

CREATING
A CARING
SCHOOL
Identifying
Vulnerable
Learners in
Your School

Guide

2

Writers

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Identifying vulnerable learners in your school

Introduction

All children in South African schools are entitled to quality education and a supportive school environment that will allow them to take full advantage of the teaching and learning opportunities to develop their potential. This fundamental right to education for everyone is enshrined in the South African Constitution and is promoted by national education acts and policies.

It is a known fact that large numbers of learners in our schools are unable to take advantage of education because they are the victims of socio-economic issues such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and violence. In Guide 1 we examined the role that schools could play to mitigate the effects on learners. We reflected on the school as a critical partner in the national multisectoral response to HIV and AIDS and poverty and constructed a picture of what a caring school in which vulnerable learners receive appropriate care and support might look like.

In Guide 2 we place the spotlight on learners and investigate what we mean by vulnerable learners, what challenges they face, and why the school can be such a powerful and positive influence in their lives. We hope that deeper insight into the plight of vulnerable learners will motivate you and your management team to put in place an *information gathering system* that enables you to pinpoint accurately who is vulnerable in your school. Dependable management information will enable you to make informed decisions about the support and care strategies that are best suited to your school context.

Key questions

This guide probes the following questions:

1. What makes learners vulnerable?
2. How can you identify vulnerable children in your school?
3. Why collect data about vulnerable learners?



What makes learners vulnerable?

The term *vulnerable children*, is used by many agencies and communities around the world and is generally understood to mean children who face hardships of many kinds. But what exactly is the nature of these hardships?

STOP and THINK

What does the term 'vulnerable children' mean?

Read the following two extracts from different sources that describe this term.

1. What are the common indicators of vulnerability listed in both extracts?
2. Why is it helpful for you and your management team to have a clear idea of what you mean by 'vulnerable learners'?

Extract 1

Individual, family and community contexts that make children vulnerable

Some specific indicators for vulnerability in children include the following:

- Any physical or mental handicap or any other long-term difficulty that would make it difficult for the child to function independently;
- Illness, either HIV or other major illness;
- Emotional or psychological problems;
- Abuse at emotional, physical or sexual level;
- Not cheerful, dull, does not perform well in class, miserable, dirty with torn clothes, sleepy;
- Use of drugs, e.g. glue, alcohol, cigarettes, dagga, cocaine;
- Neglect of schoolwork, does not attend school regularly, does not perform well at school;
- Does not receive sufficient healthy food and constantly shows signs of hunger;
- Constantly shows signs of not sleeping well;
- Poor hygiene or cannot engage in personal care;
- Does not have clothing or has dirty clothing all the time; and
- Does not receive care, particularly love, guidance and support.

Some family situations that make children vulnerable:

- Caregivers are not able or willing to care for the children under their care;
- Alcoholic, poor and/or emotionally disturbed parents;
- Handicapped (physically and mentally) or chronically sick parents, e.g. confined to bed;
- Household is overcrowded or the ratio of children to caregivers is too high;
- Divorced parents;
- Abusive family or parents or caregivers not equipped to provide the care-giving role;
- Lack of financial resources to adequately care for the child; and
- Lack of parental guidance and direction.



The community context in which the child lives also influences vulnerability:

- Risk of being exposed to dangerous situations;
- Prevented from having a normal life as a child, e.g. schooling, play, etc.;
- Unsafe environments such as informal settlements, lack of toilets, high crime level;
- High levels of poverty; and
- Exposure to crime, gangs and drug use. (Skinner, D. et al: 2004)¹

Extract 2

In South Africa, the broad definition of *vulnerability*, typically used by organisations such as the Media in Education Trust (MiET), Nurturing Orphans of AIDS for Humanity (NOAH), Save the Children UK and others involved in supporting children at risk in South African schools, include the following indicators as descriptors of vulnerability. Vulnerable children are children that:

- are orphaned (even with regards to orphans there is still much debate as to what constitutes an orphan, whether it is the death of one parent or two etcetera.);
- are hungry and do not bring food to eat at school/are unable to pay attention in class;
- need clothes and/or shoes/ do not have school uniform;
- are living on their own;
- are living with grandparents or other family;
- are caregivers to others;
- have parents who are sick;
- are not properly cared for at home;
- are physically or sexually abused;
- do not attend school;
- often do not complete homework because of household chores and lack of support;
- are visibly neglected e.g. not clean, need clothes /school uniforms;
- have emotional problems (they bully others, cry a lot, are quick to get angry etcetera.);
- are unable to manage their school work (their work is not up to standard and/or their work is often behind);
- are physically sick/ they have no one to take care of them when they are sick;
- appear abused; and
- lack confidence.

(Marneweck, L. et al: 2008)²

Comment

In both descriptions a vulnerable learner is seen as someone who has no access or limited access to basic needs such as sufficient and nutritious food, shelter, adequate clothing, a safe home and community environment free from abuse and exploitation, family care and support, good health care, and the ability to take full advantage of available education opportunities. In Extract 1 we are reminded that socio-economic



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problems and challenges in the country such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, high levels of unemployment and unacceptable levels of crime and violence experienced at community level, seriously reduce the ability of families to provide adequately for their children. As a result, children suffer enormous physical, psychological, emotional and mental hardships. The indicators of vulnerability are inclusive and offer a broad description that focuses not only on the effects of HIV and AIDS but includes poverty and violence and a range of related socio-economic problems.

A clear and agreed definition of vulnerability can provide government, community leaders and schools with a useful set of indicators to inform the planning of suitable care and support responses and interventions. At the same time it is important to gather dependable information about the size of the vulnerable learner population to ensure that planned support can be successfully implemented. For example where the school is organising a nutrition programme, it is necessary for the school management team (SMT) to know how many children need to be catered for, and what the nature of their nutritional needs is.

