BRIDGING THE GAP:
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

BACKGROUND TO BRIDGING THE GAP PROJECT

Research and experience in Ireland and internationally shows that there is a wide gap between the educational experiences and achievements of young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. This gap exists in spite of government commitments to promote equality of educational opportunity for all. It is often argued that the education system contributes to inequality, and that the many government-funded support projects for disadvantaged communities have done little to achieve social and educational inclusion. However, in Ireland and elsewhere much has been learned in recent years about how educational disadvantage might be tackled more effectively. The Bridging the Gap project draws on national and international good practice models and is developing innovative approaches aimed at enhancing the educational experience of school communities in disadvantaged areas of Cork city. The project runs from 2001 to 2006. It aims to "bridge the gap" between the educational opportunities and achievements of pupils in schools in disadvantaged

areas of Cork city and those in other areas. The project extends the community mission of University College Cork, and it is directed by Professor Áine Hyland, Professor of Education and Vice-President of UCC. The project is co-ordinated by University College Cork, funded jointly by the Department of Education and Science and by private funding obtained by UCC. Forty-two schools and centres in Cork City are participating in the project (see list of participating schools in the Appendix). There is a steering group for the project, which includes representatives from the Department of Education and Science, City of Cork VEC, and one of the funders (see list of steering group members in the Appendix). The project team includes staff from a number of university departments. The project collaborates with schools and other agencies working in local communities. It also links with state-funded educational opportunity initiatives. The project manager is Dr. Tracey Connolly.

AIMS OF BRIDGING THE GAP PROJECT

Bridging the Gap is a five-year project, for which University College Cork has secured both public and private funding. It is a leading-edge project, which seeks

to influence policy on educational inclusion locally and nationally, by developing and disseminating effective practice with a clear and strategic focus on systematic goal-setting and monitoring of results.

The project aims to "bridge the gap" between the educational experiences, opportunities and achievements of pupils in schools in disadvantaged areas of Cork city and those in other areas. It aims, in particular, to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

• to stay in full-time education for as long as possible and to achieve their full potential
• to have a positive and rewarding experience of schooling
• to develop the necessary skills and motivation to be lifelong learners
• to leave school with appropriate certification of their achievements
• to become, ultimately, gainfully employed, constructive and caring citizens.

The project also aims to bridge the gaps that often exist between

• isolated projects that attempt to address educational disadvantage and sustainable policy on educational and social inclusion
• the practice of individual teachers and whole school approaches to promoting educational inclusion
• the university and the communities it serves.

APPROACH TO EVALUATION

The model of evaluation that has been adopted within the Bridging the Gap project is collaborative and formative. It engages project participants in setting goals and in monitoring achievements against these goals. This approach to evaluation encourages reflection, which has been shown to bring about change in the practice of professionals, including teachers. It creates an environment where innovation and risk-taking are possible, because the evaluation is not based on a ''finger-pointing'' approach, nor on an assumption of deficit or failure.

By incorporating elements of participant observation, action research and reflective practice, the evaluation facilitates the concurrent documentation and early analysis of the outcomes of the project. It allows for processes and actions to be adapted in the light of emerging results and provides good examples of practice for dissemination, both within the project and further afield. In this way, the project focuses clearly on identifying the impact of various interventions, and the evaluation, by being an integrated part of the action plan, positively supports participants. In adopting such a systematic approach to evaluation throughout the life of the project, Bridging the Gap is enabled to engage in evidence based advocacy of certain approaches to promoting educational inclusion.

