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## Research Associate Summary 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**

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### ■ “Are you learnin’ us today, Miss?”

Kevin Cooney, *Headteacher*, *Garswood Training School, St Helens*

### ■ Lessons in partnership

Derek Peaple, *Headteacher*, *Park House School and Sports College, Newbury*

### ■ ...and the pupil said

Hazel Pulley, *Headteacher* and Linda Jagger, *Deputy Headteacher*, *Caldecote Community Primary School, Leicester City*

### ■ Shape-shifters

Dr Victoria M Rataj-Worsnop, *Vice Principal*, *Hockerill Anglo-European College, Hertfordshire*

### ■ Mentoring: from data to people

Michael Stewart, *Headteacher*, *Westlands School and Technology College, Torquay*

### ■ Does it help to know?

Viv Wakeham, *Headteacher*, *West Horndon Primary School, Essex*

## Background

The Every Child Matters agenda is requiring all schools to examine their broader provision for pupils. Personalised learning through successful, inclusive 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', 'curriculum entitlement and choice' and 'organising the school', whether implicitly or explicitly.

This study seeks to understand how a sample of London headteachers have sought to meet the needs of their most vulnerable learners in their school's practices. These practices are reflective of their individual and collective recognition that every child matters. These are leaders whose schools are innovative, highly inclusive and located in areas with high indicators of deprivation. Their schools reflect the complexity that is characteristic of the capital. They are multi-ethnic and multi-faith, with as many as 40 different languages spoken by the school population.

## Context

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 skilfully customises provision.

In an effort to create an orderly and stable relationship between different aspects of a child's life, school leaders try to work in partnership with other agencies, especially social services and health.

## Methods

In-depth interviews were carried out with five headteachers from both primary and secondary phases and 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 heads' vision

Integral to understanding the journey the headteachers had taken was an understanding of the experiences that had motivated them to take on their current schools. The formulation of their key priorities significantly influenced their ongoing success.

All the headteachers involved had worked in challenging London schools prior to taking up their current headships. Four, including the writer, each had over three decades of teaching experience.

*'I am not one of those people who sees my job as a job. I see it as a vocation. I always say to my newly qualified teachers: "You are about to enter probably one of the most significant professions because we are about social change." So for me, the Every Child Matters agenda has always been what I believe in.'*

## Significant people – who made a difference to these children?

Whilst the vision of the head 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 the 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

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, eg nursery nurse
- other professionals, eg speech therapists funded as full-time appointments and shared half and half between a school and health authority, or a social worker on a Master's programme completing a 100-day practice

## Learning mentors

All the headteachers interviewed considered the role of learning mentors as vital. Learning mentors<sup>1</sup> work with pupils who have low motivation, lack of self-esteem, poor communication skills and who come from generally unsupportive home backgrounds. They are often pupils with poor attendance records and/or are at risk of exclusion. As one pupil commented:

*“She helps me with my badness and my goodness.”*

Another commented:

*“She always has time.”*

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 of supportive strategies with individuals to help them cope with the school day, eg 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, eg in-school daily mentor tracking and intervention
- making contact with their target pupils on a daily basis and monitoring their emotional well-being. The class teacher or tutor will contact the learning mentor if there are any issues concerning the pupil's or student's ability to function appropriately during the day
- supporting pupils and parents during secondary transfer, eg help with visiting schools

As one head put it:

*“Stunning, this is the person we always needed in schools and now they are here”.*

## Additional provision within and beyond the school day

Three of the schools in the study were funded as extended schools but all allocated resources either from their own budget, outside agencies and/or charities, as appropriate, to offer a comprehensive package of provision comprising:

- breakfast clubs
- regular sessions with a qualified therapist or counsellor
- family or parent support worker
- after-school provision

The heads saw the development of wrap-around care not just as extending the school day but having potential additional benefits, eg a family therapy group in one school is now being led by parents who were previously attendees.

The heads interviewed see the Every Child Matters agenda as an opportunity to develop school-linked services, and some would ideally like their own school to be a collaborative care centre<sup>2</sup>. They welcome the introduction of Children's Trusts in order to manage their route through the health and social services. All looked forward to the possibility of developing new professional roles that brought education and health together.

## To conclude: lessons for leaders

- Establish, within and beyond the school, a clear vision which 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
  - maximise flexibility and responsiveness of provision
  - grow school capacity.
- Trust other professionals to work with the school to support children and families.

This research gives a flavour of how some school leaders have embarked upon the journey of restructuring and changing the way their schools and staff operate both internally and within their community to support vulnerable pupils. Every school will be considering how to expand its boundaries and draw together school-linked services. This sample of heads 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.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Home-school liaison workers who form a professional relationship with parents and pupils that is complementary to the school's. They enhance the pastoral provision and often extend and complement the work of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO).

<sup>2</sup> This would have the services of a GP and all the pupils would be registered with the GP, who would work across health authorities, with the school health adviser, mental health professional, social worker, education welfare adviser, benefits manager etc. The school would become the hub and the centre of service delivery to the community.

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