While definitions of vulnerability can be useful we must guard against using the definition as a label as this could easily result in learners becoming targets of stigma. The whole issue of vulnerability needs to be handled in a sensitive and sensible manner.

Identifying vulnerable learners in your school

South African schools are filled with vulnerable children, but it is not always easy to know who they are. Poverty, lack of parenting, violence and illness harm our children, but they do so in systemic and invisible ways. In addition, there is often a cultural imperative for children to stay in the background, and not to make demands. Many children who are hungry will not complain. Instead, they become passive and stop expecting decent meals. Children, who are affected by illnesses such as HIV, may become more and more isolated and may even go to some lengths to hide their needs. Children who are abused feel powerless and often protect their perpetrators to avoid further harm. Thus, it is quite possible for teachers to be with vulnerable children and not perceive their needs. Because of the endemic suffering, the



passivity and the silence in our communities it is possible to work with children on a daily basis and still miss the signs that tell us they need help. We can only help vulnerable children if they come to school and are enabled to stay at school. Any education, support actions and other constructive influences and benefits, which the school can offer vulnerable learners starts with this simple basic fact: *learners have to be in school to benefit from education and the school environment*. School attendance patterns and learner performance are indicators that alert us to the fact that learners may be vulnerable. Let's consider a few examples:

School attendance and learner performance as indicators of vulnerability

What does the attendance register reveal about learners?	What does the learner's performance and teacher's observations show?
1. Mpho has been absent for four days this term, and has been late on several occasions. On two days she was ill and on the other days she said she needed to care for a sick relative.	Her performance has declined, but only slightly. Although her concentration is poorer, she has a positive attitude and appears to be healthy.
2. Maria has been absent for eight days this term. She has not provided any reason for the absenteeism. Follow up with her guardians has not provided sufficient information on the cause of the absenteeism.	Maria looks tired and listless and is unable to concentrate. She often does not do her homework.
3. Andrew is always absent on the same day every week.	Andrew seems to be taking medication. He often looks faint and tends to be restless and finds it difficult to concentrate. His performance on assessment activities has dropped dramatically during the past two months.
4. Thabo has been absent for three weeks in May. This is the first time Thabo has been absent this year.	Thabo has been in several fights with other learners in class. He gets angry quickly and has taken to bullying other children on the playground. Thabo's work has become untidy and sloppy.
5. Monge always comes late for school and leaves early every day.	Monge's performance on assessment activities and in class is average and remains unchanged. She often has to borrow books from a classmate. She does not like to talk about her family.



The examples illustrate that analysing attendance records can alert teachers to problems that learners may be experiencing in their home environments. Attendance data on its own do not tell the whole story. But in conjunction with the learner's performance and the teacher's observations, it is possible to start identifying, which learners may be vulnerable. We must be careful though as our assumptions about learners could be inaccurate. Keeping accurate data on attendance and linking it to school performance *is* a necessary first step in identifying vulnerable learners, but we may need more information to be sure. We need to really know the child and her context to make an accurate assessment of her vulnerability and her need. Do you have reliable methods for identifying vulnerable children?

Collecting accurate data about vulnerable learners

Collecting reliable data about vulnerable learners in your school enables you to:

1. Compile a picture of the scope and nature of the challenge;
2. Focus your efforts and plan the most appropriate actions to support vulnerable learners; and
3. Inform the plans and decisions that management make about the use of resources in their schools.

There are ample examples that show how money and effort was wasted on actions that did not have the desired effect. A contributing factor is frequently that information is incomplete, superficial and unreliable. Often plans are put together without due consideration and without thorough analysis of the reality on the ground.

People frequently have a negative attitude to the collection of data because they experience it as a time consuming and tedious activity, and commonly do not see the purpose or value of collecting it. This is because, often as not, the data is sent off to the District Office, who send it off to the Provincial Department of Education and the school itself does not get any feedback on the results data collected or on how it is to be used.

Tool 2 that accompanies this Guide is, however, not for external use but is intended for internal, school-based planning. It is intended to assist school principals, SMTS



and SBSTs to identify vulnerable learners, to pinpoint the type of support required and to help track the learners progress.

It must, however, be noted that collecting reliable information about vulnerable learners can be quite tricky. Children who live with HIV or in households affected by HIV and AIDS, orphans, children who live in poverty stricken conditions and those who are severely affected by violence are clearly at risk and would be identified as being vulnerable. However, confirming their vulnerability status might prove to be quite challenging. Learners, their parents and caregivers often do not want to reveal this information. Additionally, persisting stigma and discrimination associated with these types of issues, means that school management will have to deal sensitively with the information and respect individuals' right to confidentiality.

Key points

We examined the meaning of the term vulnerable and how to identify vulnerable learners.

Some important insights we gained are:

1. A vulnerable learner is someone who does not have access or who has limited access to basic needs such as sufficient and nutritious food, shelter, adequate clothing, a safe home and community environment free from abuse and exploitation, family care and support, good health care, and the ability to take full advantage of available education opportunities.
2. The most common barriers to education are: irregular school attendance, physical suffering, emotional and psychological trauma, learning difficulties, and social stigma and discrimination.
3. Managing information about vulnerable learners and their needs is an integral part of an overall plan to respond proactively to the needs and support requirements of vulnerable learners. Accurate and reliable information enables management to use resources wisely and to implement appropriate support.



End notes

¹ Skinner, D. et al (2004) *Defining Orphaned and Vulnerable Children*, HSRC Press: Cape Town

² Marneweck, L., Bialobrzaska, M., Mhlanga, E. and Mphisa, P. (2008) *Enhancing school leadership: Meeting the challenges of HIV and AIDS* Research paper presented at the Teacher Education Project Conference, Johannesburg September 2008: SAIDE



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