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Student Wellbeing and
the Therapeutic Turn in Education

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This article considers current concerns with promoting student mental health and wellbeing against the backdrop of critiques of the 'therapeutic turn' in education. It begins by situating accounts of 'therapeutic education' within broader theorisation of therapeutic culture. In doing so, the importance of this work is acknowledged, but key assumptions are questioned. The emergence of concerns about self-esteem and wellbeing are then examined through an analysis of changing educational aims in Australia. This enables consideration of the broader context for policy reforms and emergent ideas about the importance of fostering wellbeing and attending to the social and emotional aspects of learning. Finally, the article argues for the salience of historicising both educational policy and scholarly critiques of therapeutic education in order to: (1) situate the contemporary emphasis on student wellbeing within a longer history of educational reforms aimed at supporting young people; (2) unsettle taken-for-granted ways in which mental health and wellbeing are currently foregrounded in contemporary schooling; and (3) develop new perspectives on the therapeutic turn in education.

Keywords: educational aims, history, education policy, therapeutic culture, mental health and wellbeing

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that schools play a vital role in fostering the wellbeing of young people (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008; Slee, Dixon, & Askell-Williams, 2011; Weare, 2010; Wyn, 2007). Indeed, an official goal of Australian education is that schools should support young

people to become successful learners and confident individuals who 'have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2010, p. 7; MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9). In contrast to the first half of the 20th century, when the cultivation of character and the inculcation of moral or ethical values was largely based on a Christian-humanist framework (Barcan, 1993), the latter years of the 20th century saw the development of more self-referential notions of personal identity, self-awareness and self-worth. This was buttressed by the increasing significance of developmental and humanistic psychology in educational policy and practice and, more recently, the growing influence of positive psychology. In sociological analyses, this educational shift — reflected in the embrace of concepts such as self-esteem and wellbeing — is understood as part of a broader 'therapeutic turn' in culture and society (Wright, 2011a).

While the importance of schools attending to the psychological and emotional health of students is now widely accepted, and the value of focusing on the social and emotional aspects of learning is commonly endorsed, some critics express grave concerns about current educational directions. Indeed, the rise of 'therapeutic education' (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Nolan, 1998) has been the subject of considerable discussion, both in the public arena and in scholarly analysis (Cigman, 2012; Corcoran, 2012; Hyland, 2006; Nolan, 1998; Scott, 2008; Wright, 2011b). In light of ongoing debate, this article offers critical and historical perspectives on the therapeutic turn in education. In doing so,

the article has three interrelated aims. First, it seeks to unsettle taken-for-granted ways in which mental health and wellbeing are foregrounded in contemporary policy. Second, it offers a reflection on educational change in Australia, with a particular focus on how therapeutic concerns became tied to formal educational aims. Finally, the article develops new perspectives on debates about the spread of 'therapy culture' (Furedi, 2004), to provoke greater dialogue between the polarised positions of a taken-for-granted embrace of the therapeutic ethos on the one hand, and an overly negative theorising of its effects on the other.

The article begins by situating debates about therapeutic education within the broader context of theoretical accounts of the rise of therapeutic culture. Important connections between current and longstanding critiques are noted, and in so doing, problematic assumptions are examined. The article then turns to the question of the aims and purposes of schooling, a subject upon which much analysis of therapeutic education is focused, through a consideration of changing educational goals in Australia. I argue for the salience of historical perspectives to illuminate the complexity of therapeutic culture and its manifestation in education. Tracing strands of a therapeutic ethos historically reveals that it takes different forms at different times. It also highlights important social dimensions that have thus far been largely overlooked, not least of which is the alliance of therapeutic imperatives and concerns about social justice and disadvantage (Wright, 2011a, 2011b).

Therapeutic Education

Therapeutic education is a concept used in sociological, philosophical and critical policy studies to describe educational ideas and practices that are broadly informed by psychological knowledge and therapeutic imperatives. These include approaches to learning that are concerned with developing personal and social skills, emotional intelligence and building self-esteem (Hyland, 2006), along with a broader range of strategies used in educational settings that are directed towards making school a positive experience, promoting good mental health, and supporting young people with problems. In short, it refers to an overall educational philosophy that emphasises the importance of attending to emotional and psychological life, pedagogical approaches aimed at making classroom activities more engaging, and curriculum initiatives that affirm social and emotional learning. A key component of this is a focus on mental health and wellbeing, which, as with other aspects of 'therapeutic education', is reflected in the embrace of school-wide frameworks such as MindMatters (2012).

