The Rise of Therapeutic Education: Beneficent, Uncertain, or Dangerous?

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> In the name of 'therapy' and 'emotions', there is much well-intentioned but insufficiently thought out faddism in schools.
>
> Mintz, 2009: 646

We currently work in a university which hosts our internationally recognised 'Research Centre for Therapeutic Education' (see: www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/rcte/index.html), of which DL is the Director. We have therefore been somewhat exercised and challenged by the work centred around Professors Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes, which directly challenges what they somewhat dramatically term 'the dangerous rise of therapeutic education' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008; see also Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). Their work is part of a wider critical assault on 'the rise of the therapeutic' in modern Western culture, rooted in the previous work of Rieff (1966), Lasch (1979) and Nolan (1998), and taking its most recent and fully articulated incarnation in the work of sociologist Frank Furedi (e.g. 2004), whose writings are particularly referred to by Ecclestone and Hayes.

We would like to draw on the useful classifying device from Smeyers et al. (2007), who posit that attitudes towards the meeting of therapy and education can be divided into three broadly defined tendencies: first, there are the enthusiastic advocates of therapeutic education; this would include policy-makers who have (arguably) uncritically embraced the role of a therapeutic ethos in the education system – in, what we will argue below, are often crass and possibly even counterproductive ways. Second, there are what Smeyers et al. term 'the reactionaries', who view the therapeutic ethos as intrinsically misguided and harmful (Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi would certainly fall into this category). And thirdly, there are those nuanced pragmatists who attempt to steer some kind of middle path between the two latter polarised positions, and who strive to distinguish effective from ineffective therapeutic practices.

As will become clear from what follows, we certainly locate ourselves in the latter category. Our co-edited book *Childhood, Well-being and a Therapeutic Ethos* (2009) (which is reviewed in this issue) is an attempt to articulate what this middle position might look like in theory and practice. The book emerged as one 'outcome' of a research project in the Research Centre, which includes the now famous Open Letter on 'toxic childhood'

that appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* in September 2006 (co-orchestrated by RH and author Sue Palmer), and which was followed in 2007 by another Open Letter on the degradation of children's play, a major conference on play and playfulness in therapy and education in 2008, and a series of seminars on the broad theme of therapeutic education, held by our Research Centre between 2007 and 2009.

The rise of therapeutic values in education has a long history, at the very least going back to the well-known humanistic educational approach of Carl Rogers (e.g. see Rogers, 1969/1994; Behr and Cornelius-White, 2008; Keys and Walshaw, 2008) – and perhaps going right back to Aristotle and Plato, with, for example, Aristotle's consideration of the place of the emotions in education and learning (Kristjansson, 2007; Mintz, 2009). There is also a critical body of literature that has fundamentally challenged the 'soul-violence' that conventional schooling systems do to children, coming out of a radical and alternative educational ethos and practice that burgeoned particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, strongly influenced by the work of people like A.S. Neill and John Holt. An excellent exemplar of the latter literature is the book *I'm Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Violence against Children*, by Alan Block. In his book, Block combines psychoanalytic object relations and postmodern approaches, illustrating the destructive effects that the idea and practice of schools and curriculum have on the development of the child's psychological self. Block explores the construction of the idea of the child as a product of adult needs, and schools as places where children are confined until they can be considered economically and socially useful.

For Alan Block, in our technocratic age, 'the definition of the child is made so precise that *the imaginative freedom of the individual child is denied*, [and] the child's freedom to play and explore is severely curtailed'. One might argue that the relentless incursion of imposed cognitive-intellectual learning at ever earlier ages (e.g. via England's state-imposed Early Years Foundation Stage) is just one example of these pernicious trends – and this in the face of mounting international evidence that the 'too much too soon' educational ideology may be doing untold harm to a generation of children (House, 2011a).

One argument is that mainstream education seems to have lost touch with a deep understanding of the developmental needs of children, and is, rather, preoccupied with foisting an adult-centric, audit-culture agenda on to children which is anxiety-driven, developmentally inappropriate and educationally unnecessary (House, 2007). We are increasingly reading media reports about how, for example, children are becoming bored and disaffected with learning at ages as young as 6 or 7; how the

rates of mental ill-health in children are at record levels and relentlessly rising; how Ritalin prescriptions are also soaring as our society medicalises and pathologises what might well be children's *understandable* response to, and unwitting commentary on, our 'mad' educational culture (e.g. Timimi, 2002); and how young boys' learning is suffering dramatically as they are being forced to 'sit still' for long periods in formal settings which are failing quite fundamentally to meet their developmental needs (e.g. Timimi, 2005; Palmer, 2009).

