

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

### Why read this text..

The concept of vulnerable groups refers to social categories that are usually perceived and described as being at risk a position or a state of helplessness, because they lack the power to cope with a natural or social threat/problem. The term may refer to children in general, but also to orphans, unaccompanied minors, street children, child soldiers, or children who are disabled or affected by HIV/AIDS) It also refers to prisoners, pregnant women, refugees, persons with handicaps, mental illness, or who are economically, or educationally disadvantaged. People or groups of people falling into these social categories are often regarded as marginalized and invisible to the rest of the society.

As a feature of the human condition, vulnerability – being susceptible to harm or in need of support – is lived and understood in historically shifting circumstances. In current thought, vulnerability emerges when unequal social and political forces limit coping capabilities and cause stress that threatens well-being, which then influences modes of resilience, resistance, agency, and adaptability. Global displacement, politico-military polarizations, and recurring environmental and humanitarian crises are seen as causes shaping the experience, distribution, and interpretation of vulnerability (Trundle, Gibson & Bell 2019, 198-199).

The diversity of groups categorized as “vulnerable” is a challenge to educators (Hoadley 2008, Trani et al. 2011). Understanding how to educate social groups categorized as vulnerable involves investigating how educators, students, and educational institutions perceive different kinds of vulnerability and the policies they adopt to respond to various constraints. Finding ways of educating disabled or refugee children entails defining educational goals, designing policies to achieve these, and fashioning forms of implementation and appropriation, that promote inclusion and secure access to education and active participation in social life.

### Historical Context

Vulnerability is a difficult concept to define because it attracts new associations and meanings as it travels across disciplines (Honkasalo 2018: 3-4). In general, the social sciences distinguish vulnerable groups based on factors such as age, low socioeconomic status or poor psychological, physical, or social health (Flaskerud & Winslow 1998). A growing body of literature vulnerability since the 1980s has created a conceptual framework for defining this term (Brooks 2003, Nichiata et al. 2008). Still, current approaches to classifying vulnerable groups often fail to consider the social dimensions of vulnerability that affect individuals, such as various forms of abuse and social exclusion (Nyamathi Koniak-Griffin & Greengold 2007).

Broad anthropological approaches to vulnerability fall under two interlinked themes: structural vulnerability and embodied vulnerability. Structural vulnerability highlights a lack of political or social agency, forms of social exclusion, and structural factors that render specific groups precarious (Leatherman 2005). Anthropologists deploy the term when they

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seek to trace the patterns of uneven risk and marginalization that emerge due to forms of inequality and discrimination (Colton 2008). They view vulnerability the lack or absence of a particular personal resource or a precarious state that constrains interlocutors' opportunities and choices (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010). Anthropologists use the concept of embodied vulnerability to study how structural vulnerabilities such as injustice, poverty, racism, social invisibility, marginalization, and discrimination become embodied by individuals and groups (Willen 2012). Anthropologists have thus specifically studied how various kinds of vulnerabilities are performed and produced.

Vulnerability is linked with morality. According to Kleinmann, this is in response to inter-human experiences of the suffering of others (1997: 66). De Martino relates vulnerability to the precarity of illness, death, poverty or other social or personal situations. He regards human life as precarious because, there are so many everyday situations where individuals may be in danger of losing their ability to be an active agent and be a passive receiver of the circumstances (2015 [1959]).

## **a) Discussion**

In educational contexts, identifying and classifying a particular social group as “vulnerable” is a process of othering and essentializing, and a way of structuring hierarchy and power within educational practices. When specific groups of students are defined as vulnerable, they are in contrast with non-vulnerable groups implicitly conceived as passive, powerless, and deficient (Marino & Faas 2020: 4).

Flaskerud and Winslow (1998) have proposed a conceptual model with three relevant markers for defining populations as vulnerable: resource availability, relative risk, and health status. Resource availability is conceptualized as the availability of socioeconomic and environmental resources (human capital and social status). Relative risk refers to the vulnerability of different groups to various health inequalities resulting from behavioral or lifestyle practices and biological susceptibility. Health status correlates to patterns of increased morbidity and premature mortality in different population groups, which is informed by an individual's age and gender. The interplay of resource availability, relative risk, and health status highlights the complexity of discerning who is vulnerable within a particular population.

Children who are deemed vulnerable never make up a homogenous group; ‘vulnerable’ points to a variety of vulnerabilities, characteristics, and educational needs that should be taken into consideration when school curricula, teaching modes, and educators’ training are designed (Canning 2011, Court 2017).

## **b) Practical Example**

Wood & Goba (2011) investigated the notion of vulnerability with relation to teacher training programmes in a study they conducted in the province of Eastern Cape in South Africa. Vulnerability, as they defined it, referred to any child whose level of vulnerability had increased as a result of HIV and AIDS and could include any child under the age of eighteen who fell into one or more of the following categories: had lost one or both



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parents or experienced the death of other family members; was neglected, abandoned or abused; had a parent or guardian who was ill; had suffered increased poverty levels; had been the victim of human rights abuse; was HIV positive themselves. The researchers acknowledged that the consequences of such problems were played out in the classroom, as teachers struggled to balance teaching and learning with the demands imposed by the increased levels of anxiety, trauma, discrimination, and increased poverty experienced by the learners.

The study explored teacher perceptions of the training programmes and, in particular, how teachers perceived themselves to have been equipped to deal with issues that arise as result of having orphaned and vulnerable children in their classrooms. Fourteen volunteer teachers, all female, were selected from twelve high and primary schools situated in disadvantaged urban township areas. Data were collected through unstructured focus group interviews and in-depth discussion of participant experiences. The main research question was how teachers could be facilitated to deal with orphaned and vulnerable children related issues in schools. Two sub-questions emerged during the research: a) what were the perceived needs of teachers with regard to the support of orphaned and vulnerable children, and, b) what recommendations could be made to better equip and support teachers to deal with orphaned and vulnerable children issues in schools.

According to the empirical material, despite the numerous teacher training programmes funded by state agencies, teachers' personal and professional needs had not received much attention. The training programme designers had not consulted with teachers on the lived reality of teaching in a school where HIV and AIDS had increased the vulnerability of the majority of children. On the contrary, the training workshops positioned the teacher as a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an active contributor to the construction of strategies based on expert knowledge and understanding of specific contexts.

The participating teachers believed that they would be able to provide valuable input to the course designers that would help them to reshape their workshops to increase their relevance. The findings revealed that there was a need for all teachers in the school to work together to address the care and support of orphaned and vulnerable children and cooperate with outside agencies and other sources of support, including parents and the general community. The study found that curriculum development skills, the local context, and the differing needs of teachers should be taken into consideration in designing any teacher training programme. The current approach to training teachers with regard to teaching and supporting orphaned and vulnerable children should take the lived experiences of the teachers as its starting point from which agencies could develop training and helping initiatives that would be responsive to the needs of both the teachers and the learners.

## Thinking further:

- Is there a notion of vulnerability and, subsequently, of vulnerable groups in educational contexts?



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- If yes, what categories of people are included? If not, should there be and for what reasons?
- How are different forms of vulnerability made manifest and experienced in educational contexts?
- Which policies have been designed to facilitate the participation of vulnerable groups in education? How would you evaluate these policies?
- What are the challenges educators experience in providing support to students regarded as vulnerable? What kinds of problems show up in everyday school practices and what strategies do teachers can employ?
- How can protection be ensured for minoritized groups without describing them as vulnerable?

## KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Vulnerability, precarity, othering,

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