This is the third annual evaluation report of the Bridging the Gap project. It covers the period from September 2003 to August 2004. The focus in this year's report is to let the project achievements speak for themselves, by including examples of practice drawn from the various strands of the project. Cynthia Deane, project consultant, has compiled the report based on extensive material provided by the project manager and by the participating schools, and on observation that she carried out of project activities during the year. The report includes two main parts. In the first part, the aims of the project and its distinguishing features are outlined briefly, and there is a summary of the activities and main achievements for 2003-2004. The findings and recommendations of the evaluation are presented at the end of this part of the report. In the second part, the findings of this year's evaluation are described under four key themes, each of which represents a hypothesis about effective ways of promoting educational inclusion that has been tested through the Bridging the Gap project. This section, which comprises the main body of the report, includes case studies drawn from school reports and from project activities during the year.

CALENDAR OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES 2003-2004

30   From the Laboratory to the Classroom: Exploring Science at Primary level
        Professional Development seminar for teachers
        Presenter: Dr. Siobhán O'Sullivan, Dept of Biochemistry, UCC

OCTOBER

8   Launch of Annual Report and video
        Session for Principals: Project planning and monitoring
21   Financial Management in Schools
        Professional Development seminar for teachers
        Presenter: Derry Cotter, Dept of Business, Finance and Information Systems, UCC

NOVEMBER

13-20   "Tyger Tyger Burning Bright" Art exhibition, Cork Vision Centre
18   Linguistic difference and educational disadvantage
        Professional Development seminar for teachers
        Presenter: Dr. Áine Cregan, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick
25   Coping with Bullying
        Seminar for parents
        Presenters: Dr. Brendan Byrne Counsellor and Elizabeth Quinn
        National Association for Parental Support
26   IT course for teachers, session 1

DECEMBER

3   IT course for teachers, session 2
10   IT course for teachers, session 3

2004
FEBRUARY

3   Reception to celebrate success in Young Scientist Exhibition (Dean Daly, Mayfield Community School)
10   IT course for teachers, session 1
17   IT course for teachers, session 2
17   The pleasure principle: Reading for enjoyment
        Professional Development seminar for teachers
        Presenter: Dr Tom Mullins, Education Dept, UCC
24   IT course for teachers, session 3

MARCH

10	Visit to UCC by parents
15	Concert in UCC attended by pupils from 8 schools
22	Strategies to Improve Literacy
	Professional Development seminar for teachers
	Presenter: Jerry McCarthy, Junior Certificate Schools' Programme and Irish Learning Support Association
31	Visit to UCC by parents

APRIL

1	Visit to UCC by parents
1	Monitoring and reporting on school projects
	Session for Principals and Teachers
20	Visit to UCC by parents
21	Public Art Exhibition Newbury House, Mayfield (Art work from two local primary schools)
26	Leadership in Schools
	Professional Development seminar for teachers
	Presenter: Michael Farrell, Administrative Secretary, UCC
28	Bridging the Gap project display at Joint Managerial Body (JMB) Conference, Jury's Hotel, Cork

MAY

4	Evaluation 2004: Preparing your project report
	Session for Principals and Teachers
11	Science Laboratory Workshop for Primary School Teachers
	Dr. Siobhán O'Sullivan, Dept of Biochemistry, UCC
17	Visit to Ionad na Gaeilge Labhartha: 1 school
25	Visit to Ionad na Gaeilge Labhartha: 2 schools

JUNE

9-10	Four showcasing events in UCC:
	20 schools participated
17	Reception in honour of four principals' retirement

JULY

7-14	Harvard Summer Institute

PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS 2003-2004

1. A whole-school approach to setting targets and monitoring results produces positive outcomes for teaching and learning in schools.

2. Arts and other curriculum enrichment interventions have a positive impact on learning disposition.

3. Empowering schools to respond flexibly to the needs of their learners and community has a positive impact on schools and produces good learning outcomes.

4. Through the Bridging the Gap project, the University engages in a learning partnership with schools, which promotes a learning organisation culture in both the schools and the University.

PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS 2003-2004

- The scope and impact of the project was broadened, deepened and extended in 2003-2004, with more pupils involved; more teachers involved; more schools involved; more parents involved, a more diverse range of activities provided.

