



How can we avoid creating generations of “fragile selves”?

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The Fragile Self

...we are emotionally vulnerable beings who need expert help to cope with the exigencies of everyday life and who have little resilience to stress (p. 21)

Thomas. D. (2006). Counselling, culture and conformity: Some implications for the education of counsellors and others involved in pastoral care. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 24(4), 20-25.



The challenge

Concern is being expressed in the media and schools about the lack of resilience of students and the prevalence of mental health problems in young people.

Are we contributing to the problem?



Provocations

Individually

Read the “provocation” allocated to your group
What is the main message?

Groups

- Compare understandings?
 - Do you agree?
 - Prepare to report back: appoint reporter and write to the formula
1. This provocation claims
 2. Our group thinks

Two sentences only!



Critiques of accepted “wisdom”

1. Therapy culture (e.g., Furedi, 2003)
2. Therapeutic education (e.g., Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009)
3. Risk averse culture (e.g., Ungar, 2007)
4. Therapeutic education as an industry



Therapy Culture

- A serious cultural force
- Encourages the notion of “vulnerability” and frailty
- Undermines our confidence in our own experience and capacity to cope
- Disempowering - encourages dependence on “expert” help to cope with life
- Encourages evasion of self responsibility
- Induces conformity - it has created a regime that 'praises some emotions and stigmatises others', creating an authoritarian and destructive dynamic e.g. “we should express our feelings in public”(but only those socially approved of)
- Privatizes the problem in the individual, ignores the social and political sphere.



Therapeutic Education

- Valuing of the emotional over the intellectual
- Subjectivity - pursuit of self rather than the pursuit of knowledge. Self at the centre and feelings prioritised
- Education has become about subjectivity- how does this topic relate to me, my feelings and view of the world?
- Implicit devaluing of children's capacity to pursue theoretical knowledge
- Preoccupation in education with emotional wellbeing situates experience as a source of emotional distress
- Promotes a deficit and diminished view of young people

(Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009)



Care but not enough intellectual demand?

The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS)
(productive pedagogies research)

“What we saw were very caring teachers. Teachers practising an almost social worker version of teachers’ work; teacher work as therapy. We believe that teachers should be praised for this, their commitments to social support for students, but that the absence of intellectual demand, connectedness, working with and valuing difference carries significant social justice implications. The actual pedagogies mapped, were thus pedagogies of indifference.....”(p. 202)

Lingard, B. (2013). *Politics, policies and pedagogies in education: The selected works of Bob Lingard*. London: Routledge.



Therapeutic education as an industry

- School are bombarded “with a diverse range of ‘products’ (instruments, activities, programs, guidance and evidence” based on diverse definitions of wellbeing (Eccelstone, 2012, p. 384)
- A plethora of resilience programs; social emotional learning programs:
... an “Ad hoc array of therapeutic interventions to develop and assess attributes, dispositions and attitudes associated with emotional wellbeing..”
- Putting all students through SEAL or SEL - the whole school approach - rather than the targeted approach is a massive overreaction to figures on "mental health" figures. Issues about a few are driving curriculum for all.
- “The Happiness Trap”

Are we getting the results, we would want, for this investment of time and money?



A risk adverse culture: Overprotection which disempowers

We protect children from:

- failure and disappointment
- the benefits that come from experiencing manageable amounts of danger
- the opportunity to experience the rites of passage
- *“opportunities they need to learn how to navigate their way through life’s challenges”*

Result: Children are missing out on the “risk-taker’s advantage”.

“...Our mania to provide emotional life jackets around our kids, helmets and seatbelts, approved playground equipment, after-school supervision, an endless stream of evening programming, and no place to hang out but the tiled flooring of our local mall, we parents are accidentally creating a generation of youth who are not ready for life. Our children are too safe for their own good.”

Ungar, M. (2007). *Too safe for their own good: How risk and responsibility help teens thrive*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart.



Can stress have benefits? The Adversity Hypothesis

Sweet are the uses of adversity

Which like the toad, ugly and venomous

Wears yet a precious jewel in his head (Shakespeare As You Like It Act 2, scene 1, 12–17)

We know about post-traumatic stress disorder(PTSD) but do we know about “**post-traumatic growth**” the positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one’s struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) . Trauma may help individuals:

1. discover new possibilities,
2. better ways of relating to others,
3. new personal strengths,
4. positive spiritual changes and
5. a stronger appreciation of life.

While this does not mean we should prescribe suffering are we “offering children “lives of bland safety and too much counseling while depriving them of the “critical incidents” that would help them grow strong? (Haidt, 2006, p. 141).



Can we be surprised?

- **Primary Teacher** (Participant in Research Project on conflict resolution) *“We didn’t think they could solve their own problems, we are surprised. There was certainly a lot of negativity that no, you can’t possibly solve things this way because these kids are used to people just sorting them out, ‘off you go’, and it’s a whole lot quicker. They’re right. In some ways it is a whole lot quicker but it’s not nearly as powerful for the children to actually do it that way and it’s not helping them the next time that they come up with something (School 6)”*.
- **Garang Dut** (Medical Student and Sudanese Refugee) arrived in Australia in Year 11 - importance of attitudes and mentor support (Speaker, University of Melbourne Festival of Ideas, 2013).
- **Ian Stuart** (teacher) concluded that educators have dramatically underestimated young peoples' potential developed pedagogies to teach advanced Atomic Theory - normally taught only to upper high school students - at year 3 level and upwards. (Speaker, University of Melbourne Festival of Ideas, 2013).



A call for a new lens

not a call for return to the “good ole days” or nostalgia about the halcyon days

While valuing progress made, we need to reflect deeply on our assumptions.

As teachers:

When might being helpful not be helpful?

How can we step back from disempowering and overprotecting?

Do we do too much “for”?

Is our common practice, uncritical practice?



A new set of questions

We need to ask does this proposed initiative/ practice and the way we implement it:

- position young people as capable
- scaffold solid intellectual work
- require problem-solving
- provide opportunities for resourcefulness
- build strengths
- build self responsibility
- build responsibility for others/community?



Pushing the boundaries

Primary & secondary groups

If we truly adopt an agenda in the student wellbeing field of increasing student's **sense of agency, self-responsibility and constructive engagement with community** what challenges can we construct?

1. **Discuss** what could we:

- **start doing**
- continue and improve
- stop doing

and WHY/HOW would this move the agenda forward?

2. **Record for sharing:**

Three great and doable ideas to take forward to achieve the above agenda?



Possible arenas for action

- *curriculum*
- *Pedagogy*
- *parent engagement*
- *student participation*
- *student leadership*
- *social and emotional learning*
- *pastoral care programs*
- *counselling / helping*
- *community engagement*

Note: Don't be constrained by these suggestions



I Used to Think . . . And Now I Think . .

Write down how what you have learned in this session that has provided a new perspective on practice



Getting the balance right



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Selected reading

- Ecclestone, K., & Hayes, D. (2003). *The dangerous rise of therapeutic education*. London: Routledge.
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