National College for School Leadership

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Research Associate Report

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Hey, what about me?

How schools provide for vulnerable children: those in danger of falling through the net and disengaging with education

Spring 2006

Special series on **Personalised learning**

Contents

Background

A child's receptiveness to learning is significantly shaped by his or her context, a context that extends beyond the school gate. As school leaders we have a direct influence over what happens within school but only an indirect influence over matters outside.

Confusion and dysfunction are powerful negative forces working against a child and his or her attempts to learn. To mitigate such forces, we need to create a personalised approach that skillfully customises provision.

The *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda (DfES 2003), including the provision of extended schools, requires all schools to examine their broader provision for pupils. Allied to this, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) have recently again drawn attention to the implications of economic deprivation linked with success at school, and the growing numbers of children's centres are representative of its policy to address this challenge. Further, new structures and assessment processes are coming into place such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), with an aim to link agencies more effectively in meeting individual pupils' needs.

The DfES's focus on personalised learning supports such developments as, in part, it emphasises removing barriers to learning and tailoring provision to meet more closely pupils' needs. Developing personalisation through successful inclusion provision and inter-agency work is the focus of this research. The components of personalised learning (DfES 2004) this study encompasses are 'Beyond the classroom' and 'Organising the school', whether implicitly or explicitly.

Certain initiatives have been targeted at attempting to meet this challenge in London. One example is the London Challenge's Design Collaborative project (2005), which focuses on re-engaging disaffected students in learning. Part of their hypothesis is that:

> Schooling is often a fragmented, disconnected and inconstant experience for many children and young people on the margins. Any change and improvement strategy aimed at making a difference to their experience of education will need to focus on learning: new ways of learning and new contexts for learning.

Another is Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP), launched by Estelle Morris in July 2003. This targeted programme aims to work with young people, aged 8-19, who are most at risk of social exclusion, committing crime and being a victim of crime. Its key objectives are to:

- reduce crime and anti-social behaviour both in the short and long term
- support young people back into education or training and help them stay there by working with those at risk of truancy
- ensure that young people are supported as they move from primary to secondary school.

However, schools themselves are also taking a lead in developing strategies that focus on meeting the needs of their most vulnerable pupils and, through removing barriers to their learning, personalising their experience. This study explores how a sample of London headteachers, from both primary and secondary phases, have addressed this challenge. Their schools' practices are reflective of their individual and collective recognition that every child matters.

The main research questions of the study were:

- Who are those children who slip through the net of provision and come through the system with little to support themselves in the future?
- How can headteachers reduce the impact of turbulence in pupils' home lives to increase their life chances?
- How do headteachers organise their schools to cater for these children while maintaining a focus on the needs of the majority?

The research journey hoped to identify the significant elements of their vision, their school ethos, management and the structures they have put in place that reduced the impact of external factors on these children and ultimately supported them. While the study adopted a London focus its purpose is to be of relevance to those in other areas facing similar challenges.

Methods

It was extremely hard to make a selection of where to visit and to whom to talk given that London is vast and complex, with so many schools and headteachers. The focus of this investigation were schools in challenging circumstances which describes many schools in London.

All the headteachers interviewed for the research have worked in schools within challenging communities all their professional lives. Their schools are multi-ethnic and multi-faith with as many as 40 different languages spoken by the school population.

All the headteachers interviewed were chosen because of their commitment to the ECM agenda prior to its launch and the continuing emphasis that was exemplified in the leadership of their schools. They were all identified via networking in London.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with five headteachers from both primary and secondary phases across a number of different local authorities (LAs) within London. Supporting information was used from two others, in addition to the writer's own school. Information was also gathered from other professionals working with the schools. The interview foci are attached as an appendix to this report. The quotes found within this paper are those transcribed from the interviews.

In addition, some of the learning mentors who worked in the primary schools where the headteachers were interviewed talked with their targeted pupils. These were children who were subjects of the inclusion teams and had some complicated life experiences. The subject of their discussions was focused around their school experiences and self-esteem. The questions were very open in their nature.

Contexts of the schools

One of those interviewed gave the following quote to illustrate his philosophy, which he shares with newly qualified teachers (NQTs) joining his school.

> "I am not one of those people who see my job as a job. I see it as a vocation. I always say to my NQTs you are about to enter probably one of the most significant professions because we are about social change. We, in schools must strive to get it right. We have to tackle the fact that September 11th happened. We have to tackle the fact that Stephen Lawrence was murdered and the fact that people were blown up in London by the way we educate tomorrow's young people. So for me the *Every Child Matters* agenda has always been what I believe in."

