



Inspiring Equity for Vulnerable Learners

by [Jana Moore](#) and [Mary Jane Boynton](#)

The term *vulnerable learner* is becoming more commonly used, but what does it mean? Who are these learners, and why are they “vulnerable”? For the purpose of our work, we use the definition developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which states that a vulnerable learner is any student with one or more of the following identifiers: has a lower socioeconomic background, special needs, or a diverse gender, or is a language learner or minority (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Any one of these factors may impact a student’s educational achievement because it acts as a barrier to their ability to focus on educational learning without strong classroom and school support. Many language learners within our schools have more than one factor that places them at risk of failing academically, which has been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For vulnerable learners, the impact will be significantly more devastating.

Issues Facing Vulnerable Learners

Multicultural students come into our classrooms with diverse backgrounds that must be acknowledged by the teacher and school. Although perhaps well-intentioned, misguided actions that minimize the cultural and linguistic assets of multicultural students (e.g., giving every student an “American name” or lumping all Spanish speakers together as “Hispanic”) result in vulnerable learners not feeling like individuals, and not feeling socially and emotionally supported.

There are several teacher actions that can lead to undesirable student responses, and these can, in turn, lead to negative teacher perceptions; it is an unfortunate cycle. Here are some examples of such behavior and the damaging cycle that results in a spiraling toward a widening achievement gap (see Figure 1):

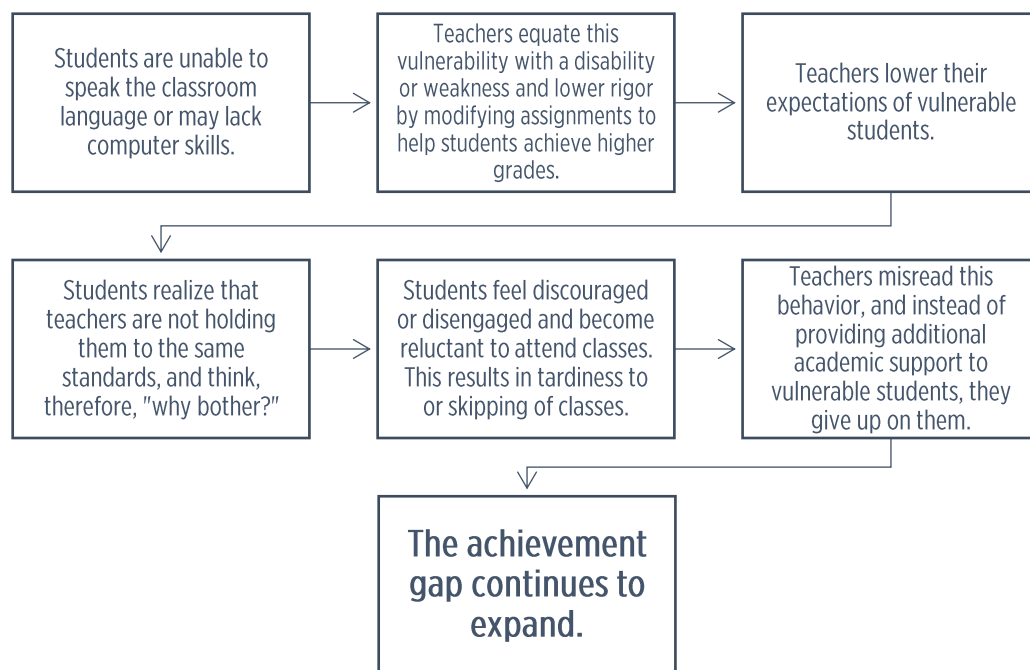


Figure 1. Expansion of the achievement gap for vulnerable students.

Lowering rigor puts already at-risk students in a position of falling even further behind their peers without a clear path to how that gap will be closed.

At a school wide level, vulnerable learners are often educationally disengaged. They might question the value of going to school, as many of them have experienced continued failure in multiple settings. This disengagement is demonstrated in tardiness and inappropriate behavior. Language learners and those with a disability may also struggle to focus on multistep directions, questions, or activities. Rather than reveal a lack of confidence or ability or show their sense of exclusion, many vulnerable learners would prefer to misbehave and skip classes. Adults, then, perceive that these students lack motivation, and therefore, do not want to learn.

