Rationale for the ‘Thinking template’

The following toolkit represents an enquiry-focused process rather than a list of strategies and ideas, since these are already well-documented in evidence-based reviews and literature reviews elsewhere. Most educational thinkers, researchers, school leaders and improvers now agree that the notion of a fixed set of strategies that work for disadvantaged pupils per se, is erroneous. Strategies that work in one context will rarely work as effectively elsewhere, unless they are well matched to specific needs and characteristics. The time has come for a fresh approach that recognises this: one that is more in keeping with the educational zeitgeist, which foregrounds a more empirical approach, in which schools make use of, and carry out research.

Therefore, this approach is based on the premise that schools need to make **their own well-reasoned choices** about the strategies that are most likely to lead to successful outcomes in **their specific contexts**. However, the approach also recognises that improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils is, **above all, about ensuring that every pupil has access to a high quality teaching and learning experience, every day. All strategies and the spending of PP funds should be directed towards this central purpose, either directly or indirectly.**

The tool kit aims to help a school/group of schools make the choices rather than make the choices for them. Each school’s context will have a unique combination of features relating to the significant characteristics of its pupils, community, workforce and school culture and systems. It is also our contention that these characteristics are not uniform within a school, but vary across different cohorts and are influenced by individuals’ learning experiences. The capacity of a school to identify and respond to the changing patterns of needs is, arguably, at the root of sustained success. There is no fixed recipe; the ingredients need to be adjusted and adapted if they are to succeed. We have developed a toolkit to support schools in adjusting, adapting and possibly replacing those ingredients.

The toolkit offers a structured thinking process that can be asked at a variety of levels from classroom to whole school level. There are a series of iterative activities embedded within it to facilitate discussion and draw out professional insights and hypotheses. It requires skilled facilitation to help participants think critically and creatively.

The toolkit will take a number of sessions to work through, informed by further review and evidence scrutiny so that it leads to well-informed analysis. A useful way to view the toolkit, is as a multi-layered*‘thinking template’* .To ensure the depth and range of thinking, each process within the ‘thinking template’, is best undertaken at all levels (e.g. governor, school leader, teacher etc.) simultaneously to create a multi-layered or multi-dimensional response – similar to a 360 degree survey. However, it may be necessary, due to constraints of time, for the processes within the ‘thinking template’ to be run through consecutively, with one stratum (e.g. governors) going through them at a time. If this were the case, it would be important to pull all the layers together in some kind of summative activity.

The identification of an important question may often be the most **valuable outcome during this process**. **However, the intention is that the school (or teacher, leader, governor etc.) works towards identifying specific, cohort, group and/or individual actions that are time limited and focused on impact**. This is not intended as a ‘one-off’ process. It needs to be re-visited in the context of both the impact of the school’s strategies and the changing combination of characteristics of pupils as individuals and groups over time.

It is our intention that, through working together in this process, all stakeholders gain both ownership and commitment to actions underpinned by a well-evidenced, clearly articulated and shared analysis that is personalised to the significant characteristics of pupils, community, workforce and school.

**‘The Disadvantaged Thinking Template’**

Please note that the ‘thinking template’ has been diagrammatically represented, so those involved in the process have a route through and visual aide memoir. However it is expected users will vary the structure to meet their needs.

The template begins with a contention or hypothesis:

**Knowing the characteristics of pupils/community/ school/ workforce is essential to ensuring consistently high quality teaching and strong outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.**

**Main processes**

The above hypothesis should be considered and reviewed by school leaders/ school improvers/ governors/middle leaders/ teachers. **This is the most critical aspect of the ‘thinking template’ and will take time.** If this is done well, the rest of the ‘thinking template’ will work better and the impact will be greater. It might help to go through the following steps.

Process 1: Consider the significant characteristics that may be influential on **pupil outcomes (which may also include ‘soft’** **outcomes**) in each of the four focus areas: pupils, community, school (culture, systems and curriculum), and workforce.

* Analyse the impact that these characteristics may be having on pupil outcomes currently (positively and negatively) in differing cohorts, groupings and subjects/aspects of provision.
* To assist you in undertaking your analysis, we have suggested some directional questions. Some questions relate equally well to all the foci, such as a question about how much you understand about the key characteristics. However, some questions relate better to some foci than others and we have categorised them. However, you may want to swap questions around **and, we would encourage you to add your own questions.**
* Some questions will work better with specific layers, but most questions should be explored by all the layers.

Process 2: Following answering these you should be able to formulate **essential enquiries**. There probably will be no more than two for each focus that will helpfully deepen and extend your analysis even further. **Some suggested** **essential enquiries are on the diagram.**

Process 3: To help you respond to and analyse your essential enquiries, we have collated a menu of suggested activities. It is for each school to think of which activities will work best in its context and/ or use its own activities.

Process 4: Following the process of responding and reflecting on your **essential enquiries**, it should be possible to identify **key themes** for each focus.

Process 5: Think about any links that are represented in your responses/evidence presented in relation to each essential enquiry **i.e. your key themes**.

* What are the links across the four different foci and how do they work?
* This is a crucial ‘funnelling ‘activity and should enable you to establish a clear picture of what you are currently doing that works well and why it is well matched to the needs of the pupils.

Process 6: Deciding on next steps.

* Consider whether these linked strengths are sufficiently embedded and consistent in the school. Use this to decide what needs maintaining and embedding further (‘maintain and embed’). Decide how and when this will happen, as well as how you will tell if it is working.
* Identify what actions might be taken to change (including to stop) existing practices that are not having sufficient impact or improve some with limited impact (‘change or improve’).

Process 7: Pulling the process together.

* Make sure that the responses from different layers (i.e. governors/improvers/leaders/ teachers/TAs) are incorporated into a summary set of multi-layered responses/actions (which could split into two sections, or more, if schools wish). Do not assume that priorities will remain the same throughout the academic year or from one academic year to another, therefore, repeat the thinking template at key points in the academic year, for example after official examination results come in.

**Section 1: maintain and embed**

**Section 2: change and improve**