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Vulnerable children at school: Lessons from England

Abstract

This chapter examines how changes to policy and practice in England since 2010 have affected how schools work with other agencies to support „vulnerable" children, young people and families. It begins by reviewing how vulnerability has become a ubiquitous term in policy, practice and theory in England and elsewhere in recent years and the difficulties involved in defining vulnerability. Research findings from two reforms, which were both designed to improve provision for vulnerable families, are then discussed in detail. Four factors affecting their success are highlighted: being family-centred and strengths-based; adopting a non-judgemental approach; communication, consistency and coordination; and mediation between family and school. The chapter concludes by advocating a shift towards addressing the multiple, 'empirical realities' of vulnerable children and their families, rather than viewing them as failing, and incorporating such a perspective into the education and professionalization of teachers and other professionals.

Changes to policy and practice in England since 2010 have affected how support for those who are commonly referred to as „vulnerable" children, young people and families. After a review of how vulnerability has become a ubiquitous term in policy, practice and theory in England and elsewhere in recent years, this chapter uses research findings from two reforms (involving but not centred on schools), which were intended to improve provision for vulnerable families, to draw out some of the lessons for practice and policy.

1 England and UK: A brief note about context

The devolution of power to different degrees to administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1997 has created increasingly divergent education and social policy systems in the countries that make up the UK. As a result, policies introduced by the UK Government from 2010 promoting decentralisation and autonomy in schools and other public sector organisations have been more widely applied in England than the other UK countries. This has led to the creation of a much more fragmented educational and social services landscape, in which budget cuts associated with economic „austerity" have greatly reduced local governments' powers and the range of support services available to „vulnerable" children and families (Simkins et al. 2014; Jopling/Hadfield 2015). For example, government rhetoric of autonomy has resulted in almost 70 per cent of secondary schools in England being funded directly by national government through the expansion of its academy programme.

Budget cuts and the reduction of local authority support, through a process described by Lubienski (2014) as „disintermediation", have left schools much more reliant on their professional networks and local support mechanisms than previously. At the same time, funding has continued to be allocated to early intervention (Allen 2011) and controversial initiatives such as the troubled families programme (Levitas 2012). As this chapter attempts to demonstrate, this has had a significant impact on both support for vulnerable families and schools' roles in such support. However, before exploring two relevant recent reforms, it is important first to examine how „vulnerability" has become such a ubiquitous concern in a relatively short time period.

2 Vulnerability creep

In recent years, it has become common to see references to a „vulnerability zeitgeist" in social policy (Brown 2015; Ecclestone/Rawdin 2016), associated with a range of interventions and programmes in the UK, Europe and North America. For Ecclestone (2017), this has represented „vulnerability creep", as the term has come to dominate policy, practice and theoretical discourses. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, „vulnerable" and „vulnerability" remain under-defined and contested terms. Potter and Brotherton (2013) draw on Esping-Anderson (1990) to distinguish between the effects of three types of welfare regimes: social democratic, conservative-corporatist and liberal-residual on approaches to defining and addressing vulnerability.

In the social democratic model, services are predominantly provided by the state, in an attempt to reduce or compensate for vulnerabilities and their effects, which are regarded as social in origin. Finland is the contemporary example they highlight and the creation of the Welfare State in the UK in 1945 is often pointed to as an

historical example. At the other extreme of Esping-Anderson's (1990) model is liberal-residual, which places much greater emphasis, and responsibility, on the individual and regards vulnerability in terms of failure or deficit. USA is the pre-eminent example of this approach, although the model has also increasingly been adopted in England in recent years. Between these extremes is the conservative-corporatist model, associated with countries like Germany or Scotland, where services are more likely to draw on partnerships between the state and families. These models have differing effects.