- The project has reached out to a broader community and there has been an increasing level of co-operation with many different agencies, both at school level and at whole project level.

- Schools have carried out more systematic data collection and analysis to help them identify the impact of the project on achieving their goals.

- An increasing level of confidence and creativity is evident in school projects.

- There has been further development of the links between UCC and the project schools, which has provided new learning opportunities for all participants, and enhanced opportunities for professional development of teachers.

- A whole-school approach to educational inclusion is becoming more evident in many project schools.

- There is greater integration of project strands, with a growing emphasis on networking and dissemination within the school-based projects.

PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS 2003-2004

From the outset, the Bridging the Gap project has been characterised by a number of important distinguishing features, which are considered to have contributed to its successful outcomes to date.

In particular, project participants and other observers have identified the following as key success factors:

- the role of the university as a central driving force in the project
- the focus on a whole-school approach to setting goals and monitoring outcomes
- flexible and strategic targeting of resources in a way that produces sustainable impact in schools
- the synergy and complementarity that is achieved between the project and other initiatives in schools and communities.

ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY AS A CENTRAL DRIVING FORCE IN THE PROJECT

University College Cork is well placed to co-ordinate the Bridging the Gap project. The university has formed positive links with the project schools and there is a good level of trust between the communities and the university. The university also has strong credibility among primary and second-level teachers in the Cork area, many of whom have over the years participated in projects and professional development facilitated by the Education Department and other departments.

The leading role played by UCC makes a critical contribution to the project in a number of important areas, notably:

- The university provides an overview of research and practice in the educational disadvantage area as a basis for the innovative developments and continuing research within the project.

- UCC has a high level of credibility in the fields of education and community development, both in Cork and nationally.
- There is an important link, through Professor Áine Hyland, Vice President of UCC and Project Director, with the National Educational Disadvantage Committee.
- The university's autonomy in the design and implementation of the project enables it to form links with, and add value to, other local and national initiatives and projects, for the benefit of the participating schools.
- The university is uniquely positioned to support and enable education professionals who want to change their practice and improve the experiences of learners in their communities.
- There is a strong commitment to the project at the highest management levels in the university, and this ensures that key resources such as personnel, funds, and infrastructure are made available to the project. A wide range of staff members drawn from a number of university departments are actively participating in the project. Students from some departments are also involved.

The university supports the participating schools and communities by building their capacity to create sustainable approaches to educational inclusion. The supports provided by the university to the project schools include, for example

- Project direction and management, including the services of a project manager who co-ordinates all of the project activities
- Focussed advice on strategic planning and goal setting for individual school projects
- Professional development for teachers and principals
- Action learning for participants, through peer learning networks
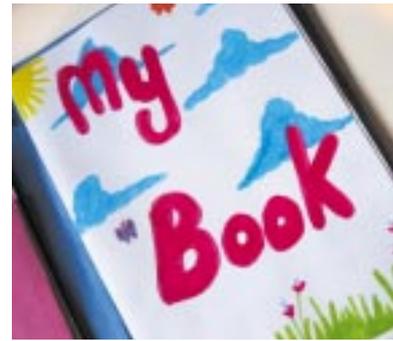
- Dissemination of best practice models of delivery, based on research findings
- Guidance for specific research projects.

University links: Achievements 2003 – 2004

During the past year, the university links have been developed in a very significant way. Schools have benefited considerably from collaborating with staff of the science faculty and students from the music department in their projects. In addition, a science workshop was held for primary teachers, and there is an interest among participants in a more extensive programme to support the teaching of science in the primary school, which may be provided by the university in the future. There have been numerous visits to the university by pupils, teachers and parents. For example, Ionad na Gaeilge Labhartha in the university has run a programme of visits for the Gaelscoileanna that are involved in the project. Several hundred pupils also took part in the four project showcasing events held in UCC in June 2004.

WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

In recent years, there have been many government-funded initiatives in Ireland designed to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to address the problems of underachievement, failure and early school leaving. However, many such initiatives are limited in their scope and impact, chiefly because they have not attempted to change the culture of the school or to take a whole-school approach to setting educational inclusion goals and monitoring outcomes. While additional specialised teachers have been appointed in some schools, and out-of-school support teams are available in others, the specialist teachers and support staff often have little interaction with the classroom teachers. The classroom teachers in turn have not generally had adequate training to cope with the specific demands and needs of children at risk.

The importance of involving the principal and the whole staff in any initiative that aims to address disadvantage has been emphasised in the reports of previous projects. Many of these reports highlight the importance of mainstreaming pilot projects and initiatives into the normal operations and curriculum of schools. Concern has been expressed that a number of the existing preventive education projects are being developed by one or two teachers within individual schools, and that other teachers have little awareness or understanding about these projects. It has been pointed out that steps need to be taken to ensure that the whole school staff is familiar with and committed to the support initiative. The whole-school approach, especially the involvement of all teachers in the setting of goals and the monitoring of outcomes, has been a key feature of Bridging the Gap from the outset. As the project progresses it is clear that this aspect plays a pivotal role in consolidating the impact and sustainability of the project.

Whole-school approach: Achievements 2003 - 2004

In the third year of the project, it is clear that the whole-school approach has become a reality in most project schools. The majority of this year's school reports show that the number of teachers and pupils participating in the project has increased over previous years. Many of the reports state that the Bridging the Gap project has developed from being a small marginal activity within the school into something that involves the whole staff, with a correspondingly greater impact on pupils and their families. Activities such as professional development for teachers, visits to the Opera House by pupils, visits by pupils and parents to UCC, and the showcasing events have provided opportunities for increased involvement and have given the project a very high profile within the schools.

Since the project began, schools have become very familiar with the model of focused goal setting and monitoring of results that is promoted within the project. This year's reports in particular show that many schools have adopted a very systematic approach to data collection and analysis, so that they are able to track the impact of their interventions on the learning and achievement of pupils.

FLEXIBLE AND STRATEGIC TARGETING OF RESOURCES

Research evidence suggests that where additional resources are carefully targeted they can bring about significant and sustainable improvement in how schools deal with educational disadvantage. These additional resources have been shown to be particularly effective when they are used to provide flexibility ''at the margins'', for example to supplement the usual curricular offerings, where they act as a catalyst for change and where they are used to assist with the implementation of innovative classroom practices. Above all, they are effective when used to bring about a change in the culture and to assist the school in putting in place the in-school processes that

enable improvement from within. In formulating a strategy for the Bridging the Gap project, it was considered important to take account of international research which found that allocating additional resources to schools is most effective when:

- The planning of expenditure integrally involves the schools themselves
- Facilitators with high credibility are bought in to provide insight and analysis and to give the initiative status
- Significant numbers of teachers in the schools are involved in planning and consultation
- There is limited but significant expenditure on symbolic change (such as establishing high quality displays of pupil work and other achievements).
- They are focused on attempts to change pupil (peer group) attitudes or staff attitudes and expectations
- Provision is made for professional development opportunities related to the goals of the project
- The additional expenditure becomes an integral part of the school's development strategy.

PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS 2003-2004

**Flexible and strategic targeting of resources:
Achievements 2003 – 2004**

Schools have been enabled through the project to identify the learning needs of their whole school community, including parents, pupils, principal and staff. The project has provided resources to help the school meet the identified needs. Over the past year, it is clear that schools have begun to diversify their activities and to involve more participants in the learning activities provided by the project. There appears to be a growing confidence in the schools, and this is evident from the range and scope of project activities that are reported this year, many of which involve a public dimension such as a concert, exhibition or display of work.

