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Vulnerable Children, Young People, and Families: Policy, Practice, and Social Justice in England and Scotland

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Abstract

This chapter begins by highlighting the rise of vulnerability as a term in social policy, and the three-level approach that is used to examine it. The first level is definitional, examining the possibility of defining vulnerability and vulnerabilities through a consideration of relevant literature and a number of recent policy documents. The second looks at how policy developments in Scotland and England have diverged, particularly since 2010, and how vulnerability has become more central to education policy in England. The third level focuses on practice, presenting research undertaken by the authors into a programme developed to support vulnerable children, young people, and families in Northern England as a case study exemplifying some of the factors affecting the effectiveness of programmes in which schools played an important but not central part. This practice perspective is still too often overlooked in discussions of policy and definition, and it is suggested that its inclusion will contribute to the ongoing debate about both how best to support vulnerable families and the implications for education and social justice.

Keywords Vulnerable children - Vulnerable young people - Vulnerable families - Vulnerability - Schools - Education - Social justice - England - Scotland

Introduction: The Rise of Vulnerability

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to refer to a "vulnerability zeitgeist" in social policy (Brown, *2015*; Ecclestone & Rawdin, *2016*), as vulnerable families, children, or groups have been the focus of a range of intervention programmes in the UK, Europe, and North America. In a review article, Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel (*2017*) suggest that vulnerability has tended to manifest in three main forms: as a policy and practice mechanism, as a cultural way of thinking

about the problems of life in today's society, and as a more robust concept to facilitate social and political research and analysis. Ecclestone and Lewis (*2014*) and Ecclestone and Rawdin (*2016*) in particular have questioned the utility and application of the word "vulnerable" in a series of articles which have criticized increasingly broad characterizations of vulnerability for creating a therapeutic emphasis in social justice (Frawley, *2015*) and thereby diverting focus and resources away from those most in need (Brown et al., *2017*). Potter and Brotherton (*2013*) drew on Esping-Anderson (*1990*) to distinguish between the effects of different types of welfare regimes on vulnerable groups. At one extreme, the social democratic model seen in countries like Finland ensures that services largely provided by the state focus on reducing or compensating for vulnerabilities and their effects. At the other, neoliberal models, seen in the USA and increasingly in England, neglect social factors, placing responsibility on the individual and regarding vulnerability in terms of failure or individual inadequacy. Between these extremes is a more conservative-corporatist model, common in Western European countries like Germany or Scotland, where services draw more on partnerships between the state and families. The key claim made by Potter and Brotherton (*2013*), echoing aspects of Ecclestone's work, is that popular discourse has tended to collate the extreme positions of neoliberal blame and social democratic compensation. This has had the unanticipated effect of neutralizing the notion of vulnerability, thereby making it easier for politicians and policy-makers to measure and thus limit it. It has also made its position in relation to social justice much more complex and contested (Brown, *2017*).

Given this paradoxical position, in which definitions of vulnerability expand as measures of it restrict the support available to vulnerable groups, this chapter seeks to focus on one of Brown et al.'s (*2017*) three forms of vulnerability: its effect as a policy and practice mechanism. It also highlights the implications of this for social justice in education, focusing on schools (as key partners in provision for vulnerable children), young people, and families. Like vulnerability (see below), social justice is not easy to define. Smith (*2018*) emphasizes consistency, relevance, and proportionality: treating people equally according to their needs and what they deserve is a useful reference point. Our approach to the issue of vulnerability in children, young people, and families focuses on three interdependent levels. The first is definitional, briefly examining the challenges involved in attempting to define vulnerability and vulnerabilities. The second looks at recent, and quite distinct, policy developments in Scotland and England. The third uses research undertaken by the authors into a programme developed to support vulnerable families in England as a case study exemplifying some of the challenges associated with operationalizing support for vulnerable children, young people, and families. This broad practice perspective is still too often overlooked in policy and research relating to vulnerability, particularly in education, and it is hoped the chapter will contribute to the ongoing debate about supporting vulnerable families and how that is important for education and social justice.

Can Vulnerability Be Defined?

Despite, or perhaps because of, growing interest in the issues, "vulnerable" and "vulnerability" remain under-defined and contested terms. For Potter and Brotherton (*2013*: p. 1), "the concept of vulnerable individuals or vulnerable social groups is often easier to talk about than to define." They suggest that "vulnerability is created by a complex interconnection of social circumstances and should not be seen as arising from mistaken or misplaced individual behaviour, decisions or fecklessness," associated, as already indicated, with some neoliberal approaches to welfare and education. For Ecclestone, there are dangers associated with the left's role in the development of