Potter and Brotherton (2013, 7) suggest that the social democratic model tends to underplay individual factors, whereas the (neo)liberal-residual model sees vulnerable individuals as „architects of their own disadvantage". They also suggest that popular discourse has tended to collate these two extremes, further neutralizing the notion of vulnerability and making it more straightforward for politicians and policy makers to measure and thus control. An example of this can be found in *Social Justice: transforming lives* (DWP 2012, 1) a UK Government publication which 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 acceptance of the liberal-residual identification of vulnerable families with deficits (Paliokosta/Blandford 2010).

Brown (2015) argues that constantly expanding definitions of vulnerability have also increased the power of professionals, who determine what support is made available and have justified cuts to welfare funding. This has in turn prevented services from attempting to address the problems faced by vulnerable individuals and families. Consequently, it is important to consider how and why definitions of vulnerability continue to expand.

2.1 Defining vulnerability

A recent review undertaken by Brown et al. (2017, 498) regrets 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 highlight the ubiquity and conceptual elasticity of vulnerability as a term, which create „common-sense or assumed understandings which conceal diverse uses with enormously varied conceptual dimensions" (Brown et al. 2017, 505). This leads them to suggest that vulnerability tends to appear 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.

There is not scope here to discuss all of these forms. However, as this chapter explores two reforms aimed at improving practice with vulnerable families, the focus will be on how vulnerability has been approached in policy and practice. In doing this, it is informed by Jenson and Fraser's (2011, 9) concern that in the US context „advances in understanding the life-course development of problem behaviours among children and youth have primarily been used to enhance prevention and treatment strategies rather than to inform theory development". For Potter and Brotherton (2013, 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", where vulnerability becomes either part of a damaging therapeutic culture (Ecclestone 2016) or a „professional euphemism" (Alexander 2010, 60), based on unexamined assumptions or judgements. Therefore, when Sharon Vincent and I wrote a research report on provision for vulnerable children in primary schools in England (Jopling/Vincent 2016), our approach to the definitional issue was to examine the taxonomies of vulnerability presented in five influential policy documents to see how they had approached the issue.

What was most striking was their variability: each document had a different starting point, focus and breadth of field. Vulnerabilities were variously described as „problems", „disadvantages", and „risk factors" in the documents and were related to the child, their parent(s) or carer(s) and the socio-economic context in which they live. Mental health was the only factor common to the five documents examined, which included government guidelines on child protection, the inspection framework for children's centres which offer support and provision for families in disadvantaged communities, and social exclusion policy. After mental health, contextual factors affecting a child's family were the most commonly cited. These included poverty, parents' unemployment, domestic violence and criminality, along with a child being in need of protection, which is both an indicator of, and a response to, vulnerability. Two vulnerabilities – having special educational needs and having a disability – were individual to the child and only one, non-attendance at school, was directly related to the child's agency.

What was striking is that the documents tended to approach the vulnerabilities in isolation. Only rarely did they recognise the complexity involved in attempting to cope with multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously, as Sabates and Dex (2012, 22) emphasised in their analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of 19,000 children born in 2000 and 2001 in the UK:

„Analyses of MCS children's outcomes at ages three and five suggested that being exposed to two or more risks in first years of life is likely to disadvantage children's cognitive and behavioural development as they grow up. [...] 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 and Dex (2012) 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. This reflects Frey et al's (2011, 136) claim that „evidence from efficacious school-based practices also supports the need to attend to interactions among key individual and environmental factors" and 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). For example, moving house frequently, poor attendance at school or persistent lateness may be an indicator of a larger issue. This led us to suggest that, rather than focusing on definitions, schools, agencies and professionals might benefit more from adopting a needs-based approach to identifying vulnerability. Such an approach would be based on a holistic view which takes as its starting point the fact that a child is likely to be affected by multiple, interacting vulnerabilies. This has parallels with the more ecological approach (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/Statham 2011; Cefai/Camilleri 2015). They put the child and their needs at the centre of support, rather than moving directly to referral to support services.

