

Good teachers don't need therapy

Ever since I started working as an educational psychologist and found that most schools I went into thought they needed their own full time psychologist, I've had concerns about the 'over-psychologising' of society. The recent knee jerk assumption that schools need 'therapeutic experts' to nurse them through bereavements or 'critical' incidents has particularly baffled me. I was intrigued therefore to read a new and provocative book, *The Therapy Culture* that argues that therapy is indeed taking over our lives. Many experiences previously thought of as normal are now seen as damaging to our emotions. The problem is, according to Furedi, this culture isn't leading to self-fulfilment but self-limitation by transmitting the message that we are all vulnerable and many of us need specialist help.

Interpreting problems in the socio-political realm as personal turmoil first emerged in the 1970's when studies of the mental health impact of unemployment merged with wider cultural influences to replace an economic critique of capitalism with a therapeutic one. The effect of these trends was to individualise protest and encourage therapeutic ways of handling problems. The decline of authority, religion and politics has also eroded social solidarity and communal norms and created confusion about how we live our lives. Forced to rely on our own individual resources, we have become preoccupied with the self.

This book argues that the management of our emotions and relationships has become the state's answer to a whole range of problems. Failing parents for example are given parenting orders and forced to attend counselling sessions, antisocial tenants are given family therapy and young offenders are given cognitive behaviour therapy.

Furedi argues that our lives have become increasingly professionalised. Professionals tell us how to conduct our relationships, how to parent and how to grieve. The expansion of the caring professions is justified by the claim that emotional problems stem from the family and so can't be solved through traditional family ties or friendship but through a relationship outwith these informal networks. Family life is now viewed as the main source of our emotional distress. Once regarded as a refuge from the pressures of life, family life is more likely to be seen as a 'toxic vehicle for transmitting dysfunctionality'. Professionals' attitudes towards struggling parents convey a 'barely concealed attitude of contempt'. Only in such a culture could a paediatrics expert conclude beyond all reasonable doubt from watching a TV programme that a father killed his sons and be taken seriously by the authorities.

This is the age of traumas, syndromes, disorders and addictions. A recent survey found children as young as 8 describe themselves as 'stressed by relationships in school'. There has been a 40 per cent increase in people who consider themselves disabled. Trauma has become an all-purpose term to describe our state of mind after an adverse experience- and it is assumed that it requires treatment.

The addictive personality such as the compulsive gambler or workaholic epitomises the powerless self. The medicalisation of bad habits, as in diagnoses such as attention deficit disorder, has important consequences

for the way we think about behaviour. It's difficult to hold people to account if they suffer from an impulse-control disorder that is apparently outwith their control.

The notion of 'risk' is another innovation bound up with the 'worst case scenario' mindset. Our ideas about risk are rooted in this sense of powerlessness that regards fear itself as a source of risk. Consequently risk assessment has become a highly subjective process in which anxiety is the key element in the definition of risk. When surveys ask people if they face more stress today than before, inevitably the majority say that it's getting worse. A culture that continually lowers the stress threshold and narrows the range of experiences with which individuals are expected to cope will create a climate where individuals interpret many unpleasant events as threats to their health. Thus discipline problems will always be 'worse than ever'.

A further illustration of the therapy culture is how low self-esteem has become the diagnosis for every problem under the sun and raising self-esteem is thought to be the all purpose magic bullet. This culture continually promotes the ideal of fulfilling our own needs and expressing our self. There has also been an important shift from 'individualism emphasising personal responsibility to rights-orientated individualism'. The passing of responsibility from the self and the weakening of accountability encourage a blame culture, illustrated by adults suing their schools because of the trauma suffered during childhood.

While children's rights are increasing and teacher authority is thought to be diminishing, teachers are expected to take on therapeutic and parenting roles such as child protection and nurturing esteem and emotional intelligence. The more schools take on the role of socialising children Furedi argues, the more they undermine parents. Although the book fails to give an alternative, apart from a nostalgic return to the 'good old days' where people were left to get on with their lives, Furedi gives us much food for thought that we would do well to consider as pastoral care is being revamped in Scotland. The challenge for our integrated community schools is to help the many parents and children who need support without encouraging a widespread sense of vulnerability and eroding people's natural resilience.

This book highlights the dichotomy between schools as centres of learning or of socialisation. But a holistic view of learning requires schools to focus on both learning and emotions; they are not incompatible, they are in fact complimentary.

Instead of the ever increasing army of specialists pulling out pupils to "fix" them so they will be engaged in learning, resources should be focused on helping create more engaging classrooms. Context is more important than individual predispositions. If pupils are involved in activities that meet their basic needs to be competent, autonomous, and have a sense of belonging, they are less likely to develop problems. Strategies developed by effective teachers will always be a better solution than therapy.