ADDED VALUE OF THE PROJECT: SYNERGY AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Bridging the Gap complements and "adds value" to other initiatives and school-based work. While many other programmes focus primarily on pupils, the focus of this project is more on supporting teachers, schools and principals in identifying specific project goals, in implementing their targeted interventions, and in collecting data to provide evidence of the outcomes. The project is closely linked, for example, to the School Development Planning process, and it supports individual schools to implement some of the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timed) targets they will have identified during their planning process.

As the project has progressed, close working relationships have been developed with national and local agencies and programmes involved in promoting educational inclusion.

These include for example the Department of Education and Science; the NCCA (Educational Disadvantage Officer); City of Cork VEC; Access Office, UCC; Cork City Partnership; National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS); Home-School Community Liaison Programme; School Completion Programme. The project and the participating schools have also formed productive partnerships with arts organisations in the Cork area. As a result, the work of the project has spread more widely into local communities.

Added value of the project: Achievements 2003 – 2004

The past year of the project has been characterised by a higher level of inter-agency co-operation than ever before. Having formed very good links with many partner organisations, for example the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), the Home-School Community Liaison programme, Fota Wildlife Park and the Cork Printmakers group, the project was able to provide a wider range of activities for pupils, parents and teachers. Schools have also developed and consolidated effective links within their own communities and they have extended the scope and reach of their projects. There is a growing level of creativity and confidence in the schools as they implement innovative approaches to educational inclusion. In a number of schools, the project is co-ordinated by the Home-School Community Liaison teacher, and this has enabled schools to integrate the project firmly with the life of the school and the community. In particular, this year has seen a very much higher level of involvement of parents than before, and this in itself is a significant development.

EVALUATION FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bridging the Gap project has five major strands: school and community-level initiatives; professional development; research; networks, and dissemination. The achievements of the project in each of these strands for 2003-2004 are summarised and evaluated in this section. Recommendations for the future development of the project are included at the end of the section.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-LEVEL INITIATIVES

The project provides additional resources that enable schools and community groups to implement targeted interventions at local level, aimed at improving the school experience in a measurable way. This "bottom up" approach has been found to be an effective catalyst for change in schools, and each year the quality of the school-based projects has improved as schools build their capability and adopt a whole-school approach to goal-setting and monitoring of outcomes. Schools submit their proposals for funding each year, and projects are selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- The proposal has clearly stated and appropriate goals and targets
- It is consistent with overall project aims
- It is linked to one of the five project strands
- It is capable of showing impact within the life of the project
- It has the potential to be sustainable beyond the life of the project
- The proposal is within available budget limits
- Relevant resources are available within the University, if required
- There is a clear operational plan for the project (timing, logistics, personnel).

School and community-level initiatives: Achievements 2003 – 2004

This year the number of schools submitting proposals for projects rose from 32 to 36. All of the primary schools in the target group submitted proposals. The total funding allocated to school-based projects this year was €110,000. In addition, a number of extra projects were funded, in response to specific requests from individual schools and clusters of schools, or networks of teachers. These projects included "Maths for Fun", projects encouraging parental involvement in the classroom, and projects that added value in a significant way to other Bridging the Gap activities. Some schools also received funding for projects focused on preparation for Cork City of Culture 2005. The total amount allocated to these extra projects was €23,000.

School-based projects were supplemented by two special activities funded by the project: a scheme of subsidised tickets for Opera House productions and the "Tyger Tyger Burning Bright" project which was organised in collaboration with the Cork Printmakers group and Fota Wildlife Park. Total funding of these activities from the project amounted to €18,000. This strand of the project represents excellent value for money, by any standards. The project grant to each school is in the region of €3,000, and the impact of this modest funding is significant, as is shown in the case studies that are included in the second part of the report.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is a central tenet of the project that teacher effectiveness has a major impact on student learning. In each year of the project, significant resources have been invested in enhancing the opportunities for professional development that are available to principals and teachers in

participating schools. The range of activities has expanded each year since the project started, and the level of participation has been consistently high.

