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## **Reinforcing the ‘diminished’ subject? The implications of the ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’ for wellbeing in educational settings**

Ecclestone, K. and Rawdin, C. (in press) *Cambridge Journal of Education*, special edition on ‘social and emotional learning’, forthcoming December 2015

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past 15 years or so, educational policy discourses, related research and everyday practices in all the countries of the UK, as well as Australia, the United States, Finland and Sweden reflect profound political and public pessimism about declining emotional wellbeing and mental health amongst growing numbers of groups and individuals deemed to be ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’, alongside wider concerns about declining levels of civic and educational disengagement and motivation for achievement (eg. Sharples, 2007; Coleman, 2009; Ecclestone, 2013; Wright & McLeod, 2014, Irisdotter-Aldenmayr, 2013; Brunila, 2012). More widely, this pessimism intersects with two other related trends: a broader sensibility that childhood and youth are in profound and unprecedented crisis (e.g Palmer, 2006; Claxton, 2002; Myers, 2011) and that employers face what William Davies calls ‘a growing psychological malaise’ amongst workers at all levels, in the form of declining levels of motivation and engagement and rising levels of stress and other low-grade mental health problems (Davies, 2015; see also Frawley, 2014).

In a British context, policy makers at national and local levels have promoted schools especially and increasingly also early years, further education, adult and community education and university settings as key sites for fostering competences, attributes and dispositions associated with social and emotional learning, emotional wellbeing and mental health. These include self-awareness and self-assessment, reflection, self-esteem and confidence, emotional literacy and emotional regulation, empathy, resilience, persistence, optimism and so on (e.g Sharples, 2007; Sodha and Gugleimi, 2009; Bywater & Sharples, 2013; Layard & Dunn, 2012, O’Donnell et al., 2014). Here a capabilities or skills-based understanding is seen as an essential foundation for a virtuous circle of engagement, inclusion and achievement, current and future emotional wellbeing and mental health. Amongst a very extensive body of research and policy reports since the late 1990s, the examples cited here represent typical claims that these goals are as important as traditional educational outcomes, and that barriers to their realization and subsequent educational needs are primarily psycho-emotional. Since 1998, a

powerful cross-political consensus that compulsory schooling is too late for psycho-emotional intervention and that much earlier approaches are needed if these aspirations are to be realized (e.g. Allen, 2011; Field, 2010).

Noting similar developments and debates in other countries, we focus in this paper on two intertwined characteristics of the shifting, complicated English policy/ research landscape that now surrounds the concerns and claims summarized above: the embellishing of a strong, pessimistic sensibility of crises with wellbeing and mental health with the wider rise in social policy of a 'vulnerability zeitgeist' (Brown, 2015) and the rapid expansion of a market of psycho-emotional interventions promoted by what we call 'pseudo-psy-experts'. Using our exploration of these developments, we then scrutinize critically earlier claims that they offer explicit and implicit images of a 'diminished' human and curriculum subject (Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). We argue that these images, and corresponding claims that more people need psycho-emotional support for a widening array of situations, continue unabated. We argue that this creates a highly restricted debate about how we understand the role of education in developing wellbeing before proposing alternatives to universal psycho-emotional interventions. In particular, we argue for that policy, research and practice needs to consider four dimensions to a wider understanding of wellbeing in schools and other educational settings: a holistic, rich curriculum-related understanding of wellbeing in place of universal interventions; much more clarity in differentiating social and emotional learning, emotional wellbeing and mental health; restraint in categorizing people as needing specialist interventions; and resistance to a seemingly ubiquitous discourse of vulnerability as an everyday, existential state of being.

## **1. UNIVERSALISING VULNERABILITY**

### **The rise of a 'vulnerability zeitgeist'**

What Kate Brown calls a 'vulnerability zeitgeist' in British social policy has significantly expanded official criteria for defining 'the vulnerable' as targets for intervention. According to Brown, this reflects the ways in which British government approaches to vulnerability between 1998 and 2010 create diffused and malleable criteria to reflect changing rationales, preoccupations and preferences (Brown, 2014; see also McLaughlin, 2011). Under the 1998-2010 Labour governments, a relatively small minority of targeted individuals and groups, defined by the Law Commission as unable to manage everyday life independently by *'reason of mental or other disability, of age or illness and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation'*, widened under the Care Standards Act of 2000 to anyone receiving prescribed medical, counselling or palliative care (see

McLaughlin, 2012). The UK Cabinet Office 2007 report 'Families at Risk' adds other criteria, including: worklessness, poor or overcrowded housing, parents' lack of academic or vocational qualifications, mothers with mental health problems, a family member with long running disability or illness, income 60% below the median, and inability to afford certain food and clothing items. According to Brown, these expanding depictions serve various purposes: enhancing state and professional power through therapeutic and disciplinary interventions; a necessary part of building citizenship; and justifying new anti-social behaviour mechanisms and reductions in welfare provision (Brown, 2015).