what she regards as a damaging therapeutic culture, which both diverts resources and obscures potentially damaging interventions for vulnerable individuals and groups (Ecclestone, *2016*; see also Ecclestone & Hayes, *2019*; Harrison & Sanders, *2006*), and for Alexander (*2010*, p. 60), vulnerability risks are becoming a "professional euphemism," based on unexamined assumptions or judgements. Brown et al. (*2017*: p. 498) assert that "the vagueness and malleability of vulnerability can result in a problematic lack of analytic clarity which in turn can have important implications for interventions and practices." They also suggested, echoing Potter and Brotherton (*2013*) above, that the conceptual elasticity of vulnerability as a term has led to the development of "common-sense or assumed understandings which conceal diverse uses with enormously varied conceptual dimensions" (Brown et al.: p. 505). Finally, Brown (*2015*) argues that expanding definitions of vulnerability have had the effect of increasing the power of both policy-makers and professionals, who determine what support is made available and in recent years have been called on to justify and implement cuts to welfare funding. This has restricted the extent to which services are able to address the problems faced by vulnerable individuals and families. This all suggests it is important to continue to consider not only how definitions of vulnerability continue to expand but also the effects of these expansions. In 2017, the Children's Commissioner for England commissioned research which focused on trying to assess the number of vulnerable children in England. To do this, the research needed first to define its terms, and as the Commissioner admits in the foreword to one of the reports (Children's Commissioner, *2017*: p. 1), "the term 'vulnerable' is used in so many different ways […] that as soon as you think you've got a grip on it, it floats back out of view." The technical report which focused on constructing a definition (Cordis Bright, *2017*) began with seven types of vulnerability, ranging from children in care of the state and in formal need categories reflecting family circumstances to definitions relating to national policy and "informal types of vulnerability." It concluded with 32 groups of vulnerable children which included new groups such as children involved in gangs and children excluded from schools while acknowledging the challenges that remained, including the exclusion of hidden or invisible children and the danger of double counting. This might lead one to suggest, as the Commissioner herself does, that the research has not brought us much further forward. However, the problem might rather be that attempts to define vulnerability are focusing on the wrong issue. One of the other reports published by the Commissioner (Coram and Coram International, *2017*: p6) identified an important deficiency in how most local authorities identify vulnerable children:

> The current threshold approach to distinguishing service levels provides a description of services available rather than of children's needs. This is service led and may exclude children who fall outside the local authority early help offer [see below], but may still be vulnerable.

The importance of working with children's (and families') needs, rather than applying artificial thresholds, is the crucial point here. The initial approach adopted by the Children's Commissioner-sponsored research was similar to that used by the authors in a research report on provision for vulnerable children in primary schools in England (Jopling & Vincent, *2016*). This took a pragmatic approach to the issue of defining vulnerability by critically examining the taxonomies of vulnerability presented in five policy documents which had influenced how schools identify vulnerable children. This included government guidelines on child protection (HM Government, *2015*); the inspection framework for children's centers which offer support and provision for families in disadvantaged communities (Ofsted, *2013*); policy documents relating to the Troubled Families Programme (DCLG, *2015*) and families at risk (SETF, *2007*); and an influential research report (Sabates & Dex, *2012*). The documents were most strongly characterized by their variability. Each had a different starting point, focus, and approach. Vulnerabilities were described as "problems," "disadvantages," and "risk factors" and were related to the child, as well as to their

parent(s) or carer(s) and the socioeconomic context in which they lived. Mental health was the only factor common to all the documents examined. After mental health, contextual factors were the most common factors and included poverty, parents'/carers' unemployment, domestic violence, and criminality, along with the broader category of a child being in need of protection. Only two factors, having special educational needs and having a disability (both cited in the child protection guidelines only), were individual to the child, and only one, nonattendance at school (surprisingly only highlighted in the Troubled Families guidance), was directly related to the child's agency. What was striking is that the documents tended to approach the vulnerabilities in isolation. Apart from Sabates and Dex (*2012*), they only occasionally recognized the complexity involved in attempting to cope with multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously. Their report was large scale in its analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a research project which has followed the lives of 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000 and 2001. One of its key findings was that:

> Analyses of MCS children's outcomes at ages three and five suggested that being exposed to two or more risks in [the] first years of life is likely to disadvantage children's cognitive and behavioural development as they grow up. Similar associations were found for children living in households with low income. Some studies have suggested that income may be more important for cognitive outcomes than other features of the family. We found that both low income and the experience of other risks in the family are important for child development, but more important are the problems associated with compounding risks. The greater the number of risks experienced by the child, the greater the problems that the child will face during the life course. (Sabates & Dex, *2012*: p. 22)

They also concluded that agencies should regard the recognition of vulnerabilities as a trigger for consideration and support, rather than for immediate, escalated referral to other agencies, an approach closer to that adopted in Scotland (discussed below). This reflects Frey, Walker, and Perry's (*2011*: p. 136) claim that "evidence from efficacious school-based practices also supports the need to attend to interactions among key individual and environmental factors" and Jenson and Fraser's (*2011*: p. 8) identification that "many policies aimed at improving conditions for vulnerable and high-risk populations have failed to consider the number, nature, or severity of problems experienced by American families" (Jenson & Fraser, *2011*: p8). Taken together, this suggests that professionals need to consider the implications of these various structural factors in families where parenting problems may already have been identified (Vincent, *2010*) and treat them as *indicators*, which may be insignificant in isolation but highly damaging in combination, rather than risk factors, problems, or disadvantages. This makes double counting a starting point, rather than a limitation. For example, moving house frequently, poor attendance at school, or persistent lateness may be an indicator of a larger issue. This leads to a suggestion that, rather than focusing on defining it, schools, agencies, and professionals might benefit from adopting a much more needs-based approach to identifying vulnerability, founded on a holistic approach which takes as its starting point the fact that a child is likely to be affected by multiple, interacting vulnerabilities. This has parallels with a more ecological way of working (Bronfenbrenner, *1979*), which Jenson and Fraser (*2011*) and others have advocated to help agencies work collaboratively to bring together universal *and* selective local interventions (Brewin and Statham, *2011*; Cefai and Camilleri, *2015*). Such an approach puts the child, the family, and their needs at the center of support, rather than moving directly to referral to support services. While policy in Scotland is much closer to this kind of approach (see below), it is much less commonly found in policy aimed at supporting vulnerable families in England, particularly in recent years.

