

**Is Philosophy for Children characteristic of the ‘therapeutic turn’ in education?
A Response to Ecclestone, K. and Hayes, D. (2009), *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, London: Routledge.**

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What is the ‘therapeutic turn’?

Ecclestone and Hayes have launched a passionate attack on the emotionalising and therapysing of public life, including all levels of education. They draw on Furedi’s analysis of the politics of fear (2005) and therapy culture (2004), tracing the latter’s origins in the work of Philip Rieff on the influence of Freud and the growth of psychological man, and Christopher Lasch on the culture of narcissism. Explanations offered for this ‘turn’ are ethical: from the de-moralisation of public life to debate about ‘life choices’; philosophical: in the turn away from humanism to postmodernism and evolutionary psychology; and political: in the demise of the enlightenment subject who confidently acquires and employs knowledge to advance society.

Inside the therapeutic turn all forms of human experience are potential sources of emotional distress requiring professional support, counselling or therapy, rather than ordinary events of human life.

The authors mourn the passing of modernity: its tenets of reason, science, human progress, the acquisition of knowledge through education as transformative. Many senses of ‘loss’ pervade the text: our having lost the ideals of humanism; our being lost, diminished, narcissistic subjects, isolated from one another and from politics; our losing the way, cut off from alternatives to current uncertainty. Furedi (2005) has also spoken of the loss of thinking and words, the loss of imagination and hope for the future.

Perhaps in this palpable sense of loss lies a clue to the anxious, introverted dimensions of our ‘social character’, to use the term coined by Fromm (1942:239). Fromm argues that once basic concerns are addressed, knowledge of our freedom leaves us with a sense of isolation, doubt and fear, in the face of which we adopt certain ‘mechanisms of escape’. Furedi’s point that, in the current culture of fear,

human deference to authority has been replaced by deference to Fate (2005:71) can be portrayed as the adoption of a mechanism of escape in response to fear of freedom. If something vital has been lost to humanity and its absence has left us adrift, perhaps it is not so foolish to turn to sources of alternative ideas and of consolation, such as philosophy. Therein may also lie the way to recover hope for the future or to live with the current uncertainty.

Uncertainty does not have to lead to the kind of contraction referred to as TINA (There Is No Alternative) (Furedi, 2005), nor to anxious insecurity, and I want to suggest that philosophy for children, rather than pandering to the abandoned and needy offspring of deceased modernity, creates a social and metaphorical space where alternatives to the given are explored and imagined.

What are the characteristics of therapeutic education?

Therapeutic education emerges in the face of a shrunken subjectivity. It abandons the idea that education can be liberating and lowers expectations of children. Rather than highlighting material and social causes of suffering it portrays exclusion as a psychological condition. Education is narrowly redefined as (skills of) teaching and learning, evading any reference to values and purposes. Therapeutic education is dangerous because its practice opens people's emotions to assessment by the state and encourages dependence on ritualised forms of emotional support.

How does therapeutic education express a 'diminished self?'

The diminished view '*erodes the idea of humans as conscious agents who realise their potential for individual and social change through projects to transform themselves and their world*' (p136). It moves away from the humanist image of the self as empowered towards a pessimistic, deterministic image of the human self as reduced, trapped and needing support.

Through the diminished view of self, learners are depicted as at risk, fragile identities, disaffected or disengaged, hard to reach or having complex needs or low self-esteem. The therapeutic orthodoxy is so pervasive that all learners are perceived as vulnerable.

What are examples of therapeutic turn in education?

Examples of terms and ‘fads’ that express the therapeutic turn are: inclusive education, emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, personalised learning, learning power, learning to learn, learner voice and the call for a more relevant and personally engaging curriculum. They include participatory and deliberative pedagogies indicated as ends in themselves, peer mentoring and mediation, well-being, coaching for happiness, and prevention of bullying.

The authors cite UK government policy initiatives Every Child Matters (DfES, 2005) and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (DfES, 2007) along with approaches such as Mosley’s Quality Circle Time (www.circle-time.co.uk) Antidote’s emotional literacy (www.antidote.org.uk), and Philosophy for Children, as examples of the therapeutic turn in primary education.

Points of agreement and difference?

