19 aged specialist provision. Because of their specialist expertise, the two schools have a larger catchment area than is the case in mainstream provision.

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

In the context of teaching learners with CLD, the project explored the importance of play as a key approach in developing 'pupil agency', enabling children to take on an active role and ownership in their experiences, as well as helping them to be capable, autonomous, and agents of their own learning. This required purposively establishing situations which place the learner in an exploratory environment, to avoid over-adherence to structure, routines and regulation to ensure their compliance and conformity.



Tolerating uncertainty (along with tolerating demand) is one of the key attributes we want our pupils with Complex Learning Difficulties, those accessing the Informal Explore Pathway at Sunningdale School or the Engagement Pathway at KTS Academy, to develop.

The latter would reinforce inflexibility of thought amongst these learners, which would be contrary to the educational philosophy of the two schools involved in the project.

The current research explored the idea suggested by the literature that as an individual with Complex Learning Difficulties (CLD) (Imray, 2021; Imray et al, 2024) develops social and cognitive play skills there will be a positive impact on their ability to tolerate uncertain situations and circumstances. It will also explore the suggestion that as a child or young person with CLD develops social and cognitive play skills there will be an increase in their ability to tolerate demands.

The research hypothesis informing the efforts of the teachers from Sunningdale and KTS Academy was that 'The development of Social and Cognitive Play supports an increase in the ability to tolerate uncertainty

for children and young people with Complex Learning Difficulties'.



The development of Social and Cognitive Play supports an increase in the ability to tolerate uncertainty for children and young people with Complex Learning Difficulties.



WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

Enabling access to the curriculum for those learners who have significant, complex needs – formerly described as children with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties (SPMLD) and more recently as those with complex learning difficulties (CLD) – has been a source of significant professional interest for many years. Commitment to this group of learners has become a key aspect of inclusive education, even though practice and provision has faced numerous challenges and tensions, with the debate regarding structured versus self-directed teaching prompting an extended debate amongst practitioners and researchers.

This Laurel Trust project highlights the core importance of 'tolerating uncertainty', which the research team at Sunningdale regard as 'the key skill we want our pupils with Complex Learning Difficulties, those accessing the pathway, to develop' (Original Grant Application to the Laurel Trust, 2023).

The study has had an added significance because it connects directly with the vision and professional practices in the two project schools. The project team

was strategic in its choice of focus, which has ensured that impetus has been given to an already well-established way of working.

'I would say that the Laurel Trust project actually feeds integrally into what the intentions of the school or groups of schools are anyway. In our case I've heard teachers talk about their sense of not knowing what is going to happen to their children once they transition into secondary. It's a professional frustration at all levels, including our support staff. We're aware that for some children that have attended our school the whole time we've managed to develop and engage them and teach them really well. But our more complex children fail when they hit secondary school... so there is a proper professional concern, which we've been able to raise professionally and formally within this project.'

Project Participant

'But our more complex children fail when they hit secondary school... so there is a proper professional concern, which we've been able to raise professionally and formally within this project.'

Project participant



be more

Sunningdale's mission statement



The research theme was one which had the potential to extend substantial work in the area of pedagogical enquiry. It was already a well-established feature of Sunningdale School's approach. Further development in this area was regarded as an opportunity to generate a useful evidence base to inform and further validate the play-based approach being championed by partner schools. This is especially important as there is an overt connection between the evidence gathered and the potential for subsequent professional development.

The research explored the idea suggested by the literature that as an individual with Complex Learning Difficulties (CLD) develops social and cognitive play skills, there will be a positive impact on their ability to tolerate uncertain situations and circumstances. It also examined the suggestion that as a child or young person with CLD develops social and cognitive play skills there will be an increase in their ability to tolerate demands.



PARTICIPANTS, METHODS AND PROCESS

Both quantitative and qualitative data were utilised as part of the Sunningdale/ Kilton Thorpe Specialist (KTS) Academy inquiry. These included qualitative audio/ video recordings of pupils’ engagement, positioning the study as a mixed-methods approach, which has become a valued characteristic of all Laurel Trust projects.

The learners with CLD were empowered as active participants in the process. The research team has sought imaginative/ creative ways of gathering/ adopting pupil views. This is a practical amplification of efforts to maximise the power of pupil-voice over the last two decades. All staff took part in baseline training/ moderation on play based approaches, the use of engagement motivators and recording and assessment methods. This ensured competency but also established consistency across the project schools and acted as a stimulus to professional sharing.

‘We then also led coaching sessions with the school... we had quite a lot of coaching, didn’t we, like peer-to-peer coaching where we had all the participating staff from each school together, engaging in reflection sessions with each other about their practice. It was not just findings though, not just what they were finding or patterns they were

seeing, but actually what they were doing and what worked and what didn’t work’
Project Team Member

The project’s research question (RQ) and hypothesis is: *“How effective is an engagement-based play approach to developing the tolerance of uncertainty and demand so that pupils and students are better able to access learning and make progress towards aspirational outcomes?”.*

This reflects the outline given in the project proposal and aligns appropriately with the work undertaken. The theme was one which had potential to extend substantial work in this area of pedagogical enquiry. It was already a well-established feature of Sunningdale School’s approach. Further development in this area was regarded as an opportunity to generate a useful evidence base to inform and further validate the play-based approach being championed by the project schools. This is especially important as there is an overt connection between the evidence gathered and potential for subsequent professional development (PD). This is apparent in the PD content derived from the project, covering:

- Play Based Learning
- Using the Engagement Model
- Using and Defining Engagement Motivators
- Assessing Realisation

‘It was not just findings though, not just what they were finding or patterns they were seeing, but actually what they were doing and what worked and what didn’t work.’

Project Team member

The research was organised in 5 phases:

Phase 1 | staff training relating to stages of play, engagement motivators, baseline training, visits to partner school to ensure standardisation

Phase 2 | included follow-up training (both for play and setting baselines), further visits to partner school, virtual moderation and film-making

Phase 3 | film-making and moderation activities, together with visits to the partner school and subsequent data collation

Phase 4 | conclusion of video recordings and the write-up and dissemination of the project

Phase 5 | information gathered regarding the entire research process, to promote reflection, future professional learning and to support dissemination

Great efforts were taken to ensure that the study focussed on the ‘real world’ of the children and the teachers. It was integral to what was already well-established in the project schools, and the additional focus further embedded the idea that play was an integral pedagogical theme.

‘We were researching something that sits at the core of what that part of our school does. We had adopted it to form that same function in our setting.’

IMPACT

Participation in the project has realised a range of practical as well as affective benefits for those involved and connect directly to the project’s thematic focus.

Practical applications in real-world settings

Project colleagues discussed training autistic youth for employment in a café. They explored the challenges likely to be encountered, including handling unexpected customer requests and changes in routine: in the words of one teacher, *‘what we’re giving them is an insight or at least a starting point of some strategies and a slightly different way of thinking’.*

Training and professional development

The project has had a positive impact because of its ‘practitioner-researcher’ focus. It provided opportunities to engage with practice sharing, joint observation and anecdotal discussions, as well as providing a space to build

on existing knowledge of an intervention approach.