National Policy for Vulnerable Children, Young People, and Families Since 2010

The devolution of power to different degrees to administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland after 1997 created increasingly divergent education and social policy systems in the countries that make up the UK. This variability has been further increased by policies introduced by the UK Government from 2010 promoting austerity, decentralization, and autonomy in schools and other public sector organizations which have been more widely applied in England than the other UK countries. This Government instigated large-scale public sector funding cuts, which included requiring national and local governments to reduce demand on expensive statutory services by targeting the circumstances that lead to children requiring a child protection response. Around this time, Allen (_2011_) made the case for integrated packages of supports for children and young people, both in the early years and throughout childhood, and Munro's review of child protection (_2011_) recommended that services should be redesigned around children's and families' needs and provide an early help offer. A large body of evidence demonstrates the pitfalls of not intervening early enough, such as the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (Poulton, Moffitt, & Silva, _2015_). In addition, growing evidence has emerged of the effectiveness of early help from, for example, evaluations of the Family Nurse Partnership in the USA (Krugman, Lane, & Walsh, _2007_) and Sure Start (Melhuish, Belsky, Leyland, & Barnes, _2008_) and family intervention projects in the UK (Nixon, Parr, & Hunter, _2006_ ; NatCen, _2009_). However, despite this growing evidence base, spending on early intervention services such as youth services and children's centers has reduced in recent years, and the number of children on child protection plans and in care has increased (NSPCC, _2017_).

There is growing recognition that new thinking is required to meet increasing demands on public services, but policies have tended to differ across the UK. The Coalition, and subsequent Conservative, Governments' policy in England followed the neoliberal model already outlined in that it was not characterized by an overall integrative approach but by a small number of national initiatives designed to be complemented by local initiatives. Some national policy direction has been provided through the Troubled Families Programme (DCLG, _2015_) and Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (DfE, _2014_), which are discussed in more detail below, but overall there has been less central direction than in Scotland. Local government has essentially been left to develop its own child welfare solutions, and education's role in relation to supporting vulnerable children, young people, and families is much less clear than it is in Scotland. In contrast, the Scottish Government has offered consistent central policy direction in the form of their early intervention policy, _Getting It Right for Every Child_, and enshrined universal services' responsibility for meeting children's welfare needs in legislation (Rose, _2015_). The difference in approach can immediately be seen in the policies' language. In England, the "Troubled Families Programme" immediately identified those families who were in need of support with the euphemistic and loaded term "troubled," whereas in Scotland, "Getting It Right for Every Child" signaled a more inclusive approach.

England

In England, the focus of national policy initiatives after 2010 moved from all children and families with additional needs, which was the aspiration of the preceding Labour Government's _Every Child Matters_ policy (DfES, _2004_) (again the language suggests a more inclusive approach), to a

"troubled" or "troubling" subgroup of families deemed "suitable for treatment" (Levitas, *2012*; Pithouse & Emlyn Jones, *2015*). The Troubled Families Programme is a whole family, multifaceted, intensive intervention, launched in 2011, which was initially targeted at 120,000 families in England. The Government provided £448 million, £4000 for each troubled family a local authority worked with, claiming that these families were causing problems for the community and the public purse. The programme changed the whole discourse around vulnerable children and families, placing much more emphasis on blame, cost, and crime. An example of this can be found in *Social Justice: Transforming Lives* (DWP, *2012*: p. 1) a UK Government publication in which the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions identified "120,000 troubled families whose lives are so chaotic they cost the Government some £9 billion in the last year alone." It proved impossible to substantiate, or challenge, that figure, which contributed to the reification of such claims into professional discourse and the continued acceptance of the neoliberal identification of vulnerable families with deficits (Paliokosta & Blandford *2010*). Despite the fact that insufficient time had passed to be able to demonstrate its impact or effectiveness, the programme was extended to 2020 and 400,000 more families in 2013.

