



Vulnerability: The role of schools in supporting young people exposed to challenging environments and situations



Stanley Tucker^{a,*}, Dave Trotman^a, Madeline Martyn^b

^aNewman University, United Kingdom

^bIndependent Researcher, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The article arises from research carried out in the United Kingdom, into the experiences of young people exposed to high levels of vulnerability through social and educational encounters in challenging environments. It considers the impact of school-based interventions, examined through the methodological lens of a composite case study typology. The effectiveness of such interventions is shown to be dependent on understanding personal, social and educational needs and the existence of responsive and appropriately resourced support structures. It also provides a framework through which to explore the value of group work, as well as behavioural, pastoral and inter-professional interventions.

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1. Introduction

The article considers the role played by schools in the United Kingdom in supporting young people who encounter environments, both inside and outside of the school-gate, which can be hostile and challenging. To achieve this, we examine data from previously published work on young people who have experienced discrimination, exclusion, violence and human trafficking (Tucker, 2011; Tucker, 2013). A typology is constructed from a series of interlinked case studies. Each element of the typology provides 'underlying dimensions, or key characteristics', examples and outcomes of school-based interventions (Cohen et al., 2002, p. 152). In constructing the typology, we synthesise data collected from interviews with over 250 young people aged between 11 and 25 years. Interviews were conducted with young people currently in school as well as those who had completed their secondary education. Young people are required to stay at school in the UK until they are 16 years old. We also make use of data gathered from discussions with those responsible for managing schools and Alternative Provision (AP) and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) – provided for students who have been permanently or temporarily excluded from school, school behaviour co-ordinators and pupil support staff.

Our previous work has, to a significant extent, concentrated on reporting on the impact of the difficulties and challenges faced by

highly vulnerable children and young people both inside and outside school. Here, we synthesise aspects of that work, in order to provide examples of effective school-based interventions specifically targeted at vulnerable young people. We concentrate on examining a range of interventions generated outside of the 'established curriculum'. In adopting such an approach, we demonstrate how different forms of personal and collective change can be promoted via a range of educational, group-focused, social and pastoral interventions. Consideration is also given to the importance of multi-professional and multi-agency responses.

The article is underpinned by a human rights perspective that provides a framework for evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of school-based interventions. It is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC requires that each individual child be protected and safeguarded, as well as being provided with opportunities for self-advocacy, self-determination and participation in decision making where appropriate. In creating the typology we show how the life chances of young people can be significantly improved not only through developing a better understanding of the situations they face, but also the importance of generating strategies that encourage and foster positive participation, choice and change.

Many of the young people whose lives form the focus of this article have encountered harrowing, traumatic and abusive events. Some have been trafficked, victimised, ostracised and tormented others have sought help and support without being 'listened to and believed' and educational systems and processes have compounded existing levels of disaffection, exclusion and alien-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 7530923667.

E-mail address: s.a.tucker@newman.ac.uk (S. Tucker).

ation. It is our ambition that this article will help to raise professional and academic knowledge and awareness, and thereby stimulate changes in practice.

2. Contextual background

To understand the appropriateness of the interventions discussed below, the nature and outcomes of the risk (and potential increases to collective and individual vulnerability) experienced by some young people need to be considered. For as Beck (1992) argues, the 'abundance of risk' that is likely to increase vulnerability emanates from personal circumstances and actions, as well as wider social, economic and educational factors. For example, increased levels of vulnerability may occur due to poverty – including risks to mental health, educational success, homelessness or exposure to crime (Osler and Vincent, 2003). Crucially, it is argued that failure by schools, and other social care and health agencies, to involve young people in exploring, assessing and responding to their own risk-based behaviour and the development of strategies to reduce or eliminate vulnerability, can 'impact on confidence, self-esteem, motivation and emotional health' (Smith et al., 2007, p. 243). Moreover, Brotherton and Potter (2010, p. 77) point to the fact that 'groups identified as being particularly vulnerable are very disparate' due to a mixture of 'structural' and 'cultural-behavioural' factors.

Research also points to a range of 'deficit agendas' influencing professional judgements when it comes to assessing the needs of particular individuals and groups of young people (Smith et al., 2007). Such agendas, it is argued, arise out of dominant discourses concerning 'dysfunctional' life styles, choices, behaviours and attitudes – rooted in negative perceptions of class, family and community values. It can be argued that such agendas are so powerful, that they restrict the ability of young people to articulate their needs, advocate for their rights and participate in decision-making processes. This is a view endorsed by Griffin (1993), who points to the existence of a linked set of representations portraying young people as 'mad', 'bad', 'diseased', 'perverted' and sexually promiscuous. The impact of such 'deficit agendas' is further played out when it comes to restricting opportunities for particular groups of young people. For example, Cronin (2013, p. 102) points to ways in which such dominant discourses have impacted on 'school admissions and exclusions because 'looked after children' ... might be viewed as potentially disruptive to overall school performance'.

Our research challenges dominant perceptions of vulnerability, risk and exploitation constructed through the discourses described above. We adopt a position, advocated by France (2004), that young people should be seen as 'reliable witnesses' when it comes to exploring aspects of their life-worlds and as 'social actors in their own right' (O'Kane, 2000, p. 136). We wanted to find out the perspectives, ideas and viewpoints of young people who have found themselves in high risk situations. We explored strategies and approaches, adopted by schools, AP services and PRUs, that young people found helpful. Our intention was to foster methodological research approaches and practices through which young people would have 'their individual and collective voices heard in matters that impact on them' (Article 12). Such an approach is supported by Smith et al. (2007, p. 328) who advocates that a rights-based approach offers young people 'better protection from harm, provide[s them] with services and benefits and encourage[s them] to participate in decisions affecting them'; the voices of highly vulnerable young people whose voices often go unheard.

3. Methodological approach

In seeking to establish those factors likely to generate high levels of individual and collective risk and vulnerability amongst young people, our methodology was underpinned by an ethno-

graphically-based approach (Hammersley, 1992). At the same time, we wanted to understand the roles that schools and other social agencies can play in proactively supporting young people. The data emanating from the research has all been generated through utilisation of voice-focused methodologies (France, 2004; O'Kane, 2000) premised on constructivist approaches to interpretivist research (Schwandt, 1994), involving interviews with young people, many of whom have previously struggled to make themselves heard and have their needs met.

From this approach, four inter-linked case studies have been generated. Each of the case studies share a number of common factors, in that they deal with the experiences of groups of young people who have found themselves in extremely challenging situations. The case studies then, present evidence of the effectiveness of school-based approaches used to support young people who experience high levels of vulnerability. Taken in combination, these interconnected studies reveal a number of common themes and demonstrate how specific individuals and groups position themselves in relation to dominant powers, ideologies and discourses (Quantz, 1992 cited in Cohen et al., 2002, p. 153). They also offer a better understanding as to the relevance of particular forms of intervention in supporting young people to manage complex situations.

From the composite case studies recurrent themes were then identified. These then formed the basis for the construction of key categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101) for a typology of intervention, focusing on themes concerned with: problems and issues facing some young people; range of help and support offered; practitioner perspectives on the value of specific interventions; the relevance of particular forms of intervention; how such interventions might be improved and further developed.

We cross-referenced the emergent themes from each case study and through this process revealed examples of related experiences for young people and adults, evidence of effective interventions and outcomes, and implications for policy and practice. These examples provided the content for the typology as well as highlighting aspects of good practice in working with vulnerable young people.

4. Typology of intervention

Within this section we present through a typology of intervention, examples of a range of interventions used by schools, AP and PRUs to support vulnerable young people. Some interventions were developed in co-operation with social care and health agencies that were willing to share both expertise and resources. Although interventions are presented under separate headings, young people frequently engaged in a range of activities covered within other typology. The range of interventions covered by the typology is indicated in Fig. 1. Following that, each element of the typology is described in more detail.

4.1. Group work and positive intentional risk

The first case study is constructed from encounters with young people who had reached 'breaking point' in terms of their ability to withstand peer pressure and acts of brutality inflicted by both peers and adults. These young people had often suffered both mental and physical abuse through persistent acts of exploitation and humiliation. The group work category incorporates two approaches to school-based group work: work with a girls' group who wanted to escape from 'disrespectful street-life and guns and gangs'; and work with a group of young people trying to 'defend themselves' from situations where they were being sexually or physically exploited, bullied or excluded.

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