Actions in both areas have resulted in the collation of a massive amount of practically useful data. This has enabled the project team to generate a credible and comprehensive body of evidence to support the original hypotheses they set out to test. Moreover, these data were applied by the teacher participants to further develop their knowledge of effective learning and teaching with the target group of children in both project schools.

- Accessible data illustrating +progress in developing play types
- Accessible data illustrating increases in the toleration of uncertainty
- Accessible data illustrating increases demand toleration
- Evidence of greater engagement by children with CLD
- Case snapshots of individual children providing ‘real world’ illustrations.

Deep analyses of these data have enabled staff at Sunningdale and KTS Academy to show how the results obtained supported the principal research hypothesis. For example, the team were able to show that there was a moderate, negative correlation showing that as Play Type Development increases, Dysregulated Presentation in Highest Demand (level 3) Situations tends to decrease. This was further supported by a low, negative correlation between Play Type Development and Dysregulated Presentation in Higher Demand (level 2) situations and Increased Demand (level 1) situations. This suggests that as play skills develop pupils are less likely to become dysregulated in situations that place increasing demands on them.

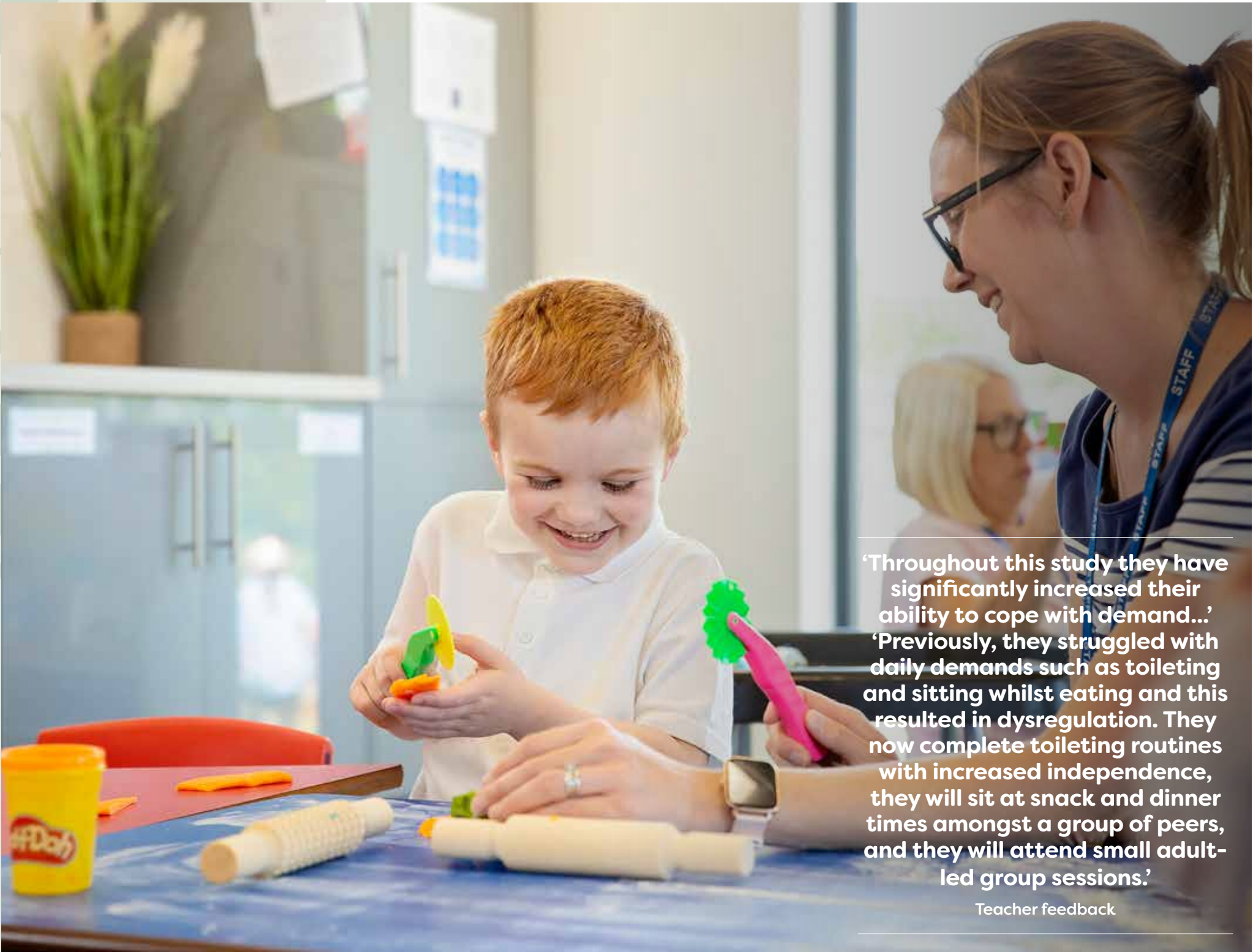
Actions in both areas have resulted in the collation of a massive amount of practically useful data.



A notable feature of the project was that it made use of the considerable in-school expertise in generating a set of valid and reliable statistically based data. This was used alongside participant stories and offered a robust and revealing narrative in support of the project team’s assertions about the value of Play with the target group of children. An illustration of the scale of data generated can be seen from the appendices which supported the schools’ final report to the Laurel Trust.

‘It was a case of learning from one another... there were no preferences stated, it was a good that everyone involved was able to give an input and ending up making a difference to the way that some of our students responded to school.’

Teacher feedback



**‘Throughout this study they have significantly increased their ability to cope with demand...’
‘Previously, they struggled with daily demands such as toileting and sitting whilst eating and this resulted in dysregulation. They now complete toileting routines with increased independence, they will sit at snack and dinner times amongst a group of peers, and they will attend small adult-led group sessions.’**

Teacher feedback

Figures and Appendices

Figures

1	Cognitive Play Types
2	Social Play Types
3	Sunningdale Play Matrix
4	Tolerating Uncertainty Record
5	Tolerating Demand Chart
6	Play Development by Key Stage
7	Dysregulated Presentation in Uncertain Situations
8	Neutral/ Regulated Presentation in Uncertain Situations
9	Resistant Presentation in Uncertain Situations
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12	Neutral/ Regulated Presentation in Routine Situations
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14	Dysregulated Presentation in Highest Demand Situations
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16	Presentation in Increased Demand (1) Situations
17	Presentation in Low Demand (0) Situations
18	Pupil Key Stages

Appendices

1	Project Timeline
2	Quantitative Data: Sunningdale Play Matrix
3	Quantitative Data: Tolerating Demand Chart
4	Qualitative Observations and Feedback
5	Tolerating Demand Chart
6	Dysregulated Presentation by Key Stage (Descriptive Data)
7	Ethical Considerations

The findings of the project are supported by the literature related to play. Specifically, the assertion that play development has a positive impact on a child’s emotional development and that Play contributes to the development of self-regulation. Affirmation that this was the case comes from the teacher-participants themselves.

WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

The delivery of the project demonstrated very sound application of some of the key principles and actions underpinning school-based research activity. These are widely recognised within the practitioner-research community – and indeed, amongst educational researchers generally – to be amongst the key building blocks for ‘practically useful research’.