The financial report on the Troubled Families Programme (DCLG, *2012*) described poor families being beset by a range of personal failings which needed to be addressed through early intervention, reflecting the shift toward a moralizing focus on individual responsibility criticized by Featherstone, White and Morris (*2014*), and Ecclestone and Lewis (*2014*). It also signaled a move away from recognizing some of the structural causes of vulnerability already identified. The government described it as a "tough love" approach. In its first iteration, the Troubled Families Programme was aimed at reducing truancy, crime, and antisocial behavior, but it was later expanded to a wider set of "problems" including domestic violence, debt, and children at risk of being taken into care. It was also expanded from working with school-age children to under-fives, although schools were not directly involved in the programme, despite nonattendance at school being one of its identifying "problems." By March 2015, the Government was claiming that 89.6% of families had been "turned around" through the programme and estimated average cost savings of £11,200 per family. Like other "turnaround" theories (Bottrell, *2009*), this simplistic claim was founded on deficit models of "fixing" families, founded on social norms which fail to take into account the effects of structural disadvantage on families with multiple and complex needs (Bunting, Webb, & Shannon, *2015*; Crossley *2015*, *2018*). In 2016, the national evaluation of the programme was published, and the researchers "were unable to find consistent evidence that the Troubled Families programme had any significant or systematic impact" (Bewley, George, & Rienzo, *2016*: p. 20). Despite this, the programme continues.

The Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (Department for Education, *2014*), launched by the Department for Education (DfE) to test innovative ways of supporting vulnerable children and young people, is another example of national policy direction in England. Ninety-eight projects have received funding from the programme which runs from 2014 to 2020. In contrast to the Troubled Families Programme, central government did not specify which service user groups should be targeted, but in Round 1 the priorities were developing new models of social work practice and rethinking support for vulnerable adolescents on the edge of care. More recently four policy areas have been outlined: residential care, social investment to support care leavers, alternative delivery models for children's social care, and targeted support for preventing children entering the child protection system. Alongside the Innovation Programme, the DfE is working with some of the leaders in children's social care through its Partners in Practice Programme, which aims to support improvement across children's social care through understanding and sharing of what works in improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. However, these initiatives have been focused on children's social care rather than being multi-agency, and the focus has been more on

child protection services as opposed to early help, which means that schools have not tended to play a significant role.

All this has led to the creation of a much more fragmented educational and social services landscape, in which budget cuts have reduced local government's power and the range of support services available to "vulnerable" children and families (Simkins, Coldron, Crawford, & Jones, _2014_; Jopling & Hadfield, _2015_). The reduction of local authority support, through a process Lubienski (_2014_) termed "disintermediation," has left schools much more reliant in their provision for vulnerable children on their professional networks and local support mechanisms than previously, while funding for statutory services has been cut. In a recent report, Crenna-Jennings (_2018_: p. 6) suggested that this has been counterproductive, "in order to maintain statutory services, cuts have been focused on early support services - and some local authorities argue this may be driving demand for more acute interventions later on." The same report also cited a survey of 1600 children's social workers which indicated that thresholds for support had also been significantly affected:

> 70 per cent of respondents reported thresholds for qualifying as 'in need' have risen over the previous three years, 50 per cent that thresholds for Child Protection Plans had risen, and 54 per cent that thresholds for care order applications had risen. (Crenna-Jennings, _2018_: p. 10)

This has had a significant impact on support for vulnerable families, particularly those who do not meet the threshold for child protection services. The current economic and social climate necessitates an increasing role for universal services in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people, but increases in schools' autonomy has also meant that they have been give less direction about how they can fulfil this role in England than they have in Scotland and elsewhere.

Scotland

Sometimes, it appears that Scotland looks at England's education and social policy and does the opposite. The policy context in Scotland offers a striking contrast to England's focus on a small group of vulnerable and "troubled" families. Less neoliberal and more coherent in approach, Scotland's national policy framework for children, _Getting It Right for Every Child_ (GIRFEC), recognized the need for change in all agencies working with children and families and focused on addressing cultures, systems, and practice simultaneously. The universal approach to all children, building on the universal services of education and health, "permeated every aspect of central and local government policy concerning the well-being of children as well as the practice of every agency in touch or working with children and their families" (Rose, _2015_: p.16).

Under GIRFEC which was launched in 2005 and rolled out nationally from 2008, a national, integrated framework for assessment, planning, and recording was introduced to be used by all agencies to ensure that "children get the help they need when they need it" (Scottish Executive, _2005_). GIRFEC is based on an ecological understanding of children's development which promotes strengths and resilience and the importance of families and friendships, schools, and communities in supporting children (Rose, _2009_). A shared concept of children's well-being was developed, using a common language and tools across all services, which formed a coordinated framework together with a national practice model for assessing how well a child is doing and what needs to change to improve their outcomes (Aldgate, _2010_). GIRFEC was supported by wide-ranging policies focusing on education (A Curriculum for Excellence: Scottish Executive, _2004_), health (Health for All Children 4: Scottish Executive, _2005_), and the early years (The Early Years Framework: Scottish Government and COSLA, _2008_).

