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# Political and educational springboard or straitjacket? Theorizing post/human subjects in an age of vulnerability

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Contemporary discourses of social justice in education, disability, mental health, social policy and feminist studies are refracted increasingly through concerns about psychological and structural vulnerabilities created by the crises of late capitalism. Focusing on developments in British social policy generally, and educational research specifically, this paper uses the authors' contrasting perspectives on two discernible discourses of vulnerability emerging in these contexts. One elevates the recognition of collective vulnerability as a springboard for new conceptualisations of resistance that disrupt materialist narratives of the human subject as a coherent, unified and rational agent of history. A second discourse offers a materialist understanding that locates vulnerability as both driver and product of a 'therapeutic culture', arguing that a psycho-emotional focus for vulnerability offers a diminished and ineffective subjectivity that belies rhetorics of resistance. These contrasting perspectives generate and emerge simultaneously from new understandings of the human subject. The paper evaluates the implications of using vulnerability to frame expectations of human subjects for everyday educational practices and relationships. It concludes by suggesting empirical questions that need exploring.

**Keywords:** vulnerability; materialism; post/humanism; social justice; psycho-emotional; subjectivity

## Introduction

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Pressing research and educational questions often arise from noticing small everyday changes in how we conceptualise humanity, regard and make judgements about people and how we treat them subsequently. The salient example for this paper is the growing ubiquity of references amongst teachers, support workers, researchers and teacher educators to 'young people with fragile/exhausted learning identities', 'vulnerable and fragile learners', the 'disaffected and disengaged'. Some references borrow policy terms offered by the Social Exclusion Unit from the previous British government, such as people with 'fractured and fragmented lives' and 'complex needs' (1998). More recently, the emergence of everyday references to 'troubled children', children from 'troubled families' and 'troubling behaviour' borrows labels proffered by the current Coalition government.

In everyday practice in schools, colleges and universities, such labels are used, variously, for asylum seekers learning English, the children of asylum seekers, the "*low self-esteemers in my class*", 'non-traditional' students who have emotional barriers to learning, working class boys, young people on entry to employment programmes, or 14-year olds disaffected with school education in this way (e.g. Ecclestone 2013; Lumby, 2011). People also increasingly refer to themselves as 'vulnerable'. In 2011, a group of British homeless young people taking part in a national policy commission about the future of public services referred to themselves frequently as 'vulnerable', defining it widely, from feeling very insecure in a scary, horrible world to the serious material problems of being homeless and unemployed (Sullivan, 2011 added to refs; see also Brown, 2014). The prevalence of vulnerability in official policies and associated practices that we explore below leads Kate Brown to suggest we live in a 'vulnerability' zeitgeist' (Brown, 2014)

However, this zeitgeist is not confined to those at the educational and social margins since vulnerability has come to be used increasingly loosely by many outside formal or official definitions, including those who might deem themselves or be deemed as privileged. At the same time, contemporary understandings of inequalities and new approaches to social justice, especially those from radical and critical perspectives, are often refracted through an intertwining of psychological and therapeutic representations of 'vulnerability' (see Ecclestone & Brunila, in press).

We respond in this paper to the theoretical and practical challenges that a vulnerability zeitgeist creates. Using two distinct perspectives, we explore the limits *and* possibilities offered by changing notions of social justice and its connection with vulnerability, highlighting implications for ideas about inclusive, empowering or emancipatory education. We frame our approach to exploring these perspectives around the question; *What does vulnerability do when it disrupts our understandings of the educational subject?* Our different positions suggest theoretical and practical implications for educational settings and we explore these at the end of the paper, addressing the question *What happens when everyday educational discourses, practices and relationships are founded on a recognition of, and attention to, vulnerability?*

We structure our arguments in the following way. First, we summarise key themes in the political, social and academic turn to vulnerability in the geopolitical context of Britain, where, according to sociologist Lois Waquant, ideological and material attacks on the welfare state and publicly funded education are the most advanced global manifestations of the re-formation of the state (Waquant, 2012). Our arguments therefore arise from a particular set of circumstances whilst being highly relevant for other educational systems facing similar re-formations. We argue that

vulnerability as a policy category and focus for radical and critical aspirations is a significant theoretical and political development. Unsurprisingly, its effects are contradictory, presenting dangers for pathologising and marginalising vulnerability alongside responses that depict it both as a source of inclusion and opportunity to politically mobilise against to prevailing reductive social policies.

