

The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education

Kathryn Ecclestone & Dennis Hayes, 2009

London, Routledge

£21:99 (pbk), 182pp.

ISBN10: 0-415-39701-4

I think that this is an important book for professionals working in the field of pastoral care. It presents a robust critique of the world of personalized learning and the legacy of initiatives established by the last government focused on emotional well-being. My experience on a first reading was one of professional disorientation; on the one hand I recognized myself as one of those charged guilty by the authors, whilst on the other hand, left with challenging questions about educational purpose and values.

Ecclestone and Hayes present a highly readable and well-structured account of how a therapeutic frame of reference permeates many areas of our lives and that schools provide its starting point. For the authors, the problem with a therapeutic emphasis is that by extension the individual whether learner or adult is inevitably regarded as diminished, subject to pathology. Furthermore, that such neediness requires the support and healing intervention of professionals well-versed (or not so) in the language and ideas drawn from the territory of the psychotherapist. Most worryingly for Ecclestone and Hayes, the incremental reach of therapy culture into the world of education has usurped the space for genuine learning, contributing to what they describe as a crisis of education.

The above summary does not do credit to a well-marshalled and carefully constructed argument that puts a disturbing spin on much of the good work that has been done over the past decade in promoting well-being and emotional awareness in education. In their view, the authors present a range of evidence demonstrating that much of what constitutes social and emotional development is about displacing the greater purpose of learning out of the classroom. In effect, the affective aspects of learning have trumped the need for intellectual understanding and rigour. Children are increasingly encouraged to introspection through self-reflection and self-esteem exercises that distract from engaging in learning itself.

Ecclestone and Hayes bemoan the substitution of curriculum subject with the new 'subject'; the child's subjective experience. This, they believe, is the way of infantilisation and fundamentalism, both themes more fully explored by Furedi (2004) whose work is a recurring reference point throughout the text. However, despite initial appearances, the authors are no defenders of Victorian liberal education methods. They are wary of being caught up in the same net as the utilitarian architects of current education policy. Their concern is that the encroachment of therapy culture into education has had a smothering impact on a profession that is too tired, too busy and too distracted with implementing social policy, and which has lost sight of educational purpose.

Without any doubt, the authors are convinced that the therapeutic has a real grip on the practice, policy and resourcing in school life, from early years through primary and secondary sectors and into post-16 education. All the usual suspects are lined up – circle time, SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) Every Child Matters, philosophy for children, school counsellors, behaviour mentors, support assistants; they are all cited as culprits in the denigration of true educational purpose. The main difficulty, they

argue, is that whilst the emotional dynamic of teaching and learning has been ever present, it has not, nor should it, become the *focus* of the learning process. By doing so the impact is to reduce what it is to be human. Since the Enlightenment society has progressed on the back of a collective capacity to know things, to understand at an intellectual level how and why important aspects of our lives function effectively – medicine, science, art, literature, language all contribute to this understanding. This is the foundation of what it is to be human in a post-modern society. Encouraging children into discussion about what they *feel* about maths, for example, should not become an educational substitute for *teaching* them maths. Ecclestone and Hayes fear it may be too late; I'm not so sure.

The authors demonstrate great skill in creating a deconstruction of the therapeutic 'cause' and unfortunately that's where the argument begins and ends – with a very effective deconstruction. The authors make attempts at proposing alternatives, none of which are as well considered or expansive as their capacity for critique. However, they maintain that a model of radical humanistic education is the way forward and this certainly warrants further attention. In the final section of the book a tantalizing and incomplete idea of this alternative is offered and I believe would make for a valuable sequel.

However, there is an inadvertent and basic flaw. *The Dangerous Rise* was published in 2009 and presented a very clever take on the UK political context of a Labour administration arguably weary and ambushed in a labyrinth of its own making of policy and initiative fatigue. Ecclestone and Hayes' argument was intended as a wake up call to educationalists, urging a reclaiming of the debate about the purpose of education. Since then the UK has seen a change of government and a radical shift in education policy heralding a seismic shift in ideological direction. Unfortunately *The Dangerous Rise* champions much of the neo-conservative agenda which is gathering apace. The coalition government has ushered in a range of changes that re-position the centrality of the curriculum 'subject' and to a significant extent have swiftly eradicated many of the initiatives of which Ecclestone and Hayes were especially critical. I am not so sure that the authors envisaged that they would become cheerleaders for the neo-con agenda, although this is precisely what *The Dangerous Rise* achieves. I suppose we must be careful what we wish for. Nevertheless, this remains an important read and one which will continue to serve as an important counter-point for us to consider in developing pastoral care.

Furedi, F. (2004) *Therapy Culture: Creating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*, London: Routledge

Giles Barrow, Suffolk