- Incremental and coherent series of project phases
- Large but complementary team of practitioners
- Participatory and collaborative approach
- Explicit and well-theorised project focus, with associated hypotheses
- Use of qualitative and quantitative data
- Strategic selection of balanced sample
- Transparent & accessible data presentation
- Credible evidence-base to support the research questions/ hypothesis posed
- Reflection on challenges, application and future potential
- Systematic, evidence-informed reporting in final (internal evaluation).

The participant experience resulted in a contribution to their pedagogical skills and the underlying theories that informed them. It allowed a space in which they could unpack their ideas, reflect on ways forward and devise intervention approaches that carried significance for their future practice – and thus, for the future educational well-being of the learners to whom they were committed. Moreover, it provided reassurance that this kind of enquiry represented something that was integral to their role as a teacher: *‘...if you don’t have people who are pretty much living the project then you know it’s going to become almost like a bolt on and I think that’s exactly how it is here... absolutely built in to what we do.’*

NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY
The work undertaken will be taken further, with both project schools stating their wish to disseminate their research findings to a wider audience. This was a strongly held commitment amongst the participants, with one stating that ‘It’s something we will share with schools all over the country’.

Dissemination of the research has been taking place throughout 2025 and will continue in 2026. One of the highlights of this effort at scaling up the results is a training video, which is being created in collaboration with Equals (equals.co.uk), to disseminate at a national level the key findings linked to the pedagogical strategies for developing play types and the use of engagement motivators. Several other initiatives are already planned or underway.

- **Regional Conference, with national relevance**
- **Professional development activity – within local schools and further afield**
- **Utilising social media – notably Sunningdale’s YouTube channel**
- **Inputs to initial teacher education, in partnership with a local university provider.**



‘We’re holding a conference which will involve both schools planning a range of sessions where we share the findings. It’ll be open to national delegates and will be a full day of sharing the findings of the research. We’ll also run a series of workshops, with the various participating staff leading those workshops around Early Career Teachers about the Play practices and how they develop and can be used...’



Quantitative Data: Tolerating Uncertainty Record
OVERVIEW

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
1	Uncertain Situations													
2	PupilCode	School	Pupil	Key Stage	Play Devel	% Increase	% Increase	Neutral/ R	Resistant E	Dysregulat	Neutral/ R	Resistant E	Dysregulated	Present
3			1	Key Stage 2	4	16	3	0.199751	0.027824	-0.22757	0.039554	-0.06389	0.024341	
4			2	Key Stage 1	6	36	2.5	0.48	-0.09667	-0.38333	0.24	-0.204	-0.036	
5			3	Key Stage 2	2	8	0.833333	0.44	-0.13	-0.31	0.173333	-0.19333	0.02	
6			4	Key Stage 1	5	20	2.666667	-0.045	0.202143	-0.15714	0.253333	-0.1	-0.15333	
7			5	Key Stage 1	2	8	1.4	0.065681	-0.05583	-0.00985	0.087078	0.068962	-0.15604	
8			6	Key Stage 2	0	0	1	0.193939	0.087273	-0.28121	-0.00792	0.012443	-0.00452	
9			7	Key Stage 2	4	16	1.8	0	-0.02778	0.027778	0.098729	-0.1415	0.042766	
10			8	Key Stage 1	1	4	1.2	0.456938	-0.37081	-0.08612	0.275073	-0.24448	-0.03059	
11			9	Key Stage 1	2	8	2	0.413468	-0.19057	-0.2229	0.167109	-0.11709	-0.05002	
12			10	Key Stage 1	3	12	1.75	0.450533	-0.18087	-0.26966	0.309683	-0.19921	-0.11048	
13			11	Key Stage 2	3	12	1.5	0.396552	0.045156	-0.44171	0.216539	-0.19054	-0.026	
14			12	Key Stage 2	2	8	1.222222	0.736842	-0.49561	-0.24123	0.543621	-0.25791	-0.28571	
15			13	Key Stage 2	4	16	2	0.441414	-0.44141	0	0.136594	-0.13659	0	
16			14	Key Stage 2	2	8	1.333333	0.374194	-0.17419	-0.2	0.067073	0.006098	-0.07317	
17			15	Key Stage 4/ 5	0	0	1	-0.69231	0.358974	0.333333	0	0	0	
18			16	Key Stage 4/ 5	1	4	1.2	0.25	-0.125	-0.125	-0.16667	0	0.166667	
19			17	Key Stage 4/ 5	1	4	2	0.466667	-0.26667	-0.2	-0.14286	0	0.142857	

Quantitative Data: Tolerating Demand Chart
OVERVIEW

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
1	Low Demand																			
2	PupilCode	School	Pupil	Key Stage	Play Develop	% Increase	% Increase	Neutral/ R	Resistant F	Dysregulat	Neutral/ R	Resistant F	Dysregulat	Neutral/ R	Resistant F	Dysregulat	Neutral/ R	Resistant F	Dysregulat	Present
3			1	Key Stage 2	4	16	3	0.15256	-0.14838	-0.00418	0.163889	-0.09426	-0.06961	0.10799	-0.02651	-0.08058	0.132972	0.27725	-0.422348	-0.48485
4			3	Key Stage 2	2	8	0.833333	0.173333	-0.12	-0.05333	0.232208	-0.13635	-0.09585	0.065741	-0.11759	0.051852	0.114286	0.148571	-0.26286	
5			4	Key Stage 1	5	20	2.666667	0.2	-0.13333	-0.06667	0.497752	-0.30024	-0.19751	0.32266	-0.159	-0.16366	0.284689	0.134769	-0.41946	
6			5	Key Stage 1	2	8	1.4	0.214286	-0.21429	0	0.285714	-0.01587	-0.26984	0.427335	-0.12009	-0.30725	0.110714	-0.11071	0	
7			6	Key Stage 2	0	0	1	0.316176	-0.25368	-0.0625	0.227273	0.004785	-0.23206	0.299359	0.06859	-0.36795	0.425061	0.066081	-0.51114	
8			7	Key Stage 2	4	16	1.8	0.166667	-0.16667	0	0.154396	-0.01802	-0.13638	0.334824	0.079905	-0.41473	0.203782	0.080882	-0.28466	
9			8	Key Stage 1	1	4	1.2	0.097359	-0.07802	-0.01934	0.179546	-0.11832	-0.06122	0.504956	-0.36883	-0.13612	0.380832	-0.25053	-0.13031	
10			9	Key Stage 1	2	8	2	0.35486	-0.22946	-0.12541	0.141042	-0.06667	-0.07438	0.183844	-0.10019	-0.08345	0.330633	-0.15289	-0.17774	
11			10	Key Stage 1	3	12	1.75	0.259789	-0.21439	-0.0454	0.158719	0.033945	-0.19286	0.118056	-0.01308	-0.10497	0.365179	-0.28822	0.07696	
12			11	Key Stage 2	3	12	1.5	0.329599	-0.20961	-0.11969	0.332468	-0.12535	-0.07792	0.332468	-0.25177	-0.08069	0.828896	-0.50191	-0.12698	
13			12	Key Stage 2	2	8	1.222222	0.440338	-0.29846	-0.14188	0.505671	-0.42424	-0.17143	0.854323	-0.32907	-0.52525	0.871986	-0.31975	-0.55224	
14			13	Key Stage 2	4	16	2	0.322271	-0.28779	-0.03448	0.398699	-0.30915	-0.08955	0.455724	-0.26822	-0.1875	0.84188	-0.38121	-0.46067	
15			14	Key Stage 2	2	8	1.333333	0.311765	-0.2951	-0.01667	0.472311	-0.38886	-0.10345	0.499509	-0.38392	-0.13559	0.779347	-0.16918	-0.61017	
16			15	Key Stage 4/ 5	0	0	1	0.122607	-0.07018	-0.05263	0.323308	-0.32268	-0.00063	0.344444	-0.33333	-0.01111	0.416967	-0.41667	0	
17			16	Key Stage 4/ 5	1	4	1.2	0.094784	0.007298	-0.10197	0.033781	-0.05827	0.022485	0.04085	-0.08827	0.047619	0.097826	-0.09783	0	
18			17	Key Stage 4/ 5	1	4	2	0.071142	-0.07114	0	0.107143	-0.10714	0	0.140793	-0.18042	0.039627	0.230769	-0.10623		