There is now an extensive body of research in the areas of youth mental health and wellbeing, matched by policy attention to preventative programs and health promotion in schools. The sense of urgency that characterises current policy mandates is underscored by a large evidence base of data suggesting an increasing prevalence among young people of both serious mental health disorders and more general forms of emotional and psychological stress. While estimates vary, most paint a rather bleak picture. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2013) suggest that more than one in ten

young people suffer high levels of psychological distress, while figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2010) indicate that one in four young Australians suffer from a mental health disorder. With educational settings regarded as 'ideal entry points' for mental health interventions (Slee et al., 2011), the question of how schools can best support the mental health and wellbeing of all students, and assist those experiencing problems, is a key challenge for policy makers, schools and the specialist staff that support young people.

Within this context, mental health promotion and strategies to support social and emotional development are seen as a key way in which schools can promote wellbeing and address what is generally agreed to be a youth mental health crisis. Concepts such as emotional and social learning (SEL), prominent in the United States, or the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) in the United Kingdom, are now commonplace. So, too, is the idea that schools have a role in helping young people develop resilience; that is, 'the ability to bounce back from difficulties and disappointments' (Weare, 2010, p. 7). Indeed, building resilience, cultivating social and emotional skills, and fostering wellbeing have become key educational priorities, supplementing longstanding educational aims of knowledge acquisition, vocational preparation and the development of citizenship (Wright, 2011b; Wyn, 2007).

Against the backdrop of alarm about how young people are faring, and ongoing debate about how schools can both enhance wellbeing and improve academic outcomes, a strand of analysis forcefully argues

for critical interrogation of the pervasiveness of therapeutic discourses and psychologically inflected practices and interventions in educational settings (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Nolan, 1998). Australia has to some extent lagged behind debate and critical assessment of these issues; the pervasiveness of psychological discourses in Australian educational policy and practice has not been subject to vigorous critique as it has elsewhere. Internationally, discussions about the rise of 'therapeutic culture' as a feature of late modernity (Wright, 2011a), and its purported detrimental effects — in short, that it reflects a psychologisation of social life, promotes a culture of narcissism and victimhood, and reflects a diminished view of the self and human potential (Lasch, 1979; Furedi, 2004; Nolan, 1998) — have been drawn upon to make sense of and critique current educational directions.

Key proponents of this position, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), suggest that behind the 'rhetoric of empowerment and positive psychology' lies an image of the student as vulnerable and fragile. In their view, contemporary schooling rests on a 'curriculum of the self that lowers educational and social aspirations' (p. xiii). A central concern is that the emphasis on social and emotional wellbeing in schools may, ironically, be deleterious, as emotional and psychological issues are foregrounded to the detriment of academic ones, leaving young people without a solid educational foundation (Ecclestone, 2011). Even some who agree in principle with promoting wellbeing in schools question the efficacy of placing social and emotional aspects of learning at the centre of education (Craig, 2007). Craig (2009), of the Centre for

Confidence and Wellbeing in the United Kingdom, suggests that depression estimates are 'grossly inflated' and that notions of 'psychological immunisation' and 'emotional literacy' are dubious and not supported by robust empirical evidence.

The publication of Ecclestone and Hayes' (2009) book, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, prompted much public discussion in the United Kingdom and beyond about the purposes of schooling and the extent to which schools should be concerned with the psychological and emotional lives of young people. Ecclestone and Hayes argue that the dominant view of young people today is that they are vulnerable and 'at risk'. One of the effects of this, they suggest, is that it turns young people into 'anxious and self-preoccupied individuals rather than aspiring, optimistic and resilient learners' (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009, p. i). The focus on wellbeing, self-esteem and personal development, they assert, has undermined traditional educational aspirations, advancing, according to Hayes, 'an uninspiring vision of all children and young people as being hapless and hopeless and in need of therapy' (Hayes, 2004, p. 180).

Such critiques are not new. More than a decade ago, Stout (2000) delivered a similarly scathing analysis of American education, arguing that the self-esteem movement had turned teachers into counsellors and schools into sites of therapeutic intervention. She advanced the view that modern American schooling was producing self-righteous, self-absorbed and underachieving children (Stout, 2000). A similar argument was made shortly after by American sociologist John Steadman Rice (2002),

who claimed that 'education has ceased to be about instruction, or the passing on of an accumulated body of knowledge; in essence, it has become group therapy'. Young people are now educated, he claimed, 'in the vocabulary of emotion and in the practice of self-absorption' (Rice, 2002, p. 27).

Such disquiet reflects broader concerns about the therapeutic turn in culture, politics and society. There has been widespread debate among commentators and social critics about the rise of therapeutic culture, its influence on the shaping of the modern self, and its infiltration into key social institutions, public policy, and indeed into virtually all aspects of society (for an overview of these debates, see Wright, 2011a). In the 1960s, the conservative sociologist Philip Rieff (1966) identified the growing cultural legitimacy of psychological knowledge, the diminution of authority, and the elevation of concerns with the self as heralding cultural and personal decline. His seminal treatise has had a profound and lasting impact on social-theoretical assessments of therapeutic culture. In the 1970s, Lasch (1979) took Rieff's work in a new direction with the development of his popular theory of cultural narcissism, arguing that there had been a retreat from politics in favour of purely personal preoccupations. In education, overriding concerns with personal fulfillment had led, Lasch argued, to a shift away from subject-based disciplines, a trivialising of the curriculum, and a dilution of academic standards.