Three of the five headteachers interviewed had six decades of headship between them. All had taken over schools in special measures or on the brink of being closed down. Not only were the pupils vulnerable but so was the whole institution. LAs had drafted these individuals in, usually for the short term, but they then embraced the challenge and stayed. Interestingly, they all articulated very similar descriptions of the schools they took over. They all independently made reference to the very needy nature of their pupils and the culture of 'shouting' in the school that prevailed when they arrived. They described the behaviour management that existed as appalling and that staffing consisted of supply teachers, failing teachers and the few good substantive teachers that had an uphill battle. There was poor staff and pupil attendance. They described the neglected buildings and the appalling smell of the toilets.

Their schools reflected very deprived local populations with poor life expectancy, tuberculosis (TB) and AIDS issues. There was evidence of alcohol, drug abuse and mental health issues. All schools had a high free school meal allocation, and many pupils came from asylum seeker or refugee families. There was also some turbulence in the school community caused by mobility of pupils.

These headteachers made the following points about their initiations to their schools:

> "It was the biggest, most miserable dump I had ever been in. It was one of the most depressing unloved, uncared for, neglected, mismanaged, misled schools that I had ever walked into."

> "I thought what I could do is show them that a school does not have to be like this. It doesn't have to have children screaming with adults screaming at them, because the culture was [that] at any point in the day in the corridor there were six or seven children raging, tantruming, kicking, howling and adults shouting at them. In the office every body shouted. Anybody who walked past a child in trouble shouted at them."

> "I was late for my first meeting with a group of staff because a child had t urinated on the staircase. I told the child that we do not do that in this school any more, this school is precious and we cleaned it up."

Inclusion being of great importance to all these headteachers, they also all talked about reducing exclusion rates from the previous regimes:

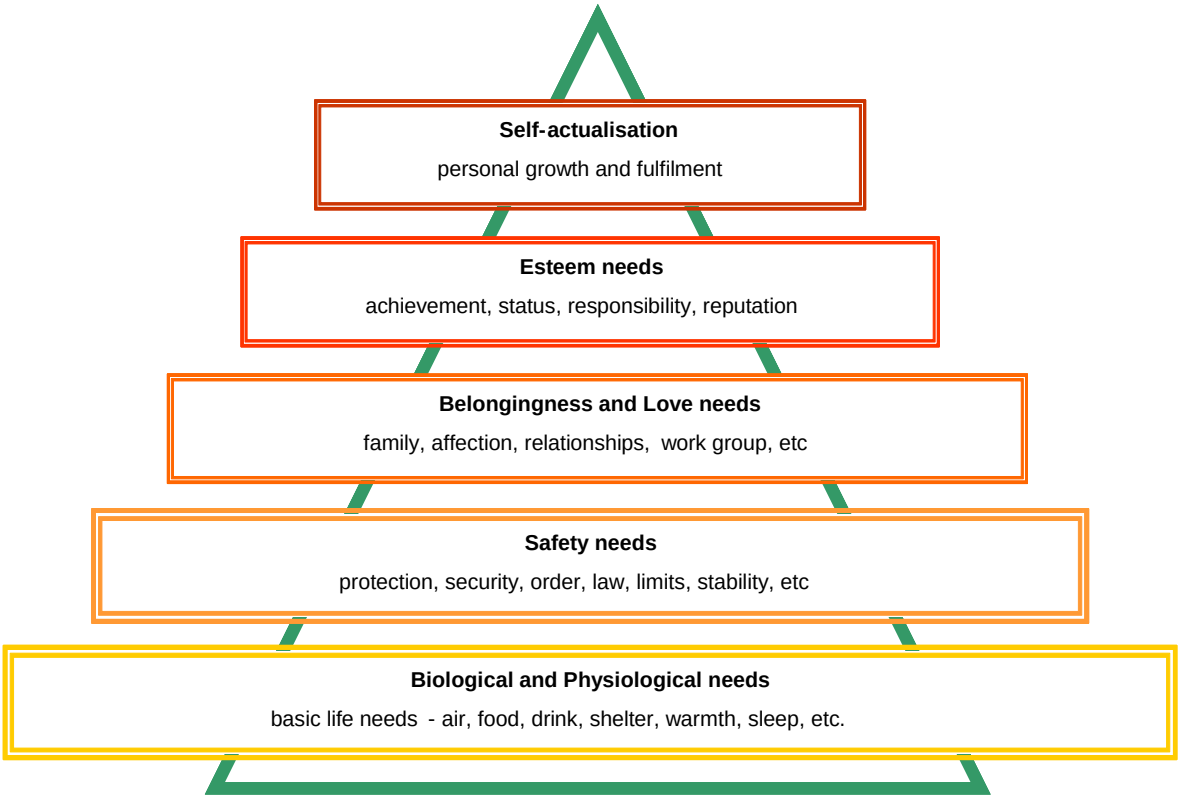
> "I said to the governors: 'then 260 children 84 fixed term exclusions, now 400 children no exclusions!'."