How can we increase the number of young people in Somerset with SEND, who are ready and able to gain paid employment, therefore improving their future life chances?

Project leads | Fairmead School together with 'sen.se'
Transition to the world of work is often a challenging issue encountered by young people with disabilities (Scope, 2024).

CONTEXT
The national picture in England has, for many years, been one in which there are problems relating to preparation and support of young people in the workplace, identifying appropriate placements, and addressing diverse access issues as independent travel and job-coaching.

To these challenges can be added the amount of work required to enhance the awareness, knowledge and skills of practitioners in education in relation to the creation of opportunities for employment and/or training for young people with disabilities.

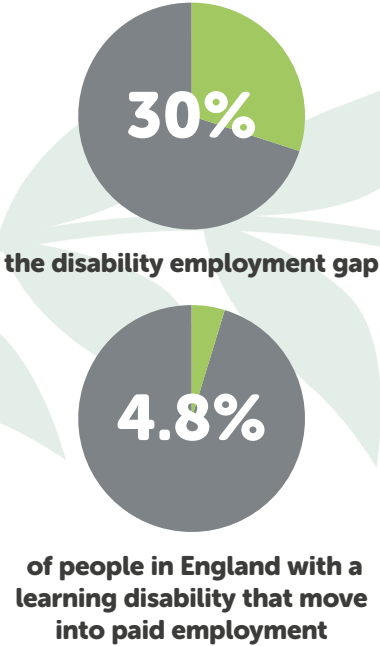
Despite the efforts of successive governments in England, the disability employment gap remains at around 30 per cent, and disabled people continue to face barriers to securing long-term employment. Only 4.8% of people in England with a learning disability move into paid employment (compared to 80% of their peers). The national climate was therefore unpromising, and it

served only to amplify the barriers that existed locally.

This project is located in Somerset, an administrative region which covers some 3,452 square kilometres, much of which is predominantly rural. In West Somerset in particular access to key services, whether on foot or

Despite the efforts of successive governments in England, the disability employment gap remains at around 30 per cent.

Around the time that this project was being formulated, Somerset had 1,439 young people post-16 with EHCPs that were known to the LA – those involved in the proposal being acutely aware that this group would soon begin seeking employment.



by public transport, is problematic, the region being one of England's most deprived areas in respect of shortcomings in its transport infrastructure.

Around the time that this project was being formulated, Somerset had 1,439 young people post-16 with EHCPs that were known to the LA – those involved in the proposal being acutely aware that this group would soon begin seeking employment. In addition, there were likely to be many more 'unidentified' young adults with disabilities in Somerset whose future was – at best – uncertain. Action relating to this target population, representing approximately 65% of all disabled young people who want to transition to employment, has been the objective of the present project.



STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The research question (RQ) identified by the project team was: ‘How can we increase the number of young people in Somerset with SEND, who are ready and able to gain paid employment?’ By focussing on such an urgent issue the project team created an opportunity to add significantly to local knowledge, closing gaps in awareness concerning this issue and enabling a more positive climate for the employment of disabled young people. Ultimately, the project emphasised the need to raise awareness amongst all stakeholders – but especially young people and their parents, carers and families and their current school or college, regarding what is available across Somerset.

A Supported Internship is a structured, work-based study programme for 16 to 24-year-olds with SEND, who have an education, health and care plan (EHCP). The core aim being a substantial work placement, facilitated by the support of an expert job coach. Interns are enrolled and supported by an education provider, for example, a training provider or college, but spend most of their learning time - typically around 70% - in a workplace. It is a full-time education programme which provides the opportunity for young people to achieve sustained, paid employment, by equipping them with the skills they need for work, through learning in the workplace.

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

The emergence of supported internship alongside mechanisms to fund routes into employment for disabled young adults have highlighted the considerable opportunities, as well as the barriers, experienced by stakeholders involved in creating a more diverse and flexible set of training and employment



‘The literature sources suggest that employers in England are missing out on a sizable pool of disabled talent. They detail several challenges that young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) face when transitioning to employment, highlighting missed opportunities for both individuals and employers.’

Extract from Project Final Report

options for this group of learners.

The core challenge, identified by the project team, was that of awareness-raising amongst all stakeholders. The significance of action on this was highlighted by the project team’s own analysis: ‘We do not appear to have challenges in getting businesses engaged we have more

businesses who are ready to offer these opportunities... However, despite this positive engagement from our business community we have struggled to recruit young people wanting to access these opportunities’.

METHODS, PARTICIPANTS AND PROCESS

The project team’s approach to data generation was underpinned by a need to secure multiple sources of evidence, which aligned well with a ‘mixed methods’ style of enquiry, with an emphasis on action-research.

Baseline data relating to applications for supported employment were generated, to compare with emerging results following the project initiative, alongside a similar dataset to illustrate % changes in pupils accessing employment during the project’s timeline. Parents and carers were surveyed about their awareness of employment, again to establish a baseline. opportunities and use this to baseline any increases in their awareness. Qualitative data were secured from job coaches about readiness for work. The project team demonstrated a

capacity for critical reflection by embedding an evaluation of the effectiveness of the existing curriculum for ‘work readiness’. The team subsequently analysed the cumulative data to identify patterns, trends and to build their conclusions into further planning.

Stakeholder ‘voice’ was at the heart of data collection, this again indicating that the project team was fully aware of the potency and value of such an orientation. This deep, ‘insider knowledge’ provided a secure and credible evidence base on which the team could then use to implement a series of actions to address the gaps in provision and practice that the data had highlighted.

The project proposal was devised as part of a partnership between all special schools and 3 Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) within Somerset. This collaboration, which has functioned for over 10

years, is called ‘sen.se’ (Special Educational Needs. Somerset Expertise). It has also worked in collaboration with a wide range of external organisations, including the Somerset Education Business Partnership.

