



## Schools and communities

# Effective classroom strategies for closing the gap in educational achievement for children and young people living in poverty, including white working-class boys

## Key messages

- Classroom strategies shown to be effective for one ethnic or socio-economic group tend also to be effective for others.

### UK research on wider school strategies

- Emerging research in the UK suggests that schools are adopting a number of promising strategies to improve outcomes for children living in poverty. These include:
  - rigorous monitoring and use of data
  - raising pupil aspirations using engagement/aspiration programmes
  - engaging parents and raising parental aspirations
  - developing social and emotional competencies
  - supporting school transitions
  - providing strong and visionary leadership.

### International trials-based evidence of effective classroom strategies

- International research evidence, based on experimental trials, identifies some common classroom strategies that work across different subjects and educational phases:
  - The quality of teaching makes the biggest difference to learning outcomes. Pedagogy matters.
  - Coaching teachers/teaching assistants in specific teaching strategies significantly raises outcomes for children living in poverty. Evidence-based approaches

include cooperative learning (structured groupwork), frequent assessment and 'learning to learn' strategies.

- Adopting new curricula does not, in general, produce large improvements in learning outcomes.
- Classroom interventions that close attainment gaps often adopt proven classroom management strategies, for example a rapid pace of instruction, using all-pupil responses and developing a common language for discipline.
- Traditional use of information and communication technology (ICT) (e.g. individualised, self-instructional programmes) has minimal impact on attainment for children living in poverty. Whole-class approaches, such as the use of interactive whiteboards and embedded multimedia, show greater promise.
- Whole-school reform models, which address multiple elements of school provision, can produce substantial improvements in academic outcomes.
- The most powerful improvements in achievement are produced through the use of well-specified, well-supported and well-implemented programmes, incorporating extensive professional development. The review identifies specific evidence-based programmes that UK schools can adopt.

- Findings from the best-evidence synthesis of strategies for struggling readers living in poverty – *What works for struggling readers?* – identify that:
  - structured phonics-based approaches, in general, work better than non-phonics approaches
  - one-to-one tutoring by qualified teachers is very effective for improving literacy outcomes, but this is an expensive strategy. Tutoring by teaching assistants and volunteers can produce positive outcomes if they are well trained and use structured phonics materials
  - Intervening immediately is most effective for primary reading, where preventative whole-class strategies are adopted first, followed by tutoring for the small number of pupils who still need it.
- Findings of the best-evidence synthesis of early years interventions – *What works in early childhood programmes?* – identify that:
  - early childhood programmes with explicit emergent literacy instruction and clear teaching objectives, provide the greatest improvements in school readiness, when they are implemented in a developmentally appropriate way.
- The attainment gap between children from rich and poor backgrounds is detectable at an early age (22 months) and widens throughout the education system, for example children from the lowest-income homes are half as likely to get five good GCSEs (General Certificates in Secondary Education) and go on to higher education.
- White working-class pupils (particularly boys) are among the lowest performers in academic achievement.
- Nevertheless, the link between poverty and attainment is a multi-racial phenomenon, with socio-economic gaps much greater than ethnic group differences.

## What evidence is available?

There is an extensive amount of research in the UK analysing the link between poverty and attainment, and in relation to other factors (gender, ethnicity, schools etc). However, there is much less quantitative evidence available in terms of ‘what works’ for specific interventions and strategies.

There is a much larger evidence base available internationally in this area.

## What approach did we adopt?

We adopted a mixed-methods research approach – a qualitative review of observational and correlational research conducted in the UK, supported by a quantitative review of trials of classroom interventions, drawn from international studies. The first provides a wider picture of current good practice in UK schools (although maybe not ‘proven’) and the second shows where there is a direct causal link between a specific approach and learning outcomes, although not necessarily drawn from UK schools.

## Who are the key stakeholders?

- children and young people living in poverty
- parents and carers of children and young people living in poverty
- head teachers, principals, staff and governors at schools and other educational organisations with a high proportion of pupils living in poverty
- local authorities
- national policy-makers.