The other two headteachers interviewed were in their first five years of headship. They had not been headteachers previously. Their schools have similarly challenging populations but their institutions had been well managed by previous incumbents that had been recognised by Ofsted. However, what these relatively new headteachers wished to do was to radically alter the ethos and the provision of the school. They wanted to cater for all their pupils and to embrace the ECM agenda. They were both visionary and keen to influence government policy and in some ways have already done so in terms of their liaison with the DfES.

Vulnerable pupils

Unpicking the word 'vulnerable' promoted a great deal of dialogue and thought because we are all vulnerable at different times in our lives and it could be said that every child is in some sense vulnerable. This condition is the nature of childhood.

However, this study focuses on those children who are not developing a constitution that will sustain them mentally and physically through to their adult lives. They are at risk out of school, sometimes put themselves at risk in school, are frequently unhappy and do not excel academically. The projection is that their inner personal resources will in all likelihood not enable them to sustain or build relationships nor support themselves financially. They will struggle to reach the higher levels within the triangle of Maslow's (1954) *Hierarchy of Needs*:



Source: Coleman 2006

The following comments by headteachers indicate how important the school was to their pupils' lives and reflected the 'Staying Safe' outcome within the ECM agenda:

> "Children love coming to school – because their home lives are so difficult they want to be here."

> "You can protect vulnerable children when they are on site but you can't when they are outside and that is where they are truly vulnerable."

A headteacher in post for only a few years made this statement about the values of his school:

> "Intrinsic to supporting vulnerable pupils is the underlying ethos of the school because either you are a school that has a moral or ethical responsibility to give children, who are vulnerable for whatever reason be it social, political or mental health, some sort of provision that makes them feel special. Or a school that feels the presences of those vulnerable children affects their position in the league table."

Inclusion is at the top of all these headteachers' agendas. As stated in the introduction, one headteacher considered all her pupils to be vulnerable. However, there is a need to be more specific from a provision perspective. The joined-up thinking pushed forward by the ECM agenda demands not only that schools are clear about their vulnerable children but social services and health are too.

One headteacher reflects on the role of social services:

> "Social services only see vulnerable children at one extreme but there are more children along the continuum of vulnerability. If you are on the at-risk register it is more difficult to fall through the gaps. If you are a kid struggling on the edges you are no less vulnerable."

Another made this observation about the pupils in his school:

> "Vulnerable pupils for one reason or other do not have a sense of who they are and where they fit into the collective in the school and as a result of that they have so-called barriers to being who they could be and are meant to be and to achieving what they could achieve and are meant to achieve. There is something about a vulnerable child; it is almost as if they don't fit into their skin. There is something stopping them growing into who they should be."

Primary headteachers talked about being able to identify children who were vulnerable as soon as they entered school. If they had a nursery class it was at the age of three, but as most schools had a degree of mobility they could be identified whenever they entered school. These children are not smoothly passing life's milestones. When they enter nursery they will possibly present with a history of missed immunisations and lack of a health visitor. They might manifest some form of language delay. When they are admitted to school at a different time they might have been previously excluded, been moved from school to school because of housing or home difficulties. Their personal turbulence means it can be hard for them to establish relationships with their peers and they might be very passive or inappropriately violent.

Poor attendance may be the key issue that impacts on all aspects of the pupil's development and will mitigate against them achieving the five ECM outcomes. A secondary headteacher commented about a different type of vulnerability that could impact on a child's ability to 'achieve economic well-being':

> "We have got a kid who is taking his GCSEs today. Really bright boy – 5A-C's no problem. All over the place really, hardly ever attends school so we have had to go over to the other side of London to pick him up. So even the kids you think are academically OK have their own levels of vulnerability."

Stories

It is the vividness of headteachers' accounts of their vulnerable pupils that could not be kept out of this writing. Their anecdotes brought their philosophy alive. These were significant individuals that stand out and influenced the headteachers' vision and formulation of their schools ethos.

Charles Leadbeater gives us the story of 'James' at the beginning of the Demos (2004) paper, *Learning about Personalisation*. Similarly, the following is a description of the life and times of 'Kyle' (pseudonym) who demonstrates vulnerability on all levels and the struggle the school had to maintain his inclusion. It also illustrates how the school worked with outside agencies but there are still questions to be asked about what more could be done. The headteachers interviewed do not regard themselves as having all the solutions. They are constantly developing the multi-agency working practices. They have all 'met' Kyle.

Kyle was born when his mother was 16 and she was not attending a school for learning difficulties at which she was a pupil. Kyle's grandparents were some help in his early years but they also had problems with functioning in society. In his first few years at school Kyle needed support with his learning and language development. In Year 3 Kyle went to live with his uncles outside London but rarely attended school.

When he returned to London he was readmitted to his previous school but his attendance was poor. The learning mentor worked with him along with the Educational Welfare Advisory Service (EWAS). Social services then became involved as a result of a child protection referral, which was made because his mother was unable to supervise him out of school. The police were also now involved because of his activities.