The project team comprised 9 schools:

Fairmead School (Lead)
Avalon School
Brookside Academy
Critchill School
Fiveways School
Polden Bower School
The Mendip School
Selworthy School
Sky Academy

Knowledge of SI and parental engagement with the school
Knowledge of SI
Stakeholder consultation
How the curriculum meets the needs to prepare young people for their next steps
Interviews with young people with SEND

WHO? Parent/Carers in the partner school. WHAT? Core question about SI to ensure consistency and supplementary questions that reflect the individual nature of each school. These were identified through discussion between the sen.se Executive Officer and the participating schools PFA (preparation for adult lead).
WHO? Open invite to parent/carers engagement sessions across the country. WHAT? Semi structured interviews with 33 parent/carers across 7 different areas of the county.
WHO? Range of professionals who attend the SI forum WHAT? Discussions via virtual meetings.
WHO? Partner Special Schools WHAT? Facilitated discussion at an all-day event designed to explore SI in Somerset.
WHO? Range of young people with SEND on SI programmes. WHAT? Semi structured interviews with young people with SEND about their experiences of supported employment. All were supported to take part in the interview by a job coach.

The Who, What and Why of Data Collection on Supported Internships

IMPACT

A wide range of practical outputs, with corresponding outcomes, have resulted from the research undertaken by the team. They are inter-connected and impact on multiple stakeholder audiences, and allow all those involved, as well as others for whom the training and employment of disabled persons has been sidelined, to ‘**imagine the possibilities**’.

There have been some notable outputs, which have utilised both in-person and digital approaches to reach target audiences. Amongst the concrete resources emerging at least in part from the project work undertaken are:

- **Alumni digital platform**
- **Supported employment guides for parents/practitioners/ employers/young people**
- **Vocational Profiles (Year 9 pilot study)**
- **Somerset Educators Guide**
- **Somerset Work Experience Database**
- **Revised EHCP and Annual review templates with additional focus on ‘Preparing for Adulthood’**
- **Creation of a Somerset ‘Heatmap’ of current vocational opportunities**
- **Parent-Carer Engagement Sessions**
- **Foundation work for county-wide Supported Employment Agency**
- **Initial negotiation with NEET services to introduce ‘pre-employment’ programmes for young people**
- **Supported employment video case studies**
- **Employers Forum – with a Supportive Internship focus.**

These actions collectively addressed the project’s central mission, that of meeting the vocational and/ or employment needs of young people with SEND across Somerset. The sustained focus on meeting the needs of discreet groupings

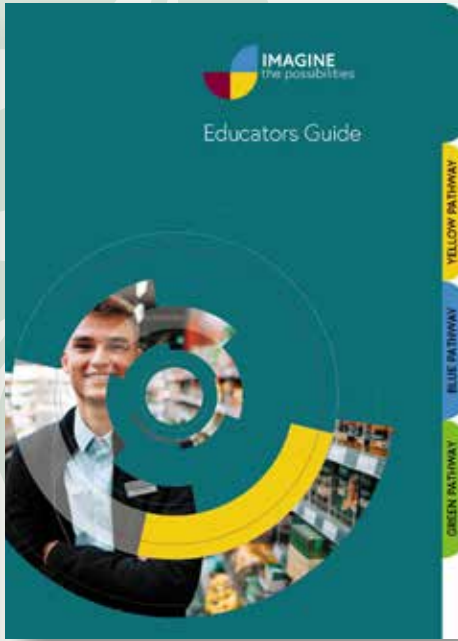


of previously marginalised young people in the region resulted in concrete actions, rather than simply presenting updated evidence of the existence of the dilemma. The actions included significant opportunities for the training and upskilling for a wide range of professionals - this has included training digital specialists in the workplace, employers or college staff to be job coaches.

The activities undertaken have raised the regional profile of supported internships the project’s actions have supported this process is by growing a critical mass of advocates across a wide geographical area, in schools and colleges. The project has promoted systemic professional cooperation to serve learners’ needs first, for example by sharing brochures, employment guides and other resources across

all the project’s partner schools or organisations.

At the very heart of these efforts has been their impact on making employment opportunities and pathways more visible and accessible for parents/carers and the young people themselves, by reducing the confusion that so often is part of the ‘supported internship landscape’. One innovative way in which this has been enabled is the development of a ‘Heatmap’ of current opportunities across Somerset, illustrating where the target group of young people live and the location of existing supported internship programmes across the region.



The project’s ‘Heatmap’ of Somerset

WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN?

The positive experiences of the research team in this project have been a notable feature, providing substantive evidence of

widespread professional learning. This can be captured in 6 aspects of project experience, which demonstrate how the successful involvement of teachers in ‘close-to-practices’ research brings almost

immeasurable benefits to schools and settings. These are neatly captured using the words of the project participants themselves.

Professional learning about ‘close to practice’ research
‘...the formulation of the bid for the Laurel Trust just helped us put down on paper our ambition, our collective ambition yeah and it turned the “it would be good if we could” into “we can actually make it happen”, and I think that’s been the amazing thing about it and it’s not just us that thinks that.’

Developing confidence amongst young people and their families
‘Parents can see wow! there is progression for my lad..’

Connecting to the pre-existing mission
‘Being part of the project is just an extension of what we’ve being doing for a long time... it’s no different but it’s given us a lot of new ideas, a lot of thinking outside the box and so it’s been amazing.’

Collaborative activity during the project’s timeline
‘...she’s really good at keeping us on task and saying this is what this is, where we’re up to, we need to get this by this time and so on. The thing is, you don’t have to hold them to account because they’re so driven on what they actually want to achieve.’



But the most potent learning relates to the accessible advice the team is now able to give to similar efforts nationally. It signals the valuable contribution made by the project in scaling-up and disseminating its strategic approach so that others can use it as a model approach.

‘We have learnt that parents and carers need information in bite sized chunks, given to them regularly, in various formats, through various platforms. The surveys carried out with partner schools identifies that more than half of the respondents were not aware of what Supported Employment was or the opportunities available.’

The Project Team



The uses of multiple datasets

‘...the methodology for this research was an action-based, mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods...The qualitative data was collected through interviews and the production of case studies with parents, teachers, school leaders and other professionals. The interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence parental engagement [and highlight] the challenge and successes that schools are facing in this area.’

Enhancing positive connections between schools and the ‘world of work’

‘I feel we are in a stronger position than before...we have developed a better system of communicating what’s available, so that our young people, their parents and the employers know where to look and where to go to get the right information.’

NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

In keeping with a project that has been all about ‘taking action’, the project team established a set of targets for the future. These were informed by strategic thinking about the best way to maximise the project’s achievements, based on a deep understanding of the challenges remaining in the supported internship field. Some key features define the way that the project team has set about doing this and offers useful guidelines for others.

‘The project team has fully recognised the importance of ‘project legacy’ – the imperative to ensure that the actions undertaken during a research project should be transferable and sustainable.’

External Evaluation Report

The team has been making full use of a well-functioning approach to communication and marketing. This has been evident in the availability of a wide range of publicity materials, making use of mixed media. Key audiences have been targeted – young people themselves, parents and families, businesses and professionals in educational settings.

The team has directed several bespoke training and/or information giving sessions to similar groups. This has impacted positively in several ways, not least making a notable contribution to ensuring greater coherence in the way that schools, colleges, support networks and businesses interact. This alignment has also helped to add critical mass in the effort to ensure



that supported internships have a high priority across the County.

