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**Tears of the Phoenix: How nurturing and support became the  
'cure' for Further Education**

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## **Abstract**

### **Tears of the Phoenix: How nurturing and support became the 'cure' for Further Education**

There is rising concern that the uncritical use of therapeutic educational interventions such as circle time or personalised learning in education is leading to a 'diminished self' (Ecclestone, 2004; 2007) - individuals who are disempowered and whose potential for agency is reduced by the well intentioned but uncritical discourse of fragility and the implementation of pseudo-therapeutic interventions in schools and colleges.

Existing debates identify a broad range of formal interventions such as those mentioned above, which might be described as therapy based. More informally, this paper, which is contextualised within the emerging literature in this field, (e.g Furedi, 2004; Cigman, 2004; Ecclestone 2004, 2007; Kristjansson, 2007) explores how teacher education, education policy and popular belief interact to generate and perpetuate an uncritical nurturing ethos amongst education professionals and considers its possible consequences for teachers and students. The paper draws on a range of qualitative data from an ongoing exploration of the changing identities of part-time inservice trainee teachers as well as from a recent case study of 30 level one students in two further education colleges.

The paper finds a well meaning, nurturing mindset amongst teaching staff, supported not by research but by received wisdom such as the value of personalised learning and a belief in the need to build self-esteem. It argues that this mindset contributes to the pervasive ethos of nurturing and dependence in Further Education which forms the focus of this discussion. Further, it suggests that whilst in concert with current government rhetoric reflected not only in official papers but also in LLUK and OfSTED

## DRAFT PAPER

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requirements, this ethos is at variance with the students' perceptions of themselves as agent individuals working towards 'good' qualifications.

The paper argues that the origins of such a nurturing mindset are two-fold, arising from the nature and purpose of teacher education in the Lifelong Learning sector and also as a consequence of the uncritical acceptance of a discourse of fragility by government and institutions desperate to resolve perceived problems around issues such as retention and achievement. It goes on to suggest that existing teacher education programmes engender an uncritical 'tick box' uncritical approach to the education of teachers, in which there is no requirement for trainee teachers to be encouraged to question contested concepts such as notions around self esteem, but where some contested concepts are required to be taught as 'fact'. Further, this is compounded by government and institutional endorsement of more formal 'therapeutic' initiatives such as the use of learning styles questionnaires by integrating them into everyday practice as a matter of policy. In this way, the paper argues, research informed practice becomes indivisible from that based on assumption and guesswork, engendering and perpetuating an uncritical mindset amongst teachers, ultimately leading to a denial of the potential for greater agency amongst professionals as well as amongst students.

Despite the rhetoric suggesting that pseudo therapeutic approaches will act in the same way as the tears of the Phoenix in respect of perceived personal and institutional difficulties, the paper concludes that this is not the case, and that the uncritical, nurturing ethos underlying many such initiatives leads not to empowerment but instead to low expectations which are legitimised in the context of often misunderstood notions and (mis)interpretations of inclusion. Ultimately, this limits the potential for agency and denies opportunity, according with Ecclestone's concept of the diminished self and raising serious questions about the state of initial teacher training in England, in that such

DRAFT PAPER

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approaches are apparently taught, accepted and implemented as fact in all parts of the education system.

## **Introduction**

There is rising concern that the uncritical use of therapeutic educational interventions such as circle time or personalised learning in education is leading to a 'diminished self' (Ecclestone, 2004, 2007) - individuals who are disempowered and whose potential for agency is reduced by the well intentioned but uncritical discourse of fragility and the implementation of pseudo-therapeutic interventions in schools and colleges.

A broad range of initiatives which might be described as therapeutic in nature are used in further education colleges on a daily basis. These include initiatives such as personalised learning, and 'services' such as counselling which are routinely available to students in the sector. Other practices, such as the focus on improving self-esteem have become embedded throughout the sector, leading Kristjansson to observe somewhat wryly that 'Self esteem has been touted as the Balm of Gilead in some psychological and educational circles for quite a while' (2007: 247).

Placed within a framework of the emerging literature in this area, this paper explores the use of such initiatives in the context of Initial Teacher Education, teaching and learning practices in the sector and FE education policy and considers the implications of their impact on the learners who are the unwitting recipients of these initiatives, beliefs and practices.

