



CASE STUDY 5

Supporting Vulnerable Groups of Students in Our Schools

Introduction

This is one of six case studies that have been written as 'finger-tip' guides to inform and enrich your support for students with SEND. Each offers an accessible, evidence-informed summary of advice. This support is both immediately actionable and can be used to enrich further discussions. All the case studies are aimed at supporting busy professional colleagues so that they can further develop their inclusive educational practices. Other case studies in the series include:

- Case Study 1: Supporting Students During a National Emergency
- Case Study 2: Supporting Students with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs
- Case Study 3: Appreciating the Role of the SENCO
- Case Study 4: Improving Attendance, Behaviour and Inclusion
- Case Study 6: Supporting the Identification and Assessment of Needs

Each case study follows the same format. They are divided into six short sections, the first being a summary as to why this particular study might be relevant to you. The next section shares selected professional knowledge that could help to inform your context. The third section offers a summary of key motivations for change. Section four offers some ways to address these. The final two sections build on this by highlighting how professional support can be further developed, including identifying selected further sources of support.

We very much hope that you will find these guides to be both informative and actionable. We wish you well in your endeavours and thank you for all that you do for your learners.

1. Why this Case Study might be relevant to you.

The focus for this case study is vulnerable groups. All students are unique, and the most effective methods of learning varies between individuals. This is particularly true for vulnerable students who often either need additional or differing forms of support. But being able to identify vulnerable students is the first step in providing them with the support they need to ensure they receive the high-quality education they deserve which is why it is crucial that educators are aware of what distinguishes vulnerable students.

The overarching definition of a vulnerable student is a young person who requires extra support with their education. It is a broad term which encompasses several types of

individuals. For example, it may be students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those with either mental or physical health issues, young people with behavioural difficulties such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or emotional disturbance, or students who are in difficult circumstances which have led to them needing extra assistance.

It is also important to be aware that individuals could be categorised as 'vulnerable' for either a short or long period of time. It may be the case that a situation or series of events has led to a young person requiring extra support for a few weeks or months, before 'bouncing back' after reaping the positive benefits, and no longer needing additional assistance. Alternatively, due to the conditions or disabilities of some students, they may require extra support on a more permanent basis.

Students who are profiled as being 'vulnerable' may well have more than one need. Their vulnerabilities could include: SEND, English as an Additional Language, being a young carer, safeguarding issues, living in care/looked after child, and / or living in poverty. This Case Study focusses on those who were identified as having a SEND (including those with SEND and other needs). Whilst other potential factors (needs) that may influence vulnerable students were not discounted, the schools in Stoke-on-Trent that took part in this project reported that those students with SEND, are increasingly neuro diverse, and welcomed support in how best to support these students.

2. Accessing Professional Knowledge

To help to inform our responses, we recognised that improving outcomes for vulnerable learners has been a priority for a number of national bodies and government departments, for a number of years. Sutton Trust research and the Social Mobility Commission reveals the current state of low social mobility in the UK and the disproportionate representation of the most affluent, often those educated in independent and selective schools, in top universities and professions. The economic cost of this inequity to the country's economy and social cohesion, and impact on the life choices of young people, is considerable unless change occurs. Research tells us that vulnerable pupils benefit from:

- Flexible grouping arrangements
- High quality character education which has a focus on emotional resilience
- Enrichment activities. These activities, (including sports and outward bound, the performing arts, music lessons, after school clubs and trips) are taken for granted by many children, but our vulnerable students may particularly benefit from being supported to access these.
- Ensuring children in the early years are well prepared for school and when at school pupils attend school regularly, are prepared for learning with the right equipment, and do not miss learning time because they are excluded from class or from the school, makes a big difference.
- Research shows that promoting a positive culture in schools which drives the belief that all children can thrive, makes a significant difference. Where schools do not give up on any child, it is more likely to get the engagement and effort by all children to do well.

- Schools to make the best use of Pupil Premium funding by consistent use of the Sutton Trust’s evidence papers, including the most effective and low-cost strategies in their Teaching and Learning Toolkit.
- We recognise the importance of schools being able to target their resources efficiently so that vulnerable learners receive additional good teaching as individuals and in small groups, in addition to whole class lessons.
- Early Help and Preventative Service, working closely with schools and other services to identify the right vulnerable children for support. It provides the right level of responsive and timely additional help for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people, and their families
- Specific parenting programmes can sometimes be productive
- Pupil Premium Reviews. These offer a useful means of improving the use of the Pupil Premium in schools, to improve outcomes and narrow achievement gaps.

3. Key Motivations for Change

As professionals, we are always ambitious to do more for our young people. In order to do this we found that it can often be helpful to clarify both our motivations for change and to identify some of the dilemmas that we face. By making these explicit, we can then prioritise strategies that might help us to address such concerns. We hope that you may find the lists below helpful. There could be both some drivers and dilemmas noted here that you also recognise. As you consider these insights, you may find yourself thinking of others, which are not recorded here. Please share them in your own teams and see if any of the strategies shared in section four might be helpful.

