# VULNERABLE CHILDREN: NEEDS AND PROVISION IN THE PRIMARY PHASE

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Despite the New Labour Government's concern with reducing social exclusion and disadvantage and integrating support services, especially in the second half of its period in power, the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review found that:

> There is still a risk of 'vulnerable' becoming a professional euphemism, couched within a deficit model that views disadvantaged children as a 'nuisance', 'incomplete' or somehow 'insufficient' (Alexander, 2010: 60)

This research report examines whether such views can be applied to policies which have been implemented since the Coalition Government took up office in 2010 and the extent to which changes to policy and practice in this period are likely to have improved the wellbeing and education of vulnerable children. As such, it relates to the Cambridge Primary Review Trust's first two priorities to 'tackle the continuing challenge of social and educational disadvantage, and find practical ways to help schools to close the overlapping gaps in social equity and educational attainment' and 'advance children's voice and rights in school and classroom'.

Although provision and support for vulnerable children has been a recurring theme of education and social policy since 2010, vulnerability remains a contested and underdefined term. This report reviews recent research and policy to see how vulnerability has been constructed and how this affects the provision that they can access. There is a growing evidence base that indicates the strong relationship between vulnerability in childhood and negative outcomes later in life, including mental health problems, economic underperformance and poor physical health, if effective support and interventions are not provided. Schools have a key role to play both in fostering achievement in vulnerable children and in facilitating their access to a range of support services. Unlike other professionals, teachers and other primary school staff see children every day and are therefore wellplaced to identify need at an early stage and respond to vulnerability before problems become entrenched.

After examining how vulnerability in children has been defined and constructed, the report reviews key Coalition and Conservative Government policies relating to early help and troubled families and compares them to New Labour and Scottish Government policies. It then reviews school-focused policies at three levels: national, local, and in-school, looking at how changes such as increased school autonomy and the introduction of the Pupil Premium have affected the ability of schools and local authorities to meet the needs of vulnerable children.

The report asserts that although there is a growing evidence base relating to the effectiveness of pre-school interventions, far less is known about the effectiveness of interventions in primary schools. Some of the factors that have been identified as key to the success of interventions in the early years, such as targeting multiple areas of need, and multi-agency working involving health, education and social care are likely to be equally effective in interventions in the primary phase. A body of evidence suggests that early intervention across the age range and focused on the whole family improves wellbeing, protects children and makes financial sense, as exemplified by a series of initiatives. The evidence also suggests that narrowly-focused programmes that address single issues are unlikely to deliver the desired outcomes for vulnerable children.

Research has also found that one of the best ways to help children is to help the whole family. Children need to be understood in the context of their families and environments, which means that interventions need to be

informed by a developmental approach that addresses their needs at different levels. A number of local programmes are already succeeding in bridging the gap between home and school for vulnerable families.

After discussing some of the indicators of vulnerability that may assist schools in identifying children in need of support, the report concludes by offering a series of recommendations for policy, research and practice:

- A mix of universal, specialist and targeted services is required that focuses on multiple indicators of vulnerability and need. Schools are well-placed to offer universal services via teachers and school nurses and to signpost children and parents to more specialist services. Integrating all the services that work with children and families – education, health, social care, housing and welfare rights - is key as in Scotland (GIRFEC) or Liverpool (Families Programme), but this will require major structural and cultural changes to join up adult and child services and to break down traditional professional boundaries and roles.

- Drawing on aspects of a strengths- and solution-focused approach may help to equip children and families with coping skills which will increase their resilience and self-reliance and reduce their dependence on external assistance.  Combined with peer support, this is likely to enable them to sustain progress once formal supports have been withdrawn.

- Support should be tailored to need. This may involve practical, hands-on support and therapeutic support customised to the child's and family's needs, taking the child's cognitive and emotional development into account in consideration of multiple, interacting vulnerabilities.

- Cultural change takes time to achieve and may require new thinking about the relationship between agencies, professions and practitioners.  Similarly, impact is not immediate and is difficult to demonstrate. More evidence is needed of successful initiatives which support vulnerable children in primary schools and their impact on improving children's lives through partnership between schools and other agencies. Schools need to take ownership of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of such initiatives and interventions in partnership with other agencies, integrating this into existing ways of working.

- More research is needed to establish which support strategies work most effectively for different kinds of vulnerable children in specific contexts.

- In identifying vulnerability, school staff should listen to and observe children carefully, and understand that vulnerability may be displayed in very subtle ways. Consideration of a range of indicators should be combined with flexible use of assessment frameworks. This will help schools to consider vulnerability factors and identify potential strengths and supports in children's lives that may protect them from vulnerability, working in partnership with other agencies.  Listening to and responding to the voices of vulnerable children and parents should be integral to such assessment procedures.

**Related sources:**

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 1:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/equity/

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 2:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/voice/

Picket, K. and Vanderbloemen, L. (2015) *Mind the Gap: Tackling Social and Educational Inequality* (CPRT Research Survey 4). York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

***Cambridge Primary Reivew, relevant publications:***

Alexander, R.J. (ed.) (2010), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Reivew*, Routledge. Chapters 4 (Childhood today), 8 (Children, diversity and equity), 9 (Children with special needs), 20 (Schools, local authorities and other agencies), and 24 (Conclusions and recommendations).

Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (eds) (2010), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys,* Routledge. Chapters 2 (Children and their primary sxhools: pupils' voices, pp. 17-48) 3 (Children's lives outside school and their educational impact, pp. 49-83), 5 (Primary schools and other agencies, pp. 97-136), 8 (Children in primary education: demography, culture diversity, inclusion, pp. 195-216), and 9 (Learning needs and difficulties among children of primary school age: definition, identification, provision and issues, pp. 217-240).

# FURTHER INFORMATION

**The report on which this briefing is based: Jopling, M., and Vincent, S. (2016)** *Vulnerable Children: Needs and Provision in the Primary Phase* **(CPRT Research Survey 6), York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust. ISBN: 978-0-9931032-6-1.**

The report is available at www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also contains information about other surveys in this series, and those related to the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, professional networking and development).

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