A consistent feature of the project has been its use of technology. The project team incorporated plans to scale-up their activity, for instance, by piloting digital internships locally, with a view to extending them across the region.

The success of this project can be crystallised in the observation that the actions taken have ‘Tripled the

number of Supported Internship programmes and have increased the number of young people applying for the opportunities, more parents and carers being aware of these opportunities and supporting their young person to apply and succeed’, as reported in the project evaluation. And the powerful words of one project participant is concluding testimony that this research has inherently been about ‘actions’ that matters. ●

‘Our findings are that partnership working brings the greatest rewards and has enabled this project to secure a range of positive outcomes. The building of strategic partnerships across the county has been invaluable. Providing the right support at the right time has enabled us to grow from 2 to 10 Supported Internship programmes and increase the numbers of young people applying for them’

Final Project Report



Learning lessons with Laurel: emerging research cultures in schools

Philip Garner, Professor of Education, Brunel University, London

‘Culture varies a great deal from place to place, and different individuals have very different experiences, with under-represented groups experiencing the most challenges.

Researchers say that their working culture is best when it is collaborative, inclusive, supportive and creative, when researchers are given time to focus on their research priorities, when leadership is transparent and open, and when individuals have a sense of safety and security’

Wellcome Foundation, 2020

‘Culture’ is one of the most frequently used terms when describing the affective impact of the way that a school organises its provision in most aspects of formal education.



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It is an important umbrella term, having relevance for the big issues that teachers and school leaders have to attend to in their daily work, of which inclusion (Harris, Ainscow, Carrington & Kimber, 2019), behaviour (Aas, Uthus & Løhre, 2023, attendance (EEF, 2025), SEND (DfE, 2018) and well-being (Barker, Hartwell, Egan & Lock (2023) are examples.

Yet in some schools the term is misunderstood. ‘Culture’ in

those places is viewed as simply a superficial measure of overall school performance, disconnected from the ‘real job’ of teaching children – that it ‘just happens’. This is despite the official view that differences in school culture can have a direct impact on the lives of children and the way that teachers shape their work. Of course, teachers and other professional staff are at the very heart of the creation and maintenance of a positive school culture. The importance of the role teacher development in doing this has been apparent for many years (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood & Hawkey, 2006).

The last two decades or so have seen a compelling rise in

the significance of ‘research’ as an essential dimension of the professional repertoire of teachers. It is therefore entirely appropriate that this should be the focus of a brief commentary in this volume of *Research that gets Results*.

So, what about a ‘research culture’ in schools? Is it merely one of education’s latest fads, the province of those who function outside of the classroom or who are less immersed in day-to-day practicalities of ‘running a school’ or ‘working at the coalface’? There is certainly an inclination - especially noted at classroom level – to be somewhat cynical of its usefulness.

‘For many teachers, research in education has a bad name’. He goes on to refer to the ‘arcane language’ it uses, and that the reason it ‘has a bad reputation is because it is hard for teachers and administrators to understand, filled as it often is with measurement formulas and statistics.’

Berliner, 2020

Such a negative perspective will cut against the professional grain of many – but it needs to be acknowledged, whilst at the same time advancing arguments to promote a ‘teacher-as-researcher’ approach, embedded within a whole school ecosystem.

Fortunately, there is a growing body of school-focussed research – conducted by teachers – to validate the importance of practice-related research. It is regarded as a legitimate professional activity which brings explicit and highly concrete outputs and outcomes for those involved. Most particularly, it impacts teachers, teaching assistants, children and young people and

related sections of the wider school community. The last 15 or more years has seen an increased momentum in this kind of activity. For many, therefore, it is seen as an essential ingredient to the way that the school operates – rather than a luxury item, a casual and serendipitous addition to the workload of already hard-pressed practitioners in schools.





Many school-located research studies have flourished across England because of the initial support from the Laurel Trust. In a relatively short time these projects have established a welcome profile in 'close-to-practice' research. This success is based on the skills, insights and hard work of those practitioners involved – which we will come to shortly. But it also builds on the way that Laurel Trust proposals are selected. Two questions at the centre of this process are of significant potency: *'What do you want to do to make a difference?'* and *'What do you want to do to improve practice?'*

It is therefore not surprising that both are linked to a challenge to make school-based research practical, and to changing a professional orientation

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and being participative. Such exhortations (and advice) formed the basis of Bill Goddard's presentation to the Laurel Trust's 2018 Conference – an indication of the importance given to these professional activities in teacher development.

From research project to research culture: scoping successful Laurel Trust projects.

This short article explores those features of successful Laurel Trust research projects which help to create a 'research culture' in schools. It assembles a realistic picture of what those most closely involved in these initiatives (the teachers and school research leads) regard as a 'research culture' and some of the ways they have sought to establish and develop it within their settings.

To achieve this, I am drawing on Laurel Trust projects that have reached their conclusion in the last 24 months or so. I use them to highlight the article's principal focus – that 'research cultures' are incredibly important and that there are some strategic ways that it can become an embedded feature of professional practice of a school. The application process for a Laurel Trust research grant sets out selection criteria which paraphrase influential recent commentaries on what constitutes research that has an impact (Scott & McNeish, 2013). Successful applicants to the Laurel Trust are periodically reminded to maintain a 'focus on improving the life chances for children and young people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds' (The Laurel Trust, 2025).

What follows, then, is my own intuitive 'take' on what enables a research culture to emerge and be sustained in a school. I build my interpretation around some of the defining features of which of small-scale projects sponsored by the Laurel Trust. These now form an impressive collection of successfully concluded research studies on a wide range of topics. The one thing they have in common is that each has been distinguished by the 'affirming and invitational context' within which these teacher-led investigations have thrived.

To illustrate this I have identified 10 significant 'culture catalysts' obtained from my scrutiny of Laurel Trust projects over several years. They were obtained by revisiting my research diaries, notes made on

visits to schools, from the accounts of practitioner researchers from the participating schools, and from project reporting or evaluation documents. There will be other catalysts, I'm sure; however, the ones I have selected have appeared with the greatest regularity in the materials I have accessed as an evidence base. This has not been a systematic exercise and is intended only as an intuition-led illustration. Hopefully, though, it will be of value in highlighting what factors make a contribution to securing a research culture in our schools that contributes usefully – and not peripherally – to the core professional duties of practitioners.

To retain authenticity to the notion of ‘practitioner-researcher’ I invited 12 teachers – with whom I have maintained a professional association for over 10 year – to rank my serendipitous selection, according to what they viewed as the most crucial (for the purposes of accuracy, 1 of my participants was unable to complete the task – a familiar ‘pressure of work’ response, all too familiar to those reading this piece). I gave a brief explanation

of each of the characteristics I felt were ‘culture catalysts’ and asked the teachers (individually) to rank order my choices. The key features underpinning each catalyst together with a supporting resource have been summarised in table format. What should be borne in mind is that, in schools which are most successful in establishing a positive research culture, considerable synergy exists between each of the catalysts identified.