By the time he was in Year 4, Kyle was in the habit of disappearing from home. He came into school with swollen lips and there was no explanation offered. He also arrived in the morning smelling of cigarettes and alcohol. Child protection referrals were made regularly. The police and the early intervention team started working with him. There were concerns he was associating with young people who were older than him who were involved in crime and anti-social behaviour. Family social services worked with his mother to try to help her set boundaries for him. By now he also had two siblings.

In Year 5 there was a period of calm for a few months but by the end of the school year he was not prepared to stay in school and had to be physically restrained from running out. Kyle ceased to engage with school in Year 6 and refused to take part in a negotiated entry. He would only enter the building on his terms and do what he wanted. If he was requested to do anything else he would become violent. At this time he threatened to throw himself off a balcony when his grandmother said she was going to call social services. A part-time place was arranged for Kyle to attend the Primary Pupil Referral Unit (PPRU). He refused to travel there on public transport so the LA, under pressure from the school, funded some transport.

Following an altercation on the bus when he assaulted the escort he was then banned from the transport. In April of that academic year a multidisciplinary meeting was arranged that consisted of the headteacher, class teacher, inclusion coordinator, learning mentor, two staff from the PPRU, EWAS, early intervention worker, Youth Offending Team (YOT), project worker from the local family centre and social services manager.

By June he was excluded from the PPRU. His attendance at school until the end of the year was sporadic and difficult to manage. Child guidance was also working with him and his mother.

Kyle was refused a place at his local secondary school and a place at the PPRU was supposed to have been arranged. He went out of London during that summer. He was then seen around the local area but not attending any institution. He brought his younger siblings to school. His brother aged six decided he wanted to stay at home with Kyle and not come into school. School staff then intervened and Kyle assaulted them. The primary school considered the siblings at risk, witnessing Kyle's violent inappropriate behaviour that his mother was unable to manage. His grandparents no longer lived in London. Procedures were then started via an inclusion team meeting to plan interventions for the siblings and social services involvement via child protection.

In terms of the ECM agenda there is a question whether this vulnerable boy, Kyle, will achieve any of the outcomes. He has already failed at being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving. There is a question as to whether he will ever make 'a positive contribution to society' or 'achieve economic well-being'. Was there anything more the school could have done for this boy? There was a multi-agency approach but somehow there were gaps in provision.

The following is a list of the at-risk categories recorded as the reason for the involvement in PAYP. In Kyle's case, he would sadly tick many of these boxes. Headteachers interviewed referred to these categories when explaining their concerns about pupils and describing their multiple needs.

At-risk categories

Nuisance in PAYP area	Arrested/convicted in past 12 months
Geographically targeted	Non-attending/early leaver
Involved negative peer group	Not regularly at school
Nuisance/anti-social	Sibling/family offending
Engaged in YOT	Substance use
Exclusion	Statement of special educational needs (SEN)
Learning difficulties/disability	In care
Truant	Asylum seeker referral
Previous convictions	Child protection register
Teenage parent	Remand to local education authority accommodation

Headteachers felt there had been a change in culture recently and family and social services teams are now trying to respond quicker to cases of this sort. However,

given the size of London and the number of boys like Kyle the pressures on resources are huge. In the sections that follow, the strategies that these headteachers' schools developed to try and improve the outcomes for children like Kyle are explored. They did not presume that they had all the answers, they acknowledged there were no quick fixes and they described the years it had taken to put their systems in place.

Schools' strategies for mitigating vulnerability

> "A teacher on their own cannot solve or find a remedy for these complex needs and the burden of success cannot be their sole responsibility. A structure needs to be put in place to maintain inclusion and then achievement."

What needed to be put in place in order for a headteacher to be able to make the following comment?

While the vision of the headteacher was all-important, the structures they put in place to support a multi-agency approach reflected their strength in developing and using teams. They:

- had a clear strategic sense of how to make new approaches work
- were adept at developing skills of key personnel and matching people to roles
- were innovative in seeing how they could 'exploit' the strengths of senior and middle management, teachers, teaching assistants, office administrators and special needs support staff for the good of their neediest pupils
- were able to use funding streams efficiently to secure provision.

> "I admire children coming from chaos and changing into mature aspiring children, it is inspirational."

Structures

The primary school headteachers stressed that getting a structure in place was vital in order for this provision to be effective. Those with greater tenure had moved towards a staff structure in which distributed leadership and succession planning were central. In all cases the headteachers knew exactly the responsibility of every member of staff and how they slotted in to the big picture. Schools are constantly evolving and these headteachers altered their structures according to need and policy. School policy approaches were used to feed into the structures outlined below; for example, all of the schools had a method for staff to note a record of concern that was clearly discriminated from a child protection referral. All the schools also had a senior member of staff, usually a deputy head or a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), who oversaw the identification of pupils/families who they wanted to work with before a crisis occurred. Their priority was early intervention.