## **Context and Methods**

This paper draws on data from two studies. The first of these was a case study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of 3 groups of 16-19 level 1 students in two further education colleges (St. Dunstan's and Woodlands). This took place during the 2004/2005 academic year and 32 young people participated. 12 teachers were interviewed and four classroom observations undertaken as part of this study and it is these data which has

## DRAFT PAPER

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been used for this paper. All these teachers held, or were working towards, PGCE/Cert. Ed qualifications.

Secondly, data have also been used from an ongoing exploration of trainee teachers and mentors identities and perceptions of their roles. For this paper, data have been used from 6 trainee teachers and this was drawn from classroom observations and an analysis of assessed written work on 'Management of Learning', submitted in December 2007. The trainees were all in their final year of training during 2007/2008, worked at 3 different colleges in the Midlands and all successfully achieved their PGCE/Cert. Ed at the end of the academic year. Five taught vocational subjects and one Literacy and GCSE English. All taught 14-19 learners.

As 17/18 of the teachers were working on 14-19 vocational programmes most of the young people they taught were enrolled on vocational education programmes. These ranged from level 1 to level 3 and covered a range of subjects including Health and Social Care, Art and Design, IT and Horticulture.

### **Deficit Models and Dependence**

It is self evident that a therapeutic ethos amongst teachers will have most impact on their students. In the context of this paper, the students concerned were all enrolled on 14-19 programmes in colleges of further education and most of them were undertaking some form of vocational education and training. Those young people entering further education tend to be 14-16 year olds pursuing an alternative (vocational) curriculum, or school leavers with few or no qualifications. Such young people are deemed to be 'at risk' (see Ecclestone and Hayes 2000: 66) and as such, fit within the deficit models described by Major (1990: 23); Colley (2003: 4) Ecclestone (2004; 2007) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) in the context of policy and provision for socially excluded young people. A discourse of fragility, using terms such as 'disadvantaged', 'disaffected' and 'low achieving' is used to

## DRAFT PAPER

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describe this group of learners who are then perceived to need 'support' to overcome these difficulties. Thus, within colleges of further education there exists a whole range of support services to address students' perceived needs, whether these are educational, behavioural, social or emotional.

This is of particular concern given that such learners are significantly 'Othered' by academics and society at large. Fine et al (2000: 117) argue that our constructions of the 'other' 'however seemingly benevolent and benign' must inevitably influence our perceptions and interpretations. In the case of these students, the representation of them tends to form two personas. The first of these is the disaffected, disruptive, uneducable youth, reflected in the type of discourse argued by Colley (2003: 28) to pathologise those at risk of social exclusion and the second is the representation of these young people as passive, needy victims of circumstance, a therapeutic perception argued by Ecclestone (2004) to diminish the self and erode individual autonomy.

Ecclestone's argument is supported by earlier work in which Minogue (1998: 258) argues that a person defined in terms of need must necessarily be construed within a deficit model and is thus unable to participate in 'reciprocal human transactions'. He goes on to argue that this is recognised by Social Justice theorists and obscured by the use of the concept of 'right' which is then extended to universal right. This, he suggests, reduces the whole population to a form of dependence on the state. Thus, he concludes, 'rights are a Greek gift' because they are, in fact, 'an instrument of subjection'.

These are important arguments within a broader social justice context. Specifically in terms of education however, there are correlations between Minogue's concept of dependence on the state, and Ecclestone and Hayes's (2008: viii/ix) notion of a rising therapeutic culture in education. The book develops Ecclestone's earlier (2004) notion of the 'diminished self' in which educational 'failure' is perceived to endow a form of emotional trauma or

## DRAFT PAPER

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need, rather than being regarded socially and politically as 'outcomes of an education system that uses assessment to rank and segregate people for unequal opportunities'. Such a state of diminished self may be reflective of a wider social move towards a therapeutic culture which seeks to exercise social control by 'cultivating a sense of vulnerability, powerlessness and dependence' (Furedi 2004: 203).

