

Out of the frying pan into the fire. Education, counselling and target-driven culture.

Cemil Egeli

SUMMARY: I write my review as a conversation between three aspects of my working self - a teacher, lecturer (in counselling skills) and a counsellor, I shall abbreviate these to T L C – I think the world needs more of it.

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T - I'm glad a chapter on primary education has been included. If we are going to be critical in our pedagogy in Higher Education (HE), it's helpful to have a sense of what is going on earlier on in the system - it's all linked. Piper (chapter 5) writes an engaging piece which captures the tensions felt in the system.

C - How so?

T- Drawing on the ideas of Freire (1970/1993), Piper explores the pathological medicalisation of children's behaviour.

C - Sounds oppressive.

T- Very, and if children can't behave as we want them to, they can get diagnosed. Teachers play a part in that process. Piper exposes the challenges teachers face between behaviour management expectations, diagnosis and the job they are supposedly meant to do. I got a real sense of a human trying to do a human job within a complex environment.

C- Complex?

T – Yes, there are many competing and conflicting factors working in schools. Social factors, which are not accounted for in the diagnostic questionnaires teachers are required to complete. Piper exposes these flaws by weaving in examples of practice and highlighting the incongruences. Children facing crime and gangs or who have escaped wars; how are these catered for in questionnaires or with diagnostic categories? The sense of fear comes through

for all involved and this is connected to school performance and attainment measures such as SATs (Statutory Assessment Tests).

Piper is writing from the chalk face of economically challenged areas correlating with Gottstein (Chapter 9) who explores the idea of psychiatric rights or “psychrights” and the enforced psychiatric mass drugging of children in the US. He states that children who are poor and are in state custody have the highest rates of government funded drugging. Gottstein provides a lawyer’s perspective, outlining practical strategies to combat these damaging interventions. He pulls no punches and is calling for system change.

C- Good! We need systemic change.

T- I think this is linked to the wider neoliberalisation of schools or the GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) agenda (Sahlberg, 2016). It enforces performance measures upon schools and a prescriptive and standardised form of education which impacts the way pupils are treated. When children are struggling to engage should we be trying to gain their compliance through medicine? What is the hidden curriculum here? (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). What values are they absorbing? Towards the end of the chapter, Piper asks “what is education for...?” (p.96) and I am mindful of Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP who said in 2015 that the purpose of education was to be the “engine of our economy” (Gibb, 2015).

C – An attainment system, rooted in fear, which diagnoses, labels and drugs kids who don’t fit “the engine”. The idea of not fitting is a common theme in my therapeutic work with adults too. Those school experiences have so much to answer for.

T- What’s more, if children then happen to experience domestic violence as Callaghan, Fellin and Alexander explore in Chapter 11, they are pathologised within the dominant discourse, taking away their own resilience and agency. The authors argue children’s experiences need to be re-framed and located both socio-economically and relationally. They also challenge the widely used label of “vulnerable” with regards to children. Surely, we are all potentially vulnerable? I worked in a PRU (Pupil Referral Unit) where some of the children like the ones described in chapters 5, 9 and 11 were educated together. Perhaps not only were they being labelled and medicalised, but they were segregated too. I think some of the critical approaches discussed in the book could really engage these children and help to break down barriers to learning whilst having therapeutic benefits too.

L - Then there's teaching in HE, which in many ways is like moving from the frying pan into the fire. Coming from schools I was well aware of the detrimental effects to education of a standardised target-driven culture. Now look what we have got.

C- More metrics to add to the bureaucratic constraints of what you do?

L- Yes, such as the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) ranking measure. One of the university regulators involved in this is the OfS (Office for Students), one of their main objectives being "value for money" (Office for Students, 2018).

These essentially neoliberal ideas could have impacts on critical teaching. Fryer & Fox (Chapter 1) and Cromby (Chapter 2) highlight some of these tensions. Both chapters address the idea of students as being customers who receive services. Being pedagogically critical can present dilemmas within this context. Fryer and Fox suggest we have to make things uncomfortable as a part of the learning, but in the growing neoliberal HE landscape where student evaluation is so important, this can present problems for lecturers especially with student surveys and feedback where students may expect a more comfortable experience. They suggest that student resistance and rejection of that critical teaching would actually indicate success. In contrast, Cooke in Chapter 13 suggests the positive feedback of trainees helps to make delivering a unit of critical teaching possible, which was encouraging to hear. I think these points in some ways model the therapeutic change process. The resistance and rejection can mean the teaching is having a transformative impact but will universities accept that in student satisfaction measures? Linked to this, Cromby (Chapter 2) recommends being explicit with students about their contradictory experience of being consumers and learners at the same time,

C- What's your view on that?

L - I think this could help, but I question the student as customer idea. Many have had the role of customer thrust upon them. They have been brought up in a neoliberal value system which is hitting them from all angles. Perhaps they are suffering from a sense of alienation (Marx, 1977) and simply do not know how to be customers of such an expensive commodity.

C - What does this mean for teaching counselling critically?

L- Counselling and psychotherapy is already a form of social criticism (Tudor, 2018) and like counselling psychology, already has a critical edge in comparison to mainstream psychology (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010). Much counselling already resists the dehumanisation of the

biomedical model (Feltham, 2015) and would not, as psychology does, try to present itself as an objective science (Cromby in Chapter 2). Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones and Bray (Chapter 7) call for the 3 pillars of “values, knowledge and skills” (p.138) to be implemented in the psychology curriculum. I think counselling education in the main already does this however it is still dominated by privileged values (Lago & Smith, 2010). I think the “seismic shift” (p.123) Dudgeon et al. call for is needed in counselling too.

C - For instance?

L- Newnes talks of the fetishising of the individual (chapter 3) which I think counselling has a tendency to do. It can also ignore socio-economic and cultural factors (Feltham and Horton, 2000). We are social and political beings (Kearney, 1996) and we need to become more politically savvy (Feltham, 2015). As Newnes says “Teaching is thus a political enterprise” (p.52); it is a political act in and of itself.

T-Lest we forget.

L- Critical teaching can be holistic and very much about the approach as well as the content as Greening & Golding (Chapter 10) suggest. As they say, we can empower learners through participation and critical thinking. The experiential and discursive nature of counselling education can really support this. It is active learning. Take Goodley et al’s discussion in Chapter 4 - it makes a case for how we may reconceptualise the idea of disability and is really useful for class discussion. Drawing on personal experiences they challenge us to unlearn accepted indoctrinations and imagine new ways of knowing. Teaching un/learning, that’s learning!

C- The counselling and psychotherapy world could do well to note the struggles and tensions reflected in this book. The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) have recently announced that they are working on a collaborative project with the BPC (British Psychoanalytic Council) and the UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) called SCoPEd (The Scope of Practice and Education for the counselling and psychotherapy professions). As they state, they are using an expert reference group to systematically map competencies, standards and training practice requirements using an evidence-based approach. Cooke (Chapter 13) discusses the pitfalls of standardised evidence-based protocols in psychology suggesting they can reduce its applications to a set of techniques leading to brand name therapies and a nomothetic approach to human difference.

The BACP (2018) seems to be using a similar language of evidence-based standardised systematicity here which in this context raises questions.

L- The counselling and psychotherapy professions have got to be very careful with what they might be wishing for.

C- McLaren (in the preface) says we live in a state of “politico-economic trauma” (p. xvii) and within a governing rationality in which everything is economised. Counselling must not collude with this or kowtow to the neoliberal hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). If generic standardisation is the direction of travel, we have to be cautious. The dangers are very clear in this book. Counselling needs to retain and develop its critical edge.

L – There are debates to be had. This book presents us with a diversity of experience. I’d love to see more - some perspectives on spiritual and transpersonal approaches or even secondary education for instance. There is a common unity of purpose within it which I think is ultimately about alleviating human suffering. It provides practical ideas yet it is presented in a heartfelt way. The contributors write personally and are passionate about their message. I felt like I was meeting new friends when I read it. There has been much written on neoliberalism in academia. This is written by people who are also in the field, showing us how they are addressing it head on and on a daily basis. From this I take much encouragement. As McLaren says, ignore the book “at your peril.” (p. xxi)

It is a call to action.

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