British Psychological Society
Safeguarding Advisory Group

Reflections on Covid 19:
Creating a vision of vulnerability on which to build trust and support.

Schools are complex organisations, which are multi-layered and multifaceted. They look inward to the task of educating children and young people, and outward to serve communities and society in the task of preparing young people in ways which will enhance their life chances going forward. All the while, schools are working for equal opportunities for all, promoting inclusion, and mindful of their safeguarding duties. These are only possible when schools are wrapped in a vision of what vulnerability means, have a context of certainty and consistency, with sufficient resources, and high levels of trust and support for their work. Such prerequisites are most urgent in the work of schools to safeguard children and young people. At no time has this been such a pressing issue, as now.

Safeguarding is an umbrella term, which is about a range of measures to ensure that children and young people have the best opportunities to be protected from harm. Harm may be maltreatment, the impairment of health and/or development, and delay or neglect to secure appropriate assessment and support. The Education Act of 2002 places a welfare duty on all educational institutions, and in order to fulfil this duty, schools and colleges must work to the statutory guidance: Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) and Keeping Children Safe in Education (2019). We know that schools play a major role in recognising when children may not be safe and contribute to multi agency networks to promote the welfare and development of children. Local Safeguarding Children Boards oversee this role with: policies, training, Child Protection processes, and annual audits. These provide the certainty and consistency necessary, with access to Local Authority Designated Officers for advice and direction.

The global pandemic of Covid 19 has left schools literally and effectively in the dark, with their doors locked to all, except the exceptionally vulnerable, and with staff as anxious as everyone else, but expected to provide some educational input and continue their safeguarding monitoring role for children and young people (BPS, 2020a). School staff are working to provide schools within schools. Many schools have managed to be open every day, and for some this includes during what were school holiday periods, for the children of key workers and for vulnerable children, to provide face-to-face provision. All schools have created what systems they can, offering all the children on their roll: online tuition; regular contact with parents; the completion of Local Authority risk assessments; in some cases, bespoke direct individual online contact with children of concern; providing and managing the digital technology to facilitate communications with parents, children, other professionals, and being alert to the needs of children, whose family do not have what they need to access technology, and dealing with the alerts/misuse of such technology; marking
work that is uploaded, and being aware when it is not. All this is managed by staff, who are anxious about their own or their dependents’ health challenges.

References to children who are vulnerable is a ‘sound bite’, at which everyone nods their agreement, that these children need and must have provision and protection. Teachers know the children they teach. They have spent their professional careers building relationships with children. Staff in schools know that there are many more such children, than are being catered for during the current arrangements (BPS 2020b). What this crisis has done is show us all, that vulnerability is complicated, sitting as it does at an intersection between the range of lived experiences of children and families. All children are vulnerable by virtue of their developmental dependence on adults, even more so are: those with special needs; with histories of abuse; in the looked after system/adopted; in homes where they are not safe; where their accommodation is over crowded, inadequate and unsafe, children who have already lost family members and so know what grief feels like (Peake, 2013). When staff were told to close the schools, these children weren’t a sound bite, they were individuals with stories, with whom school staff had relationships and to whom they had a duty of care and commitment.

The pandemic took away the context in which safeguarding by school staff operates. It has shown us all that children have been made additionally vulnerable when families are bereaved, when poverty undermines health, and ethnicity factors cost more lives. Imagine the impact of the ‘stay at home to be safe message’ on: children who survived the Grenfell Tower fire, and the children and families who live in the tower blocks that are known fire risks; children living with Domestic Abuse, who watch, listen and are fearful every day; families whose circumstances are such that they can’t provide WIFI, use of laptops, and may not be able to understand the lessons provided online, because they were failed by their schooling or because they have English as an additional language; children who are young carers for parents or siblings, who when they see a need don’t know how to get help and will later feel, they should have known, when we all knew they couldn’t, but didn’t see their plight, and now don’t see how having a 24/7 caring role means it will be a wrench for these young people to leave vulnerable family members at home, while they return to school.

As the arrangements for lockdown are being gradually released, schools are deluged by daily online briefings for a phased return of pupils, while debate is still ongoing as to whether any return to school is safe and sustainable. What this debate and these arrangements neglect to articulate and address is the backdrop to the pandemic. Schools have been challenged by: years of cuts to services from government led austerity policies; school buildings in need of repair; large class sizes. When schools don’t have enough rooms, staff, and sinks, to make a return to school safe, even for hand washing, then the ability of school staff to keep the children or themselves safe is compromised. There are not sufficient resources. Just as the NHS needed sufficient staff, beds, PPE equipment, and a vision about vulnerability, which sadly in terms of government planning did not initially include: Care Homes, people living and dying alone at home; people afraid to ask for help with non-Covid health challenges; and increased mortality rates in
BAME communities. Schools now need the right resources to support children returning to school.

Trust in schools from parents and children has been shaken. For parents, it is estimated that 30-40% will bring their children back to school before the summer holidays. For children, many find their anxieties too overwhelming from watching the daily news to contemplate returning, and some have learned new strategies to manage their fear. A boy in a school open during Lockdown, responded to his form tutor who asked him to do something with *piss off or I will cough on you*. The trust from school staff in the system to support schools, is lacking. There is no space to have conversations about this and to get the support schools need to rebuild, not only what we were able to do before, but better, for all vulnerable children and families, including those who have been made vulnerable by the trauma of frightening ill health and deaths. When staff hear Government ministers and talk in the press about: bringing in private tutors, commandeering public buildings, suggestions that teachers work in the holidays as if they have not always done that and have been doing that in the crisis, they know that the support that they are going to need has not been understood, When staff hear talk in briefings about bringing some year groups back first, for example Year 6 pupils due to transfer to secondary school in September and Year 10 pupils who are needing to restart their GCSE courses, we hear an institutional solution; not one that is about individual pupil vulnerabilities, trauma informed support, family needs, the barriers of class, poverty, and ethnicity. Children and families need to be listened to (Murphy, 2020).

Teachers are well placed to listen to children and be alert to their needs, but it will take a safeguarding commitment from all layers of government, organisations, professionals, to provide: a true vision of vulnerability, financial resources, support, necessary to rebuild trust. In areas which were badly flooded and where homes were destroyed (BBC online update, 2009), teachers reported months later, that some children would cry in school when it rained. The impact on children from the pandemic will be far greater and more long lasting. A parent reported that his daughter asked him, *if I don’t die, can I have a scooter for my birthday….*

So what of our profession? What are we doing, and what can we do, going forward? We can:

Set out the complications of a vision of vulnerability, which are so much more than children of parents in key services or children with an EHCP or a Child Protection Plan. Children and families need to see they are included in an understanding of vulnerability, not stigmatised and invited to be part of the plan to rebuild what we offer, in ways which are better than before.

We can abandon using the yoke of the institutional SEN framework for our profession: the referral criteria, one-off assessments, paper driven review processes, and the gate keeping, and open up our services to parents and colleagues to define what they need and access what we offer (Peake, 1999 and 2017).
We can help staff in schools to hear what children have experienced and how they feel, and to adopt a trauma informed basis to how schools respond. Every child should have a private uninterrupted time in a one-to-one space with a trusted adult, to say what their experiences have been, how they feel, and what would help them most to go forward.

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