Significant cuts in welfare support after 2010 parallel a widening spectrum of structural, psychological and physical risks, and the increasing tendency by all political parties to endorse claims about the psycho-emotional legacies of poor parenting, noted above (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010). Current Conservative government discourses embellish the accumulations the 1998-2010 Labour government made from 'social exclusion' and 'those leading chaotic lives' (SEU, 1998) to 'vulnerability', with the much older notion of 'troubled'. It is not surprising, then, that expanding official descriptors and criteria for assessment are linked inextricably to many diverse references to vulnerability in everyday institutional and personal life, ranging from exposure to serious structural and social problems to assumed harms and risks from mundane, everyday experiences and relationships (e.g. Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014). Here, for example, the Office for Standards in Education endorses these diffused meanings, defining migrant children, those with special educational needs, pupils who are disengaged or who are simply not meeting their targets as vulnerable (OfSTED, 2012). Here both vulnerability and support widen almost infinitely to children "*whose needs, dispositions, aptitudes or circumstances require particularly perceptive and expert teaching and, in some cases, additional support*" (p6)

### **Universal vulnerability as a progressive political project**

An important challenge to contemporary official and everyday depictions of vulnerability is to resist deterministic and hierarchical attempts to maintain the status quo, or to ameliorate vulnerability as a deficiency or weakness (see McLaughlin, 2011). From a variety of critical and radical standpoints, social researchers and activists seek to transform vulnerability into something transgressive and politically progressive. A prevailing theme is that recognition of vulnerability is an attribute of an understanding, empathetic citizenship and a '*universal*' dimension of human experience and identity (Beckett quoted by McLeod 2012, 22). Here universal vulnerability as an existential fact of death, risk of illness and disability, becomes something much more pervasive. For example, some self-defined radical/progressive standpoints respond to 'precarity' created by late capitalism's dismantling of the 'conditions for living' by presenting the recognition of and responses to vulnerability as integral to social justice and an inclusive, responsive state (e.g. Paur et al., 2012; Goodley in Ecclestone & Goodley, 2014; Fineman, 2008 ). These

challenges to a diminished or pathologised view of vulnerability go beyond a view that vulnerability arises from the material pressures of capitalism or, specifically in schools and universities to the negative pressures of achievement targets. Instead, as part of an alternative political project, vulnerability also becomes an inherent psychological state generated by social and economic progress *per se*, thereby requiring citizens and governments alike to lower their material expectations and elevate other dimensions to wellbeing and quality of life (see Frawley, 2014).

Taken together, the expansion of official and everyday definitions and standpoints that seek to transform vulnerability as a vehicle for progressive political and practical responses combine to destigmatise and therefore normalise it. Here as Ashley Frawley notes, vulnerability has become “*a cultural metaphor, a resource drawn upon by a range of parties to characterize individuals and groups and to describe an increasingly diverse array of human experience*” (Frawley, 2014 p11). Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that an overwhelmingly psycho-emotional view of vulnerability dominates current discourses and practices. This is a notable contrast to earlier perspectives that saw it as a material condition that required, first, proper recognition of both people’s diverse resources for dealing with adversities, and the empowerment they often seek and demonstrate in doing so, and, second, to argue for material remedies (e.g. Valentine & Skelton, 2003; Cole, 1997). In place of these older responses, contemporary aspirations for some form of psycho-emotional intervention reinforce a strong tendency for research and policy to align around debates about what approach is appropriate. As we argue next, this has created an expanding market of universal interventions that resonate with earlier related initiatives and educational traditions.

## **2. A MARKET OF INTERVENTIONS**

### **Historical roots and connections**

Since 1998, successive governments have responded to the crisis consensus we referred to above through an *ad hoc*, often bewildering array of aims for intervention, definitions of what is being addressed, and subsequent disagreements about the best approach. In general, borrowing heavily from policy and practice in the United States, the reports we cited in the introduction are typical of many calls from think tanks, government advisors and academics for wellbeing policy and practice that build psychological, social and emotional attributes and competences in the present whilst also preventing problems in the future (e.g Sharples, 2007; Sodha & Gugleimi, 2009; Bywater & Sharples, 2013; Layard & Dunn, 2012; O’Donnell et al., 2014). These reports are also typical in reflecting a wider problem across policy, research and practice terrains, namely the elision of crucial distinctions between social and emotional learning, mental health and emotional wellbeing: we return to this

problem in the final section. Although there is a need for detailed mapping of a fluid, complicated and incoherent policy, research and practice activities and outputs that go beyond the scope of this paper, we offer here a brief overview of features relevant for our arguments.