Extended school provision

Those headteachers that had bid for and received extended school funding were highly appreciative of what it could offer. Again this resource is often targeted at vulnerable pupils. As one headteacher put it, “The extended school funds the youth club that keeps the kids here, rather than on the estate or being at risk on the streets”.

Schools that supplied breakfast were moving towards giving the children an evening meal. This wrap-around care gives those pupils who are at risk of exclusion and alienation an opportunity to view a school from a different perspective and to develop positive relationships with adults that enable them to form a different view of the institution. The schools employ extended school managers who come from a variety of work backgrounds and target activities linked to supporting their vulnerable pupils. A youth and community worker, for example, is employed at one school to work with the hard-to-reach Key Stage 4 students and targets those vulnerable children who might be in trouble with the police after school.

The headteachers in extended schools are creative in giving other forms of employment to their teaching staff and see it as career development. As one secondary headteacher commented:

> “Our own young NQTs who are never really taught how to manage behaviour or to relate to kids’ work in the youth club at least once a week; some of them do it three or four times a week. They then get to know the kids in other ways where the relationship is not based on power and authority but on trust and respect. It helps them in their relationships in class and teaches teachers what they do not learn in college.”

Often vulnerable children can be very challenging in the classroom; therefore one can extrapolate from this development the type of experience that this headteacher is giving teachers. She is creating professionals who are more capable and aware of what makes a successful pupil–teacher dynamic.

All schools have used the funding to involve parents. This has been vital in breaking down barriers and enabling those to support their own children by raising their self-esteem and achievement.

A detailed description of a specific project can be found in the later section on the family group.

Cross-phase working

Most primary headteachers will know those pupils in Year 6 whose future at secondary schools will potentially be very limited. For some, their attendance may be a matter of weeks as they will be excluded or exclude themselves and as a consequence attend a pupil referral centre or become persistent truants until the age of 16. These are not pupils for whom there is a special school allocation or who have a statement of SEN.

> "Primaries are in a far better position to look after their own. They don't make such demands in terms of children organising their own lives." (Warnock, summer 2005)

Transfer to secondary provision is complicated and varied across London. Some primary schools may liaise with up to 20 different schools that the parents have wished their children to go to. Yet in two of the schools in the study, the local primary sent nearly 90% of their pupils to the nearest geographical secondary school. Although parental choice is paramount, in these schools the headteachers were much more positive about the process of secondary school transfer and the continuing support for those vulnerable children. They were confident about the nature of the dialogue that goes on before and after these pupils' transfer. They described early signalling of issues and how the receiving school had set up systems so the pupils were known and supported immediately.

In one primary school they had a joint, cross-phase school record keeping system and shared primary/secondary staff training on these processes. Staff from the secondary school would attend their social inclusion team meetings. Small groups of children would regularly visit the secondary school for planned sessions. Key families with siblings in both schools have joint records so information can be gathered and structures set up to support children.

The secondary headteacher interviewed used extended school funding to spread the work of the inclusion team into the local primary school and used their resources to support them. Their multifaceted inclusion faculty fed into the primary school by providing anti-bullying workshops, bereavement counselling and family therapy. Joint INSET was also organised between phases to ensure appropriate subject delivery and a more seamless continuation of provision.

The secondary school used key members of staff to work in the primary school, particularly learning mentors, so they could work with vulnerable families whose children had attendance, behaviour and emotional needs. Their educational psychologist worked in both schools. This meant there was continuity of provision in terms of children transferring and more, there was a knowledgeable focus if younger/older siblings were manifesting similar problems. There was not a need to establish a new relationship and this was beneficial for both parents and the educational psychologist.

All secondary schools gather information about their new Year 7 cohorts; however, what differs is the way this information is used so that those who are vulnerable and requiring a more nurturing environment can be provided for within the school. In the secondary school visited for this research, a learning base, similar to one that might be found in a primary school, was arranged with teachers covering several subjects. This supports those pupils who would find moving around the school surrounded by other pupils and organising themselves very challenging and who would likely not arrive at their next class in a state receptive to learning.

Significant groups

The inclusion team

Some schools have developed very sophisticated methods of assessing and targeting support for their needy pupils and have set up teams to support this. Some headteachers were concerned that when they worked with a range of professionals, families can receive different messages from the various agencies. A headteacher with a well-established inclusion team commented:

> "We needed to avoid parents having to explain themselves to 5, 6 or 7 sets of people. So we set up a key worker system for the vulnerable pupils in our school. The key workers meet regularly and the social inclusion team meet every half term."

The members of this school's inclusion team were:

- assistant headteacher, responsibility for inclusion
- 2 SENCOs
- minority ethnic achievement teacher
- 2 learning mentors
- welfare assistant
- nurture group teacher
- speech therapist
- educational psychologist
- education welfare officer
- school-based counsellor
- therapist
- school nurse.

This team allocates the key worker. The team discuss children regardless of whether they have interaction with that child or not so that they can offer support and suggest ways of working plus consider other possible referrals. They prioritise children in order of need and high priority children have pastoral support plans.

