

Removing Barriers to Opportunity and Achievement

Rob Lightfoot
CEO, NACE

Introducing NACE

An independent charity, NACE works with schools, education leaders, practitioners and policy makers to **improve provision for more able learners**, driving **whole-school improvement** and **raising standards in provision for all**.

Drawing on over 40 years' experience in the field, we offer support across all sectors, phases, contexts and stages of development.

NACE's vision

That all young people, including the more able, have the opportunity to develop their abilities without limits – no matter what barriers to learning they may face and no matter what school they attend

www.nace.co.uk/about

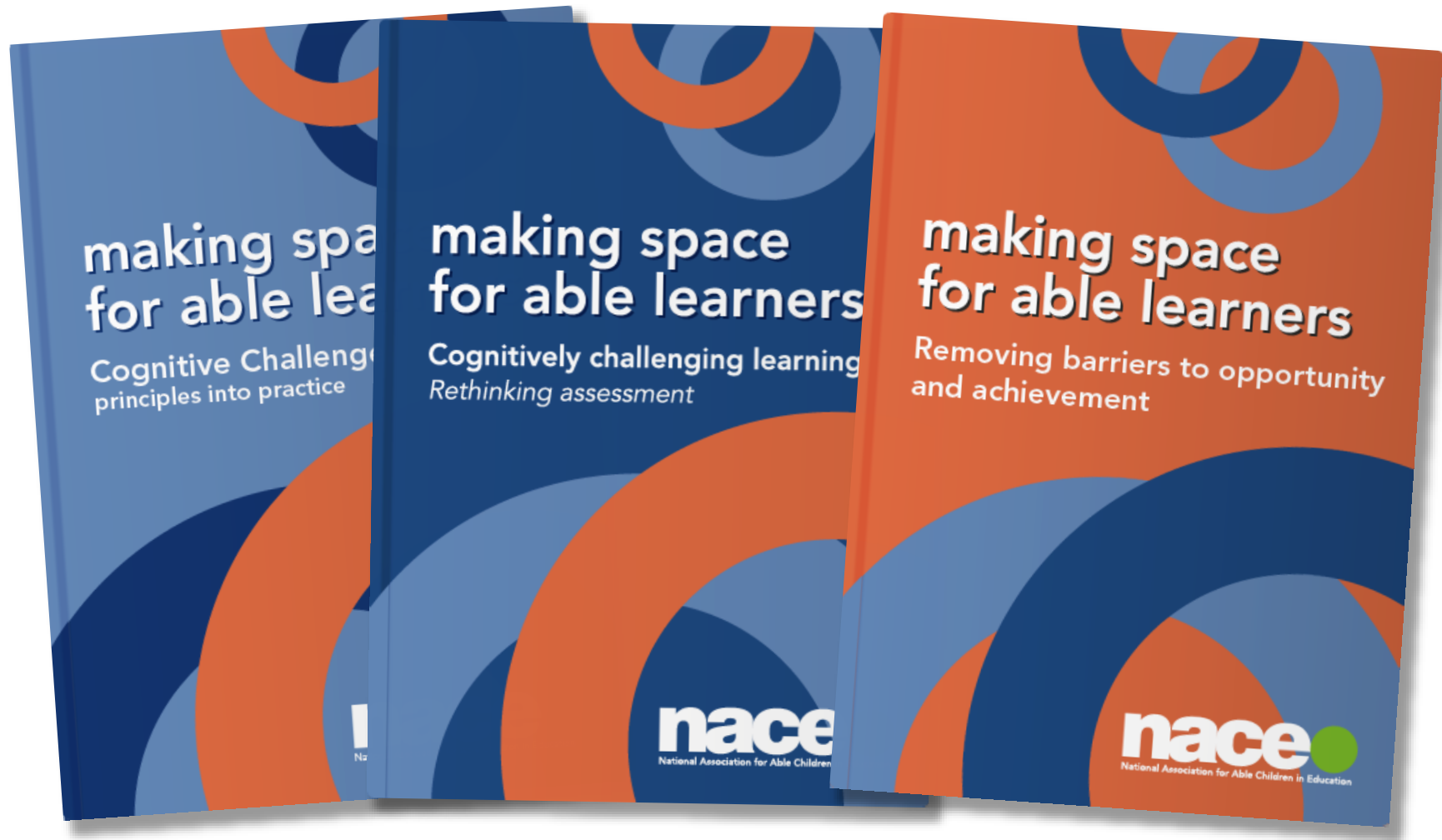
NACE core principles

- The education of more able learners is a **whole-school endeavour**
- Supporting more able learners can **raise achievement for a much wider group** of learners
- It's about creating a **curriculum which gives opportunities for all children to flourish**
- Ability can be revealed across a range of **specific domains, or more generally**
- Ability is a fluid concept: it can be developed through **challenge, opportunity and self-belief**
- Considering the needs of more able disadvantaged learners is crucial to ensuring an **inclusive and fair curriculum**.
- An **ethos and culture of high expectations and aspirations** is integral to any school providing for more able learners.
- Teachers are central to providing **challenging and enriching education**, and their **professional development** is paramount

Considering the needs of more able learners who encounter disadvantage is crucial to ensuring an **inclusive and fair curriculum**.

- NACE core principles

“We are determined to do everything we can to make sure that every child, from every background, is given an equal opportunity to succeed...”



Defining the problem

- Our research has shown that the inequity in education which impacts on more able learners is not limited to those traditionally seen as disadvantaged.
- In many ways the “disadvantage” label has contributed to the slow pace of improvements in provision.
- However, a more strategic understanding of disadvantage in the context of education makes us aware that there are many disadvantages, both visible and hidden, which affect learners from all backgrounds in myriad ways.

Rethinking terminology around disadvantage

Any pupil has the potential to experience disadvantages or barriers, in different learning contexts.

If talent is not to be lost the educational provision must be equitable.