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10 significant ‘culture catalysts’

Culture Catalyst	Characteristics and principles	Find out more
Lead from the front	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be visible in the project – take a role• Recognise niche expertise• Celebrate – make use of differences	https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-a-school-wide-culture-of-research-and-evidence-informed-practice/
Build a shared vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clarify why research is valuable• Involve Staff Early: Engage teachers and support staff in discussions• Link to School Improvement Plan (SIP) and Ofsted priorities	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131881.2024.2361412
Empower staff with knowledge, time and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CPD on how to read, interpret, and apply educational research.• Introduce Tools: Use user-friendly platforms (e.g. EEF Toolkit; Chartered College of Teaching resources)	https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-a-school-wide-culture-of-research-and-evidence-informed-practice/
Identify champions and research leads	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and support staff members to lead research initiatives.• Pairs of champions offer peer support• Maximise external facilitation• ‘Unexpected’ champions can emerge!	https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3675
Start small	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Audit of ‘key classroom issues’• Model action research practice• Encourage self-reflection on own practice.• Celebrate Evidence-Informed Practice	https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-a-school-wide-culture-of-research-and-evidence-informed-practice/
Foster collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional Learning Communities form small working groups to explore designated questions/issues• Pair with other schools• Engage with Researchers/HEI	https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3675
Integrate research into everyday practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research to drive change• Connect evidence to new classroom practices• Signal changes as a routine.• Embed ‘What does the evidence say?’	https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cubec/migrated/documents/evidencereview3.pdf
Be inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognise that all teachers are ‘enquirers’• Involve TAs, learners, families and the wider community• Value all kinds of data/evidence	https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/these-are-our-stories-affording-children-and-teachers-voices-in-participatory-research
Recognise and reward effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognise staff contributions to research (shout-outs, assemblies, and sharing events).• Share findings in staff meetings/create a termly research bulletin• Provide Accreditation (via the Chartered College of Teaching)	https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2009/11/evaluating-and-rewarding-the-quality-of-teachers-international-practices_g1ghb967/9789264034358-en.pdf
Practitioner research is not just for Christmas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look ahead – how can I build on my findings• Develop a communication strategy and plan• Grow research talent	https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-primary-role-of-research-leads-developing-a-research-culture-within-schools



From research project to research culture: participant views

In the next section of this overview of possible enablers in supporting a practice-related ‘research culture’ in schools I will illustrate each of my 10 catalysts with extracts from the evidence gathered over the last few years from Laurel Trust evaluations – with an emphasis on the words of the research participants themselves.

My teacher informants almost universally rated **Lead from the front** as the most significant of the 10 catalysts I’d identified. This was reassuring, given that almost every Laurel Trust project had in some notable way signalled that successful project delivery was heavily reliant on senior leaders. One project member observed that ‘School leaders, are actively involved in shaping the training and development process in the project and that gives it

added status’. A school’s culture of enquiry needs a leader who believes fundamentally in its value, both in the short term to address pressing problems and as a strategic tool contributing to school improvement over an extended period.

Closely following leadership in the priority listing was a school’s intention to **Build a Shared Vision**. Teachers in project schools frequently recognised the need to have a common purpose in the research they undertook. This contributed to the study’s momentum, with the teachers involved feeling that there was more likely to be a shared benefit, a view highlighted by one teacher: *‘I think that the project has really helped to grow the idea that there’s a common purpose here, that we’re all going the same way and that we can learn a lot by looking at what’s going on.’*

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Participant teacher

The most effective Laurel Trust projects ensure that ongoing strategies are in place to **Empower Staff with Knowledge, Time and Resources**. This means a consistent emphasis on CPD that links to a project’s research theme, enables access to teacher-friendly materials and – probably the most important

– leveraging space within a crowded school timetable. Bringing these attributes together is a big contribution to *‘the ingredients of excellent professional development, I think the teachers have been lucky enough to have that here.’*

The teachers involved in prioritising the importance of my collection of research culture catalysts next selected the need to identify champions within the school who can be the figurehead and ambassador for practice-based research. Such individuals are not always found amongst senior leadership teams – one Laurel project was co-led by teaching assistant, for example, confirming that *‘the well-being of research projects really rests upon having people who champion the cause because especially in what is ultimately quite an action research type environment there’s so much going on that’s valuable.’*

At application stage, Laurel Trust selection panels are alert to spot those proposals which are too ambitious on account of their scale or unrealistic focus. A realisation that to **Start Small** has been shown to be advantageous to the cultural growth of research-informed teaching. Laurel Trust projects often focus on a small target group of learners or teachers at the outset and builds gradually over time. A school research culture slowly embeds because of small steps, with consistent reinforcement – not unlike adaptive pedagogy really! This was highlighted by two practitioner researchers, who commented in turn that *‘...even small interventions can change lives,’* and that *‘The little things in some of the classrooms that have made a difference and as a result of just sharpening everybody’s focus.’*

I was rather surprised to see **Foster Collaboration** rated quite modestly as a stimulus to the generation and



maintenance of a research culture. My experience of visiting project schools as an evaluator in recent years gave me the impression that major strides had been taken to recognise and apply the benefits of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to support research developments. I experienced this taking place within schools, between clusters of schools, both formally and in a much more ad hoc manner, with one senior leader stating that *‘...as a group of schools we have definitely valued the collaboration, sharing, working on a common idea which has then resulted in this being more embedded... it will definitely be continued because it connects to the mission of the Learning Partnership.’*

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Senior Leader participant



‘I’ve got a voice, and when we’re involved in this kind of work, which is very edgy and creative, it’s important that we can express our reservations.’

Teaching Assistant participant

The contribution of **Integrating research into everyday practice** was also placed lower down the priority order by my small group of invited judges. Again, I found this quite odd, especially as at the application stage there is a request to highlight the way that the issue to be researched has significance to the school or schools involved. Applicants show this relevance by mapping the challenges inherent in the place that they are located. In every case, what emerges is an issue which has been repeatedly highlighted, a problem that needs solving and which therefore carries a lot of meaning and vested interest for the teachers taking part. Doing practitioner research with this emphasis demonstrates that ‘We have a big commitment to this locality, and what I know me and

‘We have a big commitment to this locality, and what I know me and my colleagues want to do more than anything is to do practical things to make differences... that’s what’s been happening here...we’ve all changed I think.’

Participant

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A research culture will flourish if there is a mid-set and willingness to **Be inclusive**. Those projects which have delivered some outstanding outcomes for participants have been enabled because there is a desire to recognise and make use of diverse skills, and distinctive aptitudes or know-how. They also succeed because everyone has a voice, which empowers all sections of the school community to remain involved. They’re all stakeholders, including those for whom an opportunity to be involved in ‘research’ was occurring for the first time: *‘I’ve got a voice, and when we’re involved in this kind of work, which is very edgy and creative, it’s important that we can express our reservations,’* said one TA, whilst another researcher noted that *‘For some of our children, this is the*

first time they have talked about themselves...how they feel.’