To facilitate the delivery of support when it is needed, a Named Person for every child from birth to 18 in the universal services – usually a health visitor for preschool children and a teacher for school-age children – was charged with ensuring that children have the right help in place to support their well-being, including coordinating arrangements for intervention for children with additional needs. The Named Person is now a mandatory requirement under the Children and Young People (2014) Act, along with a single planning system for each child and new statutory functions for sharing information (Scottish Government, 2014). After early fears about teachers' reluctance to take on Named Person responsibility, teachers and guidance staff in schools, who already provided support and pastoral care for children and their families, appeared to adjust to the new changes (Rose, *2015*). In contrast to England, stability has characterized children's policy development in Scotland. GIRFEC was initially introduced by the Scottish Labour Party but has remained a policy priority of the SNP Government and has cross-party support in local authorities (Children in Scotland, *2014*). Although it is a national policy framework, the Scottish Government has not disenfranchised local government and has enabled them to develop local strategies and solutions and to implement more progressive, universalist child welfare policies than in England (Stafford, Parton, Vincent, & Smith, *2012*). There is evidence that GIRFEC has resulted in better integrated working between education, social work and health services, earlier identification of vulnerabilities, and earlier support and intervention (Stradling & McNeil, *2009*; Rose, *2015*). Schools have played an important part in achieving this. However, Rose (*2015*) argued that there is now a need to ensure that there is consistent implementation across Scotland and to demonstrate that the programme has actually had an impact on individual children's well-being in both the short and the long term. This remains a concern, especially given that pressure on public sector resources has been found to have led to some families only receiving help when they reach crisis point (Stalker & Moscardini, *2012*).

The Rise of Vulnerability in Recent Education Policy in England

Although the role of schools (and preschools) in tackling vulnerability has not always been clear within central government policy, at least in England, "vulnerability" has increasingly infiltrated education discourse and policy in recent years. As late as 2010, the term appeared only rarely in the wide-ranging and comprehensive outputs of the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, *2010*). References to vulnerability in its reports relate to concerns about child protection in the 1970s and 1990s, which Barron, Holmes, Maclure, and Runswick-Cole (*2010*, p. 123) placed "within a compensatory discourse of cultural and social deficit." This began to resurface almost as soon as the reports were published. *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, *2010*) was the government paper which initiated the reduction in local government funding already highlighted and the rapid conversion of schools into academies, which are publicly funded but independent of local authority control and autonomous in areas such as curriculum and staff conditions. This has resulted in over 70% of secondary schools in England (although a much smaller proportion of primary schools) being funded directly by national government, despite there being no evidence of academies' superiority over other forms of school organization (Andrews & Perera, *2017*). The word "vulnerable" appeared 13 times in *The Importance of Teaching*, but was not defined, and most of the references in the paper are to local government's (compensatory) "strong strategic role as champions for parents and families, for vulnerable pupils and of educational excellence," alongside insistent emphasis on increasing competition between schools. This apparent contradiction may be explained by Ecclestone's (*2016*, p. 5) recognition that the "rational, self-interested, autonomous neoliberal subject" requires a "vulnerable, stressed, scared and unconfident counterpart." It is important to note that the role of championing "vulnerable pupils," criticized by Hatcher (*2014*) for vagueness, is

assigned to emasculated local government, rather than newly autonomous academies. Ecclestone's concern that increasingly "all educational institutions are key sites for developing an interrelated set of psycho-emotional attributes" (Ecclestone, *2016*, p. 2), such as resilience and emotional regulation, is reflected in schools, where complaints from staff such as special educational needs coordinators are common that they are increasingly being asked to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by other professionals such as social workers. At the same time, schools remain caught between what Sugrue (*2009*, p. 373) has called the "twin towers of autonomy and accountability." Frey et al. (*2011*, p. 134) suggest that integrating approaches to supporting vulnerability into schools is potentially problematic because "standards-based policies may actually be contrary to principles of risk and resilience because those policies may lower teachers' expectations of students and subsequently have a negative impact on achievement." As Roffey (*2016*: p. 38) has emphasized, schools have a duty to support children suffering from neglect, abuse, and loss: "If these pupils then go to school and get labelled, punished, marginalised or rejected because they struggle to conform, be compliant and co-operate, then they have a double disadvantage." However, there has been relatively little research into the extent to which schools have been involved in or benefitted from programmes designed to support vulnerable children, young people, or families in England. Similarly, there are few accounts that highlight "the empirical realities of vulnerability from the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholder groups, such as practitioners, service managers and service users/clients" (Brown et al., *2017*). This chapter is an attempt to begin to fill this gap, and the case study presented below is an example of one city's ambitious attempt to improve support and provision for vulnerable children, young people, and families.

A Case Study of a Families Programme

The Families Programme was a strategic change programme that aimed to redesign the way public sector support services for families were delivered in a local authority in the North West of England. Although introduced into a context of severe funding cuts (a 52% reduction in overall council funding between 2011 and 2017), the authority decided to use the enforced changes to try to bring about cultural transformation through the development of an integrated, early intervention, and prevention framework. This aimed to provide earlier support to families when needs were identified, using a whole family approach in recognition of the fact that children need to be understood in the contexts of their families and environments. The programme included the national Troubled Families Programme already discussed, but had a wider remit. Rather than focusing on a small subgroup of targeted families, its broader ambition was to support all "families with troubles," defined inclusively as any families with children from birth to 18 who might require some form of multiagency support. There was also a strand supporting primary schools to work together to support children with special educational needs and disability, but this was not integrated into the wider programme. One of the aims of the evaluation which the authors undertook was to determine the extent to which this was achieved.