Barriers can lead to disadvantages and disparities.

A key research finding

The language we use and the thoughts we have associated with that language, direct our philosophy, vision and actions.

Young people want to be recognised for their ability to grow and improve, rather than being constrained by fixed labels.

Defining the problem

- At present there are many solutions aiming to repair specific problems, such as poor attendance or lack of resources.
- We need a more strategic response which recognises the individual needs of each child and their personal differences.

Our research has identified key practices which create an equitable and challenging environment, including:

- A strategically planned curriculum
- Well-informed teachers
- Ambitious learning and engaging classroom practice
- Excellent relationships between school and home learning
- A school environment where learners have a sense of belonging
- Agency - giving learners a voice in their learning

Curriculum

It is essential that school leaders design a model for school life in which all can participate and achieve and where everyone feels they belong.

The strategies needed to achieve this are all detailed within our publication.

A further section is devoted to opportunities, experiences and aspirational activities outside of the classroom – all aspects of school life should be viewed as curriculum provision.

Enhancing opportunities

- All pupils need fair access to resources.
- They need places and time to work independently.
- High quality co-curricular activities should reflect the needs of pupils rather than being limited by interests of adults.
- All subjects should offer enrichment, extension and wider experience.
- Supra-curricular provision should take pupils beyond the experience of the classroom.
- Extended projects allow pupils to research, write and make presentations on subjects which interest them and extend their learning.
- Pupil voice, agency and leadership are important aspects of personal development and should be part of curriculum for all.

Increasing ambition and aspiration

- Students need to understand future possibilities.
- Work placement and university visits should support ambition.
- Communication and relationships with parents/carers are important.
- Learners need access to excellent teaching.
- All aspects of ability should be recognised and celebrated.

Understanding educational disadvantages

When a school links an understanding of disadvantages to educational inequity or learning barriers; curriculum planning, teaching and learning can be reshaped to serve all pupils well.