In contrast to my surprise at the low rating given by my invited teachers to some of the research catalysts mentioned earlier, it seemed understandable that **Recognising and rewarding effort** figured near the bottom of the rating list. My explanation for this is that teaching is one of a small cluster of professions in which - even though substantial work-load pressures exist – job satisfaction is still a factor in attracting talented, creative people to work in schools. They most usually do so with commitment and moral purpose: notions of ‘reward’ are low-ticket items, compared to the intrinsic and very personal value gained from ‘making a difference’. Even so, one project participant

highlighted the importance of celebrating research successes in sustaining a healthy research culture: *‘It’s great that they were given recognition sometimes, you know... name checked by SLT maybe or being in the weekly bulletin.’*

Finally, a catalyst that holds everything together, even though were this a sporting league table it would be in the relegation place! My play on a commonly invoked meme is that **Practitioner research is not just for Christmas**. It may offer an instant highlight, a welcome opportunity to work rather differently, or to get a result that makes a difference in a teacher’s own classroom. But engaging in close-to-practice enquiry in schools can be challenging and, as I indicated at the start of this article,

it can lead to disillusionment and cynicism when there appears to be little in the way of concrete impact. Research culture isn’t created from a one-off event, however well-funded or innovative it might be. So, an explicit communication strategy and plan is needed, projecting actions well into the future so that *‘We will be able to build on this research... it’s as starting point but as teachers we trust where it’s going.’*

‘For some of our children, this is the first time they have talked about themselves... how they feel.’

Teaching Assistant participant

Concluding thoughts

In my preparatory work for this piece, I encountered Chris Brown’s model, which he refers to as ‘REBEL’. He refers to this as practical way in which schools can develop and sustain a research culture. project is a sign of an effective Research Lead.

I hadn’t seen this before. The value of continuing to look beyond the resources, already well known to me, became very apparent, as I read further. The approach acted as a useful summation of what my account of ‘Learning from Laurel’ is all about. In my case, the expression ‘sometimes a researcher, always a learner’ springs readily to mind’, as I’d unwittingly stumbled on a piece of writing which I’d not previously encountered and which I’d found illuminating as I collated my own ideas. In many respects this is what a vibrant school research culture does – in the words of one classroom teacher from one of the project schools, ‘We’ve been working at this for quite a long time, and the project has given us a way of making more progress towards where we needed to be...it’s a journey.’



'REBEL' Element	Practical Action
R READINESS	Allocate time in CPD; research engagement as a priority in SIP
E ENGAGEMENT	Form inquiry group/journal clubs; use EEF & Research Schools
B BEHAVIOUR	Implement research-informed strategies and monitor uptake
E EVALUATION	Use internal tools/data to track impact (e.g. lesson observations)
L LEARNING	Share insights across teams; embed reflection in staff routines

In sum, the task of developing and enhancing a research culture echoes the sentiment of Carl Rogers, that ‘*The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change*’.

Practitioner research in schools, within a positive environment of support for enquiry and reflection, is worth our investment. Its benefits, as Laurel Trust projects continue to demonstrate, are long term and lead to individual and system change and, above all else, impact most on the children and young people who are its ultimate stakeholders. ●

‘We’ve been working at this for quite a long time, and the project has given us a way of making more progress towards where we needed to be... it’s a journey.’

Teacher participant

‘The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.’

Carl Rogers

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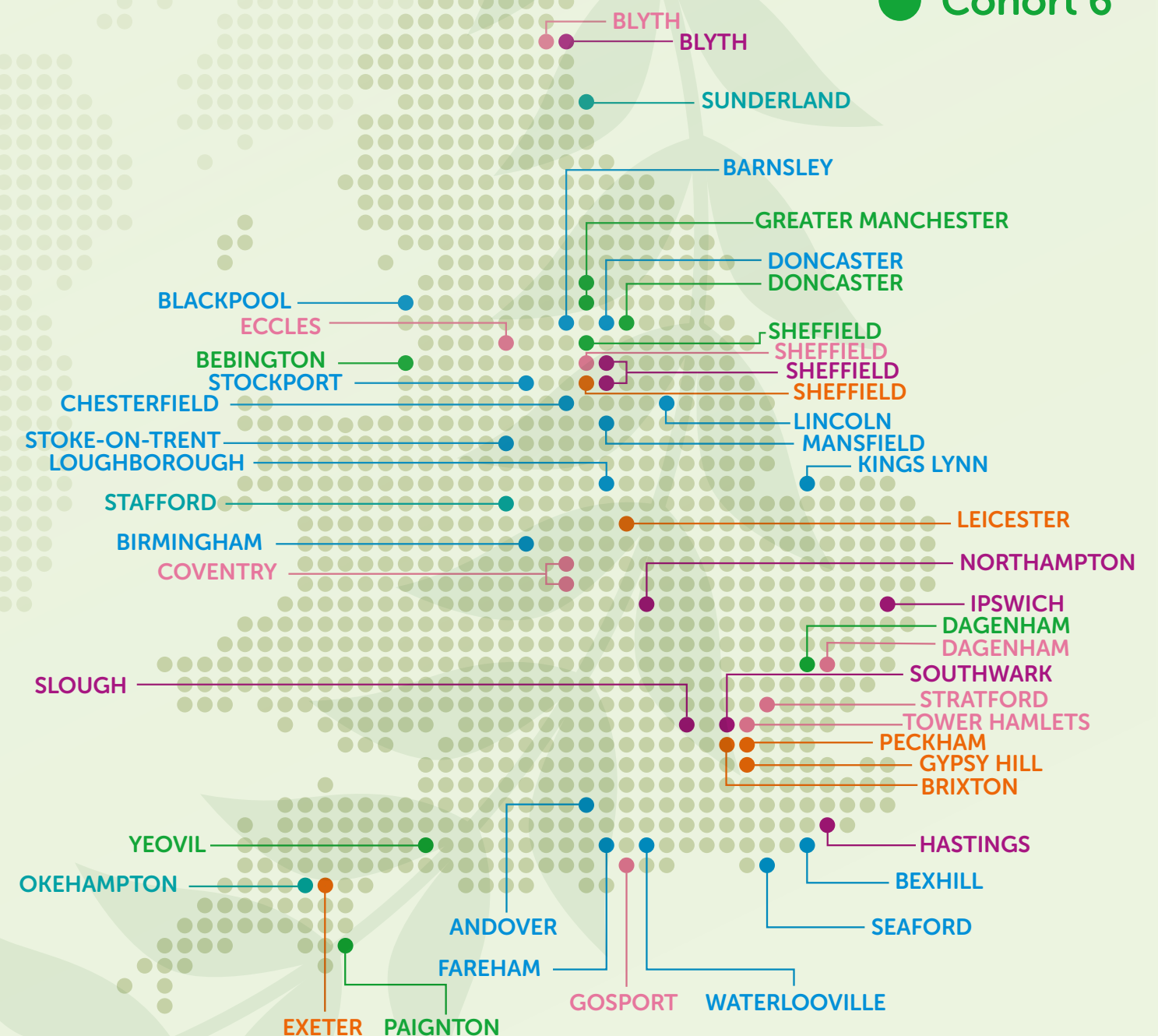
Project locations: past and present

The locations of our schools' research projects are shown here and represent a wide range of action-led research and the resulting innovation across schools in England.

To contact any of the Lead Schools in your locality please email our Consultant Director: **Brett.Associates@outlook.com**

Posters giving details of the most recent research projects appear on the website: **www.laureltrust.org.uk**

- Pilot
- Cohort 2
- Cohort 3
- Cohort 4
- Cohort 5
- Cohort 6





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