Block's impassioned arguments on imaginative play are consistent with the views of a host of educationalists, that the experience of free, *unintruded-upon* play is an absolutely essential precondition for the development of both a well-rounded, emotionally mature personality, and for inculcating the highly desirable human qualities of creativity, self-motivation and, not least, the lifelong love of learning. The freedom of *imagination* is a delicate human quality that can all too easily be damaged – sometimes irreparably – by modern, age-inappropriate educational practices. For Block, 'to deny imagination is to deny *the very creativity that makes self possible*…. To deny imagination is to instill hatred where should stem love and creativity' (our italics). Moreover, modern schooling 'establishes a dictatorship over the child *in which reality is defined by the other*. …the imagination… [is] denied for the predetermined outlines of the other. This violence denies the very existence of the individual child *and denies that child all opportunity to learn*' (our italics).

In the face of a system which, as Block writes, 'banish[es] children… under a dense cover of rationalistic, abstract discourse about "cognition", "development", "achievement", etc.', it becomes 'impossible to hear the child's own voice', in the process 'dismissing the child's experience and… falsify[ing] the actual lived experience of children'. Block advocates doing away for ever with the fixed curricula, universal standards, and intensive surveillance through which we discipline our children: 'Until we create an environment in which the child may use the educational establishment *to create him or her self*, until we serve only as a frame on which the canvas may appear in paint, we will continue to practice extreme violence upon the child, denying him/her growth, health, and experience' (our italics again).

If Block's analysis is even remotely right, then the argument for some kind of therapeutically informed sensibility becoming woven into the education system (with the *how* of such a development being the crucial issue – see below) seems to us to be pretty much unanswerable. However, enter at this point the challenging work of Ecclestone and Hayes, who take a very different view on the place of 'the therapeutic' in educational systems. In their influential 2007 book *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, they draw on a wide range of examples across the education system, from

primary schools to university, to show how, they claim, 'therapeutic education' is turning children into anxious and self-preoccupied individuals rather than aspiring, resilient learners who thirst for knowledge about the world. The book addresses a variety of themes, including: the ways in which therapeutic ideas from popular culture are now dominating social thought and policy-making, which, for them, inculcates a 'diminished view of the self' and of human potential; how schools are increasingly undermining parental authority by fostering children's dependence via compulsory participation in therapeutic activities based on the disclosing of emotions to teachers and peers; and the ways in which such developments have been propelled by an avalanche (certainly under the previous government) of political initiatives in areas like emotional literacy, emotional well-being and what they term the 'soft outcomes' of lowest-common-denominator learning.

We welcome Ecclestones and Hayes' book in terms of the serious public debate it has helped to generate about the emotional state of education. In an invited response to a report in the *Daily Telegraph* (Paton, 2009) on Ecclestone's work (referring to her chapter included in our own 2009 book on childhood), we were quoted in the *Telegraph* report as saying:

> Such highly complex issues need careful unpacking…; we need to improve on the balance between the academic and the emotional climate of children's learning environments, advocating as we do a 'therapeutic ethos' which privileges the resources of the human soul over science and technology. This is by no means necessarily the same as the crude attempts being made at a new, 'politically correct' technology of 'emotional literacy'. It is also crucial to make a clear distinction between the crass celebrity-obsessed 'therapy culture' that Ecclestone rightly lambasts, and those children who do have major behavioural and emotional difficulties that require sensitive therapeutic intervention. It would be a grave error to throw out the baby of effective and essential therapeutic help with the bathwater of celebrity culture and the overly superficial approaches to well-being and 'happiness' beloved of bureaucrats and some policy-makers.