Drivers

We identified that we were ambitious to:

- Support staff teams with their prioritisation of needs. When students presented multiple areas of need, it proved to be important to work together to consider which need should be addressed first.
- Support SENCOs in developing a confidence in accessing high quality support in relation to complex needs or rare conditions.
- Enable TAs and teachers to work and plan together, so that when interventions were delivered by TAs, teachers were also aware of the impacts of these.
- Enable consistency in the use of school systems for recording, tracking, monitoring and evaluating provision for vulnerable learners
- Facilitate coherence and consistency of information and assessment data sharing between SENCOs, teachers and teaching assistants.
- Ensure that SENCOs were made fully aware of students with SEND who may be at risk of exclusion.
- Enable senior leadership teams to triangulate data, in order to reflect and intervene early before exclusion became necessary for vulnerable students.

Dilemmas

We identified that we were concerned by:

- Circumstances that led to SENCOs feeling that the delivery of the National Curriculum within their school settings, did not allow for adequate differentiation and/or reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of learners with SEND.
- Occasions when schools had invested in systems for monitoring the provision for vulnerable pupils, however these were not fully integrated.
- Students who did not always feel included.

4. Putting professional knowledge and understanding to work.

By drawing on research and evidence informed practices in relation to the drivers and dilemmas listed above we then considered evidence informed ways of supporting vulnerable students. These included:

- Senior and middle leaders with responsibility for SEND working closely with class teachers to support differentiation and curriculum development. This aided consistency and enabled the sharing of knowledge across the school.
- Quality First Teaching being embedded into all classroom practice and as a fundamental part of this, resources were adapted to make them accessible to all students.
- The schools' improvement plans identifying the outcomes of students with SEND as a priority with a specific focus on vulnerable groups.
- Performance Management targets for all staff were linked to the outcomes for students with SEND.
- All school staff receiving training so that they could use the school's systems to support vulnerable learners effectively.
- Tracking data for current students with SEND (and those who had left) being carefully monitored by school staff.
- All staff members being granted access to data for vulnerable students. This ensured accountability at all levels.
- Teachers ensuring that interventions and the use of resources were carefully coordinated.
- Schools providing (or planned to provide) a safe space for all pupils, regardless of whether they had SEND. Schools anticipated that this would improve behaviour and reduce the number of exclusions across the school.

5. Contributing to collective professional knowledge

The strategies prioritised in section 4 will often be enacted by individual members of our school teams, supported by our whole school ethos. In our reviews we also found it particularly helpful to highlight strategies that will depend on our collective and collaborative endeavours. Here we share some approaches that could usefully inform local area dialogues.

- To work with schools to ensure that all staff have the same expectations of students with SEND.
- To support senior leaders, SENCOs and managers in schools to ensure that provision and strategies that are in place, for SEND and vulnerable students, are consistently utilised.
- To provide professional learning and development opportunities for Teaching Assistants that also allow for networking opportunities.

6. Sources of further information:

- Beyond Transition: An Intervention Programme to Support Vulnerable Students at Key Stage 3 By Linda Bell.

<https://my.optimus-education.com/shop/beyond-transition-intervention-programme-support-vulnerable-students-key-stage-3>

Aimed at pupils transitioning from Year 6 to Year 7 (and beyond), this programme is designed to help students manage stress, anxiety and schools can ensure that systems are in place to support students, pre and post transfer to high school. It should be noted that this was published before the current (2015) SEN COP and as such old terminology e.g. SA+ and National Curriculum levels are used.

- Training materials for teachers of learners with severe, profound and complex learning difficulties.

www.complexneeds.org.uk

This website contains 16 modules for supporting students with severe, profound and complex learning difficulties. Published in 2012 modules cover areas such as how to talk and listen to families, legislation, curriculum challenges, how and why students engage or disengage with learning and assessment.

- Supporting the most vulnerable children and young people By Anna Freud (National Centre for Children and Families).

<https://www.annafreud.org/media/11322/supporting-the-most-vulnerable-children-and-young-people-interactive-160420.pdf>

While this four page guide was originally designed to support student's during the COVID-19 pandemic it is also packed with suggestions of how to support them beyond this. It includes tips for families, self-care, eating disorders and OCD. There is also a self-care summer booklet for secondary pupils: <https://www.annafreud.org/media/12101/final-selfcaresummer-secondary.pdf>

- National Children's Bureau.

https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/20210513_Rapid%20Review_Full%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf

Supporting and strengthening families through provision of early help. A rapid review of evidence – summary report. By Amy Edwards, Roya Gharbi, Ava Berry, Robbie Duschinsky, (National Children's Bureau). Published in June 2021 this is a review of the Early Help and recommended ways forward.

<http://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/news-opinion/new-analysis-help-struggling-children-and-families-underlines>

A useful overview of the terms used in early help process and their definitions.

- Empowering family-teacher partnerships: building connections within diverse communities by Mick Coleman (2013) SAGE Publications.

A useful reference book for schools to refer to before and during their work with families and students that are vulnerable.