However, by the secondary level, vulnerable learners are not motivated to keep trying in a system designed to keep them from succeeding.

These observable behaviors are universal across school districts, states, and countries. The question that needs to be asked is: How do we identify these behaviors for what they are and create an environment where these learners can feel secure knowing that our schools will help them? The changes that classrooms and schools may need to make are not expensive and do not require the purchase of a new program. They just need the dedication of teachers and administrators to create an equitable space for all learners.

Strategies and Supports That Can Lead to Success

Creating an environment that is all-inclusive and accepting of diversity will result in a welcoming space, which students can easily recognize. This can happen concurrently with the school and community, as well as the classroom.

In the School and Community

Reengage School and Community. Creating an equitable space begins with the school and community. Administrators can set the tone by helping their school and community reengage with each other as well as taking the time to collaborate and engage with teachers. According to Siler (2020), “The best solution is often found after seeking information and engaging in dialog and thoughtful deliberation” (p. 108). These do not have to be in-depth sit-downs, but they can be conducted through daily and/or weekly interactions making use of emails, short phone calls, or quick drop-ins, both with teachers, parents, and the community. Similarly, schoolwide initiatives that involve teachers, community, and parents as valuable members of the learning team will also lead to increased dialog between teachers and families. Families should be recognized and used as a part of the team.

Set a Tone of Rigor. Administrators can also set the tone for how vulnerable learners are perceived academically in their schools. Building and supporting a demand for a rigorous curriculum goes a long way toward developing a school culture that emphasizes that all students can learn. Teachers can feel that they are being supported to push their students to their full potential and that their administrators will support them with job-embedded professional development, resources, and materials to reach all of their students.

Provide Extended Learning Opportunities. Purposefully scheduling extension and extended learning opportunities for all students increases equitable learning. Adequate time should be designed in the schedule for small-group instruction, high-dosage tutoring, and 1:1 instruction, as needed. This can be done during the school day as well as before and after, or even on the weekends.

Implement Restorative Practices. Last, but not least, it would be remiss not to talk about restorative practices (see www.iirp.org) and the need to take a step back from traditional and punitive practices when dealing with student discipline and infractions. “Restorative practices in schools create a healthy atmosphere that supports positive development, teaching, and learning” (Brown, 2018, p. 7). Social and emotional support for the whole school are just as important as academic needs.

In the Classroom

Create a Rigorous and Supportive Classroom Environment. Invoking an equitable space for all students in the school also demands that teachers design their classrooms with a similar focus. A rigorous, grade-level curriculum needs to be the standard, along with high expectations and academic support. Classrooms should be learner-focused spaces where students can struggle and work with the curriculum as well as each other, but also know that scaffolds and accommodations are in place as needed. Students are the focus of the class, not teachers. The expectation should be clear that students will articulate what they are learning with each other.

Create a Safe and Trusting Classroom Environment. Unquestionably, classrooms need to become places where students can receive restorative strategies and support. It is key to teach

students the fundamentals of restorative practices so that when a conflict occurs, all involved parties can move towards repairing relationships. Restorative practices create spaces "...where students, teachers and staff want to be; where they feel safe, trusted, and accepted; and where they experience care and belonging" (Brown, 2018, p. 7). Challenges *will* occur, but our vulnerable learners need to learn how to reenter the classroom after a conflict and move forward.

When teachers are enacting the aforementioned strategies and supports, the classroom becomes a true place of learning for all. Learners are taught to celebrate mistakes, assume the best, and applaud their awesomeness (Boynton & Moore, 2021).

Conclusion

Students who are vulnerable learners are increasingly falling behind in schools, but when school administrators, teachers, and the community work together, these learners can achieve. Focus needs to be placed upon academics as well as positive social-emotional learning. It begins with administrators placing trust and support in their teachers. When the staff begins to feel the positive efficacy from the leadership team and know that they are valued members of the school, it can trickle down to how they perceive the learners in their classroom. This, in turn, will promote a positive classroom climate that promotes social as well as academic success.

References

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