narrowing the gap
in outcomes
for vulnerable groups

a review of the research evidence: summary of key findings

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Commissioning the review

This summary presents the key findings from a systematic review of the best evidence available on how the gap in outcomes has been narrowed for vulnerable groups aged 3–13 (relative to the mainstream) across the five Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes. These are: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

The review was commissioned from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) by the Local Government Association (LGA) to help underpin the *Narrowing the Gap* Programme. This major development programme was launched by the LGA and the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to explore the best ways of tackling the disadvantages suffered by vulnerable children and so improve their life chances.

Review methods

The review team at NFER initially scoped the area, agreed search criteria and undertook a wide screening of empirical evidence from across the UK, including literature reviews that covered well-regarded international research. The review mainly covered research evidence from 2004, but some earlier seminal texts were also included. After applying relevance and quality criteria, the best 42 documents were analysed, using templated reviewing techniques. Evidence from about a further 30 sources was then added to help fill in gaps.

The reported evidence, and this summary, have been organised around the following four strategy areas that are seen as vital in narrowing the gap in outcomes for vulnerable groups:

• the role of schools and schools working with other organisations

• the engagement and role of parents and carers

• early intervention and prevention

• local professional and political leadership.

The last section in the review examines the cross-cutting issues and main messages for developments in policy and practice.

What the evidence has to say

Schools and schools working with other professionals

Creating the **right positive ethos, emotional climate and culture** for the school is shown to be vitally important in promoting learner well-being, and improving outcomes for all, especially for vulnerable groups. Such a **positive school fabric** is promoted by having:

- a strong, inclusive and shared vision and leadership

- a whole-school approach to pastoral care

- an effective behaviour management strategy that rewards good behaviour, ensures that children feel safe and does not tolerate bullying and bad behaviour

- strategies that promote social and community cohesion and tackle negative cultural influences.

> There is good evidence to suggest that **providing a supportive framework for learning**, which addresses individual and group needs, is a key component in raising achievement amongst disadvantaged and under-performing groups. Strategies that appeared to work include:
>
> - providing tailored one-to-one support e.g. with clear learning development plans, well trained learning mentors and targeted literacy interventions
>
> - providing more out-of-school and classroom learning, which develops self-confidence, team work and other soft skills and can be effective in improving attendance, promoting enjoyment and raising achievement amongst more vulnerable groups
>
> - providing work-related learning opportunities at key stage 4 for those who were low attainers at key stage 3, which can lead to improved attainment and a greater likelihood of continuing in education and training post-16 (Golden *et al*., 2005; 2006).

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Multi-professional approaches involving schools that have been shown to work are:

- extended schools, which result in a range of benefits for vulnerable groups (Cummings *et al*., 2007)

- improving children's nutrition, particularly in the morning with more attention given to breakfast provision found to improve both behaviour and cognition (Sorhaindo and Feinstein, 2006)

- drop-in centres at schools that offer general and sexual health advice and referral which can help to reduce teenage pregnancies more than traditional classroom teaching (indicative evidence from one good case-study)

- the use of life-skills approaches to reducing teenage drug and alcohol usage

- the role of home-school support workers in reducing exclusions and promoting good attendance (Webb and Vulliamy, 2004).

The engagement and role of parents and carers

Whole-family interventions that target vulnerable parents and carers and **support them to develop better parenting skills** have been found to have positive impacts on the staying healthy and safe, economic well-being and participation outcomes – and can ultimately lead to improved achievement outcomes for young people.

A focus on **home-learning environments**, particularly during the early years, and on children and families learning together, could be effective for interventions in terms of improving child behaviour, promoting general well-being and raising achievement (Sylva *et al*., 2004; Sammons *et al*., 2007).

The evidence suggested that there can be a range of gains for vulnerable children in schools having well framed and targeted community outreach and parental engagement strategies. The more unfocused strategies that simply seek greater involvement of parents and carers with schools are not always effective.

> **Effective practice in parenting support** and engaging parents and carers includes:
>
> - schools and other parenting support workers building collaborative, trusting and mutually respectful relationships with parents and carers
>
> - adopting the right outreach strategy to engage with, and have a positive dialogue with, different parental groups
>
> - tailoring strategies to the specific needs of the local community, and ensuring that they reflect the real lives and conditions of parents/carers and are sensitive to cultural differences
>
> - utilising 'working with' rather than 'doing to' intervention approaches
>
> - promoting positive approaches and avoiding strategies that imply that parents and carers are in deficit
>
> - engaging in effective self-evaluation of any intervention and being prepared to adapt the programme to local and individual circumstances.

The evidence suggests that, to be most effective, family support and engagement programmes need to have a sound theoretical base for their general approach. More specific strategies need well trained staff with the right attitudes but, while they can reduce long-term costs, they are expensive and need sustained funding to have most effect.

Early intervention and prevention

There is strong evidence to suggest that **putting in place prevention or early intervention strategies that address the underlying issues preventing children's well-being** is a more effective approach than intervening later. Costs generally escalate for later interventions and these often require more intrusive strategies and longer-term support in order to make improvements.

A range of research suggests that **an emphasis on interventions in pre-school** can have lasting effects. Medium- to high-quality pre-school experience has been shown to last at least until year 5 of primary school and maybe beyond. Having qualified teaching staff in pre-school settings leads to better cognitive and social skills development in children, and vulnerable groups can particularly benefit from this. It has also been found that the gains made in pre-school can be sustained by academically effective primary schools and by ensuring a smooth transition to secondary school (Sammons *et al*., 2007).

