



***Staff Conceptualisations of Risk and Vulnerability and Young People at Risk of Exclusion: Comparisons within the UK.***

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This research forms part of the Excluded Lives programme of research on *The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences*. Overall, the programme aims to understand the contextual and institutional processes that lead to different rates and types of exclusion across the UK. In this part of the Excluded Lives research, we explore how risk and vulnerability to exclusion are understood by SENCOs and Pastoral Leads in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. We examine how this informs the types of responses and interventions made to meet the needs of young people at risk of exclusion. This report is a companion to “*Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion.*”

During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools fully embraced the terms vulnerability and risk to overtly inform decision-making around provision. Arguably this brought to the surface embedded views about the balancing of risk and vulnerability and what was considered optional or indispensable in provision (Smith 2023<sup>1</sup>). Covid-19 on the one hand raised the sceptre of everyone being at risk of harm to their health (a universal vulnerability), and also a recognition that some were more vulnerable than others. The term “vulnerable” often functions to separate out a group and may be received as a stigma (Barnados Scotland 2020<sup>2</sup>). It can pathologize individuals as in some way “incapable, limited and deficient” (Brown 2011<sup>3</sup>) serving to marginalise some young people as different to others. At the same time, it has been argued that the identification of vulnerability can also be seen to be used as an indicator of those who deserve support, compassion and empathy (Brown et al. 2017<sup>4</sup>). It can draw attention to fundamental inequities in access to key resources in whole communities (Marino 2019<sup>5</sup>) and lead to a shift to understanding vulnerability as tied to situations rather than individual characteristics.

The pandemic has brought to attention the wider groups of young people considered vulnerable and their access to educational opportunities. It has also surfaced some of the complexities of responding to risk and broadened our understandings of what those risks entail. Writers in social and health policy draw attention to the ways in which the use of the term vulnerability is underpinned by very different understandings of causation, how factors within the individual, family, school or community including broader structural inequities interplay to differentially put young people at risk. Professionals’ understandings of these factors in turn shape the focus of their intervention, the purpose of the intervention (whether it is designed to prevent or ameliorate risk,

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Sharon. (2023) "Covid-19 Exposing the Fault Lines of Inclusion: The ‘Risk’ and ‘Vulnerability’ of Disabled Children in the UK." Education in an Altered World: Pandemic, Crises and Young People Vulnerable to Educational Exclusion. Ed. Michelle Proyer, Wayne Veck, Fabio Dovigo and Elvira Seitinger. London: Bloomsbury Academic

<sup>2</sup> Barnado’s Scotland 2020 Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee – vulnerable children during the Coronavirus pandemic Final and extended submission by Barnardo’s Scotland, June 2020 Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee – vulnerable children during the Coronavirus pandemic Final and extended submission by Barnardo’s Scotland, June 2020

<sup>3</sup> Brown, K. (2011). ‘Vulnerability’: Handle with care. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 5(3), 313–321. doi: 10.1080/17496535.2011.597165

<sup>4</sup> Brown, K. (2011). ‘Vulnerability’: Handle with care. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 5(3), 313–321. doi: 10.1080/17496535.2011.597165

<sup>5</sup> Marino E. K. (2019) Is Vulnerability an Outdated Concept? After Subjects and Spaces. ANNALS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 33–46, ISSN 0094-0496, online ISSN 1548-1425. C 2020

protect the safety and welfare of young people and or repair the situation) and the way that resources are allocated.

## Methodology

We were guided by the following research questions:

1. What does risk and vulnerability to exclusion mean to those with responsibility for special educational needs/additional support needs and those responsible for pastoral aspects of school provision?
2. How do they describe their concerns about particular students at risk of exclusion and how do they respond?
3. How do different forms of policy and practice in schools mediate their understandings of risk and vulnerability?
4. How does this vary across jurisdictions?

We collected case study data on young people through interviews at two points in time (T1 and T2) with two key members of staff: those with responsibility for young people with SEN/additional support needs and those who were pastoral leaders.

## Report from England- Jill Porter

### Participants

Nine schools took part with nineteen members of staff interviewed, including nine SENCOs, one from each school, and ten Pastoral Leads.

### Location of Vulnerability

For the majority of staff, vulnerability was located in a multiplicity of factors and could not be seen as single causative factors. Within the multiplicity of factors however, individual within-child factors dominated. Staff spoke about particular and general special educational or developmental needs, about mental health, attachment and trauma, as well as inability to self-regulate or moderate behaviour. Feelings of safety, identity issues and self-image were seen to impact on relationships. Vulnerability was also seen in some schools through the lens of the tools they used to monitor attendance, lateness, detentions and suspensions. On the one hand description of vulnerabilities could be seen to adopt a deficit view of the young person, on the other there was also expressions of vulnerability that reflected a universal model, at least in part.

Family factors were identified with reference made to unstable, chaotic or violent homes, and parental willingness to engage with school and their ability to set boundaries. Many identified young people's vulnerability to exploitation in the community.

School factors were also seen to contribute to a young persons' vulnerability, particularly by the SENCOs who identified the negative impact caused by a lack of support and specialist provision. Staff attitudes and poor handling of incidents of inappropriate behaviour, and a failure to recognize the interactive effect of individual, home and school factors were contributors. Less commonly staff spoke about the absence of an inclusive approach.

### Location of Risk

Not everyone spoke about risk beyond reference to the risk of exclusion. Additionally, it was often spoken about in conjunction with vulnerability, and the risk not clearly articulated. Risk was not

limited to the individual but, in order of occurrence, located in interactions in the community, school, and family.

With respect to the individual, a re-occurring theme was the mental health of the young person, and the risk of self-harm. References were made to the risk of country lines, violence and drugs as well as physical and sexual exploitation. Staff were aware of risks for the young person that extended far beyond those of education and learning and that impacted on their future prospects, including their safety and these in turn were part of the decision-making with respect to exclusion. It was evident in the narratives that the young person could be seen as both a risk as well as at risk.

In summary staff narratives had revealed their understanding of both the multiplicity of factors that contributed to vulnerability and the interactive nature of these. Pivotal in these discussions were within-child factors although there was some recognition of universality no-one spoke specifically about vulnerable situations. For many, risk was located within the individual with a tendency to speak about students who were “vulnerable and at risk.” Some individuals were seen as both at risk and posing a risk. School was generally seen as a place of safety, while also posing its own risks, in particular not providing the support that was needed

### Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

Consistent with the narratives around vulnerabilities and risk, in all cases, interventions were directed at the individual, although notably 14 of the 19 detailed cases were also directed at the school as well. In nine instances a member of the family was also involved as part of the intervention procedure. The strategic focus in all cases presented here included can be understood in relation to preventing or ameliorating the risk of exclusion. In 12 of these cases the focus was also on protecting the safety and welfare of the young person. Additionally, for six of the cases there was recognition of the need for repairing the situation, most notably with interventions designed to target relationship building between the young person and others.

Consistent with understandings of vulnerability, interventions were bespoke and personalised to differing degrees. Where there was less certainty about support needs, staff gave aims that related to further assessment or identification of need with four of the SENCOs setting this within the context of an EHCP. While interventions were directed at the individual, the focus was most often place-related, supporting the individual by changing the context of learning. These decisions were constrained by cost and availability. Whole-school or systemic responses were less prevalent and often specific to particular staff members in our sample, notably those working in settings with low exclusion rates.

### Tensions and contradictions and alignment with national policy

The interviews with SENCOs and pastoral leads in England demonstrated their understanding of both the multiplicity of factors that underpinned vulnerability and the ways in which these interacted. These findings indicated the need for a multifaceted as well as bespoke approach to intervention and the monitoring of impact.

The aims and intentions of the strategies could primarily be described as being deployed to prevent or ameliorate the risk of exclusion, and secondly, as protecting the safety and welfare of the young person. Recent policy (DfE 2023) has highlighted the place of early intervention, although the focus is on children with SEND and on meeting *additional* needs, rather than recognizing a common need (a safe secure nurturing environment) that requires additional or different support. While the focus of school strategies for the case study students in England can be seen to embody elements of

prevent or ameliorate risk, they are largely illustrative of late intervention or in some cases crisis management. National reporting systems for attendance and exclusions have shaped the tools schools use for identifying students at risk, rather than earlier warning signs related to engagement in learning, peer relationships, and feelings of belonging.

Intervention plans had a central core of changing locations for learning involving separating young people from the mainstream provision and disrupting relationships with their peers. In part this reflected the challenges of “balancing the [needs of the] majority and minority,” where the student was seen to be “affecting everyone’s learning.”

A re-occurring barrier that staff referred to was that of working with other agencies, the ways in which there had been a retrenchment to core responsibilities and activities with raised thresholds for intervention. In consequence interventions were delayed with the inherent danger that the risk of exclusion increased rather than decreased. Cost and availability framed decisions about adaptations made to the curriculum.

The focus on the individual is highly consistent with current policies for SEND where, even in the latest reforms (DfE 2023<sup>6</sup>) the emphasis lies with the procedures and processes for identification, assessment, planning and review. This reinforces the belief that there is something wrong with the young person, that they are different, and can be better supported elsewhere. It does however provide some safeguards.

Despite the focus on the individual there were examples of important work being carried out in a number of settings to directly bring about a more inclusive environment. This was echoed in settings where interventions included active attention to fostering, repairing and strengthening positive relationships, a key element along with feelings of safety in developing a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, there are several points of consistency with national policy that have fostered a focus on the individual rather than the context as the prime focus for intervention. Increases in the rate of exclusion indicates that a more inclusive approach is needed that recognizes the diversity of experiences facing young people.

## Report from Northern Ireland -Gareth Robinson

### Participants

In this report we explore the insights provided by Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), also known as learning coordinators in NI, and Pastoral Care Leads (PCLs), typically senior teachers, or vice-principals, on how they conceptualise risk and vulnerability. Seven members of staff from four core schools were interviewed, six at both Time 1 and Time 2. Both SENCO and PCL were interviewed together, (which differs from other jurisdictions) and reflects the distinct systemic context in which these professionals practice, emphasising the value of a collaborative and holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced by at-risk students.

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<sup>6</sup> DfE (2023) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan Right Support, Right Place, Right Time March 2023

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND\\_and\\_alternative\\_provision\\_improvement\\_plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan.pdf)

### Location of Vulnerabilities

Vulnerabilities were primarily situated within individual needs, reflecting a recognition that each student's circumstances were unique and multifaceted. Furthermore, staff members uniformly identified familial needs and relationships as integral to these vulnerabilities, with particular emphasis placed on parental engagement as a critical factor. This holistic perspective acknowledged the significant role of the family environment in shaping a student's vulnerability. However, the staff member from School 2 uniquely expanded the framework of vulnerabilities to include both in-school factors and community-related influences, such as negative peer group dynamics. This broader perspective highlighted the complex interplay between internal school dynamics and external community factors in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities among students.

The varying conceptualisations of vulnerability among staff members underscore the pressing need for flexible and responsive approaches to supporting at-risk students in NI's educational landscape. While certain common themes emerged, such as the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant role of parenting dynamics, views expressed by staff members also reveal differences between schools, reflecting unique perspectives and contextual factors.

### Location of Risk

Staff insights indicated that risks were predominantly situated at the level of the individual student, with each student's safety, well-being, or future prospects under threat due to their negative patterns of behaviours. Additionally, familial relationships emerged as a significant locus of risk, with the potential for deterioration or negative influences on the students. The impact of peer interactions was also prominently featured in the interviews, as staff members identified risks associated with friendships breaking down, the influence of negative peer groups on students, and the safety of peers within the school environment.

In Schools 2, 5, and 6, staff members emphasised how students' educational outcomes and opportunities were at risk due to negative patterns of behaviour and a lack of engagement. These risks related to issues such as limited contact hours, school refusal, and conflict within the classroom. School 1 framed this classroom conflict as increasing the risk of destabilising and fracturing relationships with staff members. Notably, School 5 took a unique perspective by connecting the risks of poor educational outcomes to uncertain and less favourable employment or economic destinations, highlighting the broader societal implications of these risks. Furthermore, staff members from School 1 uniquely described how some students' actions had posed a risk to the community outside the school, citing instances of anti-social behaviour and negative associations with the police (PSNI).

These diverse perceptions of risk underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by the schools in NI when addressing specific student cases and underscore the complexity of addressing risk in educational settings and the importance of comprehensive strategies that consider the unique circumstances of each school and student. They highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to address the unique circumstances of the case study students, reflecting the individualised nature of risk and vulnerability assessments within each school setting.

### Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

A number of common themes emerged from the data, relating to how the staff members intervened with 'at risk' and vulnerable students:

*Holistic Understanding:* In all schools, staff demonstrated an awareness of the multifaceted nature of risk and vulnerability. They recognized that these challenges encompassed not only academic

performance but also social, emotional, familial, and community-related factors. This holistic understanding of risk and vulnerability was a common thread throughout the sample.

*Relationships and Engagement:* Across the schools, staff frequently mentioned the importance of building positive relationships with students, peers, and parents. They recognised that building healthy connections was instrumental in mitigating risk and vulnerability. Additionally, enhancing student engagement was a shared intention aimed at improving academic outcomes and reducing risk.

*Early Intervention:* The majority of schools exhibited a proactive approach to addressing risk and vulnerability. They emphasised the importance of early intervention, aiming to prevent or ameliorate factors contributing to students' challenges. These interventions often included tailored support, modified timetables, and behaviour management systems.

*Protection and Welfare:* Protecting students' safety and well-being was a central focus in the schools. They prioritised strategies and interventions aimed at ensuring students' physical and emotional safety, particularly in situations where risk was linked to external factors beyond the school environment.

### Tensions and contradictions and alignment with national policy

*Resource and Funding Challenges* – School staff are consistently facing resource and funding challenges in their efforts to support 'at risk' and vulnerable students. The underfunding of EOTAS provision and pastoral care within schools was seen as straining their capacity to provide adequate support. This lack of resources extends to the availability of educational psychologists, whose expertise is often in high demand but insufficiently funded. Additionally, cuts to external services places an increasing burden on schools, as they must fill gaps in support.

*Systemic Issues and Processes* The inflexibility of EOTAS provision to respond to crisis situations along with the burden of evidence required to secure a placement were perceived as hindering timely interventions. Moreover, disconnected supports and services, along with delays in SEN assessments and statementing, had left students without the necessary assistance they required, compounding their vulnerabilities.

*Home and Family Dynamics* – The staff members described how family life can be complex, and students may not experience consistency at home, impacting their stability and support systems. Unstable care provisions further exacerbated these challenges

*Interactions and Relationships* – Interactions and relationships within and outside the school environment were seen as crucial for 'at risk' and vulnerable students. Parental support was described as essential, but staff explained that there can be a perception that schools abuse EOTAS provision, leading to strained relationships between parents, educators, and the EOTAS administrators

*Broader Policy and Environmental Factors* The schools often found themselves limited in their influence over certain dynamics, such as a student's need for an income, and when facing external challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. One school referred to the influence of place and demographics on their enrolment, with a high level of free school meal entitlement meaning they were tasked to carry a heavier burden of support.

Northern Ireland currently lacks a specific, coherent strategy or core policy that offers clear guidelines for schools on managing at-risk or vulnerable students and addressing school exclusions. The variability in school approaches and interventions indicates the need for comprehensive policy

development to ensure consistent, evidence-based support for at-risk students and to guide schools in their efforts to prevent exclusions.

In conclusion, the provision for young people at risk of exclusion in Northern Ireland demands a holistic, systemic, and context-specific approach. Exploring the historical context and its implications for educational inequalities can further inform targeted interventions that address the legacy of the conflict on vulnerable students. By developing a clear policy framework, reallocating resources, supporting collaboration, and addressing historical factors, the education system in NI can work towards a more equitable and effective provision that prioritises the well-being and educational success of its most vulnerable students.

## Report From Scotland- Annie Taylor

### Participants

In the six core schools, a total of eleven staff were all interviewed twice, at around six months apart. Three staff had roles which focused on pastoral care, three focused on ASL or achievement, and five had roles spanning both.

### Location of Vulnerability

Participants conceptualised vulnerability as complex and multifaceted, acknowledging a range of factors that could contribute to vulnerability in particular contexts and at particular times. In line with this, vulnerability appeared to be perceived as contributed to by a range of people and factors, including those located within the individual child, the family, the school, and the community.

Factors related to the family, such as a 'chaotic' family life, parental drug and alcohol use, perceived neglect, family involvement with the criminal justice system, and bereavement or changes to the family structure, were very commonly cited as vulnerabilities. Usually, these circumstances were described in the context of wider social problems including poverty, crime, and domestic violence; participants almost always acknowledged that the families of case study young people were also facing difficulties. Some, but not all, participants focused heavily on narratives around the impact of 'trauma', 'ACEs' and 'damage' to explain the behaviour and outcomes of some young people, particularly where outcomes had not been positive.

Where school-based vulnerabilities were mentioned, they were often framed as situated in the child as a result of ASD or communication difficulties. Covid-19 and the resulting school closures was often described as a source of, or as exacerbating existing, vulnerabilities.

Factors which can be seen as relating to the individual child, such as decision-making skills, communication challenges, and age were also often mentioned as vulnerabilities.

### Location of Risk

The terms risk and vulnerability were often used interchangeably; participants usually did not distinguish between the two, except when asked a question specifically about one or the other. Where participants did talk specifically about risk, they also discussed risk more widely, for example risk to young people when at home or in the community, including possible future risks. Similar to vulnerability, participants generally acknowledged the complexity involved in recognising risk, and its multifaceted, often shifting nature.

School was often positioned as a place of safety in participants' accounts, with students' home lives and families situated as risky and potentially unsafe. This had the – possibly unintended – effect of situating risk within the family. Participants sometimes also recognised the impact of broader social

structures, particularly inequality and the poverty, illustrating the shape and impact of poverty as a multifaceted issue.

Staff in several schools highlighted that white, Scottish, working-class boys were most at risk of exclusion. In two schools staff particularly highlighted the risk of gang membership or organised crime as a particular concern. Sometimes young people's behaviour was itself situated as the source of risk. Where a young person was 'deemed unsafe', or as 'a danger' simultaneously situated the school system as having failed the young person, and the young person as the source of risk by posing 'a threat to staff and pupils'. Participants pointed out the risk to the wellbeing of staff. Age and size were also seen as related to risk increased risk of exclusion or being put in dangerous or violent situations as they grew older

The risk of criminalisation was not usually explicitly explored, although all six schools have a campus police officer. The risk of becoming involved in criminal activity was sometimes acknowledged.

### Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

It was usually possible to see how conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability linked to the participants' stated intentions and interventions. Aims and interventions reflected participants' wide approach to defining risk and vulnerabilities; neither aims nor interventions were limited to academic success, with participants often citing aims such as increased confidence, or building life skills, and implementing interventions accordingly, such as access to wider achievement opportunities and creating opportunities to make new friends.

Where additional support needs such as low literacy levels, communication difficulties, or gaps in education, were identified as vulnerabilities, interventions included additional support to try to mitigate for these, for example by providing one-to-one support within the mainstream classroom.

Although there was usually a clear line of sight from perceived vulnerability and risk, to aim and interventions, participants did also raise concerns around access to resources, within and beyond the education sector.

### Tensions and contradictions and their link to national policy

All participants mentioned multi-agency working as an important part of preventing exclusion and were supportive and positive about this way of working. There were, however, evident tensions around the allocation of resources and the implications for young people. Services such as social work, mental health services, and special school provision, were often described as under-resourced, with thresholds so high that schools could sometimes not access the resources that they needed to offer appropriate support to young people. Similarly, with social work involvement. The impacts of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis were ongoing and seen as likely to get worse, which would compound the adversities experienced by those who were already seen as vulnerable.

Although participants almost always acknowledged the challenges facing families, this rarely appeared to extend to the interventions that were offered; regular contact with parents/carers, and sometimes referrals for family support or interventions, were mentioned, but practical and financial support were not.

The Scottish policy focus on prevention and wellbeing was evident throughout their narratives. A wide range of interventions was used within frameworks that prioritised relationships and inclusion. It was clear that young people were seen by participants as part of their schools, whether or not they were currently there. There was widespread acknowledgement that what happened for young

people within schools was intricately connected to their lives outside of school, and that the increasingly challenging broader environment, including the impact of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, was likely to exacerbate the challenges already faced by many families. This in turn highlights the crucial importance of addressing broader inequalities and adequately resourcing services beyond education. Positive communication and multi-agency working were positioned as crucial. Knowledge of and support for multi-agency working was high, reflecting Scottish Government's GIRFEC approach. Some challenges were raised, however, around ensuring that multi-agency working was in practice as effective as possible in the context of extremely high caseloads for some practitioners such as social workers and CAMHS.

### Cross Jurisdictional Comparison and Conclusions

When we compare understandings of risk and vulnerability and their links to schools' intervention strategies in the three jurisdictions, there is consistency in the extent to which individual accounts predominate despite a recognition of the [often major] contribution of other factors. This indicates that at the core lies an individual account of difference which other factors serve to exacerbate. In addition to preparing them for the future through both academic and non-academic learning, schools are concerned with the safety and welfare of young people. Safety and well-being risks serve to operate at both the level of the individual and at the level of the school. The focus of the activity can therefore be a changing one.

Staff in each jurisdiction express frustration over the barriers posed in their access to external resources and expertise which would enable offsetting the risks posed by other factors in the young person's life. The interactive element of the challenges young people face indicate the importance of being able to break the cycle where one adversity compounds the risk posed by another. Arguably schools are placed at the front line given the ongoing impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, both of which have structural roots that are outside their control.

In consequence, there are no single bullet solutions, but rather some complex decision-making as staff balance different risk outcomes to put together a package of bespoke intervention strategies

In conclusion

Our research has prompted critical reflection on the sources of vulnerability to exclusion and the multi-layered factors that contribute to its construction.

- The research has illustrated the ways in which individual and situational vulnerabilities are understood as operating in an inter-related and interactional manner requiring complex multi-layered interventions. Schools are arguably at the frontline but limited in their spheres of intervention.
- Staff identified inequalities in the parity of concern for different groups of young people at risk of exclusion.
- Understanding the interactive effect, particularly with respect to structural inequities is a vital element in looking beyond the behaviour to identify strategies that reduce risk.
- Schools where pastoral lead staff and those responsible for special educational or additional needs work closely together are better placed to adopt a holistic approach.
- The research illustrated the careful decision-making that was required to balance risk and opportunities. Interventions that were future orientated, gave young people hope and expectations were empowering.

- Policy systems that set out extended bureaucratic processes hinder timely intervention. National data systems often have unintended consequences, they can inform but can also constrain the way complex systems are understood.
- An ongoing dialogue with the young person promotes an understanding of what underlies a student's behaviour. This is an important first step towards responding in a way that gives young people a sense of agency and self-worth, together with positive future expectations.

## Section 1: Conceptions of Risk and Vulnerability

### 1.1 Introduction

Our focus in this report lies with the understandings of risk and vulnerability that underpin the responses made by secondary schools to young people at risk of exclusion across the jurisdictions of the UK, drawing on data collected as part of a cross jurisdiction, multi-disciplinary Excluded Lives project. Although there are differences in the rates of exclusion across the four jurisdictions there are similarities in who gets excluded. Looking at the data for suspensions, consistently, pupils with SEN or Additional learning needs (ALN) and those on free school meals are over-represented with rates up to 5 times higher for ALN than non-ALN pupils in Scotland<sup>7</sup>, almost four times higher in England<sup>8</sup> 3 times higher in Wales<sup>9</sup> and over twice as high in Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup>. Given this disproportionality, two key members of staff are those with particular responsibilities for these two groups of young people. In this part of the project, we explore how risk and vulnerability to exclusion are understood by SENCOs and Pastoral Leads, and how this informs the types of responses and interventions made to meet the needs of young people at risk of exclusion. This report is a companion to *“Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion.”*

In order set a context, we examine the ways in which the literature defines and uses the term vulnerability and its relationship to risk. Notably most of this literature lies within the field of Health and Social Policy (Vironkannas et al. 2020<sup>11</sup>) even where Education services are referenced. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, schools fully embraced the terms vulnerability and risk to overtly inform decision-making around provision. Arguably this brought to the surface embedded views about the balancing of risk and vulnerability and what was considered optional or indispensable in provision (Smith 2023<sup>12</sup>). Applying an Activity Theory lens to the data, we unpick the tensions and contradictions that can arise between the object(s) of the work of SENCOs and Pastoral Leaders, the tools they are using, the work of others in the school, and the impact these can have on the outcomes they are aiming to achieve.

### 1.2 Vulnerability and Risk

Despite the widespread use of the term, there is a lack of precision in the way that vulnerability has been used (Katz et al. 2020<sup>13</sup>). Indeed, it is notable how often in the literature the term vulnerable is used without definition (Katz et al. 2020). The terms risk and vulnerability are often used interchangeably and together. Indeed, the two terms are connected as we have seen during the pandemic, risk brings to the fore vulnerability. Notably, there appear to be some jurisdictional differences in the identification of risk in policy guidance documents. Public Health England (2020<sup>14</sup>) define vulnerable children, “as any children at greater risk of experiencing physical or emotional

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/pages/8/#:~:text=The%20rate%20of%20exclusion%20for,with%20a%20higher%20exclusion%20rate.>

<sup>8</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/permanent-and-fixed-term-exclusions-schools-september-2019-august-2020.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Pupil%20Suspensions%20and%20Expulsions%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020%2021%20%20Experimental%20Statistics.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Vironkannas, E., Liuski, S., & Kuronen, M. (2020). The contested concept of vulnerability : a literature review. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(2), 327-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1508001>

<sup>12</sup> Smith, Sharon. (2023) "Covid-19 Exposing the Fault Lines of Inclusion: The 'Risk' and 'Vulnerability' of Disabled Children in the UK." *Education in an Altered World: Pandemic, Crises and Young People Vulnerable to Educational Exclusion*. Ed. Michelle Proyer, Wayne Veck, Fabio Dovigo and Elvira Seitinger. London: Bloomsbury Academic

<sup>13</sup> Op cit

<sup>14</sup> Public Health England (2020) No Child Left Behind. Understanding and Quantifying Vulnerability in Childhood. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/913974/Understanding\\_and\\_quantifying\\_vulnerability\\_in\\_childhood.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/913974/Understanding_and_quantifying_vulnerability_in_childhood.pdf)

harm and/ or experiencing poor outcomes because of one or more factors in their lives". In Scotland<sup>15</sup> reference is made to children "at risk of significant harm." In Northern Ireland<sup>16</sup> and Wales<sup>17</sup>, the identified vulnerable children are listed without reference to risk. They are "defined" by exemplification through an inventory of groups that fall within this category. In this sense the term can be seen as a proxy indicator with a tendency for it being left to the reader to conclude why these young people are included, and indeed, what they are vulnerable to or at risk of.

There has also been recognition of the universality of vulnerability, yet within this, variation across the life course. Most recently, Covid-19 on the one hand raised the sceptre of everyone being at risk of harm but also a recognition that some were more vulnerable than others. Looking further at the four governments guidance documents, reveals both a commonality about the core of pupils who were officially deemed to be vulnerable but also some differences. Children in Need, with an EHCP, in receipt of social services support, children requiring safeguarding, are universally seen as vulnerable. However, in addition to children already on registers, there are also some anticipatory vulnerabilities. In Northern Ireland<sup>18</sup> and Scotland<sup>19</sup> there is reference to children "being on the edge" of receiving services. Also, in Scotland young people who require support when they are involved in making transitions at critical stages in their lives and in England<sup>20</sup> those at risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training). The presence of these additional categories reveals the extent to which schools are expected to make decisions about who they consider vulnerable. What started as a risk to health now extends to that of under-achievement. Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (2020<sup>21</sup>) expands on the risk that result from school closures:

The most obvious impact is on the right to education... which must be focussed on the development of the child's unique personality, talents and abilities. "Education" goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning opportunities.

The pandemic brought to the fore a number of the challenges in responding to risk and vulnerability. Those who might always have been seen as at risk were now combined with those for whom new vulnerabilities were identified and with this, a justification for different forms of educational provision and protection (Smith 2023). Strategies deployed in school often led to further isolation of those identified as SEND and in some cases their exclusion from access to education (Done and Knowler 2021<sup>22</sup>; Boddison and Curran 2022<sup>23</sup>). Here we also saw how the driving force of safety led not simply to identify those young people who were at risk but also those who posed a risk through, for example, not following social rules for distancing, requiring schools to carry out risk assessments

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guide-schools-early-learning-closures/pages/vulnerable-children/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-guidance#:~:text=A%20child%20who%20is%20in,Mental%20Health%20Services%20\(CAMHS\).](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-guidance#:~:text=A%20child%20who%20is%20in,Mental%20Health%20Services%20(CAMHS).)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-eligibility-ongoing-provision-children-who-are-vulnerable-or-whose-parents-are#:~:text=Vulnerable%20children%20include%20those%20with,Statements%20of%20special%20educational%20needs>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-guidance#:~:text=A%20child%20who%20is%20in,Mental%20Health%20Services%20\(CAMHS\).](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-guidance#:~:text=A%20child%20who%20is%20in,Mental%20Health%20Services%20(CAMHS).)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guide-schools-early-learning-closures/pages/vulnerable-children/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

<sup>21</sup> Children and Young Peoples Commissioner Scotland (2020) Education and Skills Committee: Evidence of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland on reopening of schools, vulnerable children and the 2020 exam diet <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/coronavirus/our-coronavirus-work/education-and-skills-committee-evidence-of-the-children-and-young-peoples-commissioner-scotland-on-reopening-of-schools-vulnerable-children-and-the-2020-exam-diet/>

<sup>22</sup> Done, E. J. & Knowler, H. (2021). Exclusion & the strategic leadership role of special educational needs co-ordinators in England (Education & Covid-19 series). British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/exclusion-the-strategic-leadership-role-of-special-educational-needs-co-ordinators-in-england>

<sup>23</sup> Boddison, A. and Curran, H. (2022), The experience of SENCOs in England during the COVID-19 pandemic: the amplification and exposure of pre-existing strengths and challenges and the prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing in schools. *J Res Spec Educ Needs*, 22: 126-136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12553>

and management. This often resulted in both a dilution of statutory duties including the requirement to make reasonable adjustments or, in some cases, access to any learning opportunities. There was also a legitimising of home schooling (Done and Knowler 2021).

Prior to Covid-19, Brown (2017), writing from a social policy perspective, was noting the process of concept creep, drawing on Haslam (2016) to illustrate how everyday use can loosen the boundaries of what is understood by a category. For example, everyday use and application makes little distinction between mental illness, mental health problems, or issues and in consequence more children are seen to require specialist interventions. The same creep is argued to apply to constructs of trauma or abuse or ASD where changes in the diagnostic criteria/assessment process serve to lower the threshold of who might be identified. Ecclestone (2017<sup>24</sup>) argues that there has been an eliding of groups of children, the disadvantaged with the vulnerable, those who are subject to safeguarding and those who are disengaged and not meeting their targets. There is a long history of the over-representation of young people with disadvantaged backgrounds seen as having SEN (Tomlinson 1982, 2012) and a growth in who might be seen as requiring additional, or extra support, a concern that is shared across the four jurisdictions.

The term “vulnerable” often functions to separate out a group and may be received as a stigma (Barnado’s Scotland 2020). It can pathologize individuals as in some way “incapable, limited and deficient” (Brown 2011) serving to marginalise some young people as different to others. At the same time, it has been argued that the identification of vulnerability can also be seen to be used as an indicator of those who deserve support, compassion and empathy (Brown et al. 2017). It can draw attention to fundamental inequities in access to key resources in whole communities (Marino 2019).

The use of the term situational vulnerability widens the account to encompass family and community elements alongside socio-political factors (Brown et al. 2017) thereby recognizing structural forces but often also containing elements of individual agency or choice. With respect to young people in the UK, the activity of county lines may give rise to situational vulnerability with the potential for harm. Schroder-Butterfill and Marianti (2006<sup>25</sup>) point to the importance of giving attention to vulnerable life situations, social processes, society and its institutions and here we consider the work of schools. In this context we can recognise “the temporal, situational, relational and structural nature of vulnerability,” Vironkannas (2018) p327. This gives a wider focus to analysing how schools respond to young people who are seen as vulnerable and at risk of exclusion. Amy et al (2020<sup>26</sup>) draw attention to the way in which the literature often refers to a pre-constituted group (in schools for example we hear reference to the “pupil premium” group) who then face structural barriers i.e. the latter is seen as exacerbating their vulnerability. This reinforces the notion that at the core still lies an individual account for their difference.

### Summary

The pandemic has brought to attention the wider groups of young people considered vulnerable and their access to educational opportunities. It has also surfaced some of the complexities of responding to risk and broadened our understandings of what those risks entail. Writers in social and health policy draw attention to the ways in which the use of the term vulnerability is underpinned by very different understandings of causation, how factors within the individual, family, school or community including broader structural inequities interplay to differentially put young

<sup>24</sup> Ecclestone K. Changing the Subject of Education? A Critical Evaluation of ‘Vulnerability Creep’ and its Implications. *Social Policy and Society*. 2017;16(3):443-456. doi:10.1017/S1474746417000082

<sup>25</sup> Schroder-Butterfill E. and Marianti R. (2006) A framework for understanding old-age vulnerabilities. *Ageing & Society*, 26(1), 9-35. doi:10.1017/S0144686X05004423

<sup>26</sup> Amy S. Katz, Billie-Jo Hardy, Michelle Firestone, Aisha Lofters & Melody E. Morton-Ninomiya (2020) Vagueness, power and public health: use of ‘vulnerable’ in public health literature, *Critical Public Health*, 30:5, 601-611, DOI: 10.1080/09581596.2019.1656800

people at risk. Professionals' understandings of these factors in turn shape the focus of their intervention.

#### 1.4 Implications for intervention

Brown (2017) explores how professionals understand young people who are vulnerable or at risk and how this shapes the way they justify intervening in their lives and the way that resources are allocated. MacLeod (2006<sup>27</sup>) writing about the constructions of young people whose behaviour leads them to be "in trouble" in school as either bad, mad or sad, identifies the importance of understanding the origins of the difficulties as "a complex interplay of social and individual factors." Macleod (2006) draws attention to the ways in which different understandings of the origin of difficulties can lead to fundamentally different forms of intervention, making a historical distinction between punitive and welfare approaches, the former characterised by firm rules and discipline and individuals being seen as responsible for their behaviour, and the latter where individuals are seen as in need of help, with a medicalising of the approach to treatment or therapy. Notably both approaches locate the problem as lying within the individual. Restorative practices are offered as a way forward where rather than allotting blame, an emphasis is placed on repairing relationships which McCluskey et al. (2008<sup>28</sup>) argue should be used on a whole school basis rather than focusing on individual incidents.

The use of whole school approaches is consistent with a recognition of systemic factors in contributing to the risk of exclusion. Schools with a more flexible approach to curriculum and assessment, who routinely listen to young people, for whom wellbeing and a sense of belonging are drivers of provision and support, are more likely to engage the diversity of learners. Looking more specifically at strategies that are effective at reducing exclusion, the meta-analysis by Valdebenito et al. (2018<sup>29</sup>) indicates that the strongest interventions are mentoring/monitoring and skills training for teachers but that also enhancement of academic skills, counselling and mental strategies were effective. However, they also caution that the impact is generally not long term, and they are not effective with antisocial behaviour. Many young people with and without SEN experience additional vulnerabilities through poverty, adverse home backgrounds, and other forms of deprivation suggesting there is a need to focus on the multiple and interdependent effects of home, school and community. In order to achieve a longer-term impact, intervention strategies therefore need to take into account these other elements and work with a range of different agencies.

In the face of multiplier effects and competing professional concerns it is also helpful to distinguish between the functions of different intervention activities. On the one hand staff need to have strategies that guide their responses to particular behaviours as they happen. These essentially serve to manage the situation and alter the interaction between the young person and others. These could be aimed at defusing the situation and making it safe or sending a message that the behaviour is unacceptable and punishing the young person, or indeed a combination of functions.

In contrast the interventions could serve to prevent the behaviour happening by targeting the environment or situation rather than the young person. This reflects the type of intervention that might be described as a reasonable adjustment. A young person with a pass to leave the class early

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<sup>27</sup> Macleod, G. (2006). Bad, mad or sad: constructions of young people in trouble and implications for interventions1 *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 11(3), 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632750600833791>

<sup>28</sup> McCluskey, G, Lloyd, G, Kane, J, Riddell, S, Stead, J & Weedon, E (2008), 'Can restorative practices in schools make a difference?', *Educational Review*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 405-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910802393456>

<sup>29</sup> Valdebenito, S., Eisner, M., Farrington, D.P., Ttofi, M.M. and Sutherland, A. (2018), School-based interventions for reducing disciplinary school exclusion: a systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 14: i-216. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2018.1>

avoids crowded corridors which trigger anxiety responses. These strategies acknowledge the ways in which school systems or structures contribute to the challenges the young person encounters.

A third type of strategy is by nature longer term and looks to the future. In many instances these strategies are based on an analysis of the underlying reasons for the behaviour and identifying unmet needs. These needs might for example lie with the abilities to forge new relationships, for dealing with difficult emotions or feelings, or for developing new skills and talents. While they are essentially focussed on the individual, it is likely that others are an integral part of the change process. It can be argued that interventions concerning young people at risk of exclusion call for a such a multi-layered approach so that staff have “of the moment” responses, that there is a preventative element, but that a longer-term view enables the young person to better meet life’s challenges. The SENCO and Pastoral Lead, alongside other professionals, face a potentially complex task.

At the level of the jurisdiction, one might expect to see differences in policy played out in the understandings of risk and vulnerability and school strategies. In the companion report we identified the impact of the standards agenda and competition between schools, the narrowing of the curriculum and assessment practices and the disintegration of links with the local authority and the specialist support that could be accessed in England. In contrast in Northern Ireland there is a strong ethos of pastoral care and an underpinning of the Rights of the child. There is a keen sense of community needs and local collaborations and a greater flexibility in the curriculum. Wales also has a more progressive and integrated approach to the curriculum and a strong focus on pupil wellbeing and understanding why a young person behaves in a particular way. Policy in Scotland is underpinned by a core quality indicator “Ensuring equality, wellbeing and inclusion,” (Education Scotland 2023). The legal framework is underpinned by a commitment to social justice and upholding children’s rights and entitlements, with a key driver of improving wellbeing outcomes. There is a strong relationship between schools and local authorities and inter-agency working.

### 1.5 Activity Theory Lens.

Policy of course is enacted in different ways by different actors in different settings. The wider literature has alerted us to the importance of taking a broader lens, one which recognizes structural, systemic barriers that recognizes situational factors, of the school, home, and community and with that the place of multi-dimensional approach to support. There is however a gap in empirical studies that have examined the ways in which different understandings of risk and vulnerability are operationalised (Brown Ecclestone and Emmel 2017). Our focus here is to investigate how staff responsible for special educational needs (England and N. Ireland) or additional support needs (Scotland) and those responsible for pastoral aspects of school provision understand risk and vulnerability, how this informs the tools they use, what they see as the object of their activity and what interventions flow from those. We are not necessarily expecting a logical contingency to be operating. Secondary schools are complex structures. These members of staff are not operating in a vacuum, and there will be a number of “rules” that mediate the decision-making process. There is variation in their roles, and the division of labour will be different in different schools. Other members of staff will be operating with a different set of beliefs. Using this theoretical lens facilitates an understanding of the mutual shaping of tools and activity. It will also serve to surface consistencies and contradictions in the ways in which interventions serve to reduce the risk of exclusion.

## 1.6 Methodology

Our aim was to understand how some young people come to be seen as vulnerable and at risk of exclusion and how these understandings inform the ways that schools respond to those risks. In order to move beyond a general description of policies and practices that operate in each school, we collected case study data on young people from our two key members of staff at two points in time with the aim of looking at more in-depth trajectory data rather than a single snapshot. We were guided by the following research questions:

1. What does risk and vulnerability to exclusion mean to those with responsibility for special educational needs/additional support needs and those responsible for pastoral aspects of school provision?
2. How do they describe their concerns about particular students at risk of exclusion and how do they respond?
3. How do different forms of policy and practice in schools mediate their understandings of risk and vulnerability?
4. How does this vary across jurisdictions?

The design of the study was a series of embedded (Yin 2009<sup>30</sup>) or nested case studies, with the descriptions of the young people an integral part of the broader picture of what was happening within the school and the role of the key staff within it (Thomas 2016<sup>31</sup>). The design enabled us to compare “general” understandings of risk and vulnerability and how this plays out with respect to two different young people. Through setting these within the context of the school we are better able to understand how the systems and structures in schools, the rules, and the division of labour operate to constrain or support the way in which key staff operationalise their understandings of risk and vulnerability to exclusion.

In keeping with the design of the study we sought to prolong engagement with visits approximately 9 months apart, although there was some variation in timing due to events connected with the pandemic. As well as interview data, we collected some observational data through field notes on the school. Where we depart from a purely interpretative stance is that we also wanted to make comparisons across the nested case studies and look for patterns across as well as within the data. This was facilitated by the addition of some coding of the data.