The family group

As stressed throughout this report, you cannot consider a vulnerable child's needs without the involvement of the family. The importance of this interaction was stressed in all schools visited. The headteacher of the school with the family therapy groups stated:

> "Doing things to children without doing them with parents does not work."

In the study, the headteachers highlighted various ways of working with families. The following paragraphs are a description of the evolution, organisation, methodology and impact of a family group in one school.

Venue

This headteacher has invested a lot of money and time in creating a parents' room that is equipped with comfy, attractive furniture. It also has cooking facilities and is generally a welcoming environment that does not feel institutional. This type of space

was seen in all schools visited and shows the respect headteachers have for parents and how they are valued as part of the school community.

Facilitators

The headteacher made contact with a professional family group worker from an accredited centre with a view to forming a family group. They identified two mothers whose children were manifesting problems and were concerned about their future at secondary school. The mothers were keen to work with the school but also had personal problems themselves. The family worker began sessions with these parents and their sons. As a result of that process the parents expressed an interest in being trained as support workers who would liaise with other parents and help run the family group in the future.

Client group

These were children who were giving cause for concern and have a negative attitude to school. They were disengaging from the outcomes of the ECM agenda and are vulnerable to destructive influences within the society outside school. They were identified via discussion with the staff team plus the professional counsellor. The size of the invited group was to be eight children plus mothers and the facilitators.

Methodology

The involvement of the trained parents was vital as they had credibility with other parents. When the group was due to be set up the identified parents were approached out of school by the support mothers who invited them to come and join the group to discuss their anxieties about their children.

The time for the session was allocated so the children and parents were in the group together for the first hour and the parents then remain for two more hours. The ethos is one of nurturing to make parents feel happy and safe. The parents are encouraged to voice their problems. The facilitators promote a tough dialogue. The lead parents challenge the other parents about the management of their children. They question what the real issues are with their children and why their behaviour has been so inappropriate.

The client parents are encouraged to share and articulate the levels of stress they have to deal with. There is an understanding of confidentiality and a notion of common trust within the group. All members commit to their involvement. There is a mutual agreement on realistic sanctions and expectations. In the ensuing weeks there is feedback from the implementation of these approaches at home and at school. The headteacher commented that, “Communication is a very powerful agent of change. The group is very persuasive”.

Outcomes

The parents respond that they feel happy and safe within the group. There is a collective responsibility within the school to ensure consistency of approach with the pupils who attend the group. There has been a positive impact on the boys, which has facilitated an easier transfer to their secondary schools. The future seems more secure and they appear to be less vulnerable and more robust in coping with life and education. The local secondary school headteacher is developing a group.

The trained parents are paid to facilitate the sessions and it has been empowering for them. They have become influential within the local community and are constantly networking and are now working with training parents to run groups in other boroughs. These two particular mothers have also gone on to extend their education both having left school at the age of 16. This work has developed their confidence and broadened their horizons.

Significant individuals

The school leaders recognised that a range of individuals could support vulnerable pupils. In this study, these included:

- teaching assistants, whose responsibilities included working with specific pupils
- para-professionals from various employment backgrounds in the role of a learning mentor, for example, nursery nurse
- other professionals, for example, speech therapists funded as full-time appointments and shared half and half between a school and health authority, or a social worker on a masters programme completing a 100-day practice.

Learning mentors

The impact of the Excellence in Cities initiative in these schools cannot be over stated. All those headteachers interviewed whose schools had benefited from this funding stream highlighted the work of the learning mentors whom they recruited. They were very specific about their role and significance in school.

Learning mentors work with targeted pupils who are often vulnerable because of their attendance problems or their lack of engagement in the education process. These pupils are often those whose family circumstances are so turbulent that there are many barriers for the individual to surmount. As a result they are often not receptive to the class/subject teacher and find it difficult to fit into the agenda of the school for a given day without support. They need someone to give them strategies for coping with their personal life so they can engage with the educational process. Some of these children will have SEN but they also manifest many other issues that cannot be supported under that umbrella alone.

The mentor sets up a programme of interaction that supports the inclusion of these vulnerable children and their tracking during the day.

The roles and responsibilities of learning mentors in these schools included:

- inviting a child's parents into school or making a home visit to explain how they will be working with their child
- developing a supportive relationship with targeted pupils
- setting up a programme with individuals of supportive strategies to help them cope with the school day, for example, conflict resolution
- using counselling interventions to remove barriers that interrupt learning
- improving attendance and punctuality by allocating time to the development of a relationship with the family and fostering dialogue with them
- referring and working with outside agencies that support the whole family
- in-school daily mentor tracking/intervention
- making contact with their target pupils on a daily basis and monitoring their emotional well-being. The class teacher/tutor will contact the learning mentor if there are any issues concerning the pupil's/student's ability to function appropriately during the day
- supporting pupils and parents during secondary transfer, for example, help with visiting schools.