Intervening early can help prevent a range of issues from becoming more severe. This includes housing, poverty, the family and unsettled home lives, child health, nutrition, anti-social behaviour, youth crime and offending and child safety. All of these can have a negative influence on children's well-being and restrict their ability to achieve in school and reach their potential. Interventions that focus on the whole family can be especially effective.

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Research evidence suggests that **effective early intervention and prevention** is built upon:

- effective multi-agency working with strong partnerships, shared priorities and action plans and linkages to local systems of power and authority

- joint systems and processes for: area/client needs assessment and gap analysis; target-setting and planning; data sharing; commissioning and referral

- the development of initiatives that: target holistic needs and are provided through multi-agency teams; involve users in service development; provide support over time and in different settings; focus on developing skills to cope with adversity (resilience); provide local and accessible support; and build on and provide learning for mainstream provision.

Local leadership

Effective leadership does not impinge directly on outcomes for vulnerable children; **its key role is to provide the drive, climate, conditions, resources and support necessary to make improvements happen** and to take overall charge of the change process.

The guidance suggests that effective local leadership in promoting improved outcomes for vulnerable children:

- has a strong focus specifically on improving the outcomes for vulnerable groups, basing strategy on good needs analysis and evidence from elsewhere

- puts a strong performance framework in place, with a clear expectations and goals, a clarity of roles for different professionals and appropriate performance and outcome measures

- is more distributed and transformational in nature and encourages joint ownership of the issues and interventions with other managers and practitioners

- maintains an outward focus, encouraging and supporting partnership, joint commissioning and integrated working

- encourages and helps provide joint training for professionals working with vulnerable groups, with training also based on a sound needs analysis

- ensures the voice of children and families is heard and helps direct improvements, with the Children and Young People's Plan being a prime vehicle for this

- is committed to the use of evidence and data to focus interventions and provides the resources and impetus for local evaluation to happen and for the findings to feed into on-going service improvements.

What are the most compelling messages from the evidence?

Strategies that promote children's health, safety and sense of safety, and economic stability all help to provide the necessary conditions to promote effective and enjoyable learning and raise achievement. Together, they give children a feeling of confidence, being valued and a part of their school and community and improve their life chances. Getting the first three right is crucial to ensuring the other outcomes. Encouraging the more vulnerable children to participate in school life and decision-making contributes to raised performance and achievement.

Programmes and interventions to remediate disadvantage and narrow the gap in outcomes for vulnerable groups need **a long-term focus**. So many interventions have been short term, with the resourcing reducing or being removed before, or just when, they begin to be effective, and before there is time for them to be properly evaluated.

There is strong evidence that strategies and programmes which adopt **a holistic and joined-up approach** and deal with the range of obstacles and negative influence that are holding children back, rather than single-issue interventions, are the most effective. These tend to value and utilise the perspectives and skills of different service partners and the clients themselves.

Interventions that **focus on the whole family** and involve children learning and working with their parents and carers are some of the most effective in supporting sustained improvements for children and preventing regression.

In designing interventions, it is of prime importance to **build upon the positive elements and experiences of children's and family lives**, and respond positively to their value and belief systems. The use and language of deficit models do not work as well.

How to get the full review

The full review will be published by NFER on behalf of the LGA and the Narrowing the Gap Programme in January 2008.

For more details, please contact the NFER's Publication Unit on 01753 637002, at book.sales@nfer.ac.uk or visit www.nfer.ac.uk.

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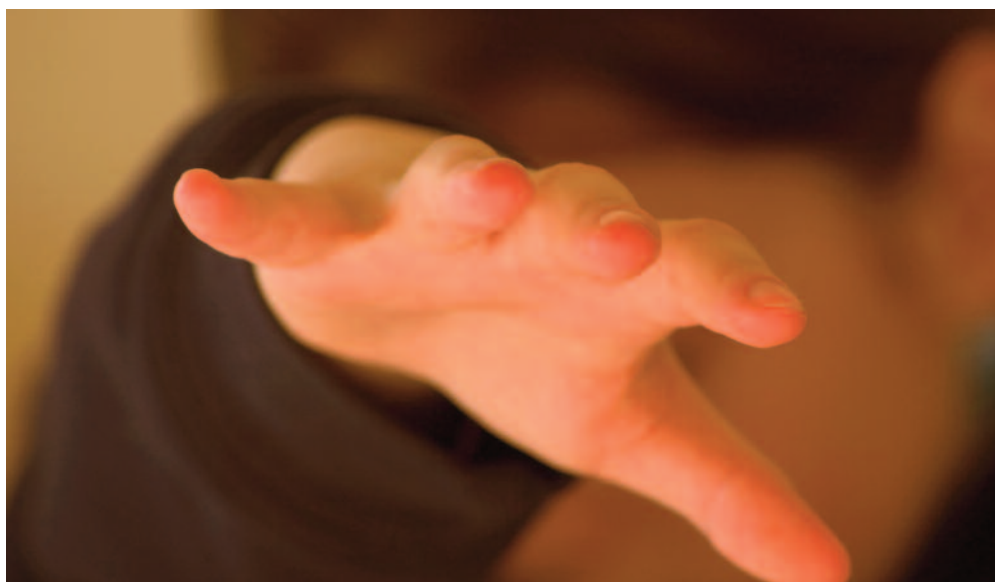
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