There are, then, some aspects of the position taken by Ecclestone and Hayes with which we are in agreement, there are aspects where we strongly disagree, and there are other areas where we think the jury is still out – particularly given the complexity of what we are exploring. We are certainly concerned that the State and the work-place might be inappropriately developing processes of emotional management as a new ideology, exploiting ideas originating from the psychological therapies in an arguably degenerate, distorting way. We do, however, believe that a *therapeutic ethos* is vital (House and

Loewenthal, 2009) if we are to find ways of reducing the number of children and adults who will require counselling and psychotherapy in the future.

We are also convinced that it is essential for particular children to at least have the opportunity to have counselling and psychotherapy, and that such therapeutic interventions need not *necessarily* feed individualism, as Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi seem to suggest it inevitably will. Indeed, the kind of therapy that we would advocate and attempt to practise (call it 'post-existential' (DL), 'trans-modern' (RH), or whatever) can actually encourage the flourishing a sense of others and community (though this would require evaluating the importance of 'being subject to'; Loewenthal, 2011). We also think that it is important for schools to provide a facilitative environment (e.g. Dockar-Drysdale, 1977; Kahr, 2002) for emotional and social development. This would best occur through a high quality relationship with the teacher; in Steiner Waldorf schools, for example, between class 1 (7 years of age) and class 8 (around 14 years of age), the child normally has the same class teacher for that whole period, and children typically develop a powerful and intimate relationship with that teacher, whom they learn deeply to trust to be a reliable ongoing presence in their school. We also realise that this kind of view has major implications for the most effective way to train teachers (though of course Ecclestone et al. would no doubt throw their hands up in horror at the prospect of therapeutic-ethos values coming into the sphere of teacher training). Again, for us, all would crucially hinge upon *the way* in which these sensibilities were introduced.

With regard to there being specific 'goals' for emotional and social learning, however, we are far less sure. They might conceivably be helpful as general guidelines or loose objectives, but not if they are imposed on individual children, which we believe would constitute inappropriate manipulation, and even a betrayal of trust. Instead, we think it important that a facilitating environment is created whereby each child can develop their own well-being in his or her own way, and where a programmatic, contrived compartmentalisation of the socio-emotional might be more unhelpful than helpful.

Whilst we have doubts about our prevailing and culturally dominant 'audit culture' (King and Moutsou, 2010) and what is currently privileged as 'research' (House, 2010; Loewenthal, 2007), we share the profound concern of many that the UK's children find themselves at the bottom of international league tables on well-being and happiness, as in the UNICEF report (2007) (such findings also have implications for the quality of adults lives, too, of course). For us, Ecclestone and Hayes significantly underplay this important issue. Travelling around some of London, we are concerned as to what we see of youth culture, and how young children are being (or are not being) brought up. We doubt if other British cities are any different. Whilst from a self-interested viewpoint, this may

guarantee work for psychological therapists for years to come, we are concerned that something has to be done – but the questions are, what, and by whom?

For us, one answer to this lies in face-to-face relationship and first-hand experience (Reed, 1996), when something good, transformative (Hart, 2009), almost magical (Chilton Pearce, 1979) can occur or be conveyed. One of us (DL) has three children, and with each he has seen how their favourite school subjects change as their teachers have changed. It does seem to be widely accepted that good teachers and good schools do effectively take account of students' emotional well-being. But how are 'good' teachers defined, and how does one prepare them? We consider one vital aspect to be the face-to-face relationship, and what tacitly emerges through it.

Counselling and psychotherapy are not necessary for everyone, though much more needs to be provided for particular children with particular needs; however, there is a key question regarding type of modality. Unfortunately, the kind of therapies that the government is providing have been ones that encourage autonomy over heteronomy, and the development of individualism. But this does not *have* to be the case – we don't have to use diagnostic medical models of mental health (Timimi, 2002), and we can minimise the extent of over-psychologisation; and in doing so, we could easily have therapies who privilege the client's being *subject to* – subject to an unconscious, subject to language, and subject to ethics in terms of putting the other first (House, 2005; Loewenthal, 2006, 2011).

We argue here that face-to-face relationships potentially provide an essential educational basis for the good. Without such a relationship, for example in the education of professionals and in their practices in general, and counselling in particular, there may be far less possibility for truth and justice, and a far greater possibility that kinds of violence will be done. In examining issues of counselling as a practice of ethics in terms of ideas of truth, justice and responsibility, is there an ethical postmodern basis (Bauman, 1993) on which we can assist in an embodied way so that we can help others not to do violence to others? Indeed, is it possible for us as professionals not to interrupt our own and others' continuity of being, not to play roles in which we no longer recognise ourselves and whereby we betray not only our commitments but our own substance?