Like most large-scale programmes, the Families Programme was not a linear set of interventions. It brought together a range of existing and new initiatives to cover the full spectrum of child and family need (see Fig. 1) with new services only introduced where a gap was identified that could not be filled by existing services. Its aim was for agencies to work more effectively with existing partners and stakeholders and build on what was already known to work well.

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Fig. 1

Integrated support and referral pathways. (Adapted from Lamont, Price-Robinson, & Bromfield, *2010*: p. 672)

The overarching objective of the research which was funded by the local authority was to measure the effectiveness of the programme and its impact on families and practitioners. It was also founded on the need to offer both contextual specificity at the micro level in the form of case studies of individuals and a recognition of the complexity of the macro level. The research involved semi-structured individual, and group interviews with 83 professionals and practitioners (including school staff) involved in the programme and in-depth case studies of nine families. The case studies were based on qualitative longitudinal tracking of children's, young people's, and families' journeys over an 18-month period during 2014 and 2015. Time was spent building relationships with the parents and carers by shadowing frontline staff when they visited families so that families got to know the researchers before they consented to undertake any interviews. All parents and carers participated in the research, but some children were too young to participate and a number of young people chose not to take part. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, *1998*), and theory of change models developed to evaluate the programmes.

Impacts

It was important to the funder that the research assessed the programme's impact both to inform its further development and to support subsequent applications for funding. Thus, the research as reported (Vincent and Jopling, *2015*) had to assess the extent to which the kinds of "hard," performative measures (Ball, *2003*) formulated and required by policy-makers were addressed. In the case studies of families, these included re-engaging young people in education and improving their attendance and/or attainment at school (evident in 6 of the 9 cases); preventing child protection plans from putting in place or de-escalating those that already were (5 cases); children returning home from care or not being taken into care (4); and parents or carers moving into employment or education (4). "Softer" outcomes reported by parents, carers, children, and young people included increased aspirations (8 cases) and improved personal and social skills (7). Recognizing that taking such a positivist approach to the complexity of families' lives would leave the evaluation open to the same criticism that followed the national Troubled Families Programme's claims to have "turned around" families, it was important to use the detailed, transactional case studies of families as a means of problematizing the outcome data reported above. It is impossible to say what the outcomes for families would have been if they had not been involved in the programme; therefore the remainder of this case study focuses on the factors identified in the research as affecting the implementation and effectiveness of the programme.

Factors Affecting the Families Programme

The challenges in assessing the impact of reforms like the Families Programme lie firstly in attempting to associate impacts with the programme and secondly in establishing how far any short-term improvements can be sustained as funding is reduced and other priorities intervene. Therefore, the remainder of this case study focuses on examining three key factors, relevant to schools and their involvement in the programme, which affected the impacts identified to try to determine the extent to which they can be applied in other contexts.

Schools' Collaboration with Other Agencies

As already indicated, the Families Programme was an explicit attempt to bring together national policy (e.g., Troubled Families, Early Help – a policy premised on the fact that all children should be able to get the help they need when they need it) with new and existing local interventions. Its broad objective was large-scale cultural change, moving practitioners from a child-centered, child protection-focused way of working toward an embedded family-centered, early help and prevention model, in which agencies worked collaboratively. System improvement was targeted across all agencies and all levels of service. Need and referral routes were integrated, and duplication was reduced. This meant that the Families Programme was able to ensure that early help services were provided without the need for a referral to children's social care. Instead, referrals are being managed through local hubs and the children's social care referral system. Families could be "stepped down" as well as up to early help services, and there were new, faster de-escalation procedures for children who no longer met the threshold for statutory intervention. However, the scale and speed of these changes meant that some agencies found it difficult to change working practices to collaborate effectively. Schools in particular, already overloaded by the increased responsibilities associated with autonomy and severe local government cuts, found it difficult to get used to the new system. Consequently, the research found that the firmly embedded "culture of referral" was difficult to transform, despite the fact that all families with a school-age child were able to access the support they needed at whatever stage they needed it. Practitioners in universal services, including schools, remained unduly focused on where they could refer families to, rather than thinking about how they could work with others to meet their needs. Despite an extensive multi-agency training programme, some practitioners remained reluctant to undertake assessments or act as lead professional. They felt they were already working at crisis level and would only have the capacity to do this kind of preventative work if time was built into their workloads. Some school staff reported that they would be reluctant to complete the noneducation sections of Early Help's assessment tool. They also felt they would struggle to coordinate support for a family because they did not know how to link up with specialist services such as mental health services and would feel uncomfortable talking to families about financial or domestic issues. There was also frustration that when referrals were made from schools, the children concerned often did not meet the required thresholds, leaving schools to fall back on their own resources and networks of support.