Professional development: Achievements 2003 - 2004

Once again, this was a very successful and cost-effective aspect of the project. Ten events were held during the course of the year, at a total cost of €8265. The total number of participants was 252, and the average cost was around €30 per person. This represents very good value for money, especially since the feedback from participants about the impact of these events is very positive. As well as enhancing teachers' skills, the events provided excellent opportunities for networking and for sharing of expertise and experience. A particular feature in the past year has been the close involvement of UCC staff in the planning and delivery of the professional development events for teachers. In addition, one event, a seminar on coping with bullying, was targeted specifically at parents and was very well received by those who attended.

Building on the work that was initiated in the previous year, two further IT courses were provided for principals and teachers in collaboration with the National Centre for Technology in Education, which fully funded the courses. Each course comprised three sessions, and the feedback from participants about the impact of the courses on their teaching practice has been extremely positive.

As in previous years, the project provided scholarships for five principals and to attend the Project Zero Summer Institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. A total of 21 principals and three teachers have now taken part in the Harvard Summer Institute since the project began, and feedback from participants suggests that it is a highlight of their career and it has a powerful impact on their professional practice in the longer term.

RESEARCH

The research strand of the project has a number of dimensions. Firstly, schools are encouraged to carry out their own research, by gathering and analysing data related to their school-based projects. This "community approach" to gathering data has been shown in US research to support greater collaborative effort and enhanced ownership of change solutions. It has not yet been used in the context of educational disadvantage in Ireland, and this project offers an opportunity to adopt an innovative approach. Secondly, the project as a whole constitutes an action-research project, which attempts to test a number of hypotheses about promoting educational inclusion by working with schools. Thirdly, the project makes it possible to bring the findings of relevant national and international research to the attention of principals and classroom teachers, and to provide them with opportunities to integrate best practices in their schools. Finally, the project supports a number of research projects that are being undertaken by individual teachers on a range of educational inclusion topics.

Research: Achievements 2003-2004

The school-based research dimension has been greatly strengthened, with most schools collecting and analysing data systematically as part of their project activities. The action research aspect of the project is enabling the project team to assemble a large amount of data on the impact of specific interventions, which can be disseminated through media such as this report and the project website. Work is continuing on the individual research projects that Bridging the Gap is supporting. Some of these projects are nearing completion, while others will continue into next year.

NETWORKS

It has already been pointed out that classroom teachers are sometimes isolated and can therefore find it difficult to become aware of teaching practices that can improve the experiences of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The experience of the Bridging the Gap project to date has shown that teachers are willing to participate in networks on relevant topics, sharing and building on good practice for the benefit of their pupils. The project provides many opportunities for networks of teachers, principals and others to meet and to share their expertise on topics of interest identified in collaboration with participants. While originally the networks were initiated and facilitated by UCC, it is clear as the project progresses that clusters of schools are beginning to form their own formal and informal local networks, with positive results being reported from such activity.

Networks: Achievements 2003-2004

This year has seen considerable development in the area of networks. Neighbouring schools have collaborated on joint projects in a number of cases, with very positive results. Two clusters of Home School Community Liaison teachers have formed networks to promote a "Maths for Fun" project, which involved parents working in the classroom alongside teachers and pupils. A network of schools involved in music projects took part in a concert that was organised by a UCC music student who works with these schools. Schools also formed networks within their own community, and this enabled them to harness local resources for the benefit of their pupils. A good example of local networking this year was the art project and exhibition jointly organised by the boys' and girls' primary schools in Mayfield.

DISSEMINATION

The project offers an opportunity to disseminate good practice emerging from a number of sources, including research literature, local, national and international projects and initiatives. A range of media is used to disseminate the work of the project, including showcasing events, exhibitions, a website, video and print media, such as reports, articles and newsletters. Schools have been very proactive this year in sharing the results of their own projects with a wider audience within their communities.