More recent interventions in the debate in England (Children's Commissioner 2017; Crenna-Jennings 2018) have focused on trying to assess the number of vulnerable children in England and failed to move any closer to defining what is meant by vulnerability. However, one of the group of reports commissioned by the children's commissioner does acknowledge that current approaches to supporting vulnerable children are service-led, rather than led by children's needs, and as a consequence are likely to exclude many vulnerable children (Coram and Coram International 2017). This may be why universal services, such as schools, are being increasingly called on to support vulnerable children.

2.2 Vulnerable children and schools

The research report referred to above (Jopling/Vincent 2016) was written for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, which extended the work of a large-scale review of the primary curriculum, the Cambridge Primary Review, completed in 2010 but never implemented. There, we noted that the term „vulnerable child" rarely features in the 608-page report and its accompanying suite of research papers. When it did appear, it was in the historical context of concerns about child protection in the 1970s and 1990s, which Barron et al. (2010, 123) placed „within a compensatory discourse of cultural and social deficit", which endures, as we have seen.

From 2010, vulnerability again became a key term in the school context. There are 13 uses of the word „vulnerable" in *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010), the government paper which signalled the unprecedented increase in (apparent) school autonomy and reduction in local government funding already highlighted. However, no definition of the term is provided. Most of the references are to local governments' „strong strategic role as champions for parents and families, for vulnerable pupils and of educational excellence", alongside a renewed emphasis on marketization and competition among schools.

What appears to be a contradiction is explained by Ecclestone's (2016, 5) recognition that the „rational, self-interested, autonomous neoliberal subject" requires a „vulnerable, stressed, scared and unconfident counterpart." Lack of real interest in vulnerable children or families is signaled by the fact that the role of championing „vulnerable pupils", criticised by Hatcher (2014) for vagueness, is assigned to emasculated local government, rather than newly-empowered schools. Ecclestone's concerns that increasingly „all educational institutions are key sites for developing an interrelated set of psycho-emotional attributes" (Ecclestone 2016, 2), such as resilience and emotional regulation, is also relevant here. Specialist staff such as special educational needs coordinators are increasingly being asked to take on responsibilities previous undertaken by other professionals such as social workers, as resources decline and record numbers of vulnerable or disadvantaged children are excluded from school.

At the same time schools remain caught between what Sugrue (2009, 373) has called the „twin towers of autonomy and accountability". Frey et al. (2011, 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". 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 families in England. Similarly, there are few accounts that highlight „the empirical realities of vulnerability from the perspec-

tives 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.

3 Supporting vulnerable children and families: Two collaborative reforms

The remainder of the chapter draws out some lessons learned from evaluations of two reforms conducted in two areas of high deprivation in North West England between 2014 and 2017. Both focused on „vulnerable" families and used mixed methods (Mertens 2007) combining qualitative research with children, young people, families and professionals with analyses of quantitative outcome data. The first reform was centrally coordinated by single city's local authority, with the objective of achieving cultural transformation through the development of an integrated, early intervention and prevention framework to support families. Its ambitious aim was to support all „families with troubles", defined inclusively as any families with children from birth to 18 who might require some form of multi-agency support. To do this, it brought together existing and new initiatives, including an early intervention team and a support service mediating between families and schools, to try to cover the full range of child and family needs. The second reform was locally-based and explicitly designed to be co-produced with families, working initially with ten families in part of a large and isolated coastal town. Although the content of the programme was tailored to each family's needs, support typically focused on education, employment and securing benefits, as well as day to day needs such as accompanying families to medical appointments. Both reforms were non-judgemental in their focus on families and worked closely with schools and other agencies as key partners in provision.

The discussion here focuses on schools' engagement with the programmes and highlights some of the key themes which emerged from the research. Reform 1 involved semi-structured individual and group interviews with 83 professionals and practitioners (including school staff) engaged in the programme and in-depth case studies of nine families. Reform 2 involved semi-structured interviews with 32 professionals and practitioners (including school staff) and five case studies of families. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) and theory of change models developed to evaluate the programmes. The findings reported in this chapter draw on the report findings from these research projects.

4 Impacts

It was important to the funders that the evaluations of each reform assessed their impact both to inform their development and to justify further applications for funding. Thus, an element of the evaluations focused on assessing the extent to which the kinds of „hard", performative measures (Ball 2001) formulated and required by policy makers were addressed. In reform 1, the authority was interested in transformative outcomes at the systemic level. In the family case studies, 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 being put 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); improved personal and social skills (7); and reduced stress levels (7).

In reform 2, data analysis suggested the programme prevented nine children from going into care, representing a total estimated saving of almost £300,000 per year; significant reduction of children on child protection and child in needs plans; improved mental health evidenced by reductions in total mental health support and activity in the locality by over 100%; and reduced numbers of unauthorized absences and exclusions from school in the area. However, the challenges in assessing the impact of these kinds of reforms lie in establishing how far the improvements associated with them in the short term can be sustained. The emphasis here is in examining in detail some of the factors affecting these impacts to try to determine the extent to which they can be sustained and applied in other contexts.

5 Factors affecting their success

5.1 Family-centred and strengths-based

Reform 1's broad 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 multi-agency support. Key factors which families identified as contributing to its effectiveness included flexibility, trust, whole family working and feeling that professionals really cared.

Featherstone et al. (2014) have identified the importance of providing „ordinary help" for families and locating it within neighbourhoods and communities. Families commented that the Families Programme was more likely to provide the „right kind of support", a mix of one to one emotional support as well as 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.

In a more holistic approach, they were able to effect what Sancho-Gil et al. (2017) have called „small tweaks" in vulnerable young people's narratives, distinct from the depersonalized, behavioural „nudge" approach criticised by Crossley (2017). Specifically, they monitored issues such as mental and emotional health, the domestic environment, family relationships and dynamics, and school attendance. The programme was underpinned by an ethos of working in partnership with families and some progress was made towards achieving a collaborative approach. However, the evaluation found little evidence of this or of the shared decision-making which gives children and young people as well as their families a greater role in determining their own interventions, perhaps because dominant policy notions of „turning families around" do not allow the time to do this.

The smaller scale focus of reform 2 made its self-proclaimed emphasis on the co-production of interventions and outcomes with families more achievable. One of the primary headteachers interviewed emphasized the value of working with families in this way, rather than focusing on children's „problematic" behaviour:

> „We find in education traditionally interventions have been with the child. So, the behaviour team will come in and work with the child but the parents aren't involved in that at all. Whereas this [reform] is very much about the whole family being part of that because quite often as we know the child may have a difficulty that's not actually a difficulty for the child. It's actually a family system issue and that's what they address."

She also emphasized that the programme's intensive support focused on empowering parents to take responsibility for changing their behaviour: „It's giving them the skills, the strategies and the confidence to do that themselves. And that's not a quick fix". These types of transactional, relationship-based approaches were very different from those envisaged in the UK Government's approach to family policy in England where the policy and rhetoric shifted responsibility on to „troubled" (Lambert/Crossley 2017) and „anti-social" families (Hayden/Jenkins 2015). However, the fact that the much smaller scale Reform 2 was more successful in this respect emphasises how difficult this is to achieve at scale and sustain over time.

5.2 Non-judgemental approach

Families and professionals involved in both reforms underlined the importance of professionals adopting the non-judgemental approach both reforms promoted. This remains rare. For example, several of the families involved in reform 1 felt that interactions with social workers had previously left them feeling intimidated and powerless. Where effective relationships were developed, for example with family support workers, families felt that the relationships they developed with the workers were sufficiently robust to allow them both to challenge *and* support them. Their non-judgemental approach was very different from their prior experiences with social care professionals. However, frustration was also expressed about how long it had taken to receive the kind of support offered by the programme. Some participating families felt their lives would have been considerably different had it been introduced sooner.