We are at risk of privileging a notion of well-being that is to do with giving primacy to autonomy at the expense of the other (Wallach and Wallach, 1983), and of our society in general. Thus, a heteronomy that is putting the other first may be what is most appropriate in enabling well-being. Without such relational learning, our lives will be impoverished, and if we hope that therapeutic education can be directly taught without

time for the face-to-face, then this is more to do with the violence of late modernism, with its associated apparent success in removing what is radical in the development of these cultural practices (Lyotard, 1984; Parker, 1997). For if we hold the view that it is legitimate and appropriate to subordinate practice to theory and the knowledge generated, with all the advantages this confers for technicians to be trained, this can also take away from a thoughtfulness that can lead to well-being (van Manen, 1991), whereby through the experience of relationship, individuals can, for example, also clarify their own and others' desire to help.

Therapeutic education without relational learning will further move away from Plato's entreaty to see *therapeia* as the wisdom of regarding scientific and technical thinking as important but secondary to the resources of the human soul (Cushman, 1). Seen thus, counselling is in grave danger of losing its way, even if it is possibly less far along that path than others (Loewenthal, 2004). Perhaps if we are able to face the other as one human being meeting another, we will be more able to, as Levinas suggests, not do theoretical violence to this other. Well-being is not training people, from a more individualistic perspective, *to appear to be* concerned about the other person: is this really acknowledging the other? Instead of being primarily concerned with systems of power and knowledge, perhaps we should all be more concerned with justice on a case-by-case basis, for, as Levinas (1969) writes, real justice in well-being cannot be appropriated or territorialised, but requires us, from and through our relationships, to be just in the moment with another.

The Government's national roll-out programme, Improving Access to the Psychological Therapies (IAPT), is currently primarily CBT oriented, and is predominantly concerned with a 'happiness' agenda (Layard, 2005; Pilgrim, 2009). There are also now plans to 'roll out' a quasi-IAPT programme for children (Brindle, 2011; Department of Health, 2011). In our view this is highly problematic: here, for example, are some ominous-sounding 'shape-of-things-to-come' quotations from the strategy document: 'Evidence shows that similar psychological interventions to those offered by the IAPT programme for adults of all ages would be effective in meeting the needs of children and young people with depression, anxiety and conduct disorders' (Department of Health, 2011: 17); and a bit later, the plan of action refers to 'an education and training programme that includes… making best use of the existing IAPT education and training infrastructure, adapting it for children and young people and their families' (ibid.: 18). There were many poignant comments on the *Guardian* website in response to their report on this story, and perhaps none more so than the following:

> Simplistic CBT is ideally suited to a patch 'em up and get 'em back to work agenda in adults – that's what IAPT is all about. Scary that it's now being lined up as the cure-all for children too. Anyone working in the field knows that kids who end up with long-term mental health problems aren't going to get 'sorted out' by a few sessions of low-intensity CBT.

We are '*critical* pluralists' (House, 2011; see also Cooper and McLeod, 2010; House and Totton, 2011), and we concede that a CBT/IAPT-type approach can be of help to some people (though there is always the key question about *how it is*, precisely, that people are being helped, as we should never uncritically assume that it is the approach *per se*, and its procedural content, that is the effective 'active therapeutic ingredient'; cf. Bohart and Tallman, 1996). But is seems to us that there are parallels between these developments in the government's latest plans for providing therapy for children, and the crass way in which therapeutic practices have routinely been bolted on to the schooling system in an often mechanistic way, without any serious thought being given to the impact on and appropriateness of the changes themselves. Ecclestone and Hayes criticise the fact that therapeutic values have come into the schooling system at all, whilst we wish to challenge not the principle, but the way in which it has been and is being done.

Also, to assume that a CBT-type approach is the only or the predominant therapeutic approach will lead to the aphorism 'that catastrophe is inevitable' (Letiche, 1990). CBT helps to take one's mind off one's problems, and is the cheapest to train (as therapists and their supervisors are not required to have their own therapy), and it tends not to challenge authority structures.