Schools which are proactive in working towards educational equity:

- **R**espond to barriers faced by students;
- **R**einforce individual potential and strengths;
- **R**ecognise potential barriers or challenges within the planned curriculum;
- **R**evise practice to eliminate barriers;
- **R**aise expectations, outcomes and aspirations.

Adaptive teaching

- What happens when teachers recognise abilities and teach to the top with supporting strategies to help all pupils achieve well?
- What happens when the teacher has a clear understanding of each pupil's needs at the start of learning and throughout the process of learning?
- Can pupils aspire to challenging, deep, complex or analytical learning with teaching adapted to help them to achieve more than they realised was possible?

Language and learning

Schools should be places where learners can speak well and communicate confidently, preparing them for highly successful futures.

If barriers to learning are to be diminished, strategies to develop language must sit at the forefront of organisational and classroom planning.

Cognition and metacognition

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2021) summarises:

Self-regulated learners are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and can motivate themselves to engage in, and improve, their learning. At the heart of this is metacognition.

Getting nurture right

- Nurture helps eliminate disadvantages in education.
- When educators focus on relationships, well-being, and individual needs, students can develop resilience, motivation, and a belief in their own potential.
- Emotional well-being directly affects cognitive development.
- When students feel cared for and encouraged, they are more likely to take risks in their thinking, ask questions, and persist through challenges.
- Nurture helps to shape well-rounded individuals.
- We want our young people to grow into confident, capable adults who can contribute meaningfully to society.

Nurture at its best supports learners in the present and prepares them for an aspirant and successful future.

**“Children have the right to surprise us.
Children have the right to enable us to
believe that they can do amazing things.
Too often, our education system
unintentionally stops that happening...”**

Dame Alison Peacock (2016)

Next NACE member meetup:

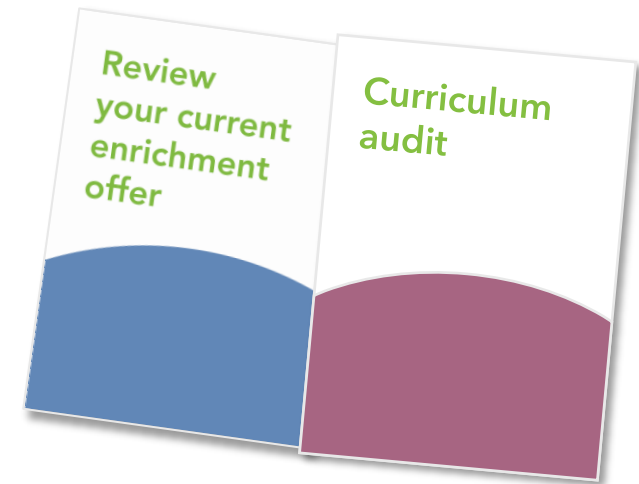
Creating a curriculum which gives opportunities for all children to flourish

This event will explore:

- The importance of curriculum design in creating an inclusive curriculum ensuring high expectations for all learners, including those who encounter disadvantage, motivating them to reach their full potential;
- The role of assessment in identifying prior knowledge and progress towards desired outcomes;
- Designing a curriculum that prepares students for success now and in the future.

Friday 3 March 2026 (10:00am – 3:00pm)

Prince Henry's High School, Evesham



Upcoming CPD events and courses

Leading on Provision for Disadvantaged More Able Learners

Tuesday 28 April 2026
9.00am - 4.00pm

Exploring Best Practice for Early Reading

Friday 27 February 2026
9.00am - 4.00pm

Getting Early Transitions Right for All Children

Friday 03 July 2026
9.00am - 4.00pm

Embedding Reading and Oracy for Challenge Across the Curriculum

Wednesday 29 April 2026
9.00am - 4.00pm

Members receive discounts on all our events and courses

Get in touch



membership
@nace.co.uk



@naceuk



NACE



/naceukFB



@nace.uk

nace.co.uk/research