## Summary

This summary is taken from the research review, which tells us what works in closing the gap in educational achievement for children and young people living in poverty, including white working-class boys. It is based on a rapid review of the research literature involving systematic searching of literature, and places a focus on the highest-quality evidence of ‘what works’. It summarises the best available evidence that will help service providers to improve services and, ultimately, outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The Institute for Effective Education carried out the review on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO).

## What are the key issues?

- One in four children in the UK grows up in poverty, and for these children the impact on their chances of education and life success is profound.

“ As the direct contact point with pupils in schools, education staff are the key route to inspiring children from low-income families into learning. ”



## Their contributions are valuable in the process of improvement

**Children and young people** living in poverty respond to classroom interventions that improve instructional processes and teaching methods. Well-specified and well-supported programmes and practices provide the greatest learning outcomes, which motivate and engage all learners, not just those from poor backgrounds. Children from deprived areas respond positively to opportunities that raise their aspirations for learning and future success.

**Parents and carers** should be actively engaged by schools to support their child's development and learning. Breaking cycles of low aspiration and disenfranchisement with education is an important step for narrowing attainment gaps.

Strong and visionary leadership, provided by **head teachers and principals**, is often the driving force behind improving outcomes for children living in poverty. Senior decision-makers play a key role in improving teaching strategies, by providing extensive professional development in evidence-based programmes and practices.

As the direct contact point with pupils in schools, **education staff** are the key route to inspiring children from low-income families into learning. They need to develop their teaching methods to meet the needs of these young people in line with evidence-based strategies drawn from the profession and research.

**Local authorities** need to work across the Early Years Foundation Stage sector, primary and secondary schools to support the adoption of evidence-based programmes and practices in schools. They should encourage changes in pedagogy through

extensive, school-based professional development. They should plan targeted approaches to raise the aspirations of children from low-income families and engage parents in school life.

In a climate of financial austerity it is crucial that schools target any new resources for poor children into interventions that are proven to raise outcomes. **National policy-makers** should support the use of evidence-based strategies and interventions, and build more widespread access to programmes of this kind.

## The evidence base

We found an extensive amount of UK-based research analysing the link between poverty and attainment. Collectively, these studies create a reliable picture of the correlation between low attainment and socio-economic class, and also investigate the relationship with other factors, including gender, ethnicity, parental factors and school environments.

Although the relationship between poverty and attainment is well characterised, there is less understanding of 'what works' in terms of interventions and strategies for raising attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and very little that is specific to white working-class boys. Most of the UK evidence in this area is based on observational studies, case studies, surveys, policy evaluations and other non-experimental research. This qualitative evidence is supported to a lesser extent by correlational analysis of outcome data for specific strategies, interventions and policies.

We identified a much larger body of quantitative international evidence that met the inclusion criteria for the main body of this review. Hence, there are some limitations in extrapolating the findings of the evidence to a UK context at this stage.

## Research review methods

Research literature was identified through systematic searches of relevant databases and websites, recommendations from our Theme Advisory Group, and considering studies cited in identified literature ('reference harvesting'). The review team used a 'best-evidence synthesis' approach to reviewing the research, adapted from the strategies used in the Best Evidence Encyclopaedia (BEE – [www.bestevidence.org.uk](http://www.bestevidence.org.uk)). The method, described by Slavin (2008), is similar to meta-analysis. This means that there are well-specified procedures for searching the literature, for including relevant and methodologically acceptable studies, and for pooling or averaging findings across studies.

## Next steps

Three other reviews in the Schools and Communities theme are available on the C4EO website. These focus on effective practice in: closing the gap for children with additional needs; educational transition; and strengthening family wellbeing and community cohesion through the role of schools and extended services.

Local decision-makers and commissioners may also find it helpful to read the **Schools and Communities directors' summary**, which presents the key messages from the three reviews.

C4EO is using the main messages from all the Schools and Communities reviews to underpin its knowledge-sharing and capacity-building work with local area partnerships, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working with schools and supporting children, young people and families in the wider community.

## Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to [www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk) to download full and in-depth versions.

## How can C4EO support your vision?

C4EO offers wide-ranging support, including:

- validated local practice
- knowledge workshops
- sector specialists and tailored support
- research and knowledge reviews including key messages from research.

Please go to [www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk) to access full information.