Between 1998 and 2010, the Labour government's sponsorship of central government programmes in English (most notably the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Strategy for primary and secondary schools (SEAL) and a pilot of the Penn Resilience Programme between 2007 and 2010) and local authority initiatives (such as the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies programme (PATHS)) was paralleled by a very large rise in targeted interventions for growing numbers diagnosed with psycho-behavioural disorders (see Harwood & Allan, 2014). The Conservative-led coalition government's withdrawal of political sponsorship for centralized programmes in 2011 was accompanied by its resurrection of an older character discourse. The traditional associations of this discourse has masked the extent to which current approaches encouraged by the government simply embellish notions of social and emotional learning and emotional wellbeing from earlier programmes with 'positive thinking', 'resilience' and 'mental toughness' as part of 'positive functioning' (Ecclestone, 2012). At the time of writing (July 2015), the Conservative government's secretary of state for education has earmarked resources in support of her 'strong' view that schools and early years settings are essential sites for developing emotional wellbeing, mental health and character, and that these are as important as educational achievement (Morgan, 2015a, b).

So, despite apparent shifts in policy vocabularies of emotional wellbeing, character and mental health over the past 17 years, policy, research and practice continue to reflect the dominance of a skills-based approach to developing a seemingly lengthening list of psycho-emotional attributes, behaviours, dispositions and capabilities. Elisions of mental health, emotional wellbeing and character, supplement skills and dispositions from earlier programmes, listed above, with others, such as hope, aspiration, community mindedness and dealing with failure as part of lifelong character development (e.g. Paterson et al., 2014). In policy-related research programmes on character, older associations with notions such as 'virtue', 'humility' and 'gratitude' seem easily to transmogrify as skills-based versions (see Jubilee Centre, 2015 and also Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

In general, then, and regardless of which discourse is invoked, these fluctuating initiatives and the concerns that underpin them all advocate a lengthening list of attributes, skills and capabilities claimed to be teachable, transferable and sustainable. We would also argue that an espoused political emphasis on 'traditional' curriculum knowledge does not militate against the prevalence or popularity of these claims and of on-going calls for a psycho-emotional focus in education. One outcome in English schools has been a marked shift in preference from targeted, discrete interventions for those

diagnosed with disorders, emotional difficulties or mental health problems towards universal or 'embedded' approaches. Outside particular universal programmes, general support for skills or capabilities-based approaches to social and emotional learning encompasses other educational goals. For example, some advocates of more attention to social and emotional learning reject, or are skeptical about, the effectiveness of discrete universal interventions, preferring instead to embed skills and dispositions in mainstream subject content and a whole school ethos (e.g. Weare, 2004; Claxton, 2002, 2007). This resonates with curricula and associated pedagogies from both the past and present, such as 'social skills', 'entrepreneurial education', 'employability', 'learning to learn', 'personal, social and health education', 'citizenship', 'personal development', 'reflective practice' and 'thinking skills'. In different ways, all these seek to develop many of the psycho-emotional skills and dispositions associated with character, social and emotional learning and emotional wellbeing, noted above. For example, the *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence* has made a disposition-based approach to subject teaching a statutory requirement in primary and secondary schools and is widely lauded as a progressive way to prepare young people for the future (see Priestley & Biesta, 2013).

Despite different emphases and roots, arguments for more attention to psycho-emotional aspects of learning and preparation for life beyond schooling through the cross-curricula approaches listed above also resonate with earlier initiatives for alternative curricula, pedagogies and assessment methods. For example, programmes introduced after the raising of the school leaving age in 1972, and extended through work preparation schemes in the late 1970s for the adult and young unemployed, focused on psycho-emotional difficulties created by unemployment, transition from school to work, welfare to work and job-seeking. Attempts to develop associated psycho-emotional skills and dispositions are now a staple of programmes in these areas. Further resonances with contemporary emphasis on social and emotional aspects of learning come from older traditions of child-centred and holistic education, inclusive and special needs education and citizenship education. Perhaps less obviously, much more explicitly disciplinary attempts to instill appropriate behaviours and associated mindsets can also be seen in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century pedagogies for moral training (e.g. Allen, 2014) and, as Thomas Dixon shows in his analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century version of 'emotional literacy', in activities to 'tame children's passions' (Dixon, 2013).