The sheer size of the programme meant that communication was a persistent issue, making effective collaboration more difficult. While there was evidence of improved understanding among professionals of what other agencies did, this does not automatically create cohesion (Featherstone et al., _2014_), despite the fact that the introduction of team around the family meetings was designed to pool expertise around a family. At the time of the research, team members still needed to develop a shared awareness of each other's roles and abilities in order to work together to develop families' resilience. Concerns were raised about cuts to children's centers and youth services and their potential knock-on effects on children in school. In the limited time period of the research, there was little evidence of new ways of working being embedded operationally. Some practitioners thought the programme's aim to provide early help and support for vulnerable children and young people from birth to 18 was too ambitious; others equated the term "early help" with providing support in the early years. Most significantly, the programme's complexity with its multiple subprogrammes and components made it difficult for many stakeholders to gain a coherent understanding of the programme as a whole.

Mediating Role Between Family and School

The research found that the programme was successful when it was able to create new ways for professionals to mediate between families and school to improve young people's attendance or re-engage them in school. Key to this was the introduction through the programme of a new School Families Support Service (SFSS) which played a role in ensuring that in four of the nine case studies, children remained in mainstream education and did not have to move to much more expensive alternative provision. This was important because, as already indicated, schools were much more comfortable referring vulnerable families to other agencies than acting as "lead professional" in attempting to initiate support, despite extensive training provided by the programme. Often they were reluctant to coordinate support for a family because they felt they did not know how to link up with specialist services such as mental health services and would feel uncomfortable talking to families about noneducational issues such as financial or domestic issues (Fitzgerald & Kay, _2008_). Some families also felt uncomfortable talking to school staff. The SFSS was able to play a key mediating role between schools and families, supporting both in accessing and coordinating support. However, its effectiveness was affected by its limited capacity and the fact that many practitioners outside education had heard of it. As already indicated, the programme's complexity made it difficult for many professionals, including teachers, to develop an understanding of it as a whole. School staff appeared to be reluctant in some cases to develop a better understanding of the programme overall and their role in it, which meant that they were not always clear about the options for children and families when SFSS support ended.

Building Relationships with Families and Involving Them in Decision-Making

Considerable effort was put into building better relationships with families. Families reported that interactions with social workers had often previously left them feeling intimidated and powerless. They were keen to emphasize that, where effective relationships were developed, family support workers offered them challenge _and_ support. Their nonjudgmental approach made families feel comfortable. However, some participating families were frustrated that it had taken so long to get the support offered by the programme and felt their lives would have been considerably different had it been available sooner. Families also felt that flexibility, trust, whole family working, and consistent support from practitioners who seemed to care also contributed to the effectiveness of the programme. Featherstone et al. (_2014_) have identified the importance of providing "ordinary help" for families and locating it in communities. Families commented that the Families Programme was more likely to provide the "right kind of support," a mix of targeted emotional and practical support, delivered in their own homes, than previous programmes. Family support workers often visited families daily and were well placed to undertake a monitoring role and respond to early warning signs. They ensured parents took children to medical appointments, identified and responded to escalating child protection risks and risky sexual behavior, and identified and responded to systemic risks such as withdrawal of services or benefit sanctions (Vincent, _2015_). Family support workers were able to access support from Department for Work and Pensions advisers seconded into the authority to work directly with families. As Featherstone et al. (_2014_) have asserted, poverty and deprivation are often neglected as major contributors to families' stresses. Most of these families had experienced benefit and debt issues for many years and felt they could only make real changes to their lives once these structural issues had been dealt with. Schools could benefit from approaches

like this which are founded on developing better knowledge of and relationships with families, although this depends in part on their building more effective collaborative working arrangements with other agencies,

The kind of transactional, relationship-based approaches (Tilly, *2008*) found in parts of the Families Programme was very different from those envisaged in the Governments' approach to family policy, where policy and rhetoric shifted responsibility on to "troubled" (Lambert & Crossley, *2017*) and "antisocial" families (Hayden & Jenkins, *2015*), as already indicated. Fathers were also engaged in the programme in some cases, a group which many previous initiatives have found hard to involve (Allen & Daly, *2007*), and families were more involved in decision-making generally. However, although family consent was needed to undertake an assessment unless it was a safeguarding case, in practice this tended to translate into parents' or carers' consent. While some practitioners sought and recorded the views of young people, there were no formal or consistent procedures for doing this, and in many cases opportunities were missed to give children and young people the voice that allows them to determine their own interventions and align them to their needs more effectively (Tucker, Trotman, & Martyn, *2015*; Wenham, *2016*). In addition, schools' tendency to focus on the individual child, rather than the family, proved difficult to shift in some cases and underlined the fact that ambitious programmes of this kind need to be given time to embed and gradually change ways of working.

Conclusion: Vulnerability and Social Justice in Education

So what are the implications of this discussion of policy and practice in relation to vulnerability for social justice in education? Given the limitations of space, it is sufficient here to highlight four main issues which emerged mainly from the Families Programme case study, referring back to Smith's (*2018*) key elements of social justice.