I share the authors’ perception that psychological accounts of human nature and solutions to human suffering tend to dominate and that popular psychology has become part of everyday language and thought in ways detrimental to good reasoning and judgement. I am similarly concerned about the bombardment of educators with superficial, magic-fix interventions, designed to boost performance, improve efficiency or manipulate the behaviour of children and young people in school. I share the authors’ frustration regarding the tendency to equate ‘being critical’ with ‘being hurtful’, and to avoid challenge or discussion of controversial questions (Haynes and Murriss, 2009). Social mores seem to court individual disclosure whilst seeking to avoid any risk and conflict that might ensue.

Primary education never enjoyed the golden time to which Ecclestone and Hayes seem to allude. As far as mass education is concerned, the ‘therapeutic perspective’ is one in a long line of discourses of deficit, particularly in primary schooling, that reduce the child to an object to be weighed, measured, compensated or manipulated. Other critiques concerning childhood are more constructively political, for example Walkerdine’s account of developmentality (in Henriques et al, 1984) and Dahlberg

and Moss's account of governmentality and its limiting effects on the lives of children (2005).

Unfortunately the authors conflate *any* interest in the emotions in thinking and knowing with superficial pop psychology and coercive educational practices. Confusion regarding emotion and learning weakens their analysis. For Ecclestone and Hayes the emotions are only allowed as bi-products of other activity, for example happiness is permitted as a bi-product of the pursuit or achievement of other altruistic goals. On the one hand they argue that educational activities have always produced affective and social outcomes alongside cognitive and practical outcomes (p62). On the other hand they claim that the cognitive is the 'essence' of the person and the intellect is dispassionate (p152) and a little later, partly contradicting themselves:

'Knowledge can be taught passionately or indifferently, by and to people who may be distraught, upset, happy or content. It does not matter. Knowledge, as it were, conquers all.'

'What we are teaching is not touched by the emotions. We argue that there is room for emotion in education only as the passionate pursuit of truth in the sciences and the study of human beauty and human emotions in the arts' (p153).

The case of P4C – how is it treated?

In the chapter on therapeutic trends in primary education P4C is trivialised in less than two sides of text as yet another fad. Eight-year-old children appearing in a DVD about P4C are belittled as saying '*as children do, sweet and engaging things about the topic*' (p33). None of the foundational literature regarding the philosophical roots of P4C is explored, nor the arguments made by Lipman regarding the cultivation of judgement and its implications for teacher education, the professionalism of teachers and the deepening of political debate about the aims of education (for example in Lipman, 1991:244-250). The authors include one brief quotation from a SAPERE¹ newsletter and enthusiastic comments about P4C from the emotional literacy campaigning organisation Antidote and the DfES. They conclude that what is shown in the DVD (and somehow by implication all P4C practice) '*has nothing to do with philosophy*', because the teacher is not shown challenging the children about what

they say, whether it is logical or reasonable, and all views are accepted unconditionally (p33). Later they argue:

‘Subjects such as ‘philosophy for children’ use therapeutic rituals to train children in empathy, respect, ‘appropriate’ ways of listening, tolerating diverse views and responding in particular ways in order to be emotionally literate, tolerant citizens’ (p151).

Has P4C been hi-jacked?

Mass education is certainly characterised by ritual and routine. Novice practitioners may place undue emphasis on following a prescribed process at the expense of progress in philosophical enquiry. The most seasoned practitioners have to try and balance goals of wide participation (30+children) with rigour and truth-seeking.

One factor impacting on P4C in schools is the impossibility of providing funded or accredited professional development courses without piggy-backing on central policy agendas, so P4C is indeed ‘sold’ on the back of ‘raising achievement’, ‘improving self-esteem’ or ‘developing emotional intelligence’². Training of teachers in P4C, and the ‘desirable competences’³ of trainers, have been the subject of intense debate among SAPERE members, particularly as enthusiasm for the approach has intensified and demand for training has grown. There is some poor practice lacking philosophical rigour and quality. The impoverishment of teacher education is a significant contributory factor in teachers’ lack of familiarity with philosophical ideas, whilst the reduction in professional autonomy is matched by a corresponding reduction in teachers’ own willingness to question and challenge ideas.

Fair or unfair criticism?

The very practitioners whose fragments of work with children are criticised by Ecclestone and Hayes have made available unedited footage of their practice for the purposes of enriching training and identifying the markers of philosophical facilitation and dialogue,⁴ one of a number of examples of their courage and willingness to subject their work to scrutiny in the interests of improving practice⁵.

In the school in question, P4C is not a substitute for other subjects, nor is it the marker of a diminished curriculum for diminished selves. It is not an expression of low expectations and aspirations. On the contrary, by all available accounts (parents, children, visitors, inspectors, test results), teachers are encouraging aspirations, raising achievement, challenging the austerity of the given curriculum, working with parents and the local community, reducing conflict, mediating and mitigating the detrimental effects of central policy initiatives and drawing additional resources towards the school to provide an enriched education.

Is the P4C self a 'diminished self'?

Ecclestone and Hayes argue that we should ask ourselves: *'What sort of child, young person, adult, what sort of human being, is pre-supposed in this policy or initiative?'* (p144)

Empirical evidence, such as it is, indicates that there are a wide range of educational benefits derived from P4C (Sapere 2006; Trickey and Topping, 2004 and 2007). Children from schools where P4C is part of the curriculum certainly do not appear diminished in any sense and when they speak for themselves about what they value in P4C it is certainly convincing. Cynics and critics will argue that children can be carefully selected, manipulated, or that it is in their best interests to endorse what teachers say, but there is something about their accounts of philosophical enquiry that defies such interpretation. Such testimony often refers to the room in P4C for a experimentation, changing one's mind and imagining alternatives, expressed as *playing and juggling with ideas*, evaluating arguments, expressed as *finding out whether things are true or not*, and for freedom of thought and expression expressed as *letting ideas and opinions out* (Haynes and Murriss, 2000; Haynes, 2007a and 2007b).

P4C is one of the few educational perspectives that does not trivialise and infantilise children. It engages the voice of self expression and the voice of social action. It promotes both passionate and dispassionate dialogue: talking about things that matter with children in ways that go beyond a repetition of the given.

Far from being conceived as vulnerable, the child in P4C is regarded as naturally philosophical, disposed to curiosity about the world and to questioning; imaginative and open-minded; capable of dialogue and of self regulation in the context of sustained participation in a community; morally alert and capable of choice and judgement; interested in the welfare of others; capable of conceptual exploration and analysis; as persons to whom it is worth listening (Matthews,1980; Lipman, 1993; Murriss, Haynes, 2007b).

Is P4C 'therapeutic'?

Human flourishing and consolation in the face of suffering have been among the concerns of philosophers and it is not surprising that these should be among the questions pursued by children. As much as they enjoy the adventurous space provided by P4C, children also welcome the opportunity to listen and to be heard and they describe the sense of feeling cared for and not being alone, when others listen to them.

Perhaps P4C is an 'escape', for children and teachers alike, in the face of prescription, performance and the climate of fear. While philosophical enquiry does not court disclosure in the way that therapeutic techniques tend to do, children do draw on their experience in their exploration of philosophical questions, so P4C can enable them to attend to matters that concern them and to develop P4C as practical wisdom, transforming of self, of experience and of the community of enquiry: a form of social action.

Is P4C dangerous?

There are teachers who manipulate what should be a democratic process in P4C to pursue behaviour modification or to hi-jack the topic for enquiry. This is both deceitful and dangerous in making the workings of power relations less visible and harder to resist (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:149).

In inexperienced hands P4C is not necessarily dangerous but neither is it helpful, leading to frustration, boredom and the abandonment of philosophy: hence the urgency of attending to the poverty of teacher education. What is dangerous is the trivialisation and ritualisation of children's thinking.

Philosophy is a 'stranger' in the primary school curriculum, and herein lies part of its capacity to transform experiences of thinking and to challenge the status quo. Philosophy has long and well-established tradition of thought outside of the current mechanistic and performative model of education, with built in self-regulatory mechanisms of logic and dialogue. It is demanding and counter to authoritarianism and coercion. P4C positions teacher alongside child and is a means to challenge the widespread trivialisation of child.

If anything, P4C needs to become more dangerous and subversive to widen the political space in schools. Among other things, it is a powerful means to encourage, to challenge anxiety, censorship and the avoidance of controversy and to contribute to the much needed re-professionalisation of teaching.

¹ SAPERE is the national practitioners' network for Philosophy for Children in the UK. Its newsletter is circulated to the membership and members can send in items for inclusion.

² The majority of P4C courses are led by self-employed consultants, as is the case with a great deal of the Continuing Professional Development provision for teachers in the UK.

³ The extent to which trainers should have a background in academic philosophy, and the form and currency such knowledge should have, has been one of the key issues in this debate about the education of P4C trainers in SAPERE.

⁴ Available from Gallions Primary School: info@gallions.newham.co.uk

⁵ See also an account of tackling controversial questions with children at this school in 'The Costs of Thinking' (2005) in *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, 17:32-37.

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