### **New types of psy-experts**

Notwithstanding the crucial role that these roots and precedents play in current enthusiasm for social and emotional learning, we perceive two uniquely contemporary aspects to policy, research and practice. First, as we have already noted, is the scale of very pessimistic concern about a crisis and a consensus that preventative forms of psycho-emotional intervention are needed. Second is the

marked shift from targeted interventions and measures for those diagnosed with behavioural, emotional or psychological problems, administered by what Rose calls 'psy-experts' (1992), such as educational and clinical psychologists and counsellors, to universal approaches delivered by those with tenuous or non-existent claims to psy-expertise, such as teachers, learning/classroom support assistants, inclusion workers and, in some cases, children and young people acting as peer mentors, 'coaches' and 'buddy counsellors' (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009).

The removal of government sponsorship for centralized social and emotional learning programmes, together with an intensification of moves to privatize and outsource education providers, including specialist services such as local authority-run educational psychology, have expanded ideas about who can be counted as psy-experts. The market of interventions now claiming to develop social and emotional learning and to promote mental health, is characterized by the decline of specialist approaches informed by some form of recognised psychological training and a license to practice, and their growing replacement by a proliferation of activities, materials and short programmes based on selected bits of popular psy-perspectives. Reflecting fluctuating fashions as well as longer-running psychological traditions, materials and activities currently include positive psychology, person-centred and relationship counselling, self-help, psycho-dynamic therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), emotional literacy/emotional intelligence and the increasingly popular trend for mindfulness.

New claims to expertise are therefore emerging. For example, as Kristiina Brunila shows in a Finnish context, youth workers who are in tune with and often come from the social groups they work with, legitimise government-sponsored projects that are out-sourced, de-regulated and short-term and which offer therapeutic interventions for young people deemed to be 'at risk': as we show below, these workers often design and administer their own psychological assessments of young people's mental states and psychological 'skills' (Brunila, 2012a, b, 2013). In England too, the shift from targeted interventions administered by traditional experts, noted above, draws in a growing diversity of practitioners from short-term, publicly-funded projects and commercially-marketed programmes promoted by charities, campaigning groups, third sector organisations and consultancies. This market is spurring traditional specialists, such as educational psychologists and especially those in services that have been outsourced to private companies or which are operating as local authority traded services, to train in new areas so that they can compete with outsourced or commercial practitioners. For example, bodies such as the relationship counselling service 'Relate', the charity Family Action (founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a philanthropic organisation working with the poor), the Amy Winehouse Foundation, the not-for-profit campaign 'Action for Happiness' which lobbies government to measure and develop 'happiness, and myriad commercial companies such as 'Art of Brilliance' are just a small number of organisations currently



competing in this market, legitimising their expertise perhaps through a Masters' degree in mindfulness, CBT, positive psychology or emotional intelligence, or just a short post-graduate certificate in 'mental toughness'. Outside these varying levels of professional training, experience of certain difficult experiences can legitimise more rudimentary forms of expertise in the form of being a 'wounded healer': for example, the Amy Winehouse Foundation, a charity funded by the Lottery to promote 'resilience training' in schools, proclaims facilitators' own recovery from drug and drink problems as sufficient expertise to carry out psycho-emotional assessments of young people's resilience and to run 'resilience and self-esteem building sessions in response to those assessments (Rawdin forthcoming). Again this resonates with other educational settings such as adult and community education, successful survivor and user campaigns in mental health to de-centre expertise and thereby de-stigmatise mental illness reinforces a shift from specialist intervention towards peer-based strategies and the use of 'embedded' pedagogies for wellbeing in mainstream programmes rather than targeted or discrete ones (see Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2015).

A rapidly shifting market of psy-fashions promoted by what we might call new types of 'pseudo- experts', bears out Nikolas Rose's observation that psychology is generous "in its capacity to lend itself 'freely' to others who will 'borrow' it because of what it offers to them in the way of justification and guide to action" (Rose, 1999 p89). We would argue that three other interrelated factors reinforce the trends we have explored briefly above. First, through highly reductionist, popularised ideas and expertise about our own and others' mental health and emotional states in lifestyle media, software 'apps' and popular culture, an intensifying trend towards what sociologists call 'therapeutic culture' reinforces and drives the expansion of psychology outside its traditional domains and de-stabilises traditional expertise. One outcome is that everyday therapeutic ideas and practices increasingly parallel those in workplace and educational setting-based programmes (see Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2004). Second, the de-centring of mental health expertise emanating from radical user-based campaigns mentioned above has done much to destigmatise mental illness, reflected for example in a shift in terminology to 'mental illhealth' or 'mental health problems' (Lewis et al., 2015). Third, concern about young people's mental health and wellbeing is predicated on, and also legitimises, conceptual incoherence and interchangeable uses of and references to emotional wellbeing, social and emotional learning and mental health in policy texts and everyday discourse. We return to this problem in the final section.

In powerful, subtle ways then, these trends simultaneously respond to and generate a profoundly pessimistic sensibility of unprecedented, endemic and worsening problems, and associated claims that intervention is essential. As we argue below, this offers explicit and implicit images of the human subjects of intervention. We explore these next and evaluate the extent to which these images can be characterised as 'diminished'.

### 3. THE HUMAN SUBJECTS OF INTERVENTION

#### Revisiting the 'diminished' subject

A key concern of earlier critiques of emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning interventions and their underlying justifications is that they depict diminished images of human subjects who experience everyday life and educational activities as an ever-present source of distress (e.g. Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). We have argued above that developments discussed in the paper both embed and expand a deeply pessimistic sensibility of psycho-emotional vulnerability across social policy into culture, everyday life, institutional settings and some radical/ critical strands of educational and social research. Nevertheless, in response to assertions that a psycho-emotionally vulnerable self is necessarily a *diminished* self, critics have not only argued that downplaying the role of emotional dimensions of learning in favour of rational, cognitive and intellectual ones reinforces outdated, mythical dualism between the intellectual and emotional, but also that portraying the emotional and vulnerable subject as 'diminished' is Othering, masculinist and elitist (eg Beard et al., 2007; Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Similarly, some advocates of radical/critical appropriations of vulnerability, discussed earlier, also challenge the idea that a psycho-emotionally vulnerable subject is a diminished subject, arguing that to present it as such is ableist and therefore Othering (see Goodley in Ecclestone and Goodley op cit).

In revisiting arguments about a diminished self, we acknowledge a need to guard against presenting an over-coherent or determinist portrayal of the human subjects of policy and the diverse interventions it generates. Indeed, there are profound contradictions. On the one hand, invocations of vulnerability in policy texts and social and emotional learning/emotional wellbeing interventions depict children, young people and adults as lacking the essential psycho-emotional skills and capacities they need to succeed in an increasingly competitive and stressful neo-liberal society. Here vulnerability becomes an ever-present yet largely implicit flip-side in depictions of psychological resilience as invulnerability. On the other hand, as Frank Furedi observes, "*the tendency to inflate the problem of emotional vulnerability and to minimize the ability of the person to cope with distressful episodes runs counter to the therapeutic idealization of the self-determining individual*" (Furedi, 2003: p114). In a similar vein, Dahlstedt and colleagues argue from their evaluations of interventions in Swedish schools, "*the individual must already be conceived as autonomous and self-reflecting. In other words, the pedagogic process appears to require the pre-existence of that which it is trying to create*" (2010, p 406). In general, the psychological underpinnings of most interventions require the active participation of rational, thinking, potentially agentic subjects who can become aware or mindful of irrational, emotional, unconscious factors that drive their behaviour and then

adopt effective strategies to create or restore a coherent and authentic and, crucially, *positive* self: SEAL, PATHS, the Penn Resilience Programme and mindfulness training, all invoke these ideas. Similarly, notions of the reflexive, self-aware self who can learn and apply emotional skills and capabilities and create associated mindsets portray an optimistic, resourceful and agentic, but ultimately *individual*, subject.

Another apparent undermining of concerns about the diminished human subject of interventions comes from the few in-depth studies of emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning interventions that have been carried out so far (e.g. Proctor, 2013; Gillies, 2011; Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Silvonen, 2014; Rawdin, forthcoming). These studies have observed participants' involvement in various activities, followed by discussion with them and the psy-experts or pseudo-experts administering programmes about responses and perceptions. Findings suggest, unsurprisingly, that participants respond in idiosyncratic ways to the implicit and explicit images of their capacity for agency and resilience that interventions promote, encourage or seek to respond to. For example, although some participants might be, variously, strategically compliant, bored, bemused, confused, or indifferent, others welcome useful skills and insights about themselves (e.g. Brunila, Proctor, Brunila & Silvonen op cit). A small number are frustrated and occasionally angry with attempts to regulate and discipline their emotions through what they see as implementers' attempts to impose class, gendered and raced fictions about emotion (e.g. Gillies, 2011). Far from reacting as vulnerable subjects, some young people reject them as 'brainwashing' (e.g. Gillies, op cit; Brunila, op cit). Others find new ways to understand themselves and their problems empowering, sometimes welcoming a diagnosis of 'learning difficulties' or a category disorder such as ADHD, even when this comes from an unofficial, locally-designed assessment administered by youth workers, because it 'explains' earlier failures and maladjustments (Brunila and Silvonen op cit). Other participants acquire new forms of peer power because teachers and peers attribute a stronger, more confident emotional identity to them, and enrol their help in managing others' emotions (eg Proctor op cit, Lendrum et al 2011). In general then, it seems that different interventions can open up new possibilities for subject positions, through new ways to act, to see oneself and others, or to be seen by others, perhaps by embracing strategies or by resisting and rejecting them. At the same time, interventions can be irrelevant for some participants who are oblivious that anything was tried at all or simply indifferent.

Yet neither these studies nor mainstream evaluations of interventions such as the Penn Resilience Programme (Challen et al., 2011), SEAL (Wigglesworth et al., 2012, Humphrey et al., 2010, Hallam, 2009) or PATHS (Curtis & Norgate, 2007, Kam et al., 2004) have studied the long-term effects of interventions, particularly in relation to their effects in both shaping and responding to children's and young people's subjectivities. So while vulnerability is undoubtedly invoked in policy and the casual, often careless discourses of everyday practice, research has not yet explored the ways in which the designers,

implementers and participants of intervention regard vulnerability, how vulnerability manifests itself in other non-intervention aspects of everyday life in educational settings, and the subjectivities that emerge.

### **Reiterating concerns about a diminished subject**

As well as indications of empowered and active involvement in emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning interventions, there is also a lack of empirical data about the invocations and enactment of vulnerability in educational settings. Nevertheless, our earlier discussion of the continuing and expanding influence of vulnerability in education policy and practice means that we remain concerned about how, amidst the construction of mental health and emotional wellbeing as a public crisis, with very wide-ranging understandings, vulnerability has become far more extensive than official criteria that make their way into everyday discourse. As we discussed earlier, the universalising of vulnerability takes it a very long way beyond official and informal identification of structural and psycho-emotional risks and harms. It is becoming normalised as an endemic human condition, the "*demonstration of a lack of worldliness and the possession of an indiscriminating and individual naivete in conducting the tough business of life*" (Frankburg et al cited by Frawley, 2015 p101. Here for example, media coverage of campaigns for governments to measure happiness and wellbeing over the past 10 years presents the public as a homogenous entity unaware of its own vulnerability and need for 'support', leading political commentator Will Hutton to ask 'What if individuals do not possess the mental equipment to be rational about why and what they choose' (Hutton in *The Guardian* quoted by Frawley, 2014 p156). It is hard to see how portrayals of people as not merely psycho- emotionally at risk from various social, material and psychological conditions, and therefore in need of 'support', but also existentially irrational, hapless and naïve, facing growing adversities yet unaware of their damaging psychological causes and effects, and lacking effective strategies for dealing with them, do not suggest a diminished subject.

We are concerned that such images justify the move in psychology, not just from trying to repair psychological damage towards building 'positive qualities', but to a much wider role where simple everyday psychological functioning is seen as not only benefiting from intervention but *requiring* it (Frawley op cit., p305, original emphasis). Here earlier forms of behaviourist psychology that portray psycho-emotionally vulnerable subjects who are prey to destructive emotional legacies, baggage and barriers, unconscious motives and drivers, give way in current versions to an expanding list of attributes, desirable mindsets and attitudes associated with the skills and capabilities of character, emotional wellbeing and mental health that require direct training, rather than being developed through more holistic approaches: we return to this argument below.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL IDEAS ABOUT WELLBEING

### **The place of interventions for emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning**

Despite our criticisms of elisions between key concepts, our own analysis has not yet differentiated between emotional wellbeing, mental health and social and emotional learning. We regard some clarity here as important for being able to consider what interventions are necessary and who for, and how educational settings might develop wider, more holistic notions of wellbeing. For example, some educational psychologists regard mental health and wellbeing as consequences of social and emotional learning initiatives. The conceptual map outlined by Neil Humphrey sees both these notions as following on from universal attempts to enhance the social-emotional skills of children and young people, and he construes wellbeing as much broader than mental health (Humphrey, 2013). Some educators argue that mental health is a construct that should be reserved for clinicians rather than educationalists (Coleman, 2009). Yet the idea of wellbeing as a broad construct is reflected in public health guidance offered to British schools. For example, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) presents it as multi-dimensional, consisting of three inter-related aspects: emotional wellbeing relates to feelings of happiness, confidence, not feeling depressed; resilience and feelings of autonomy comprise the psychological dimension; and social wellbeing consists of the ability to have good relationships with others. Yet, as we have alluded, particular interpretations emphasise these different dimensions in varying ways (see Ereaut & Whiting, 2013). Evaluation of the effectiveness of different approaches and programmes is therefore highly problematic, exacerbated by the diverse, incoherent market discussed earlier. It is therefore very difficult for educational settings to judge what approach to use, for whom and with what purpose.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of establishing consensus, clarity about terms and purposes would help practitioners and institutional managers clarify what version of social and emotional learning they endorse. It would also, as the Chief Medical Officer argues in her 2013 report on priorities for public mental health, counter an increasing erosion of crucial distinctions between these concepts that hinders clear assessments of the extent of problems with mental illness, the establishment of clear evidence for intervention and decisions about how to allocate scarce specialist resources for genuine need (Davies 2013). Her analysis, together with the problems we have raised in this paper, suggest that Coleman's assertion that we need to reserve mental health as a construct for clinicians, cited above, warrants further consideration. It also suggests that we need to be more restrained in attributing problems of mental illness to a perceived absence of emotional and social skills and perhaps also more critical about claims that attributes, dispositions and behaviours associated with emotional wellbeing can be taught, assessed and transferred.

In raising questions about what sort of intervention is implicated by particular understandings of social and emotional learning, mental health and wellbeing, we focus here on alternatives to universal rather than targeted interventions. It is important to acknowledge that, depending on what version or meaning one accepts, the option exists either to do something different or do nothing explicit at all. In relation to the second position, for example, research on primary school children has concluded that non-directive or free play may provide a better alternative medium for the development of SEAL-related skills than the more typical timetabled SEAL lessons (Woolf, 2013). More widely, the message of some recent educational research that usually lies outside policy, research and professional debates about how to foster wellbeing may be read as suggesting that wellbeing is 'caught rather than taught'. This implies that the enhancement of wellbeing might best be achieved both through imaginative and skilled teaching of particular subjects and a diverse curriculum. This approach rejects wellbeing as an explicit core educational goal. For example, maximising opportunities for children to be creative, through art, music and drama, is considered to be important in fostering a sense of autonomy (e.g. Galton & Page, 2014). In a similar vein, those who adopt a more philosophical sense of wellbeing, seeing it as living a worthwhile life, claim it can be promoted through the proper teaching of literature and history (Suissa, 2008). Other philosophers argue that the study of religious education might provide a lens through which the wellbeing agenda in schools could be re-framed and moved away from an instrumental skills-based approach (Pett, 2012). For Bev Clack, this would necessarily involve "developing an enquiring mind, cultivating habits of thought and practice that encourage the questioning of what lies outside the self" (Clack, 2012 p507). Some educationalists claim that rather than talking about feelings, schools should encourage 'silent practices' to be observed, which in turn, are likely to foster self-awareness (Lees, 2012). Arguments within critical pedagogy seek to retain an interest in emotions for their potentially transformative rather than therapeutic or skills-enhancement value (e.g. Amsler, 2011).

### **Diminishing the subject of wellbeing**

These arguments for richer understandings of wellbeing illuminate the extent to which the developments we have explored in this paper offer a diminished depiction of wellbeing and its human and curriculum subject. We have aimed to show that much policy-related debate about wellbeing, even where the term is used without the prefix 'emotional', has come to assume an almost wholly psycho-emotional meaning that is inseparable from unchallenged perceptions of an unprecedented crisis of childhood and mental illness. As we have shown, vulnerability is enmeshed in these ideas too. In the face of growing pressure on priorities for resources and expertise in educational settings, interventions aiming to develop often ill-defined or assumed notions of mental health, emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning have

to compete with traditional curriculum subjects such as literature, history, philosophy, politics and religion, that can offer a broad foundation for the development of a rounded rational and emotional human subject.

We recognise that to do this means freeing all subjects, human and curriculum, from a treadmill of achievement targets. Yet competition for a well-rounded human and curriculum subject does not merely come from pressures of time, resources and targets: instead, we see a growing trend to regard traditional curriculum subjects as creating adversity, risk and harm in their own right, where young people are either over-burdened psycho-emotionally by their demands, subjected to elitist, racist, sexist and colonialist views of the world, or simply see them as irrelevant, boring and disengaging (e.g. Winter, 2014; White, 2004). Here the powerful discourse that education should be a skills-based preparation for contemporary real life plays well to the demise of the rational human subject and the parallel rise of the stressed-out, anxious, vulnerable subject. For example, after invoking this subject, the government's secretary of state for education presented '*the importance of well-rounded education*' narrowly, as an education that develops the psycho-emotional skills of character and mental health alongside achievement (Morgan 2015a).

In proposing an enhancement of wellbeing through the curriculum and a more holistic view of emotion, character and mental health, we are not arguing for mainstream subjects to be a vehicle for dispositions and behaviours associated with social and emotional learning (see Claxton, 2007; Weare, 2003). Instead, as we have observed, philosophers challenge a diminished view of a 'rounded' education by arguing that much richer cultural, literary, philosophical, political and spiritual meanings can help children and young people develop more subtle understandings about emotions, their effects and moral dimensions (e.g. Suissa, 2008; Cigman, 2012; Clack, 2012; Pett, 2012). These perspectives reveal that the diminished subject of many emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning interventions is both the hapless, irrational, emotionally vulnerable and naive *human* subject and the *curriculum* subject of wellbeing itself. The latter has generated its own pedagogic techniques, discrete subject knowledge and a generalist psy-based understanding of expertise rather than a subject-based one.

### **Reasserting a rich meaning of wellbeing**

In place of claims to elevate the emotionally vulnerable subject as a progressive counter to an over-emphasis on the rational and cognitive, we advocate the reassertion of belief in the potential of rational, agentic human subjects. This does not overlook the importance of emotion in education but, rather, aims to confine understandings and labels of vulnerability and corresponding calls for intervention. Our support

for a broader, rich curriculum subject as essential for a much richer understanding of wellbeing aligns us with the philosophers cited above and with sociologists who reject the current view of knowledge as a mere adjunct to a long list of skills, dispositions and attitudes for functioning in everyday life in favour of 'powerful knowledge' as knowledge that "is cognitively superior to that needed for daily life" (Young, 2013: p118; see also Furedi, 2011; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). We recognise that intractable, enduring tensions between images of human subjects are at the heart of how we understand and develop wellbeing in educational settings but reiterate concerns articulated in this paper, namely that the assumptions of psycho-emotional vulnerability to which most interventions increasingly respond diminish the human and curriculum subject of wellbeing.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that underlying discourses and rationales, techniques and assumptions across the terrains of policy, research and implementation are *ad hoc*, changeable, eclectic and pragmatic and therefore contradictory, inconsistent and difficult for researchers and practitioners to keep track of. These features are exacerbated by their incorporation not just in a powerful and growing wellbeing industry with strong vested interests but also in wider debates about the psycho-emotional aspects of social justice. It is therefore important not to try to discern a unifying or dominant direction or attribute an overly determinist or totalising rationale in these developments.

We recognise that critical perspectives offered in this paper occupy a minority position, academically, politically and practically. Indeed, there seems to be no diminishing of interest amongst all British political parties that schools and other educational settings play a key role in promoting human and curriculum subjects of wellbeing, character *and* mental health as core goals for education. Yet this does not obviate the need to criticise lack of evidence of a coherent or strategic approach: instead, governments seem to cast around for new types of experts who offer an expanding, random array of psycho-behavioural pedagogies. The ensuing market legitimises pseudo-experts as an omnipresent source of authority for managing the everyday vulnerability of a human subject that, as we have argued, is a diminished one, however good the intentions are for promoting it.

We have raised questions about the claims used to justify these developments, such as an expanding existential sense of everyday vulnerability and declining levels of mental health, and associated claims that effective, socially and individually productive learning depends on educators elevating problematic elisions of character, mental health and emotional wellbeing to the forefront of their professional concerns.

Finally, in raising questions about whether a psycho-emotionally vulnerable self is 'diminished', we have



argued that it is important to challenge a powerful cultural sensibility that we are all fundamentally, universally vulnerable. This does not deny the blindingly obvious fact of our existential vulnerability to death and potential or actual disability or illness, or our risk of structural, physical and psychological harm. Instead, our arguments aim to resist two pressures: to translate existential vulnerability into a permanent state of consciousness and therefore a subject position; and second, more prosaically although related, to then regard psycho-emotional safeguarding and intervention as an essential need for simply surviving. In turn, this questions the legitimacy of interventions that aim to reshape growing numbers of psychological dispositions, attitudes and skills as necessary not just to flourish but to function and survive. We think that resisting these developments requires more precision about what aspects of social and emotional learning require direct intervention, much more restrained labeling of vulnerability and mental health 'issues', and the reining in, or even an end to, universal programmes. This might release time, resources and professional energy for serious interest in the types of educational curriculum that can offer richer, more meaningful alternatives to developing wellbeing in educational settings.

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