Furedi goes on to suggest that this 'diminished self' would be less able to exercise the 'citizens' powers of practical reason and thought in forming, revising and rationally pursuing their conception of the good' and hence would be less likely to achieve a more just society (Ibid: 203/4). Such citizens would also be less able to engage in the dialogical process which Griffiths (2003) argues is essential within a society which claims to be working towards a state of social justice and which Rawls (1999) assumes all have the capacity to engage in, ultimately leading to an even more inequitable state of society. Minogue (1998: 265) has argued that only a 'completely de-moralised and therapeutic conception of human life' can arise from treating people as creatures with needs to be managed and foresees a perception that life should be nothing more than a series of pleasant experiences. He uses this to argue against the concept of social justice which he regards as 'a reactionary project for a managed society'. However, Ecclestone perceives arguments for social justice to be a constructive response to the effects of this therapeutic ethos arguing that 'Demoralised humanism is therefore one of the most pressing problems facing educators and policy makers committed to social justice and the transforming potential of education' (2004: 133).

### **Staff Perceptions, Student Support**

Many of the behaviours of many of the young people taught by the teachers in this study might have been described as 'disaffected', both in the classroom and in their social activity. However, the perception amongst the staff teaching them was that they were 'needy' students who required a high

## DRAFT PAPER

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level of nurturing and support, an approach consistent with the 'therapy culture' described by Furedi (2004) in which marginalised and disaffected young people are regarded as vulnerable and in need of support. Strategies to address these perceived problems include initiatives such as the use of learning styles (heavily criticised by Coffield et al, 2004) or more recently, personalised learning, a policy construct propounded by New Labour (e.g. see DfES 2005; 2006; Miliband 2006) as a panacea for social ills across health, education and other parts of the welfare state. Based on no research (Ecclestone, 2007: 462) but now widely implemented across the further education sector the initiative has been criticised by, amongst others Smith (2006: 51/52) who has argued that it is based on the assumption that 'the individual's fragile self esteem may not survive a homework assignment that is too demanding...'.

In addition to initiatives such as these, formal 'support' mechanisms used by the teachers in this study included college counsellors and local initiatives such as engagement mentoring similar to that described by Colley (2003). Perhaps more significant was the evidence of a more informal 'nurturing' approach as part of a staff team or institutional ethos. This was most apparent as part of the overall ethos of a staff team responsible for Health and Social Care (HSC) groups in the Level 1 study. The very high level of nurturing observed in this group could be ascribed to staff backgrounds in that all members of the HSC team had originally trained in the caring professions, predominantly in nursing. Whilst the HSC team demonstrated the highest levels of nurturing behaviour, this approach was evident in the other teams who participated in the level 1 study and amongst 5/6 of the teacher trainees, possibly reflecting the 'ethos of care' which Ecclestone and Hayes (2008: 85) argue is 'integral to the values and purposes of all FE colleges'.

This therapeutic, nurturing ethos was reflected in actions observed during classroom observations such as making over-positive, ipsative judgements

## DRAFT PAPER

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on students' work (e.g. 'excellent work' based on three lines of writing done over three hours), enabling two students to leave the class because one wanted to speak to the student support officer and needed 'support' from her friend, and tolerating (and sometimes participating in) social behaviours unrelated to learning. This was in addition to the discourse used by the teachers in this study which also emphasised such an ethos. Sue (HSC lecturer; St. Dunstan's) described individual students as 'maturing as a person' and considered that the students' social backgrounds were significant in their perceived disaffection and low achievement:

A student that probably hasn't achieved at school, various reasons, some have the ability but maybe they haven't liked the teacher or the subject, a lot of other pulls on them from studying, personal issues, demands at home, some times not having a stable home, two adults and two children, that sort of background.

She went on to explain how personal problems have a high priority in her class:

I think I need to know them as people, and they bring an awful lot of their issues and problems with them and I need to be aware of that, sharing a lot, they come in and they are talking about clothes and what they brought somebody and they are showing me, I think I have to show an interest in that before I can move on with a lesson

Similarly, Maria (Teacher Trainee) emphasised a nurturing approach in her assignment:

There are many aspects of [Maslow's] pyramid which an effective tutor would wish to include which will enhance their approach, such as ensuring that students are warm and safe, form good relationships with the group and tutor and achieve

Significantly, this seems to suggest that to achieves of least importance, or possibly, that achievement is dependent on being safe, warm and happy. More importantly, in the tutor taking responsibility for this,

## DRAFT PAPER

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deficit on the part of the students is inferred in that they are unable to ensure that they are warm, safe and happy independently.

All 12 teachers involved in the Level 1 study defined their students in deficit terms of need. For example, Andy (Woodlands) described the students as 'low in confidence' whilst Claire and Anne (Woodlands) considered that they had 'low self-esteem and no social skills', resulting in a perceived need for 'more...pastoral care. It is a different kind of pastoral care'.

Ian (Woodlands) considered that the students benefited from 'a person centred approach' and Alan (St. Dunstan's) that it was in the students' interests to attend college rather than to find work, not for educational reasons but because 'you can't take all your personal baggage into work'.

Paul (St. Dunstan's) believed that many of the students' problems were attributable to undiagnosed learning difficulties that could have been avoided had their schools intervened earlier:

Because I think maybe there have been issues at school where they've not been correctly diagnosed with a learning difficulty and it's just been assumed that the student's either disruptive or they're misbehaving so they've been left in the system

He also considered that of the 13 students in his group, only 25% were likely to progress in college.

These comments accorded with a tendency amongst teacher trainees to pathologise the perceived needs and problems of their students. Of the six teacher trainees only one did not define students in deficit terms of need and this was Derek, an atypical trainee who was pursuing a second career after 17 years in the military and who used behavioural techniques (to great effect!) to address an identified classroom management problem. Other trainees discussed students of their own in the context of a range of conditions, the most common of which were Dyspraxia, Dyslexia and

## DRAFT PAPER

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Asperger's Syndrome (always referred to simply as 'Asperger's') and the vaguer, but none the less deficient issues, needs and self- esteem.

There was a tendency for trainee teachers to 'diagnose' students. Trevor, for example, described his student thus: 'he is Asperger's and has ODD'. On enquiry, Trevor had based this 'diagnosis' on the inservice training and personal reading he had undertaken on Asperger's syndrome, and on information he had sourced from a website (see [www.psychnet-uk.com/dsm\\_iv/oppositional\\_defiant\\_disorder.htm](http://www.psychnet-uk.com/dsm_iv/oppositional_defiant_disorder.htm)) about ODD which turned out to be 'oppositional defiant disorder'. To the best of Trevor's knowledge, his own student had never received a medical/psychiatric or psychological diagnosis. Trevor was not unusual in this – even those trainees who had not come up with their own 'diagnosis' had labelled their own students based on hearsay or unsubstantiated reports from student support staff.

Whilst these diagnoses and labels appeared to be made with the intention of 'supporting' the young people they may, none-the-less be perceived as part of a growing therapeutic ethos within education and society at large in which issues such as perceived failures or disaffection are excused on the basis of a broad range of medicalised terms such as low self esteem, trauma or depression (Slee 1997; Furedi, 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008). This also has two concomitant effects. Firstly, it removes any responsibility from the individual by pathologising a perceived problem or behaviour and secondly, it confers particular characteristics (inevitably deficit characteristics) on an individual and once young people are stereotyped into a passive, submissive role of this nature, it becomes easier to accept it than to challenge or change it and resist 'the oppression of apparent kindness' (Corbett 1990:3). The consequences of pathologising people in this way can only result in individuals who lead diminished lives lacking in personal autonomy. Further, it creates a significant imbalance in the power differential between the tutor and student, where the tutors position as teacher automatically confers the

## DRAFT PAPER

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right to pathologise individuals , a form of 'support' which can only be the instrument of subjection described by Minogue (1998).

### **Nurturing and the Needy**

Therapeutic discourse defining young people as needy, disaffected or marginalised uses a deficit model which allows both state and society to problematise them as in need of help, rather than acknowledging the structural inequality within the education system which resulted in them being so labelled in the first place. Those who are labelled early within a deficit model such as disadvantaged, disengaged and disaffected are more likely to receive 'support' from a superficially sympathetic state, and hence increase the sense of reliance and the social acceptability of dependency to the extent of pathologising certain behaviours within a medical discourse (Slee, 1997:181; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008:7/11). Within such a model, young people are encouraged to see themselves as victims, and thus their agency, as the personal autonomy and motivation to change their situation, is reduced still further. The acceptance of a low status victim role rejects the agency of individual accountability and autonomy and the young person fulfils the role of a victim requiring help; consequently there is no basis for respect for that individual (Minogue, 1998: 258; Ecclestone, 2004:128). It may also be argued that this contributes to the lower value placed on young people on vocational education programmes in comparison to others who are perceived to be independent, high achieving and lacking in vulnerability.

It has been suggested that such superficial empathy and concern for low status groups can rapidly become moralistic and judgemental, as the disaffected and disadvantaged are portrayed and perceived as 'other' (Ecclestone, 2002:26; Colley, 2003:118) and although some aspects of disaffection may be seen as legitimate resistance on the part of the young person (Corbett, 1990:2; Colley, 2003:77/101) they are more usually associated with a deficit model discourse associated with more negative societal perceptions of 'disaffected' behaviour.

## DRAFT PAPER

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This is a matter for concern, since the evidence from this study suggests that within the field of vocational education teaching staff work from a position in which students are considered to have low self esteem as a result of the economic, social and educational difficulties they are perceived to have experienced. This humanistic stand-point also problematises vocational education students and generates a 'therapeutic' approach and mind-set which is concerned with raising self esteem as a way of resolving social problems. It also raises the possibility that, consistent with the arguments cited above, these teachers run the risk of developing a moralistic and judgmental view of their students, who were portrayed as 'other' in interviews and assessed work. Further, there is a moral and philosophical question around the use of notions of self esteem raised by Kristjansson (2007) who cites Cigman's (2004) argument that a therapeutic concept of self esteem connects two assumptions – that some psychological problems are connected to self esteem and that they will benefit from therapeutic intervention. He goes on to question whether such conceptions are logically and morally acceptable.

A focus on improving self esteem did however, mean that staff/student relationships were superficially positive and this appears to be a factor in college being perceived as 'better than school' and in the words of one foundation GNVQ student: 'it's about being treated with respect'. On its own, however, this is a simplistic explanation and positive relationships are probably the products not only of a nurturing approach considered by learners to confer respect but also to 'changing dispositions to learning' as motivation is influenced by transition (Ecclestone 2002: 128/129). A nurturing approach and the incremental individual achievement of low level academic skills will not, of themselves, offer the tools for young people to achieve their aspirations but rather, excessive nurturing will result in a belief on the part of the young person that they can achieve anything without questioning how they will accomplish it, and in a form of dependence on those teaching staff

## DRAFT PAPER

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offering support. The result of this is that challenging aspirations (which might be argued to include any extended transition) are not achieved, and the focus of attention becomes the individual, rather than the structural forces which are constraining them. This is consistent with Ecclestone's (2004: 118) argument that presenting failure as emotionally damaging results in a belief that the disaffected and marginalised cannot cope without support, in a shift of attention from inequalities in the structure of the education system to a focus on people's feelings about it and to lower aspirations where these are challenging or risky.

Despite the perceptions of the students as being 'needy' and 'having issues', all the young people who participated in the study had high aspirations, most wishing to move on to technical or professional work roles. Although teaching staff described the programme as a 'stepping stone' or as 'meeting needs' but apparently placed no educational value on it, students wanted a 'good qualification' (which they conflated with a recognised or familiar brand of qualification). All believed that achieving a 'good' qualification would enable them to achieve their aspirations. This optimism, which was apparent at the beginning of their programme, did not last, and many withdrew, reinforcing staff perceptions that they were vulnerable and unable to cope. However, most of these students already had connections with the world of work through family members or their own part time employment, and they used this to make a transition to work, albeit low pay, low skill work. For most, this was a considered decision when faced with a choice between an extended transition with an unknown outcome and the imperative to earn money. Such pragmatic decisions, together with the high aspirations harboured by these young people and their ability to engage with the world of work, was inconsistent with their tutors perceptions of them as being needy and vulnerable, particularly that expressed by Paul who considered that 75% of his group would not progress in college and that all 'will need further support and if they don't get it in college they will need it in the community'.

### **Teacher Education**

The data referred to in this paper are indicative of a well meaning, nurturing mindset amongst teaching staff who clearly care deeply about the students they teach, and are consistent with the findings of an earlier study (Wallace and Atkins 2006) which found that the mentors of trainee teachers regarded their role as primarily one of nurturing, rather than coaching or assessing. This mindset is not necessarily grounded in theoretical understanding but rather in received wisdom. This is evident not only from the data presented here, but was made very clear during a tutorial session involving the teacher trainees, in which I challenged their practice in the use of techniques such as learning styles questionnaires and personalised learning approaches as well as beliefs such as the value of improving students' self esteem. These practices were not questioned by the trainees, but on the contrary justified on the basis that it was college policy, OfSTED expected it and the Consultant who had come in to do inservice training said it was a good thing, suggesting that their belief in such practices is compounded by government and institutional endorsement of more formal 'therapeutic' initiatives such as the use of personalised learning by integrating them into everyday practice as a matter of policy. Such endorsement can make it difficult to contest trainees' beliefs; for example, one local college at which a number of these teachers were employed has a section for students learning styles on its corporate lesson plan, and all are embracing personalised learning with enthusiasm.