In addition to the concerns outlined by Lasch, assessments of therapeutic education commonly lament the decline of traditional

authority and the shift towards a more emotionally expressive culture. There is also, often, a tendency to equate help-seeking with vulnerability, and a more general argument that the rise of a therapeutic ethos has led to social and personal decline (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2004; Nolan, 1998). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Wright, 2011a), a reading of the propensity towards openness about personal problems as reflecting a weak and 'diminished self' is highly problematic. One major problem with many analyses of the therapeutic turn — be it in education or more broadly — is that complex questions are often occluded by nostalgic laments for a lost golden age. The extent to which conservative cultural critiques of the 1960s and 1970s continue to dominate analyses of therapeutic culture, and its influence in various domains, including education, is striking. Many assumptions underlying these interpretations — for example, an antagonism towards emotions and a view that undermining traditional forms of authority leads inexorably to social decline — have been reinscribed, decade after decade, with little critical analysis of the foundational claims made by the conservative cultural critics that first advanced them.

In relation to education, a key point of criticism is the shift away from the traditional goals and purposes of schooling — seen to be principally achieved through the acquisition of subject-based knowledges — towards an overriding concern with how young people feel (Hayes, 2004). A major problem with this critique is that it rests on a false dichotomy that separates rationality and emotion. It also ignores the reality that authority relations of the past enabled the exercise of brutal practices in schools. Certainly, there are issues raised in critiques of

therapeutic education that warrant concern. The psychologisation of social disadvantage and processes that involve categorising and labelling students based on deficit-based assumptions are particularly worrying (Ecclestone, 2007, 2011). Especially important in this regard is the extent to which social disadvantage becomes normatively tied to the risk for developing mental health problems (Harwood & Allen, 2014). The ways in which schools have increasingly been charged with responsibility for the emotional development of young people is a matter that deserves serious attention. However, in moving forward, I argue for the importance of recognising therapeutic culture, both within and outside of education, as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that requires engagement from multiple research perspectives including, and particularly, historical ones (Wright, 2011a).

Educational Aims and the Purposes of Schooling

Therapeutic approaches in education have a long history. Guidance and counselling in schools, for example, date back to the interwar years in Australia (Wright, 2012a, 2012b). However, during the mid-to late-20th century, the therapeutic imperative intensified in education, as it did in society more broadly (Wright, 2011a), shaping not just psychological interventions, but schooling more generally. To explore this, I turn to the big picture of education policy, the aims and purposes of schooling, as a way of historicising educational concerns with student wellbeing and thinking afresh about critiques of therapeutic education.

In *The Feel-Good Curriculum*, Stout (2000, p. 5) asks:

When did the purpose of schooling become to discover oneself rather than discover the world? When did we begin to replace the historic purposes of the common school — teaching a core of knowledge, preparing citizens to be active participants in the democratic process, providing a skilled workforce — with the ideology of the self-esteem movement?

A historian of education, Barcan (1990), cautions: 'Anyone discussing educational aims runs the risk of falling into the jaws of the philosophers' (p. 12). In entering this fraught territory, however, my aim is modest. The intention is to consider formal statements of educational aims and purposes in Australia to illustrate how therapeutic notions of the self, of learning, and indeed of education more broadly, became embedded in the official work of schools. Clearly, such an approach cannot capture how these aims have been enacted or translated into pedagogical practice in educational settings. Statement of goals and purposes do, however, reflect important aspirations for schooling and as such provide a window into a changing educational landscape.

Barcan (1990) notes that up until the late 1960s, seven interrelated aims dominated Australian education. These were: 'the acquisition of knowledge; the transmission of cultural heritage; the development of character; the inculcation of moral values; education for citizenship; the provision of basic vocational training; and the inculcation of basic religious concepts' (p. 11). However, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s there was, he argues, something of a crisis of educational aims. As he notes, 'the major traditional aims disintegrated' and 'new aims

appeared'. These included: 'the development of the individual; the development of mental skills . . . including "learning to learn"; the cultivation of individual creativity; personal and moral autonomy; and the exploration of feelings' (Barcan 1993, p. 139).

With schooling a state responsibility in Australia, priorities have been articulated differently across the nation. However, since at least the late 1960s, statements of educational aims have commonly emphasised the importance of schools fostering psychological and emotional health and development. In 1969, the Dettman Report, for example, cited 'the importance of mental health' as an emergent concern and a key consideration in developing educational aims for secondary education in Western Australia in the 1970s (Western Australia Committee on Secondary Education, 1969, p. 54). It argued that focusing on the examinable aspects of the formal curriculum to the exclusion of everything else was no longer sufficient. To prepare young people for life in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, a broad education was required. This included traditional subject-based learning, but it also emphasised the need to promote each student's 'intellectual development; integration into society; physical and mental health; economic competence; and emotional and spiritual growth' (p. 1).