Learning mentors form a vital link between the school, social services and other outside agencies often triggering support for parents as well. Their support/liaison with parents is also a key to their success. Parents often view them differently and do not link them with the formal hierarchy of the school. Their role is of course essential to pupils' achievement but targets do not govern them. Their time can be prioritised according to the individual's needs, for example, anger management or conflict resolution. As part of their greater role they often lead on child protection procedures and 'looked-after' children within the schools.

Learning mentors are a developing group of professionals who come from a range of backgrounds such as youth worker, teacher, nursery nurse or teaching assistant. Many use this work to further their professional skills and education particularly in counselling or therapy. The headteachers were unanimous in the view that they had become such a significant element of their schools' provision.

Caroline Roaf's (2002) study of inter-agency working sees the developing role of the para-professional as essential. She describes them as the family–school–community links worker who fluidly crosses boundaries of existing agency working. One headteacher described learning mentors as, "Stunning, this is the person we always needed in schools and now, here they are".

From the pupils' responses it was clear that they were extremely positive about coming to school and they had obviously been supported in developing strategies to deal with situations that cause them distress.

In response to the question, 'Who do you talk to in school if you have a problem and why do you go to them?', they all clearly and confidently named their significant people and one child said of the learning mentor, "She always has time".

A boy in Year 4, when being questioned about the learning mentor, was emphatic that from his perspective "she really is the only who cares!".

Obviously learning mentors have a very full daily programme but part of the technique of managing their time is to prioritise their client group. The perception of these para-professionals by pupils is that they, the child, are important.

As one Year 5 boy with SEN commented, "She helps me with my badness and my goodness".

Directors of learning, deputy heads, senior teachers and SENCOs may line-manage learning mentors but these individuals are, according to these headteachers, central to raising the self-esteem of these vulnerable pupils and forming relationships with their parents/carers that creates a support network throughout the pupils' time at the school.

Evaluation undertaken by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) (Morris et al 2004) indicates the positive impact of learning mentors on attainment outcomes for young people:

- Clear impact on attainment levels through a strong linkage between learning mentor support and achievement. Area-based evaluations from around the country have had similar findings and show a clear impact on levels of confidence, engagement, self-esteem and attendance.
- Positive impact of learning mentor support on behaviour in the classroom, backing up views expressed by teachers and pupils.

Therapists

All headteachers interviewed expressed the need for more support via the child and mental health services (CAMHS). They all accessed alternative therapists and found the funds to support their work in schools. These professionals, as with learning mentors, provided a valuable resource and link with parents. It seemed to them very obvious that many vulnerable children had mental health issues and they considered that the school was often the main agency to push for support. The Department of Health report on children's mental health (Green et al 2004) provides significant statistical evidence of the issues for children's mental health.

Financing changes

Essential elements in taking forward such an agenda were the management of their budget and the involvement of their governors. The headteachers' visions for their organisations cost money and they had to find it in their budgets. Initially, they had to win over their governing bodies so that they would then sanction the spending in order to fund capital works or different staffing structures. The governors had to agree to spending initially that would support the risk taking of the headteacher. This funding was either recouped via increased roles or alternative funding, for example, extended schools, charities, teacher training programmes and the National Lottery.

The headteachers could justify the priorities for their spending and why they were targeting funds at vulnerable children. Children who come from disadvantaged homes or are disengaging with school can be alienated by aspects of the school environment that other, more robust, children readily accept.

All the headteachers interviewed referred to the state of the school toilets and why all had initially invested a great deal of money in improving these facilities. It is a direct way of showing children you care. One headteacher had got rid of all the boys' urinals and created "a place to visit not to desecrate". Another said their conveniences previously were all painted black and foul places. The investment on the improvement of this part of the premises was significant but judged by all to be hugely worthwhile.

Barriers to effective working and a way forward

All the headteachers interviewed were actively pushing for greater involvement of both social and health services. They all expressed the view that this working pattern was being supported by the ECM agenda and the formation of Children's Trusts. They additionally considered that an approach that enabled the location of a professional educational health worker based in school would serve the inclusion of vulnerable pupils better. Such professionals would have access to services and their knowledge of the NHS protocols would be invaluable. If funds were delegated to schools for this, headteachers felt they could advertise for and recruit more effective staff.

Headteachers interviewed were still frustrated by issues such as different working practices across boroughs. Secondary schools in London often have pupils from many different boroughs and this complicates accessing services.

Vulnerability and inclusion

The editors of the Inclusive Education series Gary Thomas and Christine O'Hanlon have made a pertinent comment about *inclusion* that could fit the word *vulnerable*:

> "The problem about the sloganizing of 'inclusion' is that the word has become often merely filler in the conversation. People can talk about 'inclusion' without really thinking about what they mean merely to add a progressive gloss to what they are saying."