Moreover, the LLUK standards for teacher education have no requirement for teachers to be familiar with research and are, anyway, now reduced to a system of box-ticking in the form of the SVUK 'Units of Assessment' which must form the basis of all endorsed ITT programmes. Together with the nurturing ethos which exists in the sector, such an approach can only lead to the staff force within the sector being unquestioning, compliant and uncritically accepting of the discourse of fragility used by government and

## DRAFT PAPER

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institutions desperate to resolve perceived problems around issues such as retention and achievement.

Therapeutic approaches such as personalised learning and 'supporting' students with 'issues' such as 'low self-esteem' may be in concert with current government rhetoric as reflected in official papers and also in LLUK and OfSTED requirements, but this ethos is at variance with students' perceptions of themselves as agent individuals working towards 'good' qualifications, a tension which deserves further exploration. In addition, the uncritical acceptance and implementation of therapeutic approaches within the sector has led to a position where research informed practice has become indivisible from that based on assumption and guesswork, engendering and perpetuating an uncritical mindset amongst teachers, ultimately leading to a denial of the potential for greater agency amongst professionals as well as amongst students.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper raises three key issues. Firstly, there are particular concerns about the nature of initial and ongoing teacher training, not necessarily in the sense that all the teachers who contributed to this advocated a therapeutic ethos in education, but in the sense that the practices associated with this were accepted in such an unquestioning and uncritical manner. As a corollary to this, these same teachers perceive themselves to be deficient if they do not 'succeed' with a particularly difficult student – i.e fail to control behaviour etc. If knowledge and education are to have any meaning and value in themselves, there is, surely, an imperative to produce teachers who are able to question and criticise the systems and structures in which they operate. An inability to do this can only reinforce the meaningless nature of much vocational education which I have criticised elsewhere (e.g. see Atkins, 2007).

## DRAFT PAPER

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There is no doubt that these teachers did work with some students who had difficult histories and psychological problems. In a (mainstream) group of 12, Michael (Teacher Trainee) reported having 1 student with dyspraxia, 1 with dyslexia, 1 with Aspergers Syndrome and 1 with Prader-Willi syndrome as well as 2 refugees for whom English was a second language. This was not unusual and raises a second question about the purpose of further education. Data such as those above suggest that, therapeutic ethos apart, the further education system is providing a social service rather than education in any meaningful sense raising serious questions about the role of the FE teacher and what the extent of their responsibilities should be.

Secondly, the young people who contributed data for this paper clearly regarded themselves as agent individuals in control of their own destiny. There was a tension between this and the teachers' perception of them as needy individuals requiring help and support. This raises an interesting question: do the students' perceptions of themselves as agent beings arise because of or in spite of the therapeutic and nurturing approach to education adopted in the FE sector?

Thirdly, the paper raises issues around the uninformed 'diagnosing' labelling and thus stigmatisation of people under the guise of 'support' which stereotypes individuals into passive 'victim' persona who are 'othered', and ultimately judged and disempowered by an educational system which should be empowering and providing opportunities.

The concept of therapeutic education is contentious and this is reflected in the number of statements Ecclestone is obliged to make about what her work is **not** claiming or alleging (2007:467). There is a pressing need for further, wide ranging research in this area, and this should begin with an exploration of the impact of specific, formal initiatives, such as personalised learning. Research is also necessary to explore the impact on teaching, learning and assessment of the nurturing ethos which is so evident amongst staff working

**DRAFT PAPER**

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in the further education system as well as the tension between teachers' perceptions of students as vulnerable and in need of support, and students own perceptions of themselves as agent individuals. Only by undertaking such work can we establish whether therapeutic education does, in fact, have the magical properties of the tears of the Phoenix and the ability to 'cure' the ills of further education, or whether many of the beliefs and practices associated with it in fact belong where the Phoenix originates, in the land of myth and legend.

## DRAFT PAPER

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