When we were students ourselves back in the 1970s and 1980s, we used to talk of alienation, but now perhaps we are so alienated that we can no longer experience our alienation – meaning, in turn, that we are further away from 'coming to our senses'; and the Government, through encouraging certain culturally sanctioned therapeutic practices, ensures that we will become even more alienated – and this affects us all, including our teachers. We may indeed be becoming more screwed up, as we spend less time with our children (on average, just two hours 'quality time' a week, as concerningly revealed in a recent survey).

To take an example, teachers are now discouraged from being alone in a class with a child. In the recent past, government was intent on stopping parents from being with other people's children. We are obsessed, for example, with paedophilia – particularly because we are overstimulated with sexual images and talk. A prime time talk-show host says he is going home for a 'family wank', whatever that is?! The delicate balance

between children and adults in terms of sexuality leaves him terribly disturbed, one might surmise. In the consulting room one might hear of a parent being terrified of the thought of wanting to smother to death their Down Syndrome baby, or that they were mortified that they had had a dream of having sex with their adolescent son or daughter. But the number of places is rapidly diminishing where such (perhaps ordinary) anxieties, that most of us successfully manage and repress without any danger of trangression, can be listened to thoughtfully and non-judgementally.

We are seeing a definition of therapy as deriving from Plato's 'Therapeia', and attempting to educate our society to see that whilst scientific and technological thinking is important, they need to be secondary to the resources of the human soul, as discussed in DL's chapter in *Childhood, Wellbeing and a Therapeutic Ethos* (House and Loewenthal, 2009; see also Loewenthal, 2010). For example, Plato's concept of therapeia is of vital importance when considering the case for therapeutic education, both from the perspective of the individual and the State. From Socrates, therapeutic education can be seen to be about awakening thought rather than instilling knowledge (cf. Hart, 2009). Plato can be regarded as understanding Socrates as the best example of somebody who abounded in the consciousness of well-being – making the soul as good as possible. Furthermore, for Plato, the way in which Socrates both lived and died was evidence that virtue and well-being are inseparable. For Socrates, the danger is that we are doing the opposite of what we ought to be doing. Rather like today, it is as if good was more to do with the goods we purchase; thus well-being is seen not as primarily about making one's soul as good as possible, but rather based upon the 'unexamined supposition' (Cushman, 2001: 13) that good is defined by consumption. Thus, Socrates was against well-being seen in terms of 'sensuous satisfactions, together with the largest attainable measure of affluence and personal prerogative' (ibid.).

Concluding Reflections

We are less than clear, then, about the role of schools in the explicit development of children's emotional well-being – and we also see 'well-being' as a highly complex notion, in the definition of which all kinds of paradigmatic, unconscious and political interests are inevitably wrapped up. We do strongly believe that there is a very urgent need to create a better world for our children, and that at least some of what we are doing could have the reverse effect – but it's not always clear what bit this is!

There is the key question of the role of the State in all this. The State's specifying what children's social and emotional development *should* be could well actually militate against the sensitive provision of a facilitative environment for the individual child to develop emotionally and socially. Such development should perhaps strive to find a

way of privileging both heteronomy and autonomy in an ongoing dialectical tension that is fluid, responsive, and never resolved. Too many people seem to respond to the perceived problem of low self-esteem by uncritically encouraging self-oriented individualism, which can so easily slide into a cultural-level narcissism (Lasch, 1979); yet for us, this is not a *necessary* outcome of therapy and being 'subject to'; for losing a grasp on rationality may be essential for human potential development.

Thus, whilst to an extent we do share Kathryn Ecclestone's concerns about undue emphases on 'emotional literacy' and children's vulnerability, a legitimate debate is necessary about the proper place of the emotional dimension in modern schooling. Such highly complex issues need careful unpacking, with an urgent need to improve on the balance between the academic and the emotional climate of children's learning environments. We propose that the notion of a subtly understood and, perhaps, lightly worn 'therapeutic ethos' is very important, if not essential – one that privileges the resources of the human soul over science and technology. This is by no means necessarily the same as the crude attempts being made at a new, 'politically correct' technology of 'emotional literacy'. One thing we can be fairly sure about, finally, is that many more children will be needing counselling or psychotherapy if nothing is done at the cultural and political level about Britain's 'toxic childhood' malaise (Palmer, 2006).

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