In sections 2 and 3, we explore theoretical responses to these dangers, focusing on two distinct, and as we conclude, seemingly irreconcilable positions. We locate discursive, im/material and performative readings of the roots, mechanisms and consequences of vulnerability within broader celebrations of it as a potential source of resistance. This position argues that the increasingly precarious state of late capitalism cannot help producing new forms of living and activism that we may term 'posthuman' (Braidotti, 2013). The second position contrasts posthuman aspirations with a materialist understanding that locates contemporary depictions of vulnerability at the heart of discourses and practices generated by a 'therapeutic culture'. This position takes a humanist stance and sees a psycho-emotional focus for vulnerability as offering an introspective, diminished sense of subjectivity, thereby challenging hopes that it can be a progressive or emancipatory lens for understanding the human subject. We conclude by highlighting implications of our two positions for everyday educational practices and relationships, and evaluate the extent to which contrasting these positions is a useful theoretical approach. We do not aim, indeed are unable, to offer a preferred position or to reconcile them. We end by evaluating our different positions and suggesting further empirical questions that warrant further exploration.


## 1. The political, social, and theoretical turn to 'vulnerability'

Official government definitions of vulnerability have expanded significantly since 1995 when the Law Commission defined the vulnerable individual as someone who is, or may be, "in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, of age or illness and who is, or may be, unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation". The Care Standards Act of 2000 and Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act of 2006 widened the criteria to include those in care, sheltered housing or lawful custody, receiving any form of health care or prescribed welfare services, requiring assistance in the conduct of her or his affairs. The last three criteria extend categories of vulnerability even further by including those in counselling or palliative care alongside other forms of prescribed support provided by an independent hospital, independent clinic, independent agency or National Health Service body.

In part, expanding official criteria and everyday references to vulnerability in educational settings are the latest manifestation of old concerns about social and educational prospects for young people at the margins of education and employment (e.g. delete Lumby, 2012). Here rising measures and indicators of low well being, disengagement and general fragility in the face of their exposure to globalization has turned education in late capitalism into a structural and increasingly stressful hurdle in a risky environment and an essential remedy (delete; Lumby 2012 see also Wright & McLeod, in press).

Vulnerability as a policy category and focus for research also has a much wider reach. In growing numbers of countries, interventions to build communal, individual and governmental resilience emanating from social policy and research are rooted in widespread pessimism about vulnerability, risk and fragility for growing numbers of

individuals and groups (e.g. Brown, 2014). One effect in policy and related research is that understandings and applications of vulnerability encompass very diverse fears, ranging from serious civil unrest, terrorist attacks and pandemics to everyday educational difficulties and dealing with social relationships (e.g. Durodie, 2009; Furedi, 2008; Ecclestone & Lewis 2014).

For critics, these malleable definitions and their application in policy and practice are tantamount to targeting social actors deemed to be at risk to themselves and to their communities (e.g. Brown, 2014; Spandler, 2013). As Brown observes in her review of approaches to vulnerability from 1998 to 2011, such diffused and malleable criteria reflect diverse and changing official preoccupations (Brown, 2014. Taken together, these criteria and their outcomes threaten to enhance state and professional power through therapeutic and disciplinary interventions, become embedded in strategies to build citizenship, and justify new anti-social behaviour mechanisms and to reduce welfare provision.

In certain responses, like those favoured by Goodley, critical researchers aim to depathologise official categories by recasting vulnerability as a progressive attribute of a relational citizenship, integral to the '*fragile and contingent nature of personhood*' where we are all '*potentially vulnerable*' and where vulnerability is a '*universal*' ontological dimension of human experience and identity (Beckett, quoted by McLeod, 2012, p. 22). In this scenario, recognising vulnerability enables everyone to claim their right to '*be protected from the effects of potential vulnerabilities [whilst] defending the rights of others to receive support in the light of their actual vulnerability*'. At the same time, for Goodley, vulnerability evokes a theoretical response. For example, some theorists depict collective and specific vulnerabilities as potential sources of political resistance that reveal structural inequalities and the deflection of social responsibility for them. From the field of mental health, Helen Spandler (2013) argues for seeing 'illness' as embodying both negative and positive possibilities, as something to marshal in order to illuminate enduring oppressions of capitalism. Here collective narratives of suffering and lay expertise de-centre professional definitions and de-stigmatise vulnerability as a springboard for political resistance. In another rejection of normalizing and unrealistic aspirations of capitalist materialism for growing numbers of people, Judith Butler links notions of vulnerability to 'precarity' as a vehicle for new forms of power and resistance:

> precariousness [is] a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed [is] one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life… precaritization as an ongoing process [avoids reducing] the power of precarious to single acts or events. Precaritization allows us to think about the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space. And it is surely a form of power without a subject, which is to say that there is no one centre that propels its direction and destruction. (Butler, in Puar, 2012, p. 8)

A recurring debate of contemporary queer feminist writings addresses the precarious, vulnerable nature of life in the twenty first century (e.g. Puar, 2012). For example, Lauren Berlant (2011) argues that the increased vulnerability of global citizens should not be dismissed as a tragic consequence of capitalism. Instead, as she argues in Puar's (2012, p. 166) piece, if we examine close enough, we will find a 'thriving new world of interdependency and care' as we open ourselves on to one another for support, alliance and connection. Here the word *precarity*, for Berlant (2011), as a term closely related to vulnerability, works as a politicized, theoretical and ontological concept because it explains an existential problem (life has no

guarantees), an ongoing economic problem (evidenced by the indiscriminate vagaries of global capitalism), a problem of the reproduction of life (we never have enough time to live), and a rallying call for political organization (we are engaged in contested antagonisms and nostalgias about times when we could, for example, rely on the security of a welfare state that is now being rolled back or is nothing more than a diminution of the state to a servant of capitalism). Precarity as a bedfellow of vulnerability emerges in late capitalism as a moment of recognition and a centre for political activism. For Goodley (forthcoming), its emergence leads potentially to some exciting debates around what it means to be human, an argument we return to below.

This radical appropriation of vulnerability links to broader and older debates about social justice. In a contemporary version of the old radical slogan 'the personal is political', a growing preoccupation with the psycho-emotional aspects of inequality draws in diverse theoretical perspectives and disagreements to offer a relational view of social justice. Here an emphasis on identity politics moves notions of universal justice away from structural change towards an 'ethics of otherness' and cultural recognition (see Gerwitz, 1998, Ecclestone & Brunila, in press). A relational view of social justice suggests that welfare professionals and educators should adopt practices that listen to the pain of cultural loss amongst oppressed groups and which also 'co-author … joint narratives about [their] problems, needs and claims' (Leonard, quoted by Gerwitz, 1998, p. 476). For other sociologists, an explicit focus on the shaping of class, raced and gendered identities and 'the generative dynamic between thinking, feeling and practices' illuminates 'the psychic landscape of social class' and the ways in which everyday and structural inequalities are framed and lived emotionally and psychologically (Reay, 2005, p. 912). In an educational context re-theorizing what is at stake when we deal in social difference requires attention to 'the investments, feelings, fears, pains, pleasures and contradictory emotions entangled within the world of education' (Leathwood & Hey, 2009, pp. 431, 436). We return later to the implications of these ideas for educational practices.


2.  **Disrupting the human subject: the possibilities or constraints of post/human**

A powerful strand in the turn towards vulnerability as a central focus for social justice comes from disability studies, and generates the potential for new, immaterial understandings of all human subjects that we might characterise as 'posthuman' understandings. For Goodley (2011), disablism can be understood as those oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralize those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative. Like vulnerability, disability disrupts the taken-for-granted, tacitly accepted, bounded rational learner at the heart of both mainstream and radical conceptions of education. For example, learners identified as having complex cognitive impairments, who might never be able to reach the highest levels of cognitive ability, trouble the end goal of much democratic and radical education because they *contravene the humanist premise that we all inhabit autonomous, rational, stable, and coherent subjectivities* (Erevelles, 2002a, p. 19; 2002b, p. 12).

Following such arguments, for Goodley there is no doubt that some disabled people, for example, those with the label of severe cognitive impairments (and here we should note the definitive quality of this scientific and psychiatric category as truly outside the appropriate humanist rational register), risk being depicted as the real Others of educational theory: inherently defective, useless, unproductive

(forthcoming). Goodley agrees with Erevelles (1996) that we need to rethink what we understand as appropriate humanness:

> … when even those who espouse radical discourses seem unable to reconceptualise an alternative world without being locked into the political constructions of what constitutes appropriate humanness, then it becomes apparent that the disability movement has a task that goes above and beyond merely extending the boundaries of the discourses that celebrate humanism and instead needs to focus its energy on re-theorising itself.  (Erevelles, 1996 p. 522)

For Erevelles, this humanist logic 'emphasises individual potential and its associated traits of autonomy, competence and rationality as the necessary pre-conditions for being recognised as a citizen' (2002a p. 9). For Vandekinderen (2013), the social construct of *norm*ality is so often tied to emplo*yability (italics in the original)* (p. 155)*.*  Yet for many political activists, labour is *the* material practice through which we are alienated and emancipated: for those that do not or cannot work, labour's normality is unveiled. Two questions resonate with our interests in this paper: 'What happens when the dominant assumptions that undergird the characteristics of rationality, autonomy and competence, [characteristics] that form the bulwark of liberal society [and of humanist, material understandings of human subjects], contravene the very existence of the oppressed group? What happens when the very essence of the liberal humanist self is necessarily predicated on the construction of the disabled Other as the embodiment of inalienable difference?' (Erevelles, 2002b, p. 11).

For Goodley, limitations of the humanist subject appear in the ways in which this subject, as it is conceptualised, will *always* exclude those humans that are judged to fail to match up to the appropriate humanness of rationality, autonomy and competence. The dominant modernist conception of the human, for Braidotti (2013, p. 13), is always 'He: a classical ideal of "Man"': rational animal endowed with language, an ideal of bodily perfection, property owning, living in towns, citizen of cosmopolitan North American and Western Europe. This humanist subject defines himself by what he exclude, thus involving a 'belligerent relation to the sexualised, racialised and naturalised "others" that occupy the slot of devalued difference' (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 143–144).

To this slot of devalued difference, we can add disabled learners. Humanism can only spawn and value those kinds of humans that match its prototype. Is there any wonder, Goodley would ask, why we urgently require new conceptions of what it means to be a valued human being? This leads us into the theoretical space of the posthuman and an im/material understanding of personhood. An im/material understanding recognises the real and nebulous, concrete and fluid, structural and cultural shapings of the human in our current contemporary time. One can account for the material shaping of vulnerability through reference to capitalism, alienation and oppression. Being able to account for the immaterial, namely discursive, cultural, informational and technological, constitution of an apparent individual and collective ontology of vulnerability requires us to look to postmodern and poststructuralist ideas. For example, Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) highly influential work on *Empire* and the *Multitude* dovetails well here. They suggest that we are witnessing a globalization of biopolitics: the streaming of discourses of the self (e.g. psychology, social work, education) that permit us to speak of ourselves and others. These biopolitical manifestations touch each and every one of us in ways that formalize languages of the body and mind. In short, discourse invite us to understand, and by doing so, govern

our selves. If we know one thing about self-governance it is this: it will inevitably lead to feelings of doubt, lack and anxiety. Vulnerability, then, is an inevitable consequence of the immaterial globalisation of biopolitics.

The theoretical space that emerges asks us to consider how we might refashion the way we live our precarious lives in association with others (Braidotti, 2006). This affirmative take on vulnerability shifts us away from the humanist reliance on the independent sovereign self to a posthuman celebration of interdependence. The vulnerable self depends upon others to live. Numerous disabled selves that are normatively understood as dependent are now recast as sources of interdependence. Disability, we might suggest, demands interdependency, thus inviting new ways of thinking about what it means to be a (post) human subject.

As we observed earlier, vulnerability is politically malleable and theoretically nebulous. Yet it also enables new ways of im/material thinking. Vulnerability cuts across the material and immaterial aspects of life. Our bodies carry the marks of culture. We come to know our bodies through available discourses, ideas and images that abound in the immaterial world. Simultaneously, these cultural formations are embedded in the material practices of capitalism. Vulnerability, like disability, has immaterial (cultural) and material (economic) origins.

The work of Puar, work that Goodley would associate also with a posthuman attitude, pushes this theorization of vulnerability, particularly her work on *debility,* where a key argument is that we all, to varying extents, live in a 'debilitated state in relation to what one's bodily capacity is imagined to be' (Puar, 2009, p. 167). Puar argues that capitalism's working over of the body places us all in a relationship with debility in an era of 'heightened demands for bodily capacity' (Puar, 2010, n.p.). The intensification of demands to do more risks wearing our bodies out, a concept that Lauren Berlant terms 'slow death'.  For Goodley, debility is a key marking of schooling, where the intensification of assessed, surveilled and performative expectations and practices risk making schools places of rising debility for children and teachers alike.  Yet debility is also an opportunity: if, as Puar suggests, we are all shown to be engaged in a process of debility, we must think again about our (educational) priorities (2010). For Goodley, then, debility, linked inextricably to vulnerability, demands new ways of thinking of the human and associated politics of aspiration, empowerment and perhaps emancipation.


## 3.  Challenging the progressive possibilities of vulnerability

Whilst recognising the motivation for an expanded account of our vulnerabilities, McLeod (2012) argues that it overlooks profound structural differences and real vulnerabilities that lead to powerful and damaging exclusions for some more than others.  Other critics, including Ecclestone, reject arguments that intertwining vulnerability, risk and resilience has progressive possibilities.  From this standpoint, popular and political sensibilities which present vulnerability as a universal human condition and a cultural norm are exacerbated by policy experts who advocate 'risk analysis' underpinned by 'vulnerability analysis' of the various forms of psychological, physical, economic, social and cultural "harms to which individuals and modern societies might be susceptible (Slovic, 2002, quoted by Furedi, 2008, p. 651). Here Furedi argues that liberal and radical discourses of empowerment and resistance are intertwined with those of vulnerability, thereby belying an underpinning lack of faith in the public's ability to be resilient on their own terms.  This, in turn, is

created by a defeatist pessimism amongst academics, policy makers and many social policy professionals about the future and how to deal with it.  For him, this produces social policies that no longer aim to solve problems but merely to offer various forms of psycho-emotional *support* for disempowered clients to face diverse vulnerabilities (2008, our emphasis).

For Ecclestone, there is an inextricable relationship between the political turn to vulnerability, profound pessimism about prospects for radical social change based on economic and material redistribution (in which meaningful education fits), and fears about psychological and emotional capacity for resilience amongst growing numbers of people deemed to be vulnerable.  This relationship challenges claims that elevating shared potential or actual vulnerability generates grass-roots forms of resilience.  Instead, the privileging of vulnerability lowers aspirations for removing material barriers and replaces them with barriers to 'participatory parity'.  This re-presents such barriers as psycho-emotional vulnerabilities that require state-sponsored therapeutic interventions (see Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014; McLaughlin, 2011).

To illuminate these developments, a body of work on 'therapeutic culture' suggests that understandings and assumptions rooted in ideas and practices from psychology, counselling and various forms of therapy dominate depictions of vulnerability and responses framed around resilience (see Furedi, 2004; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2014; McLaughlin, 2011; Nolan, 1998 Wright, 2011). Here a set of therapeutic assumptions recast individual and collective vulnerability as predominantly psycho-emotional and relational and therefore amenable to therapeutic intervention.  In this context, arguments between advocates of behavioural and more radical types of therapeutic intervention about how best to respond to vulnerability become reduced to which type of intervention is most progressive (see Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014; Ecclestone & Brunila, in press).

In this context, Ecclestone argues here that the celebration of vulnerability, precarity and debility goes further than merely justifying therapeutic interventions. In its fundamental challenge to subjectivity and agency, this celebration is the latest manifestation of profound philosophical and political disdain for materialist understandings of human subjects (e.g. Panton, 2012; Cummings, 2006 Malik, 2001 Rooted in a 'politics of subjectivity' that ruptured liberal and left feminist and race movements during the 1960s and 1970s, the turn to vulnerability in contemporary understandings of social justice reflect old struggles about the relative importance of public and private spheres of action, external and personal knowledge, and the ways in which these spheres shape subjectivity and, in turn, our agency (see Panton, 2012; McLaughlin, 2011; Ecclestone, 2011).

Notwithstanding the contemporary unpopularity of a materialist understanding of subjectivity, Ecclestone argues that a material reading of vulnerability offers two essential cautions to claims that it is emancipatory to blur personal, private, emotional and public spheres by elevating feelings and experiences of vulnerability as a source of cultural and political recognition.  First, this contemporary take on 'the personal is political' overlooks the ways in which a therapeutic culture reifies this erosion of boundaries (e.g. Nolan, 1998 ; Furedi 2004). In his study of radical political movements, James Panton argues that political and social preoccupation with 'absorbing the self in the world and reflecting the world in the self' diminishes individuals' capacity for, and interest in, action in the world.  Rather, 'collective or community life is understood as held together not by common experience or activity,

but through the ability of individuals to "disclose" themselves to each other' (2012, pp. 167–168).

Second, Ecclestone would argue that the humanist agentic subject is widely and mistakenly denigrated as solely an individualistic, self-interested, 'neo-liberal' masculine one that precludes collective agency. This overlooks how the shift in feminist and other radical political movements towards introspective, personalised understandings of the emotional individual as a necessary foundation for collective struggle has itself been central in disrupting collective struggle for social change (e.g. Panton, 2012). Instead, even highly sophisticated attempts to theorise outwards from understandings and practices of our socially and emotionally vulnerable selves will fail because, according to Panton, 'the process of interpreting experience involves an explanation of experience in terms of something other than its own content' (2012, p181). Following this argument, a therapeutic culture offers a sense of collective being confined to the orthodoxy that 'if there is no psychological openness, there is no social bond', thereby prohibiting this external explanation and the social action that might flow from it (Panton 2012, ).

Seen in this light, Richard Sennett's (2005) analysis of the nature of respect between public service and welfare professionals in crisis-ridden capitalist societies is highly relevant. Sennet argues that professionals' guilt about their own relative privilege and their inability to address structural inequality leads them to 'cross the boundaries of inequality' by privileging the promotion of clients' self-worth and empathy with their emotional and psychological experiences (2005). This is especially tempting in education where profound fears about growing pressures on those most marginalized and at risk of educational failure have eroded radical hopes for socially progressive mechanisms for equality.

In the specific context of vulnerability discussed in this paper, discursive disruptions to materialist understandings of subjectivity blur further the boundaries between our professional and/or public and private lives, and between associated ways of regarding others and behaving towards them. This intensifies cultural expectations that we should model our professional and public relationships on intimate ones and demonstrate emotional empathy, emotional disclosure, and mutual recognition of suffering. These expectations become a requisite marker of radical political commitment. In this context, a logical outcome of disability standpoints on 'ableism' is to see failure or resistance to disclosing ourselves as vulnerable as being 'ableist'. Similarly, some feminist perspectives in education depict failure to recognize vulnerability, or merely to question its discursive and practical effects, as manifestations of masculinist and elitist Othering of non-traditional students (e.g. Leathwood & Hey, 2009).

In response to such arguments, Ecclestone would argue that prioritising not merely feeling over agency in the public sphere but, specifically, feelings and disclosures of vulnerability, exacerbates a diminished introspective individuality that is suspicious of, and disillusioned with, the outcomes of collective agency and struggle (e.g. Malik, 2000; Heartfield, 2000). From this standpoint, the demand to express vulnerability exacerbates 'the real challenge facing humanism', namely 'the low esteem accorded to the status of humanity' and disillusionment with the consequences of progress (Furedi, 2006 p. 25).

Seen in this light, a diminished account of the humanist subject reifies vulnerability, depicting the experience of everyday life as inherently emotionally distressing. For Ecclestone there are two dangers here. First, the expansion of universal vulnerability risks diverting attention from serious material and

psychological vulnerabilities that demand proper resources.  Second, in a period of growing inequality and starker manifestations of it, the danger is to foster deeper disillusionment, distrust and fear of humanity itself, rather than of the structural inequalities that underpin them. This challenges claims that vulnerability is a form of resistance and a springboard for collective action.


## 4.  Implications for everyday educational practices

It should be clear that while we have not presented a 'for and against vulnerability' debate as such, we disagree fundamentally with one another about the emancipatory potential of vulnerability to disrupt materialist understandings of the human subject. Our disagreement returns us to the second of the 2 questions we posed at the beginning of this paper: What happens when everyday educational discourses, practices and relationships are founded on recognition of, and attention to, vulnerability?  We propose some implications that arise from our theorizing and suggest some practical dilemmas and tensions that arise from them, recognizing that these need exploring empirically.

For Goodley, a posthuman reading of vulnerability disrupts the educational subject in some exhilarating ways.  Following Butler's arguments about precarity in Section 1, he highlights these as a productive view of vulnerability because it affirms mutual bonds that support life. Here we are fragile but we are also fundamentally social animals requiring interdependent connections to and with others (Goodley, forthcoming).  According to Butler, 'there is something very practical at hand here: we have to rethink the human in light of precarity, showing that there is no human without those networks of life within which human life is but one sort of life' (Butler, in Puar, 2012, p. 173).

A posthuman approach to education that understands the human subject as an interdependent, connected and distributed entity lends itself to some valuable discussions around socially just, inclusive and expansive forms of education. Drawing here on his collaborative writing around posthuman pedagogy, Goodley argues that Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) text *A Thousand Plateaus* offers some compelling conceptual tools for revisioning social practice in light of a posthuman intervention (Goodley, 2007a; 2007b; 2011; forthcoming; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2013). One of these ideas, *machinic assemblage,* replaces a psychologized notion of humanist subjectivity with the visualization of self-and-others that are 'composed of multiply embodied parts that interchange, creating new relationships, alliances, and communities' (Ramlow, 2006, p. 181). Disability has the potential to rethink the distinction of self and other, recasting it as a posthuman, interdependent collectivity (Goodley, forthcoming). We can think of machinic assemblages in relation to relationships of mutuality between learners, supporters, teachers, school and community, thereby raising the image of the posthuman assemblage as a form of humanity always connected to and desiring of connections with others. Vulnerable post-human celebrates a pedagogy of connectivity. It recognises that many of these connections are infused with power relations but illuminates the possibilities for education through an expanded sense of learning: form self-as-learner to self-and-others-as-learners. Attending to our relationships, the intentions behind our connections, and the costs/benefits that emerge, are always fundamentally social, political and ethical considerations. In short, they might promote an im/material praxis.

For Ecclestone, these arguments extend long running liberal calls for student-centred pedagogy and curricula, as a challenge to arid and performative learning and assessment experiences and to the persistence of intractable inequalities in educational achievement, engagement and prospects2013a, b ). Yet reconfiguring these enduring features of education in the light of vulnerability fails to challenge the material and structural realities that give rise to them. This, of course, is an old materialist objection but it remains highly salient in the face of calls to turn attention to vulnerability and to offer new understandings of the vulnerable human subject. Here the practical question we posed in this section requires empirical study: we do not yet know what pedagogy, curriculum knowledge and assessments rooted in notions of vulnerability and precarity and related notions of social justice 'look like'. Nor do we know what their discursive effects on constructing educational subjectivities and subsequent relationships might be.

The need to explore these potential effects is pressing. Extending long running educational tensions and dilemmas around the goals of inclusion, new ones are emerging in random, *ad hoc* ways from discourses and practices framed around vulnerability. Our title for this paper, namely whether vulnerability acts as a political and educational springboard or a straitjacket, encapsulates some of these tensions. Does attention to vulnerability create a self-fulfilling prophecy that diminishes people's identity and capacity for agency, or does it offer new opportunities for these, and for socially justice responses to vulnerability? Does attention to vulnerability create a springboard for building resilience, or make it difficult to differentiate between serious and trivial claims of vulnerability, and to allocate scarce resources for those with problems? Do assumptions about, and claims to, vulnerability undermine our confidence in challenging and engaging students in difficult work and lower our expectations of what they are capable of? What happens when curriculum subjects and educators themselves become risks and threats and therefore new sources of vulnerability? How should we respond to the growing tendency to label students as vulnerable and to attribute reasons, often casually and in essentialising ways? Following Sennett (2005), what happens when attempts to elevate mutual vulnerability fail to compensate for the relative invulnerabilities that come from educational, economic and social advantage?