To the headteachers interviewed for this research, inclusion and vulnerability go hand in hand. Their vulnerable pupils often challenge the school and they ask the question how they can extend their provision to truly cater for these children. They have to allocate funds, staffing and time. They are all resolute in their belief that while they work to raise standards for all, the results of their approach cannot be measured by test outcomes alone.

In *The Micropolitics of Inclusive Education*, Shereen Benjamin (2002) examines and analyses pupils' experience of inclusion in a successful girls' comprehensive. She shows how 'effective' schooling can have unintended and unegalitarian effects for some of the most vulnerable students in schools, and unravels some of the complexities facing pupils and teachers as teachers move towards inclusive practice.

She discusses the notion of the child-in-danger and the child-as danger.

> The child-in-danger is primarily the child with learning difficulties, who can be constructed as vulnerable. The child-as-danger is the student with emotional and behavioural difficulties: the student whose affect on classrooms can be disruptive and who risks becoming socially excluded. (Benjamin 2002)

The headteachers interviewed for the project clearly knew pupils like these and they wanted their schools to go further with interventions through partnership with outside agencies to change the futures of such pupils.

In the opening of her book on *Coordinating Services for Included Children*, Caroline Roaf (2002) highlights the difficulties of multi-agency working and the tensions that arise from the different perspectives of each agency. The headteachers for this research saw themselves as pivotal in promoting the joined-up approach and having the strength and resolve to overcome any agency's bureaucratic barriers. The ECM agenda had given the headteachers the authority to sidetrack any professional boundary disputes because the child is at the centre and their needs are paramount.

The headteachers were adamant that their resolve would help prevent children like Kyle falling 'through the net', as Caroline Roaf describes it. However, none of them were naïve; they fully understood that as much as they would be involved in any collaborative and cooperative venture, ultimately there was little that they could do to solve the ills of society. They understood there were factors beyond their control like housing and overcrowding that impacted on pupil achievement in life as well as academically.

To conclude: lessons for leaders

Four main points emerge from the findings that readers might consider in relation to their own context:

- establish, within and beyond the school, a clear vision that focuses on the needs of all children
- allocate resources, both human and physical, that support inclusion
- seek collaborative relationships with services and providers to bring support and expertise to the school and its pupils, and to maximise flexibility and the responsiveness of provision and grow school capacity
- trust other professionals to work with the school to support children and families.

This research explores how some school leaders have embarked on the journey of restructuring and changing the way their schools and staffs operate both internally and within their community to support vulnerable pupils. Every school will be considering how to expand their boundaries and draw together school-linked services. This sample of headteachers see this way of working as an essential part of their brief for vulnerable children in helping to combat the limiting effects of social deprivation.

The key to their success in bringing about change, crossing agency boundaries, creating staffing structures, new posts, new approaches and realising their vision is their entrepreneurial attitude. They are not bound by any traditional views of educational leadership. One headteacher who had worked in a commercial enterprise in her life before being a head made clear links between her current role and that of being a business manager.

One can conclude from Caroline Roaf (2002) in her section on inter-agency management that what these headteachers are doing is making the process visible: “As the basic building block in a well-maintained inter agency structure this entrepreneurial potential can be realized”.

Inner-city deprivation, whether it is in London or elsewhere, demands an extraordinary commitment from their education leaders. The following is a quote from a headteacher in her first five years in that role. It sums up the motivation and drive this group of headteachers have and why they are such strong advocates for their needy pupils.

> “I think it is such a challenge working in the inner city and managing in the inner city that if you are one of those people who can do it. I think you should do it, which is why I wanted to work in inner London. I love the kids. I like the challenge. I always feel at home here. To me it is not so difficult. I never understand why people go on about it being so difficult and the kids are so difficult. Most of them love coming to school because their home lives are so poor. If they want to be here, then it is what we do with them when they are here that is so significant.”

Acknowledgements

My huge thanks to the five schools and their headteachers who participated in this research and gave so willingly of their time.

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Useful websites

The Future of Children: www.futureofchildren.org/

The Annie E. Casey Foundation: www.aecf.org/

Positive Activities for Young People – National Evaluation: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW46.pdf

Integrated Children's System: www.dfes.gov.uk/integratedchildrenssystem/

National evaluation of children's trusts: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/childrens-trusts/national-evaluation/

Appendix: The process and contents of the interviews

Opening questions

It was vital to understand what teaching and leadership experiences had acted as a catalyst to motivate these individuals to take on their current school. The formulation of their key priorities was significant in terms of their ongoing success.

Topics for discussion

- The notion of vulnerability
- The means of identification
- The strategies for support
- The evolvement of a structure
- The identification of other agencies and their use
- The examination of related critical incidents
- The analysis of an individual's needs
- The impact of the ECM agenda
- The actions of the government
- The transfer of pupils and their future
- The open road and big ideas that might cause a transformation in provision.