A year earlier, in Tasmania, a committee set up to investigate the role of the school in society also explicitly rejected a narrow view of intellectual development as the primary aim of education. Instead, it advanced a 'whole person' approach that saw physical, emotional and

intellectual development as indivisible, emphasising the social and emotional context in which development occurs (Tasmania Department of Education, 1968, p. 38). Reflecting the emergent idea that confidence and self-worth were related to achievement, the report noted that 'the cultivation of the student's self-esteem is essential in the development of his capacity to learn' (Tasmania Department of Education, 1968, p. 39). In relation to educational settings more broadly, by the 1980s, policy in some states was mandating that schools should 'provide a caring and supportive environment', because this was also recognised as important for both self-development and academic outcomes (Victorian Department of Education, 1984, p. 14). By the 1980s, attention to the personal disposition of students was considered vital, and this was reflected in the idea that schools should foster self-confidence and self-esteem (Victorian Department of Education, 1985).

At the end of the 1980s, the states of Australia formally declared a common set of educational aims. The Hobart Declaration on Schooling named the development of 'self-confidence, optimism and high self-esteem' second in its list of educational objectives (AEC, 1989). And this was broadly reaffirmed a decade later with the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA, 1999). The more recent Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) saw the emphasis shift away from self-esteem in favour of the broader concept of wellbeing. Nevertheless, it included a similar set of aims to the previous two statements, that is, that schooling should promote confidence, optimism and a sense of self-worth in order for

young people to become active, engaged and productive citizens (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9).

While the terminology and emphases have shifted, statements of educational aims since the late 1960s have reflected an explicit and enduring concern with psychological and emotional development, and the mental and emotional wellbeing of young people. There is certainly evidence to support the claims made by a number of critics that therapeutic imperatives have shaped educational policy for the past several decades. Yet, what is strikingly evident in tracing this development historically, is how closely this educational shift has been tied to a social justice and equity agenda (Wright, 2011b).

Examining historical developments in education provides an answer to Stout's provocative question of when the traditional goals of schooling were replaced with a new set of educational aims. Yet, bringing historical perspectives to bear on this issue does more than that. It also provides an alternative lens through which to examine therapeutic education, and in so doing can assist in moving beyond the impasse of, on the one hand, widespread support for current approaches that focus, for example, on social and emotional learning; and on the other hand, a growing body of critical literature. This body of work suggests that the focus on emotional literacy, self-esteem and student wellbeing reflects an abandonment of traditional educational aspirations and has resulted in something of a hollowed-out curriculum that privileges self-development at the expense of discipline-based knowledge and the broader social good. In what follows, I problematise

this interpretation by addressing an important aspect of educational reform that has largely been missing from sociological and philosophical discussions of the therapeutic turn: the radical vision for more equitable forms of schooling that emerged in the late 20th century.

As Collins and Yates (2009) have noted, the early 1970s saw the emergence of 'a new kind of thinking about social justice and education' (pp. 126–127). An important part of this was the idea that equity was not simply about the provision of schooling for all children, but that 'a caring commitment to the educational development of the individual child' was also needed. This was seen as a key way in which schooling could be made a positive 'rather than an undermining experience', especially for disadvantaged students (Collins & Yates, 2009, p. 129). While the emphasis on this has varied across the Australian states, a child-centred approach was broadly embraced by policy makers and educators as a key means by which an equity and social justice agenda could be pursued, and this has endured in curriculum and education policy, even as the 'focus on skills and processes as essential learning fed into the national economic agenda' (Collins & Yates, 2009, p. 134).

While a child-centred and caring approach has formed one part of the social justice agenda, another important aspect was the move away from the academic curriculum, which since the 1970s was seen as part of the problem of social injustice (Yates & Collins, 2010). Arguments for finding different ways of organising the curriculum have thus drawn, at least in part, on attempts to make schooling, especially the senior secondary years, more inclusive and democratic. The details of this are

complex, but in short reflect a shifting emphasis towards the development of skills and capabilities rather than simply the acquisition of subject-based based knowledges. Put another way, the overriding focus shifted to what students could do, rather than what they knew (Yates & Collins, 2010).

In addition to social justice concerns, there have, of course, also been other agendas at work which have underwritten the shift away from traditional subject-based disciplines towards an emphasis on the self and more personal and procedural forms of knowledge. These include the vocational agendas that increasingly drive education policy (Collins & Yates, 2009), as well as the positioning of education as part of the agenda for micro-economic reform (McCