

Narrowing the Gap

Variations in attainment among pupils in the same school is a phenomenon that often goes overlooked when staff sit down to scrutinise test results. It's an area NCSL has been researching and, as a recent talk2learn discussion for the College's Leadership Network revealed, there are plenty of ideas around for how to identify and tackle the problems.

Creating a culture in which staff felt able to discuss teaching and learning issues openly helped to address within school variation at the primary school where Sue Thackeray, now principal of a federation of schools in Hertfordshire, used to work.

"We had one meeting a month where the teachers were divided into phase groups and a volunteer brought an example of one child in their class who was making great progress and one who seemed stuck. For the 'stuck' child, colleagues were asked to discuss what was happening and make suggestions based in their own practice."

Niki Thomas, one of NCSL's Regional Leaders for the Leadership Network, described how, during a previous headship, her school used Inset days for staff to discuss learning in each individual class.

"This raised quite a few variation issues in relation to approaches to phonics, aspects of maths and pupil independence to name a few. The debate seemed so much more real than the discussion we sometimes had in the staffroom. One outcome was a completely revised phonics strategy between foundation stage, year 1 and 2 and much higher expectations for pupil achievement."

Sallyanne Stanton said her primary school had tried to ensure everyone had a full understanding of what pupils were expected to achieve.

"This was no mean task for a school in an area of high social deprivation and low expectations of some staff... who often blamed the children and backgrounds for their poor behaviour. *Our focus was about ensuring our children were ready to learn and developing a learning policy that pervaded all subject areas and year groups.*"



Victoria Othick, a curriculum leader at a grammar school and specialist language college in West Yorkshire, said more should be done to capitalise on the skills and knowledge of subject leaders.

"One move would be to provide all new middle leaders with a mentor from the existing middle leadership team within the school. While taking part in the Leading from the Middle programme, *the time spent discussing difficult issues and hearing about how others had tackled problem areas was invaluable.*"

Steven Williamson, headteacher of a community primary school in Rochdale, said that strong leadership was crucial.

"We are beginning to see less within school variation because all teachers are becoming leaders who are able to identify trends as they arise and have the freedom to follow through courses of action which raise standards across the school."

Several contributors felt that differing amounts of time allocated to subjects was another factor. Dean Rowley, head of maths and citizenship at a high school in Suffolk, felt the problem was more specific:

"The major problem is one of communication between departments. Good practice is not shared enough due to lack of time to sit down and talk. Secondly, the use of data can lead to a skewed picture among departments as some use data effectively and some ineffectively."

If you are not yet a member of talk2learn and would like to join, more information is available at www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities