‘Vulnerable youth’ in policy and practice: conceptualisations, enactments and impacts

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Introduction

In order to target policy and services to young people in need, it is common practice to identify a specific group as being ‘vulnerable’ (e.g. Victorian Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper 2009 and Relationships Australia Statement on Vulnerability and Disadvantage and the European Social Network seminar in Vulnerable Youth in Transition). Young people who are considered ‘vulnerable’ may also be referred to as ‘at-risk’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘marginalised’ or ‘disenfranchised’. All these terms, and indeed the identification of specific young people as belonging to such a category are controversial. Such categorisations impact on how funding, responsibilities and services are allocated and disbursed and to whom, with significant consequences for young people – those who are categorised as ‘vulnerable’ and indeed those who are not. To discuss the complex issues that confront young people, the institutions that support them and the policies that govern them, a two-day workshop, funded by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA), was held in 2013 at Victoria University in Melbourne.

The workshop brought together Australian academics, policy makers, NGO staff and young people to discuss:

- how policies in various youth-related fields identify certain young people as needing support or intervention,
- the practices of such targeting and support in different fields, and
- the consequences of these practices for young people.

Since young people themselves are central to these concerns, the workshop also included four young people who formed an expert panel for a facilitated discussion.

Complexities and concerns

How and why do certain young people come to be identified and represented as in some way ‘vulnerable’ and requiring support in Australian public policy? According to Dr Radhika Gorur (Victoria University), attempts to quantify vulnerability in clear, measurable ways have met little if any consensus. Not only does each discipline (such as economics, sociology and health) have its own way of defining and measuring vulnerability, but interconnected and reinforcing factors make vulnerability a complex phenomenon. Building on this, A/Prof Kitty te Riele (Victoria University) examined Victoria’s 2010 policy framework, Positive Pathways for Victoria’s Vulnerable Young People. This framework proposes a ‘traffic light’ approach to different levels of youth vulnerability (see p.4). Drawing on her research in alternative and flexible secondary education programs, A/Prof Te Riele highlighted dilemmas in relation to the risk of stigmatisation and deficit approaches, and both positive and detrimental impacts of service provision for some but not all.

Concerns about the identification of certain young people as ‘vulnerable’ were expressed by several workshop presenters:

- Referring to the Compact With Young Australian policy, Prof Lingard (University of Queensland) pointed out that the policy constructs young people as the problem that requires targeted solution (e.g. lifting attainment and restricting conditions for income support), overlooking wider structural, schooling, and employment issues.
- From his case study research with young people in regional Australia Dr Farrugia (Federation University) found that structural inequalities and social processes have been reified as personal or family characteristics.
In terms of policies around Youth Allowance, Prof Johanna Wyn (University of Melbourne) suggested that the assumption of normative, linear patterns of transitions is problematic, and proposed replacing such a spatial metaphor of youth with a relational understanding of ‘youth’ within social processes.

Prof Rob White (University of Tasmania) expressed concern about the simplistic use of ‘risk factors’ and ‘protective factors’ in relation to juvenile justice. As an alternative, Prof White pointed to the importance of involving community, with services as ‘social connectors’, programmes as ‘social includers’, and groups of people as ‘social supporters’.

Prof Roger Slee highlighted that exclusion has come to be seen as natural in society and in education, and that the tolerance for diversity is diminishing. He suggests we need to build the capacity of schools to work with differences based on democratic education principles rather than expanding special ‘inclusive education’ options that, ironically, are exclusive.

Service providers are at the pointy end of these considerations, when they are presented with young people who undeniably need and deserve support. They may work with selected young people because these youth are part of a specific institution (the first two examples below), or they may devise their own selection criteria to enable limited resources to be used where most needed (the final example).

- The Education Institute of The Royal Children’s Hospital specifically provides educational support to students with chronic health conditions. Dr Liza Hopkins (The Royal Children’s Hospital) explained that Victorian education policy enables exemption from schooling due to ill-health, while health policies traditionally have not taken account of the learning needs of students with a chronic health condition. As a result, while patients at the Royal Children’s Hospital have access to its education program, young patients in other hospitals may not receive any education support.

- Dr Rosalyn Black (Monash University) studied two schools in high poverty areas that have incorporated youth participation into the middle years curriculum. Dr Black reflected on the intricacies of engaging students who themselves were disadvantaged (for example, in terms of economic or educational opportunities) in programs intended to inspire these students to create social change and redress inequality elsewhere.

- The Learning for Life program (offering long term, multi-pronged support for educational participation) uses income as the criterion for eligibility. In effect this is its initial definition of vulnerability. As Anne Hampshire (The Smith Family) demonstrated, while this is a somewhat blunt measure, research data from the participants highlight the way low income intersects with other potential attributes of vulnerability, such as low parental education and high levels of mobility.

Discussions from the workshop also revealed concern about a lack of consideration of young people’s voice in the development and implementation of youth policies. Dr Alison Baker (Victoria University) showed how the PhotoVoice research method can be an empowering way of drawing out the voices of young people through the creation of and reflection on photo images. The workshop itself aimed to be inclusive of young people’s voices, through a ‘talk show style’ panel of four young people, facilitated by Leonie Kite (Office for Youth, DEEWR) and Reynato Reodica (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition).

Prof Lawrence St Leger (Deakin University) asked the youth panel: “Imagine you were the prime minister, what are a couple of things you would do for the future of this country, and in particular for young people?”. The four young people each gave thoughtful answers drawing from their life experiences.
Billy would like schools to pay more attention to students whose strengths are more in practical rather than academic learning. Based on his positive experience with the Hands On Learning program, Billy would like this kind of program to be available in all schools in Australia because “it’s based on doing hands on work out of class, one day a week you go and build stuff around your school, you go and help out other people. That’s what kept me in school for ages, and that’s what I would be preaching, I would be putting a few million into that”.

Mazna pointed to the importance of the relational dimension in schooling: “What I found valuable, in primary school I had the same teacher for three years and in high school I had the same teacher for three years as well and I think that really helped me because I was able to trust the teacher and the teacher was able to understand the needs of the students that they had”. Her suggestion indicated that policy definitions of ‘quality teaching’ may need to be reconsidered.

James would like social workers or counsellors to check in regularly with how students are going: “like five minutes, once every six months: ‘How are you going, you said you like maths here. How is that going for you?’ all that kind of stuff, just the basics to getting on some responsibility and you make those appointments but you have to do it”. Although he said his suggestions to give someone this responsibility are “not policies but they’re little things”, the resulting interest and care could have a major impact on young people.

Speaking about the welfare system, Jesse suggested extending services for young people in the care of the state beyond age 18: “You are just getting your bearings, you can’t even get a loan out, and at the age of 18, DHS [Department of Human Services] turn their back on you. I would stretch it out to 25 and they can stay with you and just give you the right tools”.

**Main findings**

Several key themes emerged from the workshop. There was general recognition of the need to change the technical-instrumental way in which youth vulnerability has generally been addressed in policy (i.e. about who and how) to a more holistic approach. The latter acknowledges the complexity of the issues and recognises each young person as a whole human being. This implies shifting from focussing on individuals to community and society; from problems to strengths; and from future-oriented pathways to wellbeing in the ‘here and now’. To support this, conversations between policy makers, NGO staff, youth and other stakeholders across the different areas (health, education, social welfare and justice) are crucial for developing and implementing youth policies and delivering youth support services and interventions.
The contested nature of terms such as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ was raised, as these imply a deficit approach. While there are reasons for using terminology that has policy currency, and while it is difficult to find a more constructive term, it is useful to beware of the politics of labelling and the connotations of the language used. Given the dynamic and relational nature of ‘vulnerability’ itself, such categorisations are difficult to sustain. Yet, paradoxically, unless these ‘vulnerabilities’ are recognised, they cannot be addressed and support that is crucially required may be denied, such as Jesse’s example above of cutting off services at the age of 18.

Despite concerns with stigmatisation, ultimately, services need to be directed to young people when and as required. These services need to be delivered in ways that reduce the risk of further marginalising young people within mainstream settings. One way to reduce such risk is to challenge and diversify notions of ‘normal’.

To help turn the discussion around, a moral lens was proposed: to actively engage with the tensions experienced in programs, services and interventions by approaching them as mortal dilemmas. The debates around youth vulnerability often pertain to categorising young people as ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving’ of extra support. Those that are cast as undeserving can be ones that are seen as ‘too-hard’ to deal with, which denies services to those who might be most in need. Equally, those that do not present with ‘classic’ modes of ‘vulnerability’ might be excluded from services that would have been greatly beneficial. Governments have a moral responsibility, based on human rights, that should not be shirked, and living up to this responsibility requires grappling with ‘vulnerability’ as a complex phenomenon that requires careful and diverse approaches, rather than blunt categorisations. The consideration of moral dilemmas includes focusing on institutional practices that may produce or perform vulnerability and marginalisation through the quotidian that aggregates to produce systemic effects.

**Future directions**

The discussions from the workshop suggested some possible future directions for policy, service delivery, and research.

Integration and continuity are vital for youth support programs. The latter is endangered by short-term approaches to funding, for example through pilot programs. The former benefits from a dedicated government unit, such as an Office for Youth that exists in several states (for example New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria), that is empowered to oversee the variety of policies emanating from different departments, and to examine the impact of different government policies and initiatives on the lives of young people.

In terms of adopting a more relational approach to service delivery, schools can play a significant role for delivering youth support services, providing a central and stable base for young people. Using schools as a hub (for example Victorian Extended School Hubs) for these services may help to enhance communication across different sectors as well as making use of schools as a community resource. In addition, the evaluation of the impact of various youth support programs and services can be broadened beyond the key performance indicators of individual organisations to the collective impact that multiple organisations and communities have on the lives of young people.

Although academic research can and must play a crucial role in evaluating youth policies and practices, taking a sceptical and critical stance can undermine initiatives that are making positive impacts on young people’s lives. Extending the moral lens proposed above to research as well would imply:
• Researcher reflexivity on the impacts of their research on programs and practices – and ultimately on the young people who are served by these programs and practices.
• Supplementing theories of power and justice with the narratives and the needs expressed by young people themselves. In this regard, the voices of the four young people were extremely illuminating to the workshop participants.
• Recognising both the benefits and limitations of key performance indicators and metrics of various sorts for evaluating programs and interventions. Placing too much focus on these indicators can obscure less measurable outcomes that can be just as important, if not more, to the lives of young people.

A multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary approach, that includes the voices of the young people themselves, provides the most promising approach to rich understandings of the enactments and impacts of youth policies and practices.

A final word

In his closing remarks for the two-day workshop, Prof Fazal Rizvi (University of Melbourne) suggested that “the fact that our experiments with doing things for young people produce dilemmas is something which I don't think we should run away from, but we should learn to engage with”. The workshop provided a forum for such discussions, and is particularly timely and relevant considering the proposed changes to the Youth Allowance scheme and closure of youth services in the 2014 Australian budget.