For Ecclestone, more troubling political questions arise about elevating perceived or real bodily, cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities as the foundation of inclusive practices: does this undermine aspirations for material, technological and medical advances, better education and the basic standards of living and work that should characterize modern societies? Here justification for not striving for structural and material advances because this is unrealistic and oppressive for growing numbers of people excluded from them seems too easily to lead to a poverty of aspirations. For Goodley, such concerns miss the point about the complexities not only of educational processes but also the ways in which we might reconfigure what it means to be human.


**Conclusions**

The turn to vulnerability as focus in policy, practice, academic research and radical and progressive political and educational agendas is a significant development. We have used two contrasting positions to review existing debates, highlighting dangers for pathologising vulnerability, alongside its promise to invite more inclusive and

compassionate responses. One response is to recognize the very real political mobilisations around modernity's human subject (Goodley forthcoming). Here activists with the label of intellectual disabilities have, in some corners of the globe, mobilised around the notion of being *People First*. The trouble with evoking such a humanist concept, however, is that the often the only successful person is a socially productive one measured in terms of 'value for money, flexibility and, of course, the proverbial performance rating' (Peck and Tickell, 2002, p. 387). In the cold light of day, many of us (including members of *People First*) fail to match up to this impossible ideal of personhood.

Ecclestone acknowledges that experiences and feelings of structural, physical and psycho-emotional vulnerability are increasing: they are not, therefore, mere social or cultural constructions but are, rather, embodied, felt and experienced. This caveat is important in face of criticisms that questioning discourses and practices founded in vulnerability make one invariably ableist, elitist or simply uncaring. From a materialist position, she has argued that a therapeutic culture privileges a focus on psycho-emotional vulnerability and legitimizes therapeutic interventions. For her, this both belies and constrains political hopes and possibilities for vulnerability. Specifically, silencing universal aspirations for bodily, material and psychological well-being because they are excluding, oppressive and ableist reinforces widespread political and philosophical disillusionment with the role of the humanist subject in social and scientific progress.

In the political context of intensifying ideological attacks and resource cuts to the welfare state, state governance of emotionally vulnerable subjects and resistance to it might be read as a contemporary response to C. Wright-Mills' injunction to 'make private troubles public issues' (1959/1979). Here we share concern that vulnerability expands state governance. This can be read, perhaps over- simplistically as a 'neo-liberal' responsibilisation of the psychologically and structurally independent, self-interested individual citizen (see Emery 2013). Yet celebrating psycho-emotional vulnerability also enables the therapeutic state to sponsor new pedagogies offered by lay and professional experts as an omnipresent source of authority for managing everyday emotional vulnerability whilst avoiding attention to the underlying structural conditions that create it (Ecclestone, 2013b). For Goodley, adopting vulnerability as a mode of production for processes of psychologisation can feed into wider processes of pathologising marginalised Others. In contrast, were we to view vulnerability as an inevitable condition of late capitalism, then this begs the question: what do we do with vulnerability? A posthuman approach seeks interdependence, connection and assemblages between those deemed vulnerable and many others. In this case, then, vulnerability is recast as an ontological, relational and political opportunity for reconnecting with our communities and institutions (including those associated with education).

We have aimed to illuminate contradictory positions on the growing prominence of vulnerability and some of their potential effects on educational practices. Although it seems that these positions are largely irreconcilable, debating them here has, we believe, been highly productive. We conclude by highlighting the need to scrutinise claims for emancipation and empowerment, on the one hand, and arguments that vulnerability leads to disempowering and confining forms of education, on the other. We also recognise the need to explore empirically the practical manifestations of these claims and arguments in everyday educational settings. Contrasting two distinct theoretical positions has enabled us to expose fundamental political and theoretical disagreements and to identify gaps in our understanding of how accounts of social

justice rooted in different understandings of subjectivity are, or might be, translated into everyday teaching, curriculum knowledge, assessment and support practices. This offers both theoretical and empirical possibilities for further work.


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