The first relates to equity, treating people according to their needs. Verhallen, Hall, and Slembrouck (*2017*) have examined the impact of what they refer to as the opposed ideologies of child welfare: family support and child protection. The Families Programme represented an attempt to move toward strength-based, nonjudgmental family support, although tensions with child protection-focused practice were also evident. This involved significant cultural change, moving away from the service-led approach criticized by Coram and Coram International (*2017*) toward a more needs-based approach, although the research found that financial constraints meant that thresholds were actually tightened, at least initially, making it harder for some families to gain support. Schools are more likely to see the benefits of a support-based approach than one focused on protection. Such an approach starts from the premise that professionals are not just there to intervene and solve problems but to listen, challenge, and support families' transformation, treating parents and carers as people as well as parents (Featherstone et al., *2014*). This type of relationship-based approach is closer to that adopted in Scotland than in England, although budget cuts have also had negative effects on provision in Scotland. It is also difficult to achieve at scale.

The second issue relates to consistency and equity. Rather than blaming families, the Families Programme attempted to take account of the role of structural systemic factors, particularly poverty, in contributing to their ability to cope and to develop an understanding that families require hands-on support. The research also demonstrated that parenting was not an issue in some cases, despite negative previous assessments. Family support workers were often the first professionals to acknowledge that parents were not failing, they were in fact good parents, and this made them feel

valued. They did this by building relationships with them and offering consistent support over time. While parenting is clearly an issue in many child welfare cases, professionals need to be open to the fact that children and young people's behaviors do not necessarily correlate with bad parenting. A definition- or deficit-based approach to working with vulnerable families, such as in the Troubled Families programme, is much less likely to achieve that.

The third issue relates to relevance. Schools are always seeking to build better relationships with parents, particularly as children get older or experience difficulties. Where it was successful, the Families Programme engaged parents and carers by working with them and tailoring the programme to their needs, rather than attempting to fit them into existing services. It also successfully engaged younger children but struggled to engage some teenagers with more complex needs. While there were some positive outcomes for teenagers, the research suggests that positive outcomes for the most troubled young people appear to be dependent on the availability of specialist education and mental health services. All of the teenagers in this study had had a range of special school and mainstream placement breakdowns. It may be necessary to rethink the way in which educational provision operates for the most vulnerable since nonattendance at school had a negative impact on the safety of these young people and contributed to their being engaged in offending. By tackling education and other issues at an earlier stage, if sustained, a mediating service like the SFSS working between schools and social services to meet young people's needs may in time result in fewer young people presenting with complex problems as teenagers. Harker (*2016*) has argued that teachers are the frontline of child support and protection and that schools may see benefits to children's learning as well as their well-being if they are willing to assume a greater role in protecting children. The Families Programme was innovative in placing schools at the heart of some aspects of service delivery for vulnerable children and families. If resourcing issues are addressed, schools could be more actively involved in providing targeted early help services (Jopling & Vincent, *2016*), as they are in Scotland. However, this may be more difficult to achieve in England due to funding cuts which have reduced local authorities' engagement with, and jurisdiction over, schools (Jopling & Hadfield, *2015*). As one of the professionals who took part in the research pointed out, it may be necessary need to redesign services completely for very troubled young people. However, a better understanding of how children and young people experience the systems in which they are involved is necessary to understand why they do not engage with education or access mental health services until they are in crisis. It is equally important actively to give them a voice and include them in co-designing alternative services relevant to them. The research found little evidence of genuine shared decision-making which gave children and young people as well as their families a greater role in determining their own interventions.

The final issue relates to working in and with communities. The Families Programme was able to create greater flexibility in statutory service provision and remove some system barriers to ensure prevention and family support were more integrated with child protection services (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, *2009*). While social workers continued to hold statutory cases, far more intensive work was undertaken by family support workers enabling the skills of non-social work qualified frontline staff to be combined with those of qualified social workers. There is, however, a need to extend the role of volunteers to ensure family support services are not overstretched as additional need is identified. There is also a need to build capacity within communities. Traditionally, children's social care in this local authority, as well as nationally, had little involvement with local communities, but by the end of the research, meaningful conversations were beginning to take place in local communities in an attempt to understand what children and families wanted and needed (Buchanan, Poet, Sharp, Easton, & Featherstone, *2015*). Schools were beginning to play a part in this, and it is crucial if social justice is to be addressed.

Despite decades of policy emphasis on collaborative working, individual services and agencies, including schools, often remain isolated. Viewing programmes and interventions from multiple perspectives may offer an opportunity to improve practice and outcomes by reducing the uncertainties Ling (*2012*) identifies as a key function of effective research and evaluation. Consequently, this chapter suggests that in order to avoid costly statutory intervention, it is necessary to shift emphasis away from risk and protection (where appropriate) and focus on supporting families to build their own resilience. This involves removing structural barriers to accessing services, providing support in neighborhoods and communities, and designating an increased role for universal services, including schools. Schools need to shift their focus on to vulnerable families, as well as vulnerable children and young people, and contribute to the development of mediating services to reduce barriers between services. In research terms, it is also important to develop new forms of evaluation that integrate programme-level, typically quantitative evidence with the highly contextualized knowledge provided by evaluative case studies of individuals and families. Although achieving "hard" transformative outcomes is desirable, improving the stability of families and reducing immediate risk of harm are significant outcomes in their own right, and the Families Programme demonstrated that it could achieve these kinds of outcomes for certain families in particular contexts. The challenge is to extend this to more families and different contexts.

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