Dissemination: Achievements 2003-2004

Last year's project evaluation report and showcasing video were widely circulated and generated very positive publicity for the project both locally and nationally. The project web site was redesigned this year and it is now more user-friendly and informative. Articles about the project have appeared in local newspapers and in UCC publications. Members of the project team were invited to meet the management advisory committee of the Department of Education and Science to discuss the future development of policies on educational inclusion.

Schools have also begun to disseminate the work of the project in their own communities and further afield. There have been high-profile concerts, including a very successful one in Cork City Hall, a prize-winning project in the national Young Scientist exhibition, a very innovative food fair and many art exhibitions and displays of pupils' work. As a result, the project is becoming widely known, not only throughout Cork City but also among the education community at national level.

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

- Schools make a difference: when they adopt a teamwork approach to setting clear and measurable goals, and when they track their results using performance data, very quick and significant success can be achieved. Immediate successes help to increase confidence and expand the vision of what is possible.
- Investment in the quality of teaching and in the professional development of teachers and principals can bring considerable gains in the achievement of pupils.
- Real education change requires community-wide commitment and strong leadership. The involvement of parents is particularly critical.
- Adopting a community approach to gathering and analysing data - making collection and analysis of data a focus for collaborative effort - enhances the impact of the project and promotes ownership of the outcomes.
- Targeting resources, including best teaching resources, where they are most needed produces good results.
- Throughout all of the strands of this project, we are improving the knowledge base about the effectiveness of specific interventions in promoting educational achievement and inclusion.

Recommendations for the future development of the project

All of the key project goals set for 2003 - 2004 have been achieved, and some targets have been exceeded. As the Bridging the Gap project begins its fourth year, it is recommended that the achievements within all strands to date should be consolidated and used as a foundation for further development. The emphasis in this phase of the project is on building sustainable capacity in schools, in communities and in the university that will help achieve the goals of educational inclusion that the project has set.

This will be facilitated by:
- Affirming the active learning partnership between schools, communities and university, guided by the project team and in particular by the expertise and experience of the Project Director and the Project Manager.

- Engaging teachers as researchers in their classrooms, setting targets, planning interventions and collecting data to monitor the impact of their actions.

- Disseminating the outcomes of the project locally and nationally, and influencing policy and practice on educational inclusion.

- Supporting the formation and continuation of networks, which have proved a very effective part of the project in the past year. The collective network approach has the potential to add considerable value in terms of the professional development of teachers and the integration of schools with their local communities.

For 2004-2005, it is recommended that two aspects of the project should receive special attention, with a view to enhancing the national and international knowledge base about the effectiveness of specific interventions in promoting educational achievement and inclusion. These aspects are research and leadership.

Firstly, because strategy focused, policy led research can make an important contribution to shaping future educational inclusion measures, the four dimensions of the research strand of the project should be explicitly highlighted:

1. Action research in schools and communities
Build on the good examples of practice in this year's evaluation report to encourage and support the collection and dissemination of data by teachers and schools.

2. Project-level research
Continue to test key hypotheses about the effectiveness of specific actions and approaches, which will produce important insights into the critical success factors for intervention projects designed to promote educational inclusion.

3. Integrating national and international research
Raise the awareness of project participants about the results of relevant research carried out at national and international levels. Compare Bridging the Gap project outcomes with the research literature, if and as appropriate.

4. Individual research projects
When the research projects that are currently supported by Bridging the Gap are completed next year, it will be possible to assess the value added by these projects, and to determine the criteria for future selection, funding and support of such research. The possibility of commissioning research on specific topics might also be explored.

Secondly, because the evidence available from the project to date suggests that strong leadership makes schools more effective in addressing educational disadvantage, a number of questions about leadership might be further explored next year. Such questions might include, for example:

- What leadership qualities and practices are most effective in promoting high achievement and educational inclusion in schools?

- How can principals as leaders enable teachers, pupils, parents and communities to achieve their high-level learning goals?

- What kinds of professional development can best enhance the skills and practice of educational leadership?