### *Participants*

As this was part of a larger mixed methods Excluded Lives project, the staff were based in schools selected through a stratified sampling that varied across the four jurisdictions, reflecting variations in the governance and organisation of educational provision and rates of exclusion. Further details can be found in each of the jurisdiction report sections.

### *Interviews*

During the Time 1 interviews, participants were asked to identify two or three students who they understood to be at risk of exclusion (formal and informal) who may have additional vulnerabilities such as health, education, crime, peers, family. For each young person, they were asked to reflect on:

1. their current concern;

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<sup>30</sup> Yin R.K. (2002) *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, G. (2016) *How to do your Case Study*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Sage

2. the criteria they used to select the young person;
3. what they were working on with the young person;
4. the strategies or approaches they were using or planned to use and why;
5. what they were aiming to achieve;
6. who else they were working with and what these other individuals/agencies were working on;
7. what they felt enabled or constrained their work.

Participants were also asked to reflect on their understandings of the terms 'vulnerable' and 'at-risk' and how they aligned or differed from the views of other people they were working with.

The researchers returned to schools between 4 and 9 months later (average 6 months). At Time 2, participants were asked to reflect on what had happened since for each young person. To act as an aide memoire, staff were sent a brief note of what they had said at time 1. This prompted their memory of who they selected as case study students. At the second interview they were asked about the strategies or approaches being used, if they had been successful or changed, if they had achieved the aims set out, and what the outcome had been. As part of this, participants were asked if they felt the young person's level of risk had increased, decreased or remained the same since Time 1. In a small number of interviews, the question regarding changing levels of risk was not asked, or in some instances, not answered directly. In these cases, a judgement was made by the researchers collaboratively, including assigning a "not clear" judgement.

### Data Analysis

A hybrid approach to data analysis was taken, adopting both inductive and deductive approaches. Within each jurisdiction, the data were initially chunked drawing out narratives that related to risk and vulnerability in both time 1 and time 2 interviews, and separating narratives that were a response to the question "What does being vulnerable and at-risk mean to you in your position of SENCO/Pastoral Lead" and additional general comments that arose in the course of the interview, from that which was used specifically when describing their work with the case study young person. We set alongside these narratives, how staff described their role. From interview one we tagged what they were working on with the student (the object of their activity) what they wanted to achieve, what tools they were using, who else was involved and how the work was shared (the division of Labour) what supports or constrains the process, how they described the interventions or strategies used. This analysis was set alongside interviews at time 2 to update. In order to look at how one element of the data compared to other elements, a series of codes were set alongside the narrative data. This enabled us to search for combinations or patterns in the data and examine logical contingencies both within each data set and across staff. In part the codes were informed by the broader social policy literature on vulnerability and risk, but as researchers shared insights and made connections these codes were re-examined with individual jurisdictions adding codes that were specific to their data. This enabled us to compare and contrast across jurisdictions without constraining new themes arising from the data.

The literature argues for the location of vulnerability and risk to be understood at different levels: with the individual and some characteristic of that person; or with some aspect of their situation which might interact with characteristics of that young person. We therefore also coded whether the vulnerability (or susceptibility) lay with the family; with the school; or at a wider level of the community or society. The same coding frame was applied to narratives around risk. For example, a chaotic home background might lead to poor attendance at school putting the young person at risk of harm within the community. A school with zero tolerance policies might lead to high levels of suspension and a young person at risk of disengagement and poor attainment.

These codes were set alongside a coding of the stated aims and what staff said they were working on with the case study person (was it designed to offset the risk, was it directed at the well-being and safety of the young person, changing their behaviour, or designed to create new networks and relationships); these aims might be achieved in a number of different ways so we also coded who and what the intervention or strategy was directed at- was it directed at the individual, their family, the school or the community?; and was it designed to prevent or ameliorate risk, to protect their welfare or make safe, to punish or discipline or to repair relationships. The coding framework was therefore designed to investigate the connections between the responses that were made and how staff understood the vulnerabilities around the young person and the risks that were posed.

### Ethics

Participants were informed about the overall aim of the Excluded Lives project, and for this particular piece of research and consent sought for their involvement in two interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes, for audio recording and use of quotations. Not all participants agreed to the use of quotations, and these have been omitted from the report. Participants were assured of the steps taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and the management of the data. Details that might inadvertently identify a school, member of staff or student have been omitted from the report. Staff were asked prior to the first interview to think about a few young people who would be deemed at risk of exclusion, and that we would be exploring their understandings of what it means for a young person to be seen as 'vulnerable' and 'at-risk' of exclusion and how those young people are supported and were invited to use pseudonyms or numbers to refer to these students. The project was reviewed and received ethical clearance from each University Research Ethics Committee.

## Section 2: England Report

### 2.1 Research Participants: Schools and Staff

In England, nine schools took part in this section of the research and nineteen members of staff were interviewed (Two additional schools did not complete all parts of the research). This included nine SENCOs one from each school and ten Pastoral Leads. The SENCOs differed both by length of experience as SENCO and as teachers, and the extent to which the focus of their role was strategic, with a concentration on the development of school SEN processes, and the degree to which they engaged in hands-on contact with students. Eight of the ten pastoral care leaders were part of the senior management team and as Table 1 reveals, occupied a variety of designated roles: Behaviour and Attendance, Safeguarding, Attitude to Learning, Student Experience and Well-being, Mental Health (or combination) giving them a range of different orientations to students at risk of exclusion.

The schools represented different levels of exclusion: four with low rates and five with high. Further we made a distinction based on what levels were typical or expected given the school population. Full details of the sampling procedures can be found in the companion report *“The Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion across the UK.”*

School ID	LA	Rate of Exclusion	Role	Role Description	Further Info
1	1	Low/Lower Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Assistant Head and Progress Manager	
3	2	High/Lower Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Deputy Head, responsible for Behaviour and Attendance.	T1 Only
			Pastoral Lead	Assistant Head: Safeguarding and Student Progress	
4	2	Low/Lower Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Deputy Head Teacher: Student Experience and Wellbeing	
5	2	Low/Higher Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Assistant Head Teacher: Behaviour and Safeguarding	
6	2	High/Higher Than Expected	SENCO		
7	3	High/Higher Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Assistant principal: Behaviour and Attendance	
8	3	Low/Higher Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Assistant Head: Behaviour and Attitude to Learning	
10	4	Low/Higher Than Expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Alternative Provision Co-ordinator	
			Pastoral Lead	Head of Year: Mental Health Behaviour and Attendance	
11	4	High/Lower Than expected	SENCO		
			Pastoral Lead	Vice Principal	

Table 2.7 School and Staff Characteristics in England

## 2.2 How staff conceptualised vulnerability

Our expectations at the outset were that SENCOs would be more likely to identify aspects of learning and young people's responses in the classroom, and that pastoral leads would adopt a more holistic view concerning students' welfare and well-being, when they spoke about vulnerability. This was not entirely reflected in the interview data. In fact, for the majority of staff, vulnerability was located in a multiplicity of factors and could not be seen as single causative factors.

Within the multiplicity of factors however, individual within-child factors dominated in the narratives of staff. They were mentioned by all staff when describing their chosen case study students, and by all but one [SENCO in school 4] in their general statements. Staff spoke about particular and general special educational needs, developmental needs, dysregulation, anxiety and mental health, an inability to moderate behaviour, trauma and attachment needs. Vulnerable students were described as not feeling safe, being defiant, having identity issues, with self-image impacting on relationship with others. While such vulnerabilities could be seen to adopt a deficit view of the young person, there was also expressions of vulnerability that reflected a universal model, at least in part. All young people could be seen as vulnerable and many spoke about the impact of puberty, of being a teenager. A further universal factor, COVID, was identified as having contributed to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, including the acceptance of diversity.

Other influences played a role in locating vulnerability. Family factors were identified by all the pastoral leads and by all but two of the SENCOs. Staff referred to unstable, chaotic, or violent home backgrounds. Parental willingness to engage with school, their own experience of education, and their ability to establish routines and set boundaries. The wider environment also contributed where students were seen to be vulnerable to exploitation (criminal, sexual, and other manipulation). These sources of vulnerability were mentioned by half the pastoral leads (5/10) and two thirds of the SENCOs (6/9). These contextual factors were more likely to be identified in a response to a general question, than described with respect to the case study young people.

The interactive element of these varied factors was described by the SENCO in school 1 in relation to vulnerabilities for students with SEN:

*a lot of students for SEN are at risk and do have multiple disadvantages that, their SEND puts them at a huge disadvantage already, but equally, if you put that with a situation where..you've got a parent who's ill with COVID, or ..cancer.. for a student with learning.. needs.., or special educational needs rather, it's more of an impact. Because sometimes, for them to process that and understand it..if they've got moderate learning difficulties, that's hard for them to process and understand. If they've got ASD, their social communication, so they can't say, 'Miss, I feel really sad', or 'I didn't like the way that happened.' If they've got ADHD, they're more likely to just explode or choose behaviour as an outlet."*

Also, in the wider context:

*If they're not having breakfast in the morning, if their house is freezing so they're not sleeping properly, if they're sharing a bed – all of these things that we actually do know exist, they're having an impact on them. If they haven't slept properly... I think if we make schools more inclusive by design, and that includes everything, their SEN needs, I think it has to be at the heart of everything that everyone does. It has to be the most important thing"*

While the statements of the need for inclusive design by this SENCO were distinctive, the contribution of school factors was identified, by all but one SENCO and six of the ten pastoral leads. This included poor handling by staff and the extent to which they could and would adapt the teaching. Staff spoke about a lack of understanding or poor attitudes of some members of staff. There was also a widely identified lack of support to meet needs, the impact of cuts in services, a lack of specialised provision. Others made reference to the exclusionary environment of the school and the impact of intervention fatigue and being surrounded by too many adults. Exclusion from a previous school was also seen to contribute to their vulnerability.

How and when people came to be seen as vulnerable was also seen in some schools through the lens of the tools they used to monitor attendance, lateness, detentions and suspensions and these served to trigger concern. Quantitative data was used to set a threshold for when a young person came to be seen as vulnerable to exclusion.

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Vulnerability	Perspective(s)
1	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) School (G, CS) Community (G)	SEN needs and YP with ADHD particularly struggling Not getting enough support Multiple disadvantages and economic crisis Need for inclusive by design and staff understanding To be vulnerable is to be at risk Mental health and Covid Breaks in routine
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS) School (G) Community (G)	Not just behaviour, more about mental health Covid bringing about additional needs Delayed impact of adversity Community issues being brought into school Family breakdowns
3	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G, CS) Community (G)	Domestic situation- family breakdown, lack of boundaries and routines Institutional Erasure What ones born with (poor health) and how you see the world Not being contented in your own skin (feelings of shame) and not achieving potential Literacy levels and SEND School moves Attendance and Engagement Social Anxiety
	Pastoral Lead (T1Only)	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS)	Impact of Covid on vulnerable students Complex home lives and willingness of family to engage Dysregulation and sensory overload Undiagnosed needs
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS) School (G, CS) Community (CS)	Impact of COVID on accessing diagnosis When school is unable to meet a students' needs Negative experiences of school Extreme levels of defiance Limited engagement of family
4	SENCO	Individual (CS) Family (CS) School (GCS) Community (CS)	To be vulnerable is to be at risk Gender questioning SEND Family breakdown and engagement Personal hygiene Vulnerable to exploitation (manipulation, sexual and physical abuse) Vulnerable to life choices

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Vulnerability	Perspective(s)
			Mental health (anxiety, psychosis) Exclusionary environment, lack of support
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G, CS)	Not just about safeguarding but about being able to access learning and engaging in relationships Wider than unmet developmental needs Attachment needs, trauma, emotional abuse Family circumstances Intervention fatigue Impact of puberty
5	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) School (CS) Community (G)	Social vulnerability- peer and friendship groups, social media Challenging home-life Cognitive understanding and rigidity of thought Emotional regulation and relationships with staff Not feeling safe Lack of support and specialist provision Adolescence, hormones and sexual attraction Safeguarding Truancy
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS) School (G) Community (CS)	Those at the top of the threshold of needs How schools adapt their offering to provide a bespoke programme Lack of stable home background Growing drug use Rival gangs outside school
6	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G, CS) Community (G)	Being vulnerable at school makes you vulnerable outside of school and vulnerability in school are usually external factors Neurological (only) vulnerability much easier to support Social vulnerability massive All children vulnerable but more adverse experiences the more support needed Product of cuts to services Failure of sharing information COVID and impact on acceptance of diversity Behaviour as communication of need
7	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G)	Persistent absence and late SEND Young carer Looked after child, Child Protection, Children in Need EAL Behaviour issues and picking up detentions Trauma and underdeveloped/Immature behaviour Unstable Families/Domestic Violence Anger Family relationships and boundaries Social norms Mental health and suicide attempts
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) Community (G)	[Not] Being safe and being well cared for Parental engagement and what's happening in the background

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Vulnerability	Perspective(s)
8	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) School (G)	Attendance Safeguarding Combination of needs, learning, SEMH, ADHD, behaviour School refusal Provision, health, home environment Aggression and inability to moderate behaviour Self-Image and relationship with others Refusal to comply Not being able to access work, misunderstood and dis-engagement
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) School (CS)	Non-attenders Students developing extreme and challenging behaviours and identity issues Challenging up-bringing Parents who don't know how to respond to their children's behaviour Lack of relationship with school staff and situations being poorly handled
10	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) School (CS) Community (CS)	No diagnosis yet something not right Behaviour as communication Previous experience of exclusion SEND Impact of adolescence Mental Health Domestic violence County lines Relationships with staff
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G, CS)	Missing out on education One size does not fit all Parents with poor experience of education and lot of social services support Early childhood trauma and attachment issues Poor student mental health Need for relationship building
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS)	Anyone can be vulnerable e.g. Impact of Covid Mental health and health issues Transfer from another school and unwilling to make a fresh start
11	SENCO	Individual (G, CS)	Behaviour as communication of need to be listened to Contradiction between size and maturity ADHD and adverse impact of medication Self-harm
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) Community (CS)	Students without an EHCP Attachment and adverse child experiences Involvement with gang, drugs and weapons

Table 2.2 Overview of Staff Perceptions on Vulnerability (G= general and CS =case study) in England

### 2.3 How staff conceptualised risk

Staff spoke at less length about risk than they had about vulnerability. Indeed, not everyone spoke about risk beyond reference to the risk of exclusion. Additionally, it was often spoken about in conjunction with vulnerability, referring to a group of students who were “vulnerable and at risk,” often without a clear indication of what the risk referred to. For example, staff made reference to “risky choices” or “going down the wrong path” or that “things wouldn’t go well” or the young

person would “struggle,” without specifically identifying what the risk was. All mentioned risk to the individual but in the interviews for two pastoral leads this, was a general statement and for a further two it was with reference to the case study person only. For all staff, with the exception of three pastoral leads, risk was not limited to the individual but, in order of frequency, located in interactions in the community, school, and family. Indeed, references to risk located at the level of the family were relatively infrequent with four SENCOs and four pastoral leads referring to this context. Additionally, four (3 pastoral leads and 1 SENCO) made no reference to risk in the context of the school.

Given these caveats when risk was spoken about, a re-occurring theme was the mental health of the young person, of self-harm and suicide attempts, and of identity issues. There were also a number of references to community-based risk- sexual, and physical exploitation, involvement with police, gang violence, drugs and county lines. These references were often linked to the dangers of persistent absence from school, of disappearing from view. Exploitation was also a risk that followed exclusion with school positioned as a place of relative safety. There were of course risks posed at school through negative interactions with peers and being misunderstood by staff, and through not accessing learning resulting in gaps in their learning and future prospects of becoming NEET. School, the people and the fabric, was also at risk from anger and violence of the young person, from the disruption to the learning of others. It was evident in the narratives that the young person could be seen as both at risk and a risk.

The fewest references to risk were made in the context of the family. More specifically, parents could be seen to pose a risk, where for example they hampered multi-agency working or access to diagnosis and treatment or through the presence of violence in the home.

Looking across comments staff were aware of risks that extended far beyond those of education and learning and while they were much less directly referenced, the risks were to the young person’s future prospects and safety and these in turn were part of the decision-making with respect to exclusion. This is illustrated in the case of the student nominated by the pastoral lead in school 8:

*In terms of her rates of exclusion, they have been quite low compared to certain others and that's because of the fact of the safeguarding that we've had to either make reasonable adjustments for her behaviour, which we have to, we do or she probably should have been excluded, but we couldn't because we had to keep her in the building.”*

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Risk	Perspective(s)
1	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) School (CS) Community (G)	Criminal exploitation Making risky choices Risk of social exclusion Seen by staff as dangerous Risk to self-concept
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (CS)	Drugs, absconding Creating a gang mentality in school Careful levels of non-attendance
3	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (G,CS) Community (CS)	Risk in relation to safeguarding and parental decision to withdraw child Risk linked to parental decisions around diagnosis and medication Understanding of the ways in which school measures reduce risk Risk of being lost in the system and becoming NEET

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Risk	Perspective(s)
			Criminal and intimidating behaviour outside school and police involvement Risk to feeling safe
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (CS) Family (CS) School (CS)	Home circumstances Violence to other vulnerable students
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS) School (G, CS)	Actions that are disturbing to the fabric and community of the school Keeping them and other students safe Toxic friendships Self-harming Missing from home and school Negative behaviour (defiance, vaping and unprovoked violence) impact on others
4	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (CS) Community (CS)	Risk to attaining qualifications and becoming NEET Risk of harm and safeguarding concerns Risk to efficient education of others Risk of suicide Risk from drug use Risk of sexual exploitation Bringing knife into school Sexualised and inappropriate behaviour to girls Risk of radicalisation
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G) Family (G) School (G, CS) Community (CS)	There is no real assessment of risk Literacy and the ability to engage in lessons at a basic level Impact of home on readiness to learn Allegations of sexual harassment Risk to the safety of others and disruption of their learning Being "flooded with adults" Violence and drugs Exploitation in community Knowing how to assert dominance Missing from school
5	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) School (G, CS) Community (G, CS)	Risk when out of school Risk as a consequence of exclusion Risk to the safety of other students and wider community Risk from school being unable to provide support Risk of arrest Risk of becoming persistent non-attender
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (CS) School (CS) Community (G, CS)	What happens outside of school/AP time County lines and drug exploitation described as a vulnerability Fighting other students when things go wrong
6	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (CS) School (CS) Community (G, CS)	Domino effect of not being in school being at risk in the community- county lines, fights, exploitation Risk of not getting an education Risk of violence to others and staff Risk from social isolation
7	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) School (CS) Community (G, CS)	Non-attendance on education Assault by a family member Under-developed behaviours leading to future struggles Mental health and risk of suicide Criminal sexual exploitation
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS)	Non-attendance and the impact on learning and peer relationships Students at constant risk of exclusion because of their behaviours
8	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) School (G, CS)	Risk because school had no further strategies Risk to safety of students and (female) staff Risk of disengagement due to curriculum offering

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Risk	Perspective(s)
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G) Family (CS) School (CS) Community (CS)	If students are not in the building Missing from home Use of reasonable adjustments and non-exclusion to minimize risk Impact of behaviour on the physical environment
10	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G, CS) Community (CS)	Risk of abuse from peers Risky behaviours from alcohol Risk from stressful situations and ongoing mental health Risk of disengagement and resilience to failure
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS)	Becoming disconnected from school Burning out because their problems have not been addressed At risk and self-harming because of "appalling" mental health
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS) Community (G, CS)	County lines and the risk of exploitation
11	SENCO	Individual (G, CS) Family (G) School (CS)	Risk of violence to others Risk through student not anticipating probable outcome
	Pastoral Lead	Individual (G, CS)  School (G, CS)  Community (CS)	Risk outlined in relation to outcome and intent  Going to alternative provision cuts their life chances, joining a group of other permanently excluded students  Drugs and risky behaviour  Dealing in school  Knives and intent  COVID and disengagement  County lines

Table 2.3 Overview of Staff Perceptions on Risk (G= general and CS =case study)

#### 2.4 Differences between the general discourses and those which referred to the case study students

When asked broadly about their understanding of vulnerability and risk, for some a general question elicited particular contexts, as well as student characteristics as the SENCO in school 5 demonstrates: *so obviously, you can get all different kinds of vulnerabilities. So the social vulnerability, home-life contributes to that, use of social media, friendship groups, peer groups. Also, ...cognitive understanding, so obviously, a student who's functioning at a much lower age, cognitively, they're going to be far more vulnerable. So that would definitely be part of it, learning needs, so unfortunately, students with learning needs are more likely to be excluded or will get involved with behaviour issues."*

For some the narratives were more policy referenced when asked a general question about what vulnerability means to them. For example, using categories of young people that reflected safeguarding documentation. As the pastoral lead in school 7 illustrates:

*“any child who has or is persistently absent....special educational needs, EAL...historical trauma mental health difficulties.. any child from a disadvantaged background. Young carer, CIN, Child protection, Looked After Children ..half of my school population are classed as vulnerable”*

For others it elicited information around the school system of thresholds, often through review of behaviour and attendance data. In consequence there was a broader view of vulnerability for nine of the staff members. However, when the focus was discussion of their nominated case study students, this elicited wider and more detailed reflections on vulnerability for five members of staff.

In contrast, when it came to narratives around risk, only one interviewee spoke more broadly in general terms about risk. For other interviewees the context of their chosen case studies was more likely to elicit considerations of risk.

## 2.5 Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

The staff narratives had revealed their understanding of both the multiplicity of factors that contributed to vulnerability and the interactive nature of these. Pivotal in these discussions were within-child factors although there was some recognition of universality no-one spoke specifically about vulnerable situations. For many, risk was located within the individual with a tendency to speak about those who were “vulnerable and at risk.” Some individuals were seen as both at risk and posing a risk. School was generally seen as a place of safety, while also posing its own risks, in particular not providing the support that was needed. Given these understandings we turn to look at how they connect to the activities around interventions.

Table 4 provides a summary of the aims, focus and interventions with illustrations from the first of the case study individuals as, being discussed first, these were usually presented at interview in more detail. A fuller discussion of the interventions for all the case study students can be found in “The Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion across the UK.” Consistent with the narratives around vulnerabilities and risk, in all cases, interventions were directed at the individual, although notably in 14 cases they were also directed at the school as well. In nine instances a member of the family was also involved as part of the intervention procedure.

While the interventions were directed at the individual the focus was most often place-related, whether this was to do with attendance and being in school, or related to going on somewhere else, a future placement or in one case specialist provision. Thus, while the focus was on supporting the individual, this was done by changing the context of learning. Eight of the case studies, for whom there was less certainty about support needs, included aims that related to further assessment or identification of need, some with the explicit reference to EHCPs with four of the SENCOs setting this within the context of an EHCP. Thus, assessment and identification were often a means to identifying further support. Six members of staff referred to aspects of attainment, gaining qualifications, improving literacy and numeracy and one more broadly to accessing and curriculum and learning. Aims also included the development of student skills with six members of staff referring to skills that would improve their interaction with others, either through self-regulation and anger management, or the development of social skills. Consistent with this was the reference to improved relationships in five cases, either with peers, family members or staff. Not all aims gave a clear sense of direction with seven members of staff expressing aims that mostly referred to managing the situation, avoiding permanent or fixed term exclusion, or taking the pressure of staff.

Turning to consider risk however puts these aims in context. The strategic focus in all cases presented here included can be understood in relation to preventing or ameliorating the risk of exclusion. In 12 of these cases the focus was also on protecting the safety and welfare of the young person. Additionally, for six of the cases there was also recognition of the need for repairing the situation, most notably with interventions designed to target relationship building between the young person and others.

School ID	Staff Member	Aims or Intentions	Strategies	Interventions	Strategic Focus
1	SENCO	Getting her into school building and having work supplements and then into the SEND room Securing outside support	Directed at individual and school	Staff changing interactional style Parent dropping her off in morning Referral for counselling Working with Educational psychologist to plan provision Gradual introduction into mainstream Use of Autism network progression framework	Prevent or ameliorate risk
	Pastoral Lead	Trying to get him into the classroom	Directed at individual, family and school	Daily truancy calls Pay for taxis, uniform, food etc Family support working with parents Mentoring and careers conversations Entered for exams	Prevent or ameliorate risk
3	SENCO	To avoid being NEET To receive additional support for mental and physical health Establishing a strong daily routine for coming to school and connecting to people who are sympathetic to his situation Making sure he is happy in school with OK sound levels Supporting family with access to resources Making an EHCP application	Directed at individual, family, school and others	Teaching periods in SEN group Building strong relationship with staff and SEN staff connecting with him Regular meetings and daily contact with family member Slightly delayed start to day Establishing daily routine Close monitoring of attendance Use of quiet room Linking with external agencies and hospital consultants EHCP procedures Curriculum steered around practical and vocational that engages Early level Certificate in Science	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare Repair relationships
	Pastoral Lead (T1 only)	Managing situation	Directed at individual, and school	Reduced timetable Reward positive and make school about positive interactions More time in SEND and less in mainstream Members of staff skilled and understand behaviour	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare Repair relationships
	Pastoral Lead	Identifying needs Building a trusting relationship Manage the students' behaviour	Directed at individual, and school	Reduced curriculum Reduced social time SEN testing Working with behaviour improvement manager to build a trusting relationship	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety Repair relationships

School ID	Staff Member	Aims or Intentions	Strategies	Interventions	Strategic Focus
4	SENCO	Keeping student safe with education secondary Place to transition to next year Accessing something meaningful, structured and safe Gaining qualifications	Directed at individual, school and family	Curriculum English, Maths, science, citizenship, art, music, bike maintenance. Adaptations to enable sitting GCSEs Access to high level teaching assistant and some one-to one tutoring in core subjects Not using sanctions Use of dedicated room AP for social emotional well-being and music programme Key worker mentoring Access to school to meet friends during unstructured times Sharing information with family Joint family meetings with advisory worker	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare
	Pastoral Lead	Able to self-regulate and remove self from difficult peer situations Stopping cycle of exclusion Getting at core elements Re-establishing communication between student and parent	Individual Family School	Finding positive experiences Emotional regulation interventions Positive praise Video profile of student for staff with suggested ways of working	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect Repair
5	SENCO	To get student into specialist provision with small classes and a therapeutic approach Writing EHCP To make it through day without outbursts Acquiring appropriate interaction and language skills	Directed at individual, family and school	Working with student on one-to-one basis Helping her to develop appropriate ways to interact and communicate with others Decompression time (for staff and student) in SEN room Counselling sessions and CAMHS Working with other agencies- Team around the family, social care and police	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare
	Pastoral Lead	Developing students' relationships with apprenticeship and social care teams	Directed at individual, family and school	Adapted curriculum with Unit Award programmes in cooking and music 12-week programme with youth worker to improve relationship with parent English and Maths Sat exams at AP as well as vocational entry level qualification	Prevent or ameliorate risk
6	SENCO	School to find out more about student background, working with other agencies, Keeping him in school and increasing time in school Building relationships so feels safe in school	Directed at individual, family and school	Assessment for accessing early help Meeting with other agencies Reintegration timetable Key member of staff building a relationship Meeting with AP	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare Repair - relationships

School ID	Staff Member	Aims or Intentions	Strategies	Interventions	Strategic Focus
7	SENCO	Building confidence Understanding social norms Anger Management Understanding trauma Literacy and numeracy	Directed at individual, and school	Personalised timetable Small group work in English and Maths Cognitive Behaviour therapy Wrap around care Staff asked to make reasonable adjustments	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare
	Pastoral Lead- 17	Behaviour management Avoiding detention for being late Stop student escalating through consequence system	Directed at individual	Working on self esteem SLT Mentor Extra support in (redspot lessons) at T1 AP Blended learning at T2 for academic and mental well-being focus	Prevent or ameliorate risk
8	SENCO	Preventing PEx Skills to change behaviour Identification of need and assessment	Directed at individual, family and school	Threshold Tracker Pastoral Support Learning Reviews Managing anger Managed move CAMHS Assessment Family support Social Care ADHD assessment Provision of safe space	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare
	Pastoral Lead	Support around anger management	Directed at individual	Reduced timetable Alternative curriculum Counselling sessions AP for maths, English and science Martial Arts	Prevent or ameliorate risk
10	SENCO	Collecting evidence and EHCP finalised Access to AP Working towards English and Maths Giving different experiences that will inform post school activity	Directed at individual, family, school and others	EHCP application Adjustments to (PT) timetable Allocated key person Keeping them away from other students All teachers to try and see student's viewpoint Art Flexible lunch time arrangement Online lessons Work experience Working with Police liaison, Youth Offending and Educational Psychologist College place	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare Repair relationships
	Pastoral Lead	Avoiding PEx Finding another way through Taking pressure off staff	Directed at individual	College vocational course College maths and English Project work at home	Prevent of Ameliorate risk
	Pastoral Lead	Keeping the student in school Keeping focused on getting through to GCSEs and college	Directed at Individual	Giving student safe zones and alternative ways to express feelings School making reasonable adjustment to uniform code	Prevent of Ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare

School ID	Staff Member	Aims or Intentions	Strategies	Interventions	Strategic Focus
11	SENCO	To not receive FTE Accessing the curriculum, learning from teachers Improved reading age Improved social interaction Understanding the consequences of their behaviour Assessment for EHCP	Directed at individual, school and others	Literacy and numeracy intervention 6 weeks counselling Pupil passport so staff more knowledgeable about student Use of safe spaces Behaviour plan Inclusion space for online learning Sport and mentoring AP SEMH mentoring on how to socialise with others Referral for multi-agency support	Prevent or ameliorate risk Protect safety and welfare
	Pastoral Lead	Avoid PEx Knowing what he wants and sees in the future	Directed at individual,	Exploring external options Counselling in self- belief and motivation Mentoring Early intervention plan from behaviour advisory team	Prevent or ameliorate risk

Table 2.8 Overview of Staff Aims, Interventions, and Strategic Focus for Student Cases in England

Consistent with understandings of vulnerability, interventions were bespoke and personalised to the individual context but presented with different degrees of detail- sometimes to list what staff were doing e.g. close monitoring, learning reviews with less information on what the student was engaged in. We can see in their accounts that schools were planning to work with a number of different agencies, sometimes to promote their own understanding of what was needed, at other times to share information. These included working with educational psychologist, social care, specialist hospital consultants, youth offending teams, police liaison etc. In some instances, there was close work with parents as they deployed a number of different tactics to improve attendance, including daily contact and truancy calls, delayed starts to the day, and establishing soft start routines, using taxis to collect students as well as parents dropping students off.

Other interventions were more learning focussed. The how and where of teaching was altered to include more time in the SEND department, more 1:1 and small group work, more targeted support in challenging lessons, the use of blended and online learning as well as alternative provision including that provided by colleges. In a number of instances there was explicit reference to changing the curriculum, with personalised timetables, but usually including maths and English. Often there were reduced and part-time timetables that lessened the demand on student engagement, with some also making reference to cutting social time. There were instances of schools actively seeking to base the curriculum around the students interests with the use of a Unit Award programme to provide outcomes. Schools gave examples of adaptations for sitting exams including vocational level qualifications.

There were also many examples of looking beyond qualifications to develop skills and well-being that could ultimately improve behaviour. These might be through a mentoring programme with a key person, in or outside school. They included cognitive behaviour therapy, emotional regulation, working on self-esteem and building confidence and mental well-being. In some instances, a school behaviour improvement person was directly involved. Students were also referred for counselling and relationship related work.

Where interventions were aimed at the school, there were examples of staff making reasonable adjustments, to be more understanding, for example through seeing the student's viewpoint. This was most explicit in school 4 where a video profile was made with suggested ways of responding to the case study student. There were also examples of inset relating to classroom management. These "whole-school" or systemic responses were less prevalent and often specific to particular staff members in our sample. Rather, understandings of risk and vulnerability predominantly concerned individualised support that was provided outside the mainstream classroom. The needs of these young people were not necessarily fully understood and required input from other agencies. It was these other agencies that had the expertise and experience to inform support that resulted from factors located in the home or community. An important part of the intervention involved managing the situation and the avoidance of risk, although the risk, apart from that of permanent exclusion was not always clearly articulated.

### *2.6 Tensions, contradictions and consistency with national policy*

Through examining staff understandings of vulnerability and risk and putting these in the context of national policy we can grapple with some of the complexities of responding when young people are at risk of permanent exclusion. As the pastoral lead in school 7 stated "vulnerability comes in many guises," and the narratives illustrated the multiplicative nature of the ways in which adverse factors interacted. As the SENCO in school 1 described: *"the crisis, of whether people are putting food or fuel choices – that's detrimental to these kids, and these kids then...it triggers their behaviour, which then triggers their exclusion rate."* Changes in the economy and the impact of COVID contributed to the pressures experienced by young people during the time of this research. The interviews with SENCOs and pastoral leads demonstrated the consequent complexity of responding to young people at risk of exclusion. These findings indicated the need for a multifaceted as well as bespoke approach to intervention and the monitoring of impact.

In almost all instances the prime focus of intervention were strategies directed at the individual young person. They were largely described as personalised although not necessarily fully bespoke, as another pastoral lead in school 7 described:

*"I've got about 150 different packages, we will pick and choose which we think the child needs and sometimes there's further personalisation."*

The aims and intentions of the strategies could primarily be described as being deployed to prevent or ameliorate the risk of exclusion, and secondly, as protecting the safety and welfare of the young person. Despite the multifaceted nature of the support needs, there was also a recognition of the need for a measured approach to intervention as indicated by the SENCO in school 9:

*"sometimes, .. we throw loads of different things at a situation or a problem. And actually, do we need to throw all those different things? do all the different professionals need to do that.. because if you throw everything at it, you don't know what's going to work, you don't know what is working, you don't know, you can't measure that. And also, some of these kids that we work with, you know, you throw too much at them, and they'll just become overwhelmed. And that can make them feel even worse"*

We can see in some of the narratives an awareness by staff that the interventions, rather than offsetting the risk of exclusion can serve to further distance students from inclusion in the classroom. Intervention plans had a central core of changing locations for learning involving separating young people from the mainstream provision and disrupting relationships with their peers. In part this reflected the challenges of *"balancing the [needs of the] majority and minority,"*

where the student was seen to be *“affecting everyone’s learning.”* Careful decisions were needed about what could be taken away to make time for individual learning and mentoring, how to reduce timetables and still retain relationships with peers. These decisions are easier where the aims and intentions of interventions are driven by a clear indication of the direction of travel. Conversely, negative aims and those that largely refer only to staff activity do not provide a strong mechanism against which to balance decisions.

A multifaceted approach was reflected in the plans or intentions that staff had for working with other agencies, but these were often constrained to those that were part of formal procedures for assessment for EHCP. Indeed, a re-occurring barrier that staff referred to was that of working with other agencies, the ways in which there had been a retrenchment to core responsibilities and activities with raised thresholds for intervention. In consequence interventions were delayed with the inherent danger that the risk of exclusion increased rather than decreased, that young people became exposed to greater risks to their welfare and safety. In order to provide more timely intervention, staff particularly indicated the need for more support coupled with an understanding of what underpinned the young person’s behaviour. This was often combined with an expectation that what was needed was a diagnosis and a specialised form of intervention.

The focus on the individual is highly consistent with current policies for SEND where, even in the latest reforms (DfE 2023<sup>32</sup>) the emphasis lies with the procedures and processes for identification, assessment, planning and review. This reinforces the belief that there is something wrong with the young person, that they are different, and can be better supported elsewhere. It does however provide some safeguards with respect to supporting the young person. There has however been a policy decision to move away from requiring an EHCP for a young person with behavioural needs (DfE 2023). This policy move is not consistent with the sentiments expressed by some SENCOs and pastoral leads of the importance of identifying what lies behind the behaviour. As the pastoral lead in school 4 indicated it was important to Investigate whether *“there’s a learning need that is sitting underneath.”* In the experience of the SENCO in school 9: *the majority of students with behaviour issues, there’s normally a learning need or an undiagnosed need or an unmet need and a lot of that is learning based.”* Further that *“the students who are most vulnerable, or those that don’t have any EHCP because they aren’t looked after. It feels if a student’s [that are] looked after have an EHCP [and]there are other routes available.”*

Staff spoke about the adaptations made to the curriculum, usually retaining teaching in Maths and English but also adding subject time in music, sport, and art. This required them: *“to look at children as individuals to find a route that suits them purely to progress. ..once you find that subject that becomes your passion.. education suddenly takes on a whole new meaning because it has it becomes purposeful. And I’m a great believer that school doesn’t meet the needs of everyone...it’s about.. finding something for an individual to engage with [Pastoral Lead School 10].* For a number of the students vocational and practical activities were identified. Again, we see the tensions that occur as cost and availability frame these decisions. Additionally, these adaptations require a fundamental shift in national policy to valuing different types of achievement and measures of progress.

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<sup>32</sup> DfE (2023) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan Right Support, Right Place, Right Time March 2023  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND\\_and\\_alternative\\_provision\\_improvement\\_plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan.pdf)

Against the backdrop of an individual focus, staff in some schools, spoke at some length about the ways in which young people were made vulnerable through a lack of access to adequate support. If schools had been able to access this support, they would not be vulnerable. Thus, vulnerability was a failure of the system and was in effect putting that young person at further risk. Vulnerability for SENCO in school 1 *“It means not getting a lot of things of an education, it’s not getting enough support.”* This contextual understanding of vulnerability is consistent with policy definitions of special educational needs (DfE 2014<sup>33</sup>) as students who require support that is not *normally* available. There were also a number of instances where staff, consistent with the legal framework were making reasonable adjustments, particularly with permission to leave class and to occupy areas in which they felt safe. Adjustments were also made with respect to attendance, arrival times and wearing school uniform. Conversely, a number of members of staff indicated a concern that students’ behaviour was being made worse by their colleagues’ negative attitudes, poor handling and classroom management practices and staff being unable to interpret early warning signs that would facilitate a de-escalation and return to a calm learning environment. There were descriptions of the ways in which whole school intervention had been provided to facilitate staff understanding the impact of trauma and domestic abuse. Inset had been provided on classroom management including changes to tone of voice, positioning and body language. The SENCO in school 4 described the importance of follow-up to this work: *some students just take a bit of time to process... it’s not just about behaviour, it’s about engagement. So the second session that we’ve done with staff has been about engaging students in your lesson.”* As the SENCO in school one stated: *everything that we do for them [the most vulnerable] will replicate and wave out and impact all the others.”*

Important work was therefore being carried out in a number of settings to directly bring about a more inclusive environment. This was echoed in settings where interventions included active attention to fostering, repairing and strengthening positive relationships, a key element along with feelings of safety in developing a sense of belonging. While recent DfE (2023) policy proposes changes for a more inclusive society little is referenced that suggests systemic changes to schools. However, the introduction of a new leadership level SENCO could provide possibilities for the strategic development of whole school policies that are more inclusive. Arguably this will be enhanced where SENCOs and pastoral leads work closely together.

Recent policy (DfE 2023) has also highlighted the place of early intervention, although the focus is on children with SEND and on meeting *additional* needs, rather than recognizing a common need (a safe secure nurturing environment) that requires additional or different support. While the focus of school strategies for our case study students can be seen to embody elements of prevent or ameliorate risk, they are largely illustrative of late intervention or in some cases crisis management. National reporting systems for attendance and exclusions have shaped the tools schools use for identifying students at risk. In consequence relatively crude measures of attendance, detentions and suspensions are often deployed rather than earlier warning signs related to engagement in learning, peer relationships, and feelings of belonging.

In conclusion, there are a number of points of consistency with national policy that have fostered a focus on the individual rather than the context as the prime focus for intervention. Increases in the

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<sup>33</sup> DfE (2014) NEW ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/301928/SEND\\_reforms\\_-\\_letter\\_for\\_teachers.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301928/SEND_reforms_-_letter_for_teachers.pdf)

rate of exclusion indicates that a more inclusive approach is needed that recognizes the diversity of experiences facing young people.

## 2.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

It is notable that punishment does not have a place in the planned interventions of the project schools. Indeed, staff did not talk about presenting negative outcomes for behaviour. Rather it was recognized that detentions and suspensions were ineffective deterrents for case study students. Conversely, staff recognized how their use increased the likelihood of permanent exclusion. This has important policy implications for a shift away from a narrow focus on the legal use of different sanctions and the need to embrace the term wellbeing as more than offsetting risks of harm and keeping children safe. The latest guidance for Behaviour in Schools (DfE 2024<sup>34</sup>) makes reference to pupil well-being as well as behaviour and attendance in the title with wellbeing largely seen in relation to safeguarding and supporting pupils “to achieve the behaviour standards,” (DfE 2024 p13). The guidance outlines behaviour expectations with respect to pupils with SEND, but not for other vulnerable pupils. The complexity of young people vulnerabilities needs to be recognized and attended to with greater parity of concern. This is an important omission in the national guidance. Further, while schools are expected to make up for the shortfalls in other services, they need to be empowered to do so and recognized for their achievements by National policymakers.

The interactive nature of the identified vulnerabilities indicates the benefit of SENCOs and Pastoral Leads working closely together. This suggests that it is timely for some schools to rethink how the pastoral lead role is defined and the extent to which their roles are unduly constrained by an emphasis on behaviour and attendance.

The removal of the requirement for an EHCP for those with a “behaviour need” in National policy requires careful consideration to clarify that although students may not experience difficulty in learning or have a disability, it is important that to identify and address underlying needs, and the interview data indicates that schools would welcome support in achieving this;

In order to address the need for early intervention, much more emphasis both in national and school policy, should be placed on early indicators [rather than poor behaviour and the recipients of sanctions] e.g. engagement, peer relationships, feelings of belonging

A narrow subject driven curriculum does not meet the diversity of student need and many, including those at risk of exclusion disengage. Although there is no legal requirement to adhere to it, secondary schools typically do so as a marker of providing a broad and balanced curriculum, and as a means of demonstrating to Ofsted that “learners study the full curriculum.” This study has demonstrated the importance of valuing a more diverse curriculum offering and recognition of a wider range of achievements.

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<sup>34</sup> DfE (2024) Behaviour in Schools Advice for headteachers and school staff February 2024.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ce3721e1bdec001a3221fe/Behaviour\\_in\\_schools\\_-\\_advice\\_for\\_headteachers\\_and\\_school\\_staff\\_Feb\\_2024.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ce3721e1bdec001a3221fe/Behaviour_in_schools_-_advice_for_headteachers_and_school_staff_Feb_2024.pdf)

## Section 3: Northern Ireland Report

This report presents findings from the research carried out in Northern Ireland (NI) focusing on the perspectives of school staff members responsible for the well-being and outcomes of young people at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. Specifically, we explore the insights provided by Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), also known as learning coordinators in NI, and Pastoral Care Leads (PCLs), typically senior teachers, or vice-principals, on how they conceptualise risk and vulnerability. Information about staff perceptions on this topic in NI is limited and requires further research to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Initially, eight core schools were recruited in NI, with five of these agreeing to participate in the first round of interviews (T<sub>1</sub>). Subsequently, four of these schools completed a second, follow-up interview (T<sub>2</sub>). This report only presents the data of staff members who completed both interviews. During the interviews, we asked participants to discuss the cases of two students that they were supporting as well as more general questions about policy and practice in relation to their pastoral care systems.

At the request of most schools, both SENCOs and Pastoral Care Leads were interviewed together, some suggested this would be less of a time burden for them while others claimed that this would better reflect the way in which they worked. It's important to note that this differs methodologically from the approach taken in other jurisdictions, but it also reflects the distinct systemic context in which these professionals' practice, emphasising the value of a collaborative and holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced by at-risk students.

The following sections report on the characteristics of the study's sample, participants' conceptualisations of vulnerability and risk, variations in their discourses, the influence of their perceptions on approaches to student cases, tensions between policy and practice, and, lastly, implications for the provision of education for young people at risk of exclusion. In doing so, the intention is to provide a detailed understanding of the complex landscape of supporting at-risk students within the educational context of Northern Ireland. While the report's findings offer valuable insights into the challenges and strategies employed by a select group of schools in Northern Ireland, it is essential to acknowledge the limitation of a small sample size. Generalising these findings to the broader educational landscape of NI should be done cautiously, recognising the diversity of schools and contexts in the jurisdiction. Additionally, the final section of the report presents a range of implications that can inform policy development and support strategies for at-risk and vulnerable students, contributing to a more equitable education system.

### 3.1 Research Participants

The four schools that staff members were recruited from in NI were all post-primary, non-selective secondary schools. Most of these were categorised as having low rates of exclusion, with only one of the four deemed to have a variable rate. In Northern Ireland there are multiple school sectors, each with different governance bodies representing different community and religious interests, each of which also having nuances or variations in the process and power to exclude. We attempted to reflect this by including at least one school from the Catholic Maintained, Controlled, and Integrated sectors, respectively.

School ID	Management Type	Rate of Exclusion	Role	Role Description	Further Info
1	Catholic Maintained	Low	PCL; Vice-Principal	Designated Teacher for Child protection & Safeguarding	
			SENCO	Senior Teacher; Responsible for Learning Support; Deputy Designated Teacher for Safeguarding & Child Protection	
2	Controlled	Low	PCL; Vice-Principal	"I'm the Vice Principal in charge of pastoral care, which I suppose means that I wear sort of a number of hats. It means that I'm the designated teacher for child protection, working with all those kinds of external agencies, supporting those more vulnerable children. It also means that I'm responsible for promoting positive behaviour within school."	
			SENCO	"I've just been appointed as SENCO [...] we were saying about how we work closely together. I would've been a Head of Year, so I'd have worked as part of the Pastoral Team."	
5	Integrated	Variable	PCL; Senior Teacher	"Part of my remit is to implement a relevant preventative curriculum for the students in school."	
6	Controlled	Low	PCL; Vice-Principal	"[...] to look at things in the school more systematically [...] To tighten things up and create more consistency and clarity to some things in the school as to how we operate [pastorally]."	
			SENCO	"I work really closely together [with PCL VP] and it's not that behavioural difficulties come down the road of SEN too fast or become the SENCO's [...] It's definitely a good system that works. It's really good too that we both have those two different perspectives: that I was a pastoral head a year moving into SENCO and [PCL VP] was SENCO moving into pastoral, so we both can see it from both sides, you know, and pull that learning and when we're dealing with the kids."	Not present for T <sub>2</sub>

Table 3.9 School and Staff Characteristics in NI

In total, we interviewed seven staff members from the four schools. Six staff members completed both T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> interview, with only the SENCO from school 6 unavailable for a second, follow-up interview. For the most part, the leadership of pastoral care in the schools was the responsibility of a vice-principal – interestingly, this role was occupied by a senior teacher in the integrated school. Although, the senior teacher reported that the principal, who was unavailable during this study, would also be heavily involved in this aspect of school life.

When describing their roles, the staff members often referred to the collaborative nature of their work, particularly the relationship between PCL and SENCO. For some, their role was about implementing a curriculum in support of the pastoral side of education, while for others it was about creating a cohesive, strategic, and responsive school environment that could manage the needs of all students.

### 3.2 How staff conceptualised vulnerability

This section examines the conceptualisations of vulnerability among staff members in the participating schools. It is important to note that the views expressed by staff members differ

between schools, reflecting unique perspectives and contextual factors. For that reason, the information will be presented by school.

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Vulnerability	Perspective(s)
1	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual - Family	- Visibility of vulnerabilities - Covid impact on vulnerability - Vulnerability in terms of disengagement/attitudes of apathy
	SENCO		- Vulnerable to lower levels of attainment
2	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual - Family	- Not all vulnerable kids at risk - Parenting
	SENCO	- School - Community	- Risk harder to address - Role perspectives unique - External issues
5	PCL; Senior Teacher	- Individual - Family	- Risk and vulnerability synonymous - Vulnerable groups - Data on vulnerable groups
6	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual	- Risk and vulnerability interdependent
	SENCO	- Family	- School's cases are complex

Table 3.10 Overview of Staff Perceptions on Vulnerability in NI

### Location of Perceived Vulnerability

Staff members described the location of perceived vulnerabilities with reference to specific student cases in their respective schools. In their accounts, vulnerabilities were primarily situated within individual needs, reflecting a recognition that each student's circumstances were unique and multifaceted. Furthermore, staff members uniformly identified familial needs and relationships as integral to these vulnerabilities, with particular emphasis placed on parental engagement as a critical factor. This holistic perspective acknowledged the significant role of the family environment in shaping a student's vulnerability. However, the staff member from School 2 uniquely expanded the framework of vulnerabilities to include both in-school factors and community-related influences, such as negative peer group dynamics. This broader perspective highlighted the complex interplay between internal school dynamics and external community factors in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities among students.

### Staff Perspectives

#### School 1:

Staff members from school 1 attempted to articulate how the visibility of vulnerability in schools is much more complex than often realised, because a majority of students are in need of additional supports. According to the PCL, "out of our school, you could classify 75% as vulnerable or at risk to a certain extent." They elaborated on various aspects of vulnerability, including emotional needs not being met at home, neglect, and the prevalence of mental health issues. The PCL also acknowledged the impact of COVID-19 on students' vulnerability, particularly regarding access to basic needs like food and heating. Furthermore, they highlighted the challenge of addressing apathy and a lack of motivation among students, often linked to low self-esteem. In contrast, the SENCO claimed that vulnerability has consequences on educational outcomes, focusing on students who were vulnerable to lower levels of attainment. They noted the impact of the pandemic on students' opportunities and future prospects, particularly due to disengagement and reduced educational achievement – "you're going to have a whole generation, a whole sort of outpouring of students coming in, who because of lack of educational engagement or lack of educational achievement are going to be completely."

*School 2:*

In this school, the PCL discussed the complex relationship between vulnerability and being at risk –

*“Vulnerability... there must be factors within their life which makes them more vulnerable. So it could be that they’re ‘at risk’... I suppose not all vulnerable kids will be at risk. ACEs or it could be that there’s a special educational need or there’s, you know – Yeah, I suppose I would see that as vulnerable. A child can be vulnerable, and we know that we have to wrap that extra layer around them to help support them, but they manage, and they get through. And there’s plenty of children in school, well there’s scores and scores of them who’d be vulnerable, but they manage.”*

They highlighted that not all vulnerable students were necessarily at risk of exclusion. The PCL mentioned factors such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), special educational needs, and parenting dynamics as contributors to vulnerability. They particularly emphasised the impact of parenting on students' vulnerability, mentioning instances where suspensions didn't necessarily result in improved parenting. The SENCO in School 2 noted that distinguishing between risk and vulnerability can be challenging – “[vulnerability when] *the support and interventions that are put in place are enough, where at risk is if the interventions aren’t working.*” They highlighted that risk can be harder to address when interventions are ineffective and that their role provided unique insights into sensitive issues related to child protection and external troubles affecting students, compared to other staff members within the school.

*School 5:*

The PCL in school 5 regarded vulnerability and at risk as synonymous terms - *“I think that probably the two terms are quite similar, to me, vulnerability means at risk.”* They identified specific vulnerable groups, including statemented students, children on the child protection register, Looked After Children (LAC), students from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The PCL emphasised the importance of data in identifying vulnerable groups, referencing statistics on suspensions, free school meals, and care team students. This staff member frequently referenced policies and school systems during their interview, which seemed to imply that they thought vulnerability (for a large number of students) could be managed to a certain extent via structure. At the same time, they also referenced outliers to this in that while the general school population responded to structure, there were some students who required a softer and/or relational approach.

*School 6:*

Similarly, the PCL in School 6 viewed risk and vulnerability as interdependent concepts. They noted that all students at risk of exclusion were vulnerable in some way. *“I don’t think we have any kids that are at risk of exclusion who are not vulnerable in some way [...] And nearly one can cause the other. You know what I mean?”* They highlighted the complex nature of cases, mentioning a specific student who faced emotional challenges and was subject to bullying. The SENCO in this school questioned the distinction between ‘at risk of exclusion’ and ‘vulnerable in general’ and suggested that complex cases often involve multiple complicating factors, such as being Looked After Children (LAC) or having a history of early cases. The claim from both these staff members was that their school had adopted a child-centred and whole school approach. This came across in how they described cases and in particular their vulnerabilities - every case was unique and had its own complexities.

The varying conceptualisations of vulnerability among staff members underscore the pressing need for flexible and responsive approaches to supporting at-risk students in NI's educational landscape. While certain common themes emerged, such as the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant role of parenting dynamics, it is clear that vulnerability as perceived by school staff members in NI is a multifaceted and highly individualised concept.

### 3.3 How staff conceptualised risk in NI

Staff members across the schools articulated distinct perspectives on how they conceptualised risk within the context of specific student cases. These perspectives shed light on the multifaceted nature of risk and its unique manifestations within each school's environment.

School ID	Staff Member	Location of Perceived Risk	Perspective(s)
1	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual wellbeing. - Family relationships. - Community.	- Vulnerable boys and criminal/anti-social behaviour - Drugs increasing risk factor - Impact of lack of parenting on risk
	SENCO	- Safety of others. - Relationships with staff.	N/A
2	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual wellbeing. - Peer safety. - Family and peer relationships. - Educational outcomes / opportunities.	- Risk framed in terms of low levels of attainment, because of refusing to attend class - Most 'at risk' group described - Safeguarding concerns for peers
	SENCO		- Balancing risk and disruption to others
5	PCL; Senior Teacher	- Individual prospects. - Family relationships. - Educational outcomes / opportunities. - Employability and economic destinations.	- Disconnect between schools and other authorities/services on prioritising risk
6	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Individual wellbeing. - Family relationships.	- Distinction made between at risk and risk-taking behaviours
	SENCO	- Negative peer influence. - Educational outcomes / opportunities.	- All of those at risk are vulnerable - Risk-taking behaviours example

Table 3.11 Overview of Staff Perceptions on Risk in NI

#### Location of Perceived Risk:

Staff members described the location of perceived risks, i.e., who and/or what is at risk, when discussing specific student cases within their respective schools. Their insights indicated that risks were predominantly situated at the level of the individual student, with each student's safety, well-being, or future prospects under threat due to their negative patterns of behaviours. Additionally, familial relationships emerged as a significant locus of risk, with the potential for deterioration or negative influences on the students. The impact of peer interactions was also prominently featured in the interviews, as staff members identified risks associated with friendships breaking down, the influence of negative peer groups on students, and the safety of peers within the school environment.

In Schools 2, 5, and 6, staff members emphasised how students' educational outcomes and opportunities were at risk due to negative patterns of behaviour and a lack of engagement. These risks related to issues such as limited contact hours, school refusal, and conflict within the classroom. School 1 framed this classroom conflict as increasing the risk of destabilising and fracturing relationships with staff members.

Notably, School 5 took a unique perspective by connecting the risks of poor educational outcomes to uncertain and less favourable employment or economic destinations, highlighting the broader societal implications of these risks. Furthermore, staff members from School 1 uniquely described how some

students' actions had posed a risk to the community outside the school, citing instances of anti-social behaviour and negative associations with the police (PSNI). These diverse perceptions of risk underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by the schools in NI when addressing specific student cases.

### Staff Perspectives

#### School 1:

The PCL focused specifically on the relationship between vulnerable boys and criminal/anti-social behaviour, underscoring the heightened risks faced by students, especially in an area marked by high deprivation – *“it’s probably not atypical or abnormal in the sense that we’re talking here all about boys, and generally in our school, our biggest issues are boys, in terms of the more serious issues, it’s boys, in terms of suspensions, it’s boys. It’s boys, particularly of this local area and this ward, where there’s a high area of deprivation.”* Additionally, the PCL highlighted the burgeoning issue of drugs within the community and its implications for students, further expanding the concept of risk – *“that’s something we’re trying to tackle too in school, you know, so in terms of vulnerable...it’s maybe easier asking who’s not vulnerable in our school at the minute.”* They also emphasised the pivotal role of parenting, or the lack thereof, as a contributor to risk, particularly concerning the absence of clear boundaries and guidance at home – *“we’re finding more and more that the kids that are coming through social services, there are kids that are coming through EWO, the kids that we’re having issues within school, lack of parenting is huge.”* These insights illuminate how risk pervaded individual behaviours, community dynamics, and family circumstances within the school.

#### School 2:

Within School 2, the PCL framed risk primarily in terms of low levels of attainment, often stemming from students' reluctance to attend class due to factors like social anxiety and complex family backgrounds. The concept of being 'at risk' was closely associated with various factors such as fractured family structures, single-parent households, eligibility for free school meals, residence in specific towns, and concerns related to self-harm and community disturbances –

*“Well if we think about the children that are kind of at risk at the minute, you know, the rest of them, generally, [Name], there’s Social Services involvement [...] Generally you’re talking about broken homes or single parent families. Generally free school meals, generally from in the town, [Town], and those kind of... you know. Probably it’s issues with self-harm, probably trouble in the community, that kind of thing [...] And actually a lot of them, their parents would’ve had difficult times at school as well. It’s interesting that quite often children who end up going to EOTAS, maybe an older brother or sister would have gone and actually maybe even a parent would’ve gone, so you do...”*

Additionally, the PCL highlighted safeguarding concerns for peers as an integral dimension of risk perception. The SENCO in this school emphasised the delicate balance required to address risk for a particular student while minimising disruptions to others – *“I suppose you’re thinking about the child but you’re also thinking about the children around them as well.”*

#### School 5:

In School 5, the PCL voiced frustration over the discord between the school and external authorities or services when prioritising risks. They cited a specific incident to illustrate the discrepancy, where a seemingly minor event attracted immediate police attention while more serious child protection concerns went unaddressed – *“I’ve been waiting for a call from your police office about a child who’s*

*at serious risk of child protection and you still haven't rang me back, but yet in half an hour of a child gets hit with a snowball..." So there's real anger."* This frustration underscored the challenges in aligning risk perspectives among different stakeholders.

#### School 6:

School 6 staff members made a clear distinction between being 'at risk' and engaging in risk-taking behaviours. The PCL described a student who, although appearing to cope well on the surface, exhibited risk-taking behaviours related to substance use and relationships with older peers – *"on the surface appearing to cope well or behave well, but actually I think she was really unhappy and was just disengaging from everything."* This nuanced perspective emphasised that risk may not always manifest in overt ways. The SENCO further reinforced this notion by highlighting that all students considered 'at risk' had underlying vulnerabilities, emphasising the intertwined nature of risk and pre-existing challenges. They also discussed concerns about students' risk-taking behaviours, including substance misuse and sexual activity, and the proactive steps taken to address these concerns.

These diverse conceptualisations of risk within the different schools underscore the complexity of addressing risk in educational settings and the importance of comprehensive strategies that consider the unique circumstances of each school and student.

### 3.4 Differences between general discourses and that which referred to the case study students

In evaluating the differences between the general discourses surrounding risk and vulnerability and those specific to the case study students, notable distinctions emerged within the perspectives of staff members. While general discourses often encompassed broader issues such as community challenges, parental engagement, and the impact of external factors like drugs and anti-social behaviour, the focus shifted when referring to the case study students. In these instances, staff referred to the intricate details of individual student cases, highlighting nuances that went beyond the broader discourse. This included factors such as the students' reluctance to attend class, safeguarding concerns involving peers, and the influence of family backgrounds and parenting dynamics. These distinctions highlighted the importance of tailoring interventions to address the unique circumstances of the case study students, reflecting the individualised nature of risk and vulnerability assessments within each school setting.

### 3.5 Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

The school staff in the NI sample had been attempting multiple interventions with each case, which for the most part indicates a challenge with strategic focus. To unpack this further this section attempts to connect the staff members' understanding of their students' risk and vulnerability to the interventions they were working on.

School ID	Staff Member	Intentions	Objective	Interventions	Strategic Focus
1	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Attempts to break the cycle of poor parental	- Future orientated - Behaviour change	- Exceptional teaching arrangement (ETA) - EOTAS placement(s) - Modified timetable(s)	- Prevent - Protect
	SENCO				

		engagement - and so vulnerability - Confidence/Re-integration	- Shifting image of the school	- Tailored entry/exit - Formal and internal suspensions (cool-downs) - EA behaviour support	
2	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Embrace strategies - Academic currency - Breaking the cycle - Building positive relationships	- Safety and Wellbeing - Behaviour change.	- Stepped behaviour system - Key adults - School SEBD register - Modified timetable(s) - 'Don't make small things big', 'What's appropriate, what's not Appropriate?' - 'Are you a friend magnet?' - Generalise instructions	- Protect
	SENCO				
5	PCL; Senior Teacher	- Keep student(s) in school - Academic currency - Avoiding confrontation - Self-regulation - EOTAS support	- Future orientated - Networks and relationships - Behaviour change	- Preventative curriculum - Stepped behaviour system - In-school counselling - Modified timetables - School social workers - Centralised detention - Restorative conversations - Behaviour for learning framework	- Prevent
6	PCL; Vice-Principal	- Desire for therapeutic intervention - Managing relationships - Reintegration - Compliance with rules and routines	- Safety and wellbeing	- Restorative practices - Addiction recovery programme - Take Ten app - Modified timetables - EOTAS partnership arrangement(s) - Family support worker - Full time Nurture Provision - Lower ability set for additional support - Learning support – structured time - 1-2-1 Engage teacher - Stretch and challenge - Reward periods - Phasing back - SEN route over pastoral - Movement passes - Ad hoc removals from class (timeouts/lunch out of school) - Report - Student contract	- Protect - Repair
	SENCO				

Table 3.12 Overview of Staff Aims, Interventions, and Strategic Focus for Student Cases

Across the four schools, there are notable patterns in how staff conceptualise risk and vulnerability, their intentions or aims, and the corresponding interventions they employ to address these concerns. These patterns reveal a distinct strategic focus within each school:

*School 1:*

**Prevention and Protection:** School 1 staff predominantly aimed to prevent vulnerability by disrupting the cycle of poor parental engagement and boosting students' confidence. Their interventions, such as Exceptional Teaching Arrangements and tailored entry/exit plans, reflected a strategic focus on prevention and protection.

It is evident that School 1's staff members recognised the complex interplay of risk factors within their student population. They identified key issues such as criminal and anti-social behaviour among vulnerable boys, the impact of drug-related concerns in the community, and the critical role of parenting in shaping students' vulnerability. In response to these insights, the staff from School 1 formulated clear intentions and objectives for their interventions. The primary aim was to disrupt the

cycle of poor parental engagement, which they identified as a significant contributor to vulnerability. They recognised the critical importance of addressing this issue to prevent further complications and risks associated with insufficient parental support. Additionally, the staff aimed to boost students' confidence and facilitate their reintegration into mainstream classes, viewing this as a vital step in diverting students away from a path of vulnerability.

To achieve these goals, School 1 staff members set clear objectives for their interventions. Their approach was future-oriented, with a focus on equipping students with the skills and confidence necessary for a successful future. They also aimed to bring about positive behavioural changes in students, acknowledging that such changes were pivotal in reducing vulnerability. Moreover, the staff aimed to enhance the overall reputation and negative image of the school held by parents (also ex-pupils) by implementing these interventions. Their interventions included Exceptional Teaching Arrangements (ETAs), EOTAS placements, modified timetables, tailored entry and exit plans, formal and internal suspensions (referred to as cool-downs), and support from the Education Authority (EA) for behaviour.

Overall, School 1's strategic focus appeared to be on prevention and protection. They aimed to intervene early to prevent further vulnerability, enhance student safety and well-being, and improve their prospects within the school setting. This approach underscores the school's commitment to addressing risk and vulnerability comprehensively and proactively.

*School 2:*

**Holistic Support:** School 2 adopted a comprehensive approach, addressing various aspects of vulnerability and risk. Their intentions revolved around embracing strategies, building academic skills, breaking the cycle of underachievement, and fostering positive relationships. The interventions, including the stepped behaviour system and key adult support, aligned with this multifaceted approach.

In School 2, the staff members viewed risk primarily in terms of low levels of attainment, often linked to students' reluctance to attend classes due to issues like social anxiety and complex family backgrounds. The concept of being 'at risk' was closely associated with various factors, including fractured family structures, single-parent households, eligibility for free school meals, and concerns related to self-harm and community disturbances. This comprehensive understanding of risk reflected the complexity of challenges facing their students.

To address these challenges, School 2 staff members formulated a well-defined strategic focus, encompassing a holistic set of intentions. These intentions included encouraging students to embrace strategies for navigating life's challenges, ensuring they possessed the necessary academic skills for their future, breaking the cycle of underachievement within families, and fostering positive relationships with both staff and peers. This multifaceted approach underscored their commitment to addressing a wide range of factors contributing to students' vulnerability.

In alignment with their intentions, School 2 implemented a range of interventions, including a stepped behaviour system, identification of key adults to support students, maintenance of a school SEBD (Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Difficulties) register, and specific instructional approaches such as 'Don't Make Small Things Big,' 'What's Appropriate, What's Not Appropriate?' and 'Are You a Friend Magnet?' These interventions collectively aimed to safeguard students' welfare, nurture their development, and prepare them for future success.

In essence, School 2 exhibited a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy aimed at creating a supportive and empowering learning environment. Their approach addressed diverse aspects of vulnerability and risk, ultimately working to break the cycle of underachievement and provide students with a solid foundation for their futures. This strategic focus underscored their dedication to supporting students comprehensively and holistically.

#### *School 5:*

**Preventative Measures:** Staff in School 5 emphasised keeping students within statutory education and avoiding confrontations. They aimed to equip students with academic currency and self-regulation skills while minimising disruptions. Their interventions, like centralised detention and a preventive curriculum, reflected a strategic focus on prevention.

The perspectives of School 5's staff on risk and vulnerability revealed a significant concern regarding the alignment of priorities between the school and external authorities or services. They expressed frustration over the discord between the school's perspective on risk and the responses from external agencies. This frustration was exemplified by a specific incident where a seemingly minor event garnered immediate police attention while more serious child protection concerns within the school context went unaddressed. This discord highlighted the challenges faced in balancing risk perspectives among different stakeholders.

In terms of their strategic focus, the staff at School 5 adopted a preventive and ameliorative approach to address student risk and vulnerability. Their primary aim was to ensure that students remained in statutory education or within the school environment for as long as possible, emphasising the critical importance of continuous engagement in education. This overarching aim was supported by several intentions, including equipping students with academic currency for their life beyond school, avoiding confrontations with staff and peers, fostering self-regulation skills, and facilitating access to EOTAS supports. These intentions highlighted the school's commitment to improving students' educational trajectories and promoting their holistic development and well-being.

To realise their objectives, School 5 staff members implemented a range of targeted interventions. These interventions included a preventive curriculum, a stepped behaviour system, in-school counselling services, modified timetables, engagement with school social workers, centralised detention procedures, restorative conversations, and the implementation of a behaviour for learning framework. These measures aligned with their strategic focus on prevention and amelioration, emphasising the significance of early interventions and proactive support to mitigate risks and vulnerabilities. School 5's approach aimed to create a nurturing and supportive environment that addressed students' individual needs while promoting positive behaviours and relationships.

#### *School 6*

**Protection and Repair:** School 6 staff made a clear distinction between 'at risk' and risk-taking behaviours. They aimed to protect students' safety and well-being while addressing underlying vulnerabilities. Their extensive interventions, including restorative practices and addiction recovery programmes, demonstrated a strategic focus on protection and repair.

School 6's staff members provided a nuanced perspective on risk and vulnerability, making a clear distinction between being 'at risk' and engaging in risk-taking behaviours. The PCL highlighted a particular student who, despite appearing to cope well on the surface, exhibited risk-taking behaviours related to substance use and relationships with older peers. This perspective emphasised that risk may

not always manifest in overt ways and highlighted the need to look beyond surface behaviours to identify underlying vulnerabilities. The SENCO at School 6 further reinforced this notion by emphasising that all students considered 'at risk' had underlying vulnerabilities, highlighting the interconnected nature of risk and pre-existing challenges.

In terms of their strategic focus, School 6's staff exhibited a primary orientation toward protecting students' welfare and safety while simultaneously addressing and repairing issues contributing to their risk and vulnerability. Their overarching aim was to provide students with access to therapeutic interventions, empowering them to manage their relationships effectively and facilitating their reintegration into mainstream classes, particularly after periods in EOTAS or nurture provision.

To achieve these objectives, School 6 implemented an extensive range of interventions, more than those observed in the other schools. These interventions included restorative practices, an addiction recovery programme, the use of the Take Ten app, modified timetables, partnership arrangements with EOTAS, dedicated family support workers, a full-time Nurture Provision, lower ability sets for additional support, structured learning support, one-on-one engagement with teachers, opportunities for stretching and challenging students, designated reward periods, phased reintegration into mainstream classes, prioritising the Special Educational Needs (SEN) route over pastoral support, issuing movement passes, ad hoc removals from class for timeouts or lunch out of school, and maintaining detailed student contracts.

The strategic focus of School 6 emphasised the importance of protecting students' safety and well-being while simultaneously addressing underlying issues and repairing any disruptions they encountered as learners. This comprehensive approach aimed to create a supportive and therapeutic environment where students could thrive, develop positive relationships, and ultimately overcome the challenges contributing to their vulnerability and risk.

### Common Themes

Alongside the distinct strategic focus of each school a number of common themes emerged from the data, relating to how the staff members intervened with 'at risk' and vulnerable students:

*Holistic Understanding:* In all schools, staff demonstrated an awareness of the multifaceted nature of risk and vulnerability. They recognized that these challenges encompassed not only academic performance but also social, emotional, familial, and community-related factors. This holistic understanding of risk and vulnerability was a common thread throughout the sample.

*Relationships and Engagement:* Across the schools, staff frequently mentioned the importance of building positive relationships with students, peers, and parents. They recognised that building healthy connections was instrumental in mitigating risk and vulnerability. Additionally, enhancing student engagement was a shared intention aimed at improving academic outcomes and reducing risk.

*Early Intervention:* The majority of schools exhibited a proactive approach to addressing risk and vulnerability. They emphasised the importance of early intervention, aiming to prevent or ameliorate factors contributing to students' challenges. These interventions often included tailored support, modified timetables, and behaviour management systems.

*Protection and Welfare:* Protecting students' safety and well-being was a central focus in the schools. They prioritised strategies and interventions aimed at ensuring students' physical and emotional safety, particularly in situations where risk was linked to external factors beyond the school environment.

In summary, while each school displayed a unique strategic focus based on their specific context and challenges, there were common threads of holistic understanding, relationship-building, early intervention, and a commitment to protecting students' well-being. These patterns provide valuable insights into how schools approach risk and vulnerability, emphasising the importance of tailored support and multifaceted strategies to address the complex needs of students effectively.

### 3.6 Tensions and contradictions and consistency with national policy in NI

Staff members identified a range of barriers and constraints to the work they were doing with students. In this section we draw out the tensions and contradictions that underpin these factors and attempt to understand how these are framed by policy and resource allocation.

#### *Tensions and Contradictions:*

Table 5 provides an overview of the instances in which participants referred to various barriers and constraints they have experienced while working with students deemed to be at-risk and/or vulnerable.

Theme	Staff Perspective	Participant Quotation
<b>Resource and Funding Challenges:</b>	EOTAS Provision and Pastoral Care Underfunded	"[...] they're' dealing with some volatile individuals where they have to have two staff members always present for that one child, which stretches it even more and makes it more difficult for them."
	Lack of Resource for Educational Psychology	"[...] when you have a limited number of hours – and by a limited number of hours I'm talking 16 hours a year for a school of 600+ pupils..."
	Cuts to Services – Increasing Burden on Schools	"The lack of services out there at the moment is tripling, it really is, you know. We're seeing more and more in school where we're expected to do more and more with less and less."
	Lack of specialist capacity in school	"I think it's beyond our capacity [...] So I do. I think we're trying our best with...but even all our pastoral supports that we have in school, she would be way beyond that too. I do think that she needs specialised therapeutic stuff."
<b>Systemic Issues and Processes:</b>	EOTAS Inflexibility/Responsiveness to Crisis	"If your kid's in crisis today, and the panels not until six weeks down the line, hard luck."
	Burden of Evidence to Gain EOTAS Placement	"Your records must be meticulous, if you're marking a comment or if you're going to be saying something on the behaviour management system, that will go to someone to read at some point."
	Onerous EOTAS Referral Process	"The EOTAS system itself in terms of the referral system is quite onerous, and it changes quite regularly, which doesn't actually really facilitate the school at all, because you can have a referral declined for multiple reasons [...]"
	Disconnected Supports and Services	"You do find though that occasionally with Education Welfare or Social Services or particularly CAMHS that you maybe don't know that a child is known to that service until you get a phone call, and sometimes that could be well into the year."
	Delays with SEN Assessments and Statementing	"Our feeling was that if we had applied for an EOTAS placement for this pupil with the panel sitting last week they probably would've come back and said, "You're waiting on the statement and you haven't got the advice from that yet, you need to wait for that advice to come before we can offer a placement [...]"
	System not inclusive of at-risk students	"The education system, the way it's currently set is not set up for Student 1 by any stretch of the imagination."
<b>Home and Family Dynamics:</b>	Family Life	"[...] whenever we look at kids, we can trace back most of the issues to home life... You know, when you look at home life, the kids are predominantly the way they are because of issues to do with parenting."
	No Consistency at Home	"Suspension won't change anything and for Student 4, you know, it won't change his behaviour, it won't change consistency at home."
	Unstable Care Provisions	"[...] rang the head of child social services, for example, to complain about how the system had treated this student. After our meeting, this student had 13, 13 or 14, changes of placement."
<b>Interactions and Relationships:</b>	Parental Support	"The parents that we have 100% behind us, are the parents that you really don't need, if that makes sense [...]"
	Perception That Schools Abuse EOTAS Provision	"It's the idea that maybe it's the perception, and I can understand that they're under severe pressure, maybe it's the perception in EA that teachers are using EOTAS as basically a means to exclude students."

	Duration of Time Between EOTAS Panels	<i>"There's a huge gap between, umm, the panel meetings for EOTAS [...] but this child unfortunately hasn't found things easier and so now we're in a position where the, the next panel meeting is 18th December – it's a long time to wait with a child that's completely, you know, in crisis."</i>
	Lack of Student Connection to School	<i>"[...] she hates school, and she actually isn't even aware of what it is, but she can just say, "I just hate the place." So no, she's not really felt a strong connection to [school name]."</i>
<b>Broader Policy and Environmental Factors:</b>	School Limited Influence	<i>"I'm going to be honest, not really, not really. I think he's got to the stage in his life where he's 16 now, he's earning some money working in the [shop], he just doesn't see authority like schools or social services as something that brings any positivity to his life, which is really sad."</i>
	COVID	<i>"[...] his placement was interrupted by COVID."</i>
	Heavy Lifting Schools	<i>"Schools that are heavy lifting are schools that have a high level of free school meal entitlement, schools that deal with a high number of EWS attendance, they are schools that have high levels of referrals to counselling services, children who do not sit or pass the transfer system [...] So when children come to here, we don't select them on anything, so you're dealing with more heavy lifting."</i>
	Policy Protects the School	<i>"The policies are very important because, well, as you know, policy is important in any organisation, because it protects."</i>
	Characteristics of EOTAS Placement	<i>"The dynamics of location, I think we've got past the fact it's in the [part of the city], just, but 15 boys and one girl [...] And yeah, it's going to be a difficult [...]"</i>

Table 3.13 Themes emerging from participant perspectives on barriers and constraints.

The themes that emerged from the analysis provide a structured framework to understand the complex interplay of factors affecting the support and well-being of these students:

*Resource and Funding Challenges* – School staff are consistently facing resource and funding challenges in their efforts to support 'at risk' and vulnerable students. The underfunding of EOTAS provision and pastoral care within schools was seen as straining their capacity to provide adequate support. This lack of resources extends to the availability of educational psychologists, whose expertise is often in high demand but insufficiently funded. Additionally, cuts to external services places an increasing burden on schools, as they must fill gaps in support, which can detract from their core educational function. These financial constraints represented a critical barrier to offering comprehensive assistance to the students the staff members were supporting.

*Systemic Issues and Processes* – The challenges within the NI education system itself add complexity to managing 'at risk' and vulnerable students. The inflexibility of EOTAS provision to respond to crisis situations was perceived as hindering timely interventions. Moreover, the burden of evidence required to secure an EOTAS placement was said to be onerous and complicated. Disconnected supports and services, along with delays in SEN assessments and statementing, had left students without the necessary assistance they required, compounding their vulnerabilities. These systemic issues underscore the need for a more streamlined and responsive system in NI.

*Home and Family Dynamics* – The staff members described how family life can be complex, and students may not experience consistency at home, impacting their stability and support systems. Unstable care provisions further exacerbated these challenges. These factors highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the broader context within which students live, as it directly influences their educational experiences and overall well-being.

*Interactions and Relationships* – Interactions and relationships within and outside the school environment were seen as crucial for 'at risk' and vulnerable students. Parental support was described as essential, but staff explained that there can be a perception that schools abuse EOTAS provision, leading to strained relationships between parents, educators, and the EOTAS administrators. Disrupted EOTAS placements, coupled with lengthy gaps between EOTAS panels, had been observed as disrupting students' routines. While some staff referred to the importance of the students' having a positive connection to the school. Building and maintaining positive relationships were vital for

students' emotional and educational development, making these factors central to effective support strategies.

*Broader Policy and Environmental Factors* – Broader policy and environmental factors impacted how the schools managed 'at risk' and vulnerable students. The schools often found themselves limited in their influence over certain dynamics, such as a student's need for an income, and when facing external challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. One school referred to the influence of place and demographics on their enrolment, with a high level of free school meal entitlement meaning they were tasked to carry a heavier burden of support. In this context, the staff member seen the importance of having robust policies that would protect the school's interests, despite these sometimes inadvertently leading to confrontations with vulnerable students. Understanding these broader contextual factors is essential for developing effective strategies and policies to support these students comprehensively.

#### The political economies of managing risk and vulnerability in Northern Ireland Schools

In Northern Ireland, the management of at-risk and vulnerable students within schools reveals a complex interplay of factors, highlighting the absence of a specific strategy or core policy guiding these efforts. This lack of a coherent framework is evident in the notable variation across schools in their strategic foci and the extensive number of interventions applied to individual student cases within relatively short timeframes. The absence of coherent guidelines challenges schools' ability to consistently address risk and vulnerability, leaving room for diversity in approaches and outcomes.

One salient observation is that not all student cases presented by school staff members were resolved in a positive way [see trajectories report]. Only two were described as having deescalated risk, while three escalated and three remained unchanged. This variability underscores the need for a more structured and coordinated approach to managing student vulnerabilities, as well as effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

Among the schools examined, School 5 exhibited a more preventative focus compared to others. Its proactive approach and interventions, such as in-school counselling, could be attributed to distinct governance structures for management and resourcing as an integrated school. These differences allowed School 5 to allocate resources and manage student exclusions differently, reflecting the potential impact of governance and resource allocation on responses to student needs. This is not to say that School 5 responded better than the other schools simply that it afforded staff alternative options.

Beyond the school environment, many staff members emphasised the influential role of external factors, including familial relationships, peer groups, and the broader community. However, the influence of Northern Ireland's historical conflict on the inequalities experienced by vulnerable student groups remains an indirect and underexplored aspect. While our sample did not provide direct evidence, this dimension warrants further examination and consideration in future research.

One clear example of the political economies at play in this context lies in the relationship between students, schools, and EOTAS provision. Tensions persist within the existing processes and structures, creating barriers that hinder timely access to support for students in need. The burden of evidence required to secure an EOTAS placement, coupled with inflexible EOTAS panels, underscores the need for systemic changes to streamline and enhance the support mechanisms available to vulnerable students. These challenges underscore the necessity for NI to develop a comprehensive policy framework that addresses the complex needs of at-risk and vulnerable students while considering the broader societal and historical context within which these challenges persist.

### 3.7 Implications for the provision for young people at risk of exclusion in NI

The implications for the provision of support and services for young people at risk of exclusion in NI are diverse and reflect the complexities of the education system and the broader societal context:

*Policy and Strategic Development* – Northern Ireland currently lacks a specific, coherent strategy or core policy that offers clear guidelines for schools on managing at-risk or vulnerable students and addressing school exclusions. The variability in school approaches and interventions indicates the need for comprehensive policy development. Establishing a well-defined policy framework is essential to ensure consistent, evidence-based support for at-risk students and to guide schools in their efforts to prevent exclusions.

*Resource Allocation and Funding* – The persistent resource and funding challenges faced by schools, particularly in the underfunding of EOTAS provision and pastoral care, significantly impact their ability to provide effective support. Addressing this issue requires a review of resource allocation mechanisms to ensure that schools receive adequate financial and human resources to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable students.

*Systemic Reforms* – The identified systemic issues, including the inflexibility of EOTAS provision, the burden of evidence for placements, and delays in SEN assessments and support, highlight the need for systemic reforms. These reforms should focus on streamlining processes, enhancing flexibility, and ensuring timely interventions for at-risk students within the education system.

*Family and Community Engagement* – Understanding the pivotal role of family dynamics, peer groups, and community contexts in student vulnerabilities is crucial. The provision of support services should include strategies for engaging parents and families in the education process and building positive community relationships. Addressing issues that originate from students' home and community environments is essential for comprehensive support.

*Governance Structures* – The variations in governance structures among schools, such as the example of school 5 as an integrated school, highlights the impact of governance on resource management and exclusions. Examining successful governance models can inform potential reforms aimed at empowering schools to manage resources and exclusions more effectively.

*Conflict Legacy* – While not directly evidenced in the sample, the historical conflict in NI may have contributed to the disparities experienced by vulnerable student groups. Exploring the historical context and its implications for educational inequalities can inform targeted interventions that address the legacy of the conflict on vulnerable students.

*Interagency Collaboration* – Enhancing collaboration and coordination among agencies, schools, and support services is critical. Strengthening the alignment between EOTAS and schools, improving communication among stakeholders, and fostering a shared commitment to the welfare and educational attainment of at-risk students are essential steps.

*Data Monitoring and Evaluation* – Implementing robust data collection and evaluation mechanisms is crucial for gaining insights into the effectiveness of interventions and identifying areas for improvement. Regularly monitoring student progress and outcomes can inform the refinement of support strategies and ensure evidence-based interventions.

In conclusion, the provision for young people at risk of exclusion in Northern Ireland demands a holistic, systemic, and context-specific approach. By developing a clear policy framework, reallocating

resources, supporting collaboration, and addressing historical factors, the education system in NI can work towards a more equitable and effective provision that prioritises the well-being and educational success of its most vulnerable students.

## Section 4: Scotland Report

### 4.1 Research Participants: Schools and staff

In Scotland, we interviewed staff across two case study local authorities (LAs). Both LAs are urban but LAa has a larger population, a higher number of pupils and schools, and a higher proportion of children and young people who are eligible for free school meals.

The exclusion rates for our schools have not stayed consistent over time – in four of the core schools, the rate of exclusion moved between the ‘below’, ‘average’ or ‘above’ categories over the three years prior to Covid-19 related school closures, so schools could not meaningfully be characterised as one category or another.

The proportion of children and young people registered as eligible for free school meals, and the proportion of children and young people living in areas with the highest levels of deprivation (based on SIMD data), varies widely in the schools in our sample, within LAs. In addition, three of the six schools are Roman Catholic. In Scotland, every child has a non-denominational catchment secondary school and a Roman Catholic catchment secondary school. Because there are fewer Roman Catholic schools in each local authority, their catchment areas tend to be far wider, which could be reflected in SIMD data for each school. In LAb, the percentage of children and young people registered for free school meals in the Roman Catholic school in the sample is less than half that in either of the other two schools, also reflected in the far smaller proportion of children and young people living in areas in SIMD 1 or 2 (15% compared to 52% and 68%). In all three schools in LAa, at least 30% of the pupils are registered for free school meals.

The proportion of children and young people identified as having an Additional Support Need varies across the six core schools, ranging from 44% to 72%, although it should be noted that this is not necessarily representative of the ‘true’ figure as there may be differences in recording and reporting across schools. ASN in Scotland is purposefully a broad category intended to be used flexibly in response to need, so children and young people can move in and out of this category.

We asked our six case study schools to identify staff who were responsible for pastoral care or additional support needs, and schools identified twelve staff across the six schools. One staff member left the school between interviews, so his case studies were excluded from the sample. The remaining eleven staff were all interviewed twice, at around six months apart. Three staff had roles which focused on pastoral care, three focused on ASL or achievement, and five had roles spanning both. Job titles varied across the schools, with pastoral roles described as principal teacher, lead, or deputy head for ‘inclusion’, ‘pastoral care’, ‘nurture’, or ‘wellbeing and equality’, or ‘house head’. ASL or achievement roles included principal teacher or lead for ‘support for learning’, and deputy head responsible for attainment and achievement. Three of those with roles encompassing both areas were deputy heads, and two were middle management. For the purposes of this report, and to ensure the preservation of anonymity, all those with roles focusing on pastoral care are recorded as ‘pastoral lead’, those responsible for ASL or achievement are recorded as ‘ASL lead’, and those spanning both are recorded as ‘pastoral and ASL lead’.

### 4.2 How staff conceptualised vulnerability

Participants conceptualised vulnerability as complex and multifaceted, acknowledging a range of factors that could contribute to vulnerability in particular contexts and at particular times. In line with this, vulnerability appeared to be perceived as contributed to by a range of people and factors, including those located within the individual child, the family, the school, and the community.

*'I think when we're talking about vulnerability, we use the word vulnerable a lot in the joint support team and it could be a vulnerability with regards to you know how they're feeling whether that's gender, their sexuality, illness, we have a lot of parents and grandparents as well, we have a lot of grandparents looking after children in the school and we have to talk about illness and disability. Young carers, you know, abuse, neglect, violence, additional support needs as well. So I suppose the term, vulnerability is used often but it's kind of an umbrella term. It encompasses so many different things.'* (Pastoral care lead)

Factors related to the family, such as a 'chaotic' family life, parental drug and alcohol use, perceived neglect, family involvement with the criminal justice system, and bereavement or changes to the family structure, were very commonly cited as vulnerabilities. Usually these circumstances were described in the context of wider social problems including poverty, crime, and domestic violence; participants almost always acknowledged that the families of case study young people were also facing difficulties.

*'So yeah, if I'm thinking technically in terms of vulnerability in education, my key thing I think would be, first and foremost, stability in the home, with particular view to, you know, poverty, family cohesion, addiction, and the impact that that can have.'* (Pastoral care lead)

The importance of relationships was often emphasised, with participants pointing out that children and young people without an adult 'on their side' were more vulnerable than others.

Psychologically informed concepts were common, with participants highlighting young people's perceived 'distress', 'dysregulation' and 'anxiety'. Some, but not all, participants focused heavily on narratives around the impact of 'trauma', 'ACEs' and 'damage' to explain the behaviour and outcomes of some young people, particularly where outcomes had not been positive:

*'She was doing very little work, that fell apart as well. And, and we'd high hopes for, for her, you know, as far as academic work because she was able but she, she, she wasn't ready to learn because she was so damaged.'* (ASL lead)

Factors which can be seen as relating to the individual child, such as decision-making skills, communication challenges, and age were often mentioned as vulnerabilities. School-based factors were usually implied rather than explicitly referenced as vulnerabilities, except where they related to social interaction with other pupils and the resulting vulnerabilities, for example to exploitation or getting into trouble in and out of school as a result of social interactions. Where these school-based vulnerabilities were mentioned, they were often framed as situated in the child as a result of ASD or communication difficulties:

*'...a worry for a lot of our pupils that just a lot of it is just really to fit in and to have these friendships, but that does make them the most vulnerable actually.'* (Pastoral care and ASL lead)

Covid-19 and the resulting school closures was often described as a source of, or as exacerbating existing, vulnerabilities. Participants described the increasing number and complexity of children they saw as vulnerable since the pandemic. At times this was explained by the 'trauma' caused by the pandemic, and at others it was explained by the compounded effect of poverty, the pandemic, and perceived parental behaviour.

*I think the, the actual lockdown for the pandemic was almost like the precursor to, I think, years of vulnerable and at-risk young people because of the trauma that that's brought about. (Pastoral care and ASL lead)*

*I'm seeing even from two years ago, you know, a huge increase, and I'm assuming it probably is to do with Covid, to do with pupils who are now...I just, just having that impact of the effects of everything that happened and still, you know, parents struggling with poverty, I suppose, leaving their children sometimes to their own devices more and more. (Pastoral and ASL lead)*

In discussions around Covid-19 it was usually implied, or stated explicitly, that participants expect that the impact has not yet become fully clear, and that there is more to come in future years.

### 4.3 How staff conceptualised risk

The terms risk and vulnerability were often used interchangeably; participants usually did not distinguish between the two, except when asked a question specifically about one or the other. Comments about vulnerability often also encompassed risk, and comments about risk often included vulnerability:

*'We have, we have so many categories of vulnerable young person, because we've got neglect being one of our main categories, however, it could also be that it's a young person that's at risk in the community, at risk of being kind of indoctrinated into gang culture is our kind of latest one that we've got.'* (Pastoral care lead)

Where participants did talk specifically about risk, they often talked about risk of exclusion but also discussed risk more widely, for example risk to young people when at home or in the community, including possible future risks. Similarly to vulnerability, participants generally acknowledged the complexity involved in recognising risk, and its multifaceted, often shifting nature:

*Yeah and, you know, that's something you need to be mindful, I suppose, getting back to when you were talking about risk, is when you're looking at what's causing the risk, there's, usually there's just never one factor, there's a combination of factors and it's trying to unpick was it a particular trigger or was it a combination of triggers and it was just, yeah, a particular random thing on that day just added to all the other things ongoing?* (ASL lead)

#### *Family and community risk*

School was often positioned as a place of safety in participants' accounts, with students' home lives and families situated as risky and potentially unsafe. This often arose in discussion of exclusion prevention and use of internal exclusion rather than formally excluding young people.

*for some young people, there's a greater risk for them being at home than for them being in school, so we have to be, you know, we have to be mindful of that when we're making our decisions* (ASL lead)

This framing of school as safe and home as unsafe had the – possibly unintended – effect of situating risk within the family. Participants sometimes also recognised the impact of broader social structures, particularly inequality and the poverty that results from this, on family life. The degree to which this was explicitly recognised in the interviews varied between the participants, but not noticeably by job role group or school.

Participants often alluded to family life; a 'good routine', 'good family life', 'nurture' and 'loving families' as key ways of avoiding exclusion and avoiding risk more generally and in relation to exclusion.

*So see even though our white and black children might be in the same kind of levels of poverty, our black children have really stable routine families because they're maybe first generation born in Scotland where they've come from Africa, they've got a really good routine and good family life. For*

*our white young people it's cyclical generational neglect and poverty that's really multifaceted and so even though they might be at the same SIMD status or the same poverty status, they are completely different in terms of how they'll access education and progress, like, in society and in life, so definitely boys, definitely white Scottish and single parent mums seems to be as well, they really struggle with boys. The single parent mum and the boy seems to be really difficult as well, so lack of male role models there, and so the gang becomes their family outside of the family home.*

*(Pastoral lead)*

As the above participant points out, the shape and impact of poverty is a multifaceted issue which cannot be fully explored in the context of a time-limited interview. Similarly, however, the young people described above as *not* at risk of exclusion no doubt also have complex, multifaceted lives and their perceived success in education is unlikely to be due solely to parenting differences and family structure.

Participants were usually aware of the risk factors for school exclusion at a population level, and in most respects said exclusion in their schools echoed these. Staff in several schools highlighted that white, Scottish, working-class boys were most at risk of exclusion.

*Poverty, substance misuse, mental health, which is not easily talked about, a kind of toxic masculinity type of culture, and as a result, most of the young people that we are now providing bespoke curriculums for and working really hard to avoid exclusions are S1 to S3 white working-class males.*

*(Pastoral and ASL lead)*

Staff in two schools particularly highlighted the risk of gang membership or organised crime as a particular concern. These schools were in different local authorities but with similar profiles in terms of ASN and SIMD data.

*The single parent mum and the boy seems to be really difficult as well, so lack of male role models there, and so the gang becomes their family outside of the family home. (Pastoral lead)*

#### *Individual risk*

Risk was sometimes conceptualised as located within the individual young person. It was clear throughout participants' accounts that additional support needs including ADHD, ASD and dyslexia were seen as important risk factors for exclusion.

*There's definitely a link in terms of the demographics. I can identify clearly the demographics of those of additional support needs... Which aren't diagnosed or aren't clear. That's for sure. Or very, very poor literacy I would say, when you've got a child who's got very poor literacy. (Pastoral and ASL lead)*

As a result of this awareness, participants very often talked about the importance of ensuring young people could access the curriculum, and of enabling support for communication and peer relationships.

Although behaviour was, in line with Scottish Government policy, usually treated as a form of communication, sometimes young people's behaviour was itself situated as the source of risk in participants' accounts. Some participants described 'risk taking behaviours' and described young people as being a 'risk to themselves'. These cases where a young person was 'deemed unsafe', or as 'a danger' simultaneously situated the school system as having failed the young person:

*there was self harm as well. There were reports from the, the children's house of her unsafe behaviour, her influence on other children when she was out there and we couldn't manage her. You know, ultimately we couldn't manage her. She was a, a danger. (ASL lead)*

In some cases, as in the above example, young people were described as presenting a risk to others. Sometimes young people were described as requiring a risk assessment in order to be able to come to school, and as posing 'a threat to staff and pupils'. Participants pointed out the risk to the wellbeing of staff:

*there's an impact on the people that are working their hardest to support these young people and are probably at risk themselves in terms of their own health and wellbeing when they are at risk of constant abuse, threats, and I think there's a cycle there that then feeds into it's difficult to see past that when you're doing the whole restorative welcoming them back, unconditional positive regard. I think if you feel vulnerable yourself, which you've got to remember, vulnerability, we've got vulnerability in our staff as well. (Pastoral and ASL lead)*

Age and size were also seen as related to risk, with participants describing how they believed some young people were at, and presented to others, an increased risk of exclusion or being put in dangerous or violent situations as they grew older, particularly for those who were seen as already vulnerable in social situations.

*... other people will take advantage and push and, you know, force, well not force him, but push him, entice him to do things and respond, which he's not able to withhold, so the situations that are more physical, so it's about yes, you know, getting into a fight, for example, for him, or it's about becoming more confrontational and towering over, you know, some teachers, or even, you know, some teachers who might be smaller in stature, and being quite intimidating as part of a group, so yes, as age, as they become older, they present a higher level of risk, yes, they do. (Pastoral and ASL lead)*

Although the potential risk of exclusion, and risk to others, was highlighted by participants, the risk of criminalisation was not usually explicitly explored, although all six schools have a campus police officer. The risk of becoming involved in criminal activity was sometimes acknowledged, but the risk of becoming criminalised through interactions with the criminal justice system which may have been otherwise avoidable was not.

#### 4.4 Differences between schools and staff in their conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability

We found no discernible differences across the three groups (ASN/ pastoral/ both) in how they framed risk and vulnerability, possibly reflecting Scottish Government's children's policy framework, Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), which emphasises the importance of taking a wide, wellbeing-focused approach and prioritises multi-agency working. In line with this, all the participants in Scotland talked about risk and vulnerability in a very wide sense, not limited to risk of exclusion or risk at school. They all acknowledged complexity and were aware of a range of factors that could influence risk and vulnerability, including the impact of learning barriers but also wider factors including family and community. Those with direct responsibility for ASN sometimes talked in more depth or first of all about learning-based additional support needs or diagnoses such as ASD or literacy levels, but all participants raised both ASN and wider pastoral issues in discussions around risk and vulnerability.

In all schools but one, poverty was acknowledged as a key driver of risk and vulnerability; the school in which it was not framed in this way was the one with the lowest (and markedly lower than all the

other schools) rate of pupils from SIMD 1 and 2. Staff in this school talked a lot about undiagnosed ASD, which also came up in other schools to a lesser degree.

Staff in two schools particularly highlighted the risk of gang membership or organised crime as a particular concern. These schools were in different local authorities but with similar profiles in terms of ASN and SIMD data.

#### 4.5 Differences between general discourses and that which referred to the case study students

Participants identified eighteen case studies of young people who they considered at risk of exclusion. The eighteen case studies comprise ten individual boys, one group of ten boys, and seven individual girls. One staff member left the school between interviews, so follow-up interviews with trajectory data are available for fifteen young people plus the group of ten boys<sup>35</sup>.

General discourses and those which referred to case study students were generally very closely aligned (see table 1). When describing individual cases, participants almost always referred to the types of issues they also raised when talking about risk and/or vulnerability in a general sense. These issues were wide-ranging, including additional support needs, poverty, relationships with adults, challenges in families, parental engagement, trauma and ACEs, violence, neglect, mental and physical health, and interactions with peers.

Participant	General discourse	Case study discourses
1	Relationships/ feelings of safety; covid-19; parents/family; poverty; support; partnership working	Relationships/ feelings of safety; covid-19; parents/family; poverty; support; partnership working
2	Covid-19; poverty; neglect; peer relationships	Relationships/ restorative practice
3	Poverty; social work; transitions; family structure; violence/gang culture; care experience; partnership working; male role models; trauma	Poverty; social work; transitions; family structure; violence/gang culture; care experience; partnership working; male role models; trauma
4	Relationships/ knowing young people; SIMD/poverty; school as safe, home as risky; trauma	Relationships and belonging; surveillance; trauma
5	N/A (staff member left school)	N/A (staff member left school)
6	Age; poverty; ASN; care experience; complexity; relationships	Age; ASN; poverty; family; complexity; relationships
7	ASN; literacy; family (support needs and engagement); relationships; mental health; age; peer group	ASN; literacy; family (support needs and engagement); relationships; mental health; age; peer group
8	Trauma/ACEs; behaviour as communication; social work; bereavement; SIMD/poverty; CAMHS	

<sup>35</sup> More information about the case studies can be found in the companion Excluded Lives report companion to "Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion."

9	Complexity; Covid-19; poverty; violence and gangs; ethnicity; mental health	Complexity; Covid-19; poverty; violence and gangs; ethnicity; mental health
10	Safe at school; mental health; ASN; information sharing	Accessing curriculum; health and mental health needs; sharing good practice
11	ASN (decision making and consequences); nuance and context; family/home	Gaps in learning; ASN; decision making and lack of understanding in social situations
12	Self-esteem, confidence; peer relationships; family/home	Mental health/health; family life; challenging peer relationships

Table 4.1 – General and Case Study Discourses

A more detailed example of the alignment of general and case study discourses can be seen in the worked example below. As part of a wider acknowledgement of the complexity of vulnerability and risk, this pastoral lead focused on the importance of relationships throughout the interviews; vulnerability was seen as increased for those without supportive relationships and adults who were able to protect them:

*I think if you're a young person, you're vulnerable. I mean, that, that's the nature of being a young person, you're dependent, you're dependent on the adults around you to be trustworthy, on your side, getting it right for you. I think when you talk in education about vulnerable, when you use the word technically, it's where that's not happening, where the adult isn't providing that. (DHT pastoral care, general)*

In line with this wider conceptualisation of vulnerability and therefore risk as mediated by relationships with supportive adults, in both the case study examples, the participant focused on relationship-building and developing trust.

With case study 8, the participant described creating opportunities for regular, short, ad-hoc, positive interactions to build relationships:

*But, you know, those kinds of check-ins and yeah, obviously I'm helping her sort of understand how to clean your face or whatever it is, but also just that constant message this is where I am, this is where I am, in the hopes that I'm checking in, that if she needed a check-in, she would come and see me.*

*With pupil, the first pupil, you're building something, so every time you have another conversation, and another conversation, and another conversation, you're putting just another wee piece of trust in place, another wee piece of consistency in place, it's retained, it's held, the next time she gets called to your office, she doesn't feel fearful, she might be pleased to come and see you and let you know how her day's going, because she recalls the last couple of visits to the office weren't all bad.*

With case study 9, the focus on relationships was evident through the work the participant had done to support the development of relationships between the pupil and other staff members, and then utilising these relationships to support the young person.

*So, what I did then was I arranged a meeting with mum and actually delayed that meeting until it was a day where [nurture specialist] was in, so that he could have that support next to him. So, those kinds of things, just sort of building in that trust and being quite responsive to needs as they arise and listening.*

*So yeah, so he'd come in on Monday, very, very closed off, very, very shut down, and gone into his literacy group, I'd asked him if he'd eaten today, nope. Have you drunk anything today? Nope. I said, 'Right, well, can I get you something?' And he said, 'Nope,' because that's a pushback, it's a, I don't want anything from you. He could be starving, and he wouldn't want it from me. And I said, 'That's no bother.' And I went through to the next room where we've got, you know, kind of one of our PSAs who supports nurture in the morning and said, 'Look, this is what he's telling me, but I think he is, he does need fed, could you give it 10 minutes, like we've not spoken, stick your head around the door.' And then I picked up with her later on said, 'How did you get on?' And he'd hoovered down a toasty and three cups of tea.*

Table 4.2 – Worked example 1: Pastoral lead (case studies Scotland 8 and 9)

#### 4.6 Conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability and their link to intentions (aims) and interventions

It was usually possible to see how conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability linked to the participants' stated intentions and interventions. Often these links were explicit, with participants referencing previous comments, and at other times links were more implicit.

Aims and interventions reflected participants' wide approach to defining risk and vulnerabilities; neither aims nor interventions were limited to academic success, with participants often citing aims such as increased confidence, or building life skills, and implementing interventions accordingly, such as access to wider achievement opportunities and creating opportunities to make new friends.

Where additional support needs such as low literacy levels, communication difficulties, or gaps in education, were identified as vulnerabilities, interventions included additional support to try to mitigate for these, for example by providing one-to-one support within the mainstream classroom.

Participants were able to explain their reasoning behind selecting particular interventions, often in great depth, and their reasoning always came back to the perceived needs of the child. As described in depth in the companion report *"Trajectories of Young People at Risk of Exclusion"*, interventions were usually flexible and were often adapted to suit the needs of the child and the changing context.

General discourse – risk and vulnerabilities	ASN – decision making and understanding consequences; need for nuance/ context when deciding whether young person is vulnerable and requires support or intervention
Case study discourse – risk and vulnerabilities	Gaps in learning due to ASN and poor attendance; lack of understanding of social situations and poor decision-making skills; risk of sexual and social exploitation
Case study aim	Life skills, safety, self-worth: <i>'I couldn't care less how many qualifications she leaves school with, as long as she can leave school just with an understanding of personal safety and personal worth as well.'</i>
Case study interventions	Part-time timetable (currently 'very part-time'); time in support base; different start and finish times and lesson changeover times; child planning meetings; frequent communication with home; fortnightly planning support group meetings (external, including ed psych); outdoor education days at two local charities; building wider

	achievement opportunities into timetable; being led by YP's interests
Reasons for interventions	P/T timetable and time in support base make it easier to navigate relationships as not surrounded by lots of people, and also to try to make it possible for YP to access school in some way; communication with gran to support attendance; planning support group meetings act as a 'sounding board'; being led by YP's interest e.g. horse riding/ animals, as a way of engaging her; wider achievement opportunities provide opportunities to 'catch up on missed aspects of childhood'
Case study tensions and contradictions	Transition from primary school badly managed; questions around whether this young person would have had a better experience in a special school

Table 4.3 Worked Example 2: Pastoral Lead (case study Scotland 15)

Although there was usually a clear line of sight from perceived vulnerability and risk, to aim and interventions, participants did also raise concerns around access to resources, within and beyond the education sector, that they perceived as necessary in supporting the young people they described (see section 4.4 tensions and contradictions).

#### 4.7 Tensions and contradictions and consistency with national policy

All participants mentioned multi-agency working as an important part of preventing exclusion and were supportive and positive about this way of working. There were, however, evident tensions around the allocation of resources and the implications for young people. Services such as social work, mental health services, and special school provision, were often described as under-resourced, with thresholds so high that schools could sometimes not access the resources that they needed to offer appropriate support to young people.

*... you can also feel quite isolated and unsupported, because different organisations have different priorities or have different...how they gauge risk, how they gauge concern is different from ourselves, or yeah, so there can be things that you're thinking like, God, this is, and you know, they've got a lack of resource so they might be going, well, what you're describing to us is actually relatively run of the mill. (ASL lead)*

Extremely long CAMHS waiting lists were frequently raised as a problem, with schools sometimes saying they were taking on some of the work that they previously would have expected CAMHS to do. Similarly, social work involvement was described as only available when families were at breaking point, which was frustrating for school staff, who ended up filling the gap.

*when social work become the lead professional in theory, the reality is it's not happening in practice, and that becomes problematic because they're there because you're meant to be doing a joined up piece of work with a young person, your team around the child or team around the family, and actually the reality is, on a day to day basis, the school are still the ones that are doing the majority of the support. (Pastoral and ASL lead)*

There was a general sense that the impacts of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis were ongoing and likely to get worse, and that this would compound the adversities experienced by those who were already seen as vulnerable.

*All children are vulnerable. And depending on what's lacking around them is where social services, education services, health services, we're trying to pick it up. But, I mean, it's...you know, we talked*

*about where those services are in terms of their breaking points, we know that child poverty is on the rise, that's not getting any better, cost of living's up, cost of everything's up, services haven't recovered from the pandemic, so the level of need goes up, but the resources get tighter and tighter, meaning that the vulnerability that we see becomes more prolific and more evident and...I'm depressing myself [laughs]. (pastoral lead)*

Similarly, although participants almost always acknowledged the challenges facing families, this rarely appeared to extend to the interventions that were offered; regular contact with parents/carers, and sometimes referrals for family support or interventions, were mentioned, but practical and financial support were not (except as an initial response to Covid-19 during lockdowns). This is likely to reflect the limited access to resources and scope to work with parents experienced by schools.

#### 4.8 Implications for policy and practice

The Scottish policy focus on prevention and wellbeing was evident throughout participants' narratives. A wide range of interventions was used within frameworks that prioritised relationships and inclusion. It was clear that young people were seen by participants as part of their schools, whether or not they were currently there. There was widespread acknowledgement that what happened for young people within schools was intricately connected to their lives outside of school, and that the increasingly challenging broader environment, including the impact of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis, was likely to exacerbate the challenges already faced by many families. This in turn highlights the crucial importance of addressing broader inequalities and adequately resourcing services beyond education. Positive communication and multi-agency working were positioned as crucial. Knowledge of and support for multi-agency working was high, reflecting Scottish Government's GIRFEC approach. Some challenges were raised, however, around ensuring that multi-agency working was in practice as effective as possible in the context of extremely high caseloads for some practitioners such as social workers and CAMHS.

Reflecting Scottish Government policy, participants' accounts of case studies were strongly underpinned by an understanding of behaviour as communication. This understanding was evident in the practice they described, which overwhelmingly focused on supporting young people and trying to meet need, rather than punitive approaches. In Scotland in recent months there has been a renewed interest in behaviour, culminating in the Education Secretary's recent 'behaviour summit'<sup>36,37,38</sup>. The case studies act as sobering reminders of the complex issues surrounding experiences and perceptions of behaviour in schools, including poverty, societal and cultural issues, structural issues, adults' actions, interactions and perceptions, resourcing and staffing in schools.

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<sup>36</sup> J.P. Holden (2022), 'Education in Scotland: Pupil Behaviour "The Worst It's Been in Years"', *Herald Scotland*, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/20139609.education-scotland-pupil-behaviour-the-worst-years/>

<sup>37</sup> Scottish Parliament Debate (24th May 2023), 'Motion S6M-09126', *My Society*, <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2023-05-24.17.0&s=Schools+Exclusion#g17.26>

<sup>38</sup> Scottish Government (May 2023), 'Behaviour in Schools', <https://www.gov.scot/news/behaviour-in-schools/>

## Section 5: Cross Jurisdiction Comparison

### 5.1 Setting the Context for Comparisons

Overall, the Excluded Lives research programme aims to understand the contextual and institutional processes that lead to different rates and types of exclusion across the UK. Educational policies within each of the jurisdictions varied at the time of the research with respect to the differing emphasis placed on well-being, early intervention, flexibility of the curriculum and the extent to which provision was responsive to community needs. At the same time there continue to be similarities in who gets excluded. The pandemic brought to attention the wider groups of young people considered vulnerable and their access to educational opportunities. It also surfaced some of the complexities of responding to risk and broadened our understandings of what those risks entail. Here we look across the jurisdiction reports to consider the ways in which the use of the term vulnerability is underpinned by very different understandings of causation, how factors within the individual, family, school or community, including broader structural inequities, interplay to differentially put young people at risk of exclusion. We then turn to look at the how professionals' understandings of these factors in turn shaped the focus of their intervention.

The data were collected through interviews with two key professionals in each school at two points in time with a particular focus on students who they put forward as being of concern and at risk of exclusion. There were variations in the role of professionals that reflect policy differences in each jurisdiction. We included staff with responsibility for students who had special educational needs, but recognize that the focus in Scotland are a broader group of young people with a range of additional support needs. In England staff were referred to as SENCOs, in N. Ireland they were also referred to as Learning Co-ordinators and in Scotland their focus was additional support needs or achievement or both. Similarly, the staff whose prime responsibility was pastoral care varied in their activities both within and between jurisdictions. In England, for example their designated role ranged from Behaviour and Attendance, Safeguarding, Attitude to Learning, Student Experience and Well-being, to Mental Health; in Scotland the role spanned Inclusion, Nurture, Wellbeing and Equity and almost half the roles spanned both pastoral and educational needs. In N. Ireland, the two staff members were, at their request, interviewed together, often because it reflected better the way in which they worked. These differences serve to remind us of the distinct systemic context that professionals were working in and the different values that underpinned their activities. More specifically it is indicative of the extent to which collaborative, holistic approaches or particular policy initiative are drivers of school responses.

The number of schools participating varied from 4- 9, in part a reflection of the differing geographies and population in England, N. Ireland and Scotland, and although originally the aim was to include both high and low excluding schools, the pandemic made school selection and involvement quite problematic. In consequence in Scotland the schools were selected from urban settings with a higher percentage of young people receiving free school meals. In N. Ireland schools were predominantly those with a low exclusion rate and spanned different management types.

### 5.2 Understandings of Vulnerability

The literature has heightened our attention to the ways in which sources of vulnerability are located broadly, not merely focussing on a characteristic of the young person but also with reference to a situation or context, widening the account to the school, family, the community or structural forces. This was echoed in the discourses of our key members of staff in each of the jurisdictions. Staff refer

to its complex and multifaceted nature (Scotland), a complex interplay of factors (N. Ireland), and a multiplicity of interactive factors (England).

At the same time in both N. Ireland and England, individual factors predominate in the discourse. Reference is made to groups of young people, those with SEND, children on child protection register, looked after children (England, N. Ireland). Within the individual factors lies a recognition that vulnerability can stem from feelings and emotions including self-image, anxiety and mental health and these in turn impact on relationships with others (England). Reference is made to psychologically informed concepts and not having an adult on their side (Scotland) as well as apathy and low self-esteem (N. Ireland).

In N. Ireland three of the four schools located vulnerability within individual and family only. Staff here identified familial relationships and needs as integral to the vulnerabilities with a critical factor being parental engagement. In England family breakdowns, a lack of boundary setting or establishment of routines were seen as contributing factors, particularly with respect to attendance.

In contrast in Scotland, in all but one school poverty was positioned as a key driver of vulnerability, with a recognition that wider social problems played out in families. There was often a blurring in the discourse between individual and situational accounts, for example young people on free school meals, those who have experienced adverse life situations (N. Ireland) or neglect, chaotic family life with drug and alcohol use and involvement in the criminal justice system and bereavement (Scotland), where the impact is individually felt but the root cause is situational.

In Northern Ireland and Scotland much less is discussed with reference to schools as a source of vulnerability. Rather, school-based factors are implied rather than specifically referenced- except with respect to those related to social interaction (Scotland). Conversely, in England the contribution of school factors is discussed more directly with reference made to vulnerabilities caused by a lack of access to appropriate educational support, negative attitudes of some staff including those who show a lack of contextual understanding, and poor classroom management skills. There is also some distinctive recognition of the need for a more inclusive approach.

The impact of Covid-19 was commented on in each jurisdiction. In N. Ireland it was seen to have a profound impact, particularly with respect to access of basic needs including food and heating. In Scotland it was described as exacerbating vulnerabilities both with respect to the number and complexity through the compounded effect of poverty, trauma and perceived impact on parental behaviour. Likewise, in England, the pandemic was seen to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and have a negative impact on the acceptance of diversity.

### 5.3 Understandings of Risk

In many ways it was difficult to separate out staff understandings of risk from that of vulnerability, as the terms were often used both interchangeably and together in each of the jurisdictions. At the same time there were differences within jurisdictions about the extent to which all students that were seen as vulnerable were at risk and those who were at risk also seen as vulnerable. This was well illustrated by the way in which a student could be seen as both at risk and a risk (Scotland and England). In N. Ireland a distinction was made between being at risk and engaging in risk-taking behaviours. In Scotland the system was seen to have failed when a young person became a risk, and this was inferred in England.

Differences again play out in the ways in which sources of risk are located. In England and Northern Ireland risk are predominately located at the individual level with a particular concern around educational outcomes and employability (N. Ireland) mental health, violence and drugs (England).

Jurisdictions further differ with respect to families where relationships are a significant locus in Northern Ireland and in Scotland home is framed (possibly unintentionally) as an unsafe place for some individuals. In contrast, relatively little is said in the England narratives about risks and home; instead risks to the individuals are often linked with community exploitation. In Scotland and England schools are positioned as a place of safety. In contrast in N. Ireland peer interactions were described as impacting on safety within the school environment.

There were consistencies between how staff spoke generally about risk and vulnerability and more specific narratives concerning the case study students. However, the latter were more detailed, highlighting nuances that went beyond the broader discourses and were more likely than general discourses to elicit reference to risk (England). There was recognition in the general discourses that at a population level some groups were more at risk than others. For example, in Scotland, white working-class boys were particularly seen to experience risk, and those with additional special needs, including ASD and dyslexia. In England students with SEN without an EHCP, and those unable to access the curriculum through reading difficulties were considered to be at particular risk.

Although it is possible to see the ways in which risk was located both for the individual and as a result of situational and structural factors, risk was also portrayed as shifting. For example, absence from school on the one hand raised concerns about the risk to educational attainment and outcomes, it also raised concerns about safety. Young people who were not in school were seen as at greater risk of exploitation.

#### 5.4 Links to Intervention

When we turn to compare the three jurisdictions an important question is how their understandings of risk and vulnerability inform their intervention strategies. What or who needs to change and to what purpose? Interventions in each setting are presented as multifaceted, personalised and bespoke, reflecting the perceived needs of the student. In this regard they align closely with understandings of risk and vulnerability that are located with the individual. The aims and strategic focus vary between schools and cases, and are not limited to academic progress. In all three jurisdictions they include teaching pro-social skills that under-pin the building of positive interactions. In this sense the strategies can be described as future orientated, designed to change behaviour in the here and now but also help develop skills to draw on in any future situation. Although the focus lies with the individual, their social and emotional underpinning requires others also to respond to the young person differently. With respect to academic attainment, strategies often involve the introduction of new teaching arrangements, the use of modified or reduced timetables, adapted curricula, access to alternative rather than mainstream provision. These are often introduced to promote (re)engagement with learning, reducing the pressures on students, providing smaller group sizes and more access to individual support. They can also be an opportunity to build on students' strengths and interests. However, such approaches can additionally be seen to have potential disadvantages. In the England report, staff note the exclusionary potential of interventions that can also contribute to difficulties in keeping pace with mainstream learning and sever relationships with peers. Such observations draw attention to the careful balancing act required in decisions around the place and content of learning.

We also see intervention strategies designed with the aim of addressing issues of safety and well-being in each of the jurisdictions. Often these involve movement passes (N. Ireland) or the equivalent to enable young people to get out of situations they find challenging and access safe (decompression) spaces. There are many examples of providing counselling, and other therapeutic and mental health interventions of the jurisdictions. For many of the case study young people,

particularly in the Northern Ireland and Scotland reports, school interventions can be considered holistic in responding to needs.

Despite the recognition that vulnerability is located across different levels and factors, there are fewer examples where the target of the intervention is the school, family or wider context. For example, schools do make reasonable adjustments in response to individuals, and recognize they need to intervene earlier. There is also a school focus with respect to managing the situation, keeping the student in school (England), or compliance with rules and routines (N. Ireland). However, there are relatively few examples of a school change to make the mainstream environment more inclusive. We do see in the English data examples of school inset to promote a contextual understanding of behaviour, and in Scotland on prioritising inclusion.

There are also fewer references to working with parents to support them in bringing about change. In Northern Ireland one school had a particular focus on changing parental relationships with the school. In England there were some examples of working with parents around improving attendance and in Scotland despite the widespread acknowledgement of the challenges facing families practical support is described as limited. The majority of the interventions are either designed to enable the young person to fit into the mainstream class or, more commonly, to be educated elsewhere.

It is unclear the extent to which this reflects school culture and policy or the barriers that schools encounter, or a combination, the one shaping the other. Across all three jurisdictions staff discuss the extent to which interventions are constrained by resource challenges within and beyond the education sector (Scotland). There is a universal concern expressed about the extent to which they are enabled to work with other agencies who are equally under-resourced, with a consequent raising of thresholds to access interventions (N Ireland, England and Scotland) and a retrenchment to core responsibilities (England). The impact is delayed access to appropriate support.

### *Summary*

When we turn to examine the links between understandings of risk and vulnerability and schools' intervention strategies there is consistency in the extent to which individual accounts predominate despite a recognition of the [often major] contribution of other factors. This is partially consistent with an account that at the core lies an individual account of difference while other factors serve to exacerbate the risk. Schools are concerned with the safety and welfare of young people in addition to preparing them for the future through both academic and non-academic learning. Safety and well-being risks serve to operate at both the level of the individual and at the level of the school. The focus of the activity can therefore be a changing one.

Staff in each jurisdiction express frustration over the barriers posed in their access to external resources and expertise which would enable offsetting the risks posed by other factors in the young person's life. The interactive element of the challenges young people face indicate the importance of being able to break the cycle where one adversity compounds the risk posed by another. Arguably schools are placed at the front line given the ongoing impact of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis, both of which have structural roots that are outside their control.

In consequence, there are no single bullet solutions, but rather some complex decision-making as staff balance different risk outcomes to put together a package of bespoke intervention strategies.

## 5.5 Implications and Policy

The reports raise important issues with respect to policy. They note issues about the parity of concern between those with and those without an EHCP (England) and issues of inequality around poverty (Scotland). Although expressed differently these are likely to involve similar groups of students, consistent with the groups that staff express concern as being at greater risk of school exclusion.

The reports reveal the ways in which over-bureaucratic procedures can hinder timely access to support. This is evident in Northern Ireland with respect to documenting evidence to access EOTAS and in England with respect to assessment and application for an EHCP. The lengthy procedures are seen as adding complexity to managing risk, and to make a heavy demand on staff time. Neither policy systems support early intervention, a strategy that is deemed fundamental to a success outcome. Indeed, in Scotland the policy focus on prevention (and wellbeing) is prevalent in staff narratives.

In contrast to the bureaucracy laid down in national policies, what is seen to be needed is flexibility that can support the tailoring of interventions to meet different needs and interests in a timely manner. Governance structure was identified as a facilitating factor in Northern Ireland. In England some schools show greater flexibility and confidence in interpreting a broad and balanced curriculum. Too much flexibility can also be seen as problematic. A concern is raised in the Northern Ireland report that because the jurisdiction currently lacks a core policy, this leaves too much scope for variation between schools in the approaches they adopt and students risk outcomes.

There is a further interesting difference between Northern Ireland, where there is a lack of national data, and England where data is noted as constraining attention to who is seen as vulnerable. In Northern Ireland robust data is seen as having a vital role in monitoring and evaluation and identifying areas for improvement. This highlights the ways in which national data can provide a safeguard for particular groups. Conversely in England, where data are routinely gathered, and statistics regularly published, the limitations of their usefulness are highlighted. Data that are easily measurable/collectable (attendance, sanctions, suspensions), are seen as too decontextualized and insufficiently nuanced to inform early identification of vulnerable groups. These observations draw attention to ways in which data collection tools shape activities often with unintended results.

Both Scotland and Northern Ireland fully recognize the importance of family and community engagement. However, activities in these areas are also recognized as problematic, either because of school resources or because of poor lines of communication with other agencies. Schools are not empowered to extend their responsibilities to provide the sustained support of young people in other contexts.

Given the interactional nature of individual and situational factors contributing to vulnerability it is interesting to note that in both Scotland and Northern Ireland responsibilities for pastoral and educational aspects are closely intertwined. This helps to ensure a contextual understanding of vulnerability and the attending risks.

The literature in welfare policy has drawn attention to the ways in which the use of the term vulnerability raises important questions with respect to entitlement, who deserves support, and also to human agency (Brown 2015<sup>39</sup>). Inequalities are heightened during times of austerity, particularly

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<sup>39</sup> Brown, K. (2015) *Vulnerability and Young People: Care and Social Control*. Policy Press

for children and young people. Our analysis has surfaced the limitations of single factor accounts and the importance of a contextual understanding where relationships form a central element.

Notably young people in Brown's (2015) research distance themselves from the term. Further she states:

when operationalised, the concept of vulnerability opens up tensions about how far vulnerability judgements take account of the views expressed by the individual or group in question, and the extent to which these should be overridden p179

Staff in our research drew attention to issues of self-image, and mental health, a reminder of important identity work as young people navigate their teenage years and preserve a sense of self-worth. It is a timely reminder of the place of critical reflection of what underpins assumptions and beliefs about the construction and use of the term vulnerability.

## 5.6 Core messages

- The research has illustrated the ways in which individual and situational vulnerabilities are understood as operating in an inter-related and interactional manner requiring complex multi-layered interventions. Schools are arguably at the frontline but limited in their spheres of intervention.
- Staff identified inequalities in the parity of concern for different groups of young people at risk of exclusion.
- Understanding the interactive effect, particularly with respect to structural inequities is a vital element in looking beyond the behaviour to identify strategies that reduce risk.
- Schools where pastoral lead staff and those responsible for special educational or additional needs work closely together are better placed to adopt a holistic approach.
- The research illustrated the careful decision-making that was required to balance risk and opportunities. Interventions that were future orientated, gave young people hope and expectations were empowering.
- Policy systems that set out extended bureaucratic processes hinder timely intervention. National data systems often have unintended consequences, they can inform but can also constrain the way complex systems are understood.

Our research has prompted critical reflection on the sources of vulnerability to exclusion and the multi-layered factors that contribute to its construction. An ongoing dialogue with the young person promotes an understanding of what underlies a student's behaviour. This is an important first step towards responding in a way gives young people a sense of agency and self-worth and positive future expectations.

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