

**Interrogating Conceptions of “Vulnerable Youth” in  
Theory, Policy and Practice**

INNOVATIONS AND CONTROVERSIES: INTERROGATING  
EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Volume 2

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# **Interrogating Conceptions of “Vulnerable Youth” in Theory, Policy and Practice**

*Edited by*

**Kitty te Riele and Radhika Gorur**

*The Victoria Institute, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia*



SENSE PUBLISHERS  
ROTTERDAM / BOSTON / TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-94-6300-119-9 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-94-6300-120-5 (hardback)  
ISBN 978-94-6300-121-2 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858,  
3001 AW Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands  
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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FAZAL RIZVI

## FOREWORD

A community cannot regard itself as a moral community unless it has a clear sense of its social responsibilities to all of its members. Of course, we readily recognise the responsibilities we have to our family and friends. But what about those whom we might never meet, or who are not directly related to us? How do we determine our broader obligations to the community as a whole? Are there some within our community who have a greater claim on our sense of moral responsibility? What is the scope of our moral community? Does it include those who are not our compatriots? Is it possible to regard the humanity as a whole as our moral community?

These issues of morality are as complex as they are old. They have been central to ethical deliberations in every cultural and political tradition since time immemorial. Their complexity lies in the fact that our social and economic resources are always limited to meet the moral claims of everyone. Indeed, questions of distributive justice arise only in conditions of scarcity. In the context of limited resources, we have to decide how we might meet the needs of those who are more deserving. How do we determine who is deserving, in any case? And how should our limited resources be distributed in manner that is fair and equitable?

Over the years, moral philosophers, such as John Rawls and Robert Goodin, have suggested that vulnerability should be regarded as the main criterion with which claims of justice should be assessed. Those who are most vulnerable should receive our greatest moral attention. In socially democratic societies, policy makers have widely used this principle to allocate public resources. However, the translation of generalised moral principles into effective policy and programs has never been easy. Political interests have invariably intervened, leading to complex debates about how vulnerability should be defined, classified, measured and represented.

In recent years, these debates have become further complicated, as nation-states around the world have preached austerity – the mantra that the state should withdraw from many of the responsibilities it had once assumed to look after the disadvantaged. Moving beyond the redistributive principles associated with the Keynesian Welfare State, this neo-liberal ideology has attempted to shift the state's responsibilities to the vulnerable to their families or to philanthropic organisations – or indeed to the individuals themselves. The idea of collective responsibility has been eschewed. In a sense moral discourse itself has been 'individualised', with individuals now asked to become responsible for their own welfare – become 'self-reliant' – on the one hand, or develop an attitude of charity on the other.

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Of course, the state can never be in a position to entirely abandon the vulnerable. There has thus emerged in recent decades a language of ‘safety net’, which has substantially weakened the stronger sense of moral responsibilities that the state had once assumed. The neo-liberal state has increasingly sought to shift these responsibilities to the market, leaving the vulnerable to even greater vulnerability. This shift has accompanied an administrative technology of ‘managing’ vulnerabilities, rather than addressing them in the language of morality. In an era when a focus on self-interest and self-regulation has become supreme, the question of how the vulnerable might be protected has become ever more important and urgent.

This timely book suggests that the responsibility for protecting the vulnerable cannot be left to individuals, but demands collective action, through institutions such as education, health and welfare. It examines some of the ways in which public policies and programs represent those who are vulnerable, involving a range of assumptions about the social, economic and political conditions that produce their vulnerabilities. The authors are critical of the ways in which these assumptions, in recent definitions of vulnerability, have become narrowed with attempts to enforce ‘self-reliance’. In response, this book points to the need to enlarge our social and political thinking so that, in so far as this can be avoided, no one is forced into a vulnerable or dependent position. Even if this utopia cannot be realised, the book suggests, it should nonetheless steer our moral imagination.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The genesis of this book lies in a workshop funded by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. The Workshop Program is a principal component in the Academy's promotion of research in the social sciences. Academy workshops are small gatherings of those working at the cutting edge of social science research. We are grateful to the Academy for their sponsorship of the workshop and recognition of the significance of our inquiry. More information can be found on the Academy website: <http://www.assa.edu.au/programs/workshop>

The preparation of this book was supported through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program

We are also grateful to Professor Fazal Rizvi. His role as co-Convenor ensured we met the essential requirement that convenors must include a Fellow of the Academy. Far beyond that, however, we appreciate his wisdom, which guided both the workshop and the development of this book. Hendrik Jacobs provided his creative insights for the book cover, Freya Lance helped with the style formatting, and Luke Swain created the comprehensive index. In addition, Kitty would like to thank Stephen Crump, without whom none of this work would have been possible. Radhika would like to acknowledge her family for their support and encouragement.



## INTRODUCTION

As a group, ‘youth’ have become a ‘matter of concern’ – the target of various policies, schemes, interventions and strategic attention. A review of 198 countries across all continents found that only 43 did not have a national youth policy (youthpolicy.org, 2013). In particular, the perceived vulnerabilities of youth are being elaborated in fine detail – physical and mental health, poverty levels, family support, engagement with community and school, education outcomes, even their spiritual lives and their sense of connectedness with the environment have come to be theorised, worried over, monitored and measured. However, the complexity, range and interconnectedness of the issues that appear to conspire against some groups and individuals are such that no clear-cut solutions are readily visible or even possible.

For youth who are vulnerable (or ‘at risk’, disadvantaged, marginalised or disenfranchised – terminology varies) the interconnectedness of various indicators of vulnerability are a phenomenon of life. They experience all of these mutually-reinforcing issues at once. But given the nature of administrative systems, a young person might be dealing with a variety of agencies and organisations, each with a different approach, a different philosophy, a different measure and a different preferred outcome. Such profusion of policies and confusion of approaches may serve not only to dilute the good that could come of interventions, they could also fail to reach many that require support. Of course, funds, too, are always limited – many services to youth are provided by non-government, not-for-profit and philanthropic organisations, usually with the help of volunteers. Competing for funds could mean that approaches might diversify, as each organisation feels the need to show how they are unique in their approach. Even with government services, policies change with government priorities, and this lack of consistency can be quite detrimental to young people who are already facing many challenges.

If there is little coherence between departments such as the health, education, justice and social services departments, there is also little communication across disciplines about the theories that could usefully inform policies and practices. In many cases, the requirements of numeric measures to monitor progress, allocate resources etc. lead to the development of thin and unsuitable measures which ignore the complexity of the situation, often reducing it to a single economic measure. Such policy practices not only fail to produce good solutions, they fail to harness the resources available to the youth themselves and to the community.

When developing policies for young people, there is now considerable agreement that it is important to listen to their voices – not only to elicit their perceptions and points of view, but also to develop interventions that are more likely to succeed in realising their objectives. Young people are often surveyed to

generate their understanding of the issues that affect them. However, because experiences of vulnerability are complex and often the particular mix of issues are quite individual, case study and qualitative approaches and narratives from young people themselves provide a much richer picture than a larger-scale survey. But the translation from such efforts to ‘give voice’ to actual policy influence does not always occur.

To sum up, we share concerns around three issues. First, while it is often emphasised that any effective policy that seeks to address the needs of vulnerable young people needs to be holistic, the various agencies and organisations and government departments that deal with young people have little opportunity to exchange notes, engage in interdisciplinary and cross agency deliberations to probe the underlying theories that inform their practices, or to explore the challenges and dilemmas they face. Second, academics, policy makers, practitioners and service providers all recognise the complexity of the issues involved – yet aspects of their practices ignore these complexities, particularly when critiquing policies or evaluating practitioners. Finally, while the voices of young people are considered vital to inform policy and practice, there is not adequate attention to how such elicitation of stories might occur in forums where they are most likely to have policy impact.

To explore (and perhaps even begin to address) these issues, together with Professor Fazal Rizvi we convened a forum in August 2013 where policy makers, people from philanthropic organisations, academics, service providers and young people could gather and inform and interrogate each other. This gathering was made possible by a grant from the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (Te Riele, Gorur, & Rizvi, 2014). Complexity was not a conclusion, but rather the starting point of the discussions. To that extent, there was a pragmatic focus on how we might ‘go on together’ (Verran, 2007). Exploration of such techniques as photovoice and a panel discussion provided examples of how we could go beyond tokenistic nods towards including the voices of young people, and elicit experiences and opinions that could enrich policy debates and practitioner actions. This book arises from that forum.

The book is organised in four sections. In Section 1 ‘Setting the scene’ Radhika Gorur explores the concept of vulnerability and Kitty te Riele analyses the conundrums posed by this concept in relation to policy and practice for young people. The final chapter in the section, by Roger Slee, paints the bigger landscape of exclusion within which the arguments outlined across the book take place.

Section 2 ‘Policy approaches’ includes four chapters analyzing relevant youth policy in different fields. Johanna Wyn focuses on policies that connect young people’s participation in learning with their economic productivity, and argues that this nexus is increasingly problematic. Rob White explains the understandings of risk and protective factors in policies and research regarding juvenile justice, and the relevance of broader social patterns. Lawrence St Leger and Julie White both explore health policies in their chapters – the former through a focus on health promotion and the latter through a critical analysis of policies in relation to the education of young people with serious health conditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Section 3 ‘Practice narratives’ similarly traverses various fields that are of relevance to ‘vulnerable’ young people, but the five chapters here take a practice perspective. Anne Hampshire and Gillian Considine outline how a major national Australian charity is moving beyond the concept of financial vulnerability in their work to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people. Kristy Muir, Lyn Craig and Bridget Jenkins tackle the concept of young people who are ‘NEET’, i.e. ‘not in education, employment or training’, and provide insights to better understand the experiences of such young people. Liza Hopkins and Tony Barnett explore the ways in which one particular service works across the intersection of youth, chronic illness and education. David Farrugia, John Smyth and Tim Harrison critically explore the intersections and disjunctions between the assumptions made by social policy regimes and differently positioned young people to show how these distinctions contribute to the construction of youth subjectivities in regional Australia. Ros Black and Lucas Walsh contrast approaches to developing young people’s active citizenship, with particular attention for those young people whose experience may include markers of marginalisation and exclusion.

Finally, Section 4 turns to ‘Young people’s voice’. Alison Baker and Vicky Plows discuss the ethical and methodological challenges for academics in representing the lives of the young people they research, particularly in the context of participatory research approaches. Four young people provide the final chapter: Geskevalola Komba, Jesse Slovak, Billy White and James Williams. They had been invited as experts for the workshop (see above), to offer us insights into the lived experiences of young people who might be considered ‘vulnerable’. The chapter is an edited version of the transcript of their contributions. For this book, it is fitting to give them the last word.

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