One of the care workers engaged in reform 2 also emphasised the importance of the programme's neutrality: „It's about looking from the outside-in and being able to give that advice in a non-judgemental way." A local headteacher felt that this was the key to its success, which was „very much driven by relationships and an understanding of where families are and how things can improve with their [the families'] input." This had allowed them to build trust at different levels, including among professionals, as one special educational needs coordinator commented: „I've felt much more that I trust services that are working to support young people. I haven't always felt that in the past." As a result, different agencies had been able to work closely together in ways that were not always apparent in the much larger reform 1, as the head teacher already quoted emphasised: „Anywhere else [they] would just say, ‚No, that's your problem. It's Education'".

An Education Welfare Officer interviewed highlighted the speed with which families' difficulties could escalate. She felt that the concentrated nature of the programme in a relatively small area allowed professionals from different areas to join together to offer support:

> „In this case [the programme] was able to pull together a raft of other professionals to support the family members. So, Mum got support with her health, Dad got support with his addiction and also his mental health. […] It was a joined-up approach over an extended period of time. And that's what made the difference."

Again, this highlights the fact that, although applicable to small scale interventions in a range of contexts, it is difficult to sustain these kinds of approaches because they depend so much on professionals being trained and prepared to build longstanding relationships with vulnerable children and their families.

5.3 Communication, consistency and coordination

The complexity and size of reform 1 meant that communication was a persistent issue. Participants reported that it was hard to find out what services were available in their area, despite the creation of a new services directory. While there was evidence of improved understanding among professionals of what services other agencies offered and the frequency of cross-agency meetings (including schools) to pool expertise and coordinate services around a family was increased, this did not automatically lead to cohesion (Featherstone et al. 2014). Consistency was also an issue in that participants across the agencies involved were concerned that budget cuts led to thresholds for services being raised, therefore excluding families from support.

As an Education Welfare Officer emphasised, consistency and meeting expectations were seen as key drivers in meetings families' needs in reform 2: „They don't overpromise, they don't under-deliver. If they say something's going to happen, it does happen". As has been indicated, consistent support and communication were also associated with increasing trust among families. One of the headteachers interviewed emphasised the importance of having a single social worker coordinating all support for the family, rather than being repeatedly moved between professionals with whom they had to start from scratch. This enabled the coordinating social worker to develop relationships that were strong enough to identify support that went beyond families articulated needs: „They had to try to find a way in to give them the support they needed that they didn't actually say they wanted. They were very good at that" (headteacher). Knowing families to this extent is difficult to achieve at scale.

5.4 Mediation between family and school

The programmes were successful when they were able to mediate between families and school to improve young people's attendance or re-engage them in school. In reform 1, the introduction through the programme of a new School Families Support Service (SFSS) played a key 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 the research also found that 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. They were often 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 non-educational issues such as financial or domestic issues (Fitzgerald/Kay 2008).

Furthermore, the programme's complexity with its multiple sub-programmes made it difficult for many professionals, including teachers, to develop an understanding of the programme as a whole. Practitioners outside education were unlikely to have heard of SFSS. School staff were not always clear what would happen when SFSS support ended. Since school staff could be required to take over as lead professional at that point, their reluctance in many cases to develop a better understanding of the programme overall and their role in it prevented them from being able to do this effectively.

In reform 2, the programme also fulfilled an intermediary role. At times this was at odds with the inflexibility of school approaches, but schools were able to accommodate themselves to this, as the Education Welfare Officer interviewed commented:

> „Sometimes [the programme's] agenda to support families is maybe at odds with the behavior and discipline policy in the school, but I think because we've got good working relationships with the workers at [the programme], we've managed to overcome some of the more difficult obstacles you're going to get in any organisation."

Her experience was that previously schools would have found it difficult to engage children from vulnerable families. On one hand, schools would have attempted home visits, but would not have had built up the relationship with the family necessary to reintegrate them into school. On the other hand, social services staff would have offered them support, but would not have had the close engagement with education to promote the importance of school. Often it was small things, such as reminding parents in the morning that they needed to get their children up for school or ensure they had clean clothes, that made the difference.

The challenge for researchers is finding ways to evaluate the importance of such relatively minor actions. As one headteacher emphasised, working with families, rather than individual children, allowed the programme to

develop a holistic, longer term approach: 'The project was mum's stabilisers. They helped her through so much and, as mum's confidence grew, we managed to get [her daughter] into school.'

6 Conclusion: from definitions to empirical realities

In the CPRT report (Jopling/Vincent 2016) we concluded by suggesting that schools were likely to benefit from being supported to recognise potential indicators of vulnerability in children, rather than referring the children elsewhere for support. The vulnerability indicators we developed were intended to be used by schools to consider children's potential vulnerability. Moreover, it is important to reiterate that it is the coexistence, and interaction, of multiple vulnerability factors which are likely to be most important in predicting vulnerability (Vincent 2010; Sabates/Dex 2012).

Therefore, we separated the indicators we proposed into three categories: child, parent/carer, and environmental, to encourage professionals in schools and elsewhere to get to grips with identifying need and potential support in partnership with other agencies. There is no need to list those indicators in detail here. In relation to children, they included educational indicators such as low levels of attendance at school, behavioural indicators such as being withdrawn or tired, and health indicators such as delayed development or significant changes in weight. Focusing on multiple indicators in this way also help schools to adjust the power balance, moved by expanding, deficit notions of vulnerability in the direction of professionals allocating limited funding, back towards children and families and addressing their needs.

Regarded with hindsight, this shift towards looking for indicators reflects the programmes' attempts to encourage professionals to go with the grain of families' needs (Brotherton/Cronin 2013): to take as a starting point the notion that vulnerability indicators are multiple and function interdependently; and to understand that while focusing on micro-changes can be highly effective, sustaining improvement for such families means is complex and difficult. The fact that our research demonstrated that schools found it challenging to take responsibility for vulnerable children even when they were operating within relatively large scale, supportive programmes suggests that we remain a long way from the flexible and imaginative forms of support which Brotherton and Cronin (2013) have also called for. The outcomes and „empirical realities of vulnerability" (Brown et al. 2017) highlighted in the research outlined above suggest that in England at least the enduring effects of the liberal-residual deficit model still prevents many schools and other agencies from adopting a holistic family-centred approach to supporting vulnerable families.

The programmes we evaluated resembled in many ways the capabilities- and asset-based approaches common in Scotland and other European countries, where vulnerable children and their families are regarded as having special educational, complex and/or additional needs, which can be used as the foundation of supporting them. Although this kind of approach can be difficult to evaluate (Packham/Foster 2014) and problematic in terms of the values on which they are based (Ecclestone/Lewis 2014), it emphasises the importance of developing an understanding of where families are and using that knowledge to build relationships with them that will allow them, including children and young people, to have a voice in their own support (Tucker et al. 2015). This suggests that the initial professional education and later development and professionalisation of school staff needs to focus on the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the „empirical realities" of the children and young people they work with. However, schools are already overstretched. The success of interventions like the school families support service in reform 1 indicates the value of exending professionalisation to develop new roles which promote mediation and collaboration between schools, social services and other agencies which work with vulnerable families

As a primary headteacher working in another highly deprived part of Northern England emphasised recently in connection with another research project, it is knowing and understanding the potentially vulnerable family that is important. Addressing the performance and accountability-focused concerns which so often restrict schools' engagement with programmes working with such families (Fitzgerald/Kay 2008) is secondary:

> "Whenever a newly-qualified teacher starts, the first thing we say to them is: ‚Get to know the children, get to know the families. Don't worry about the curriculum, that will come later. Don't worry about all the bits and pieces, your planning and things like that. Number one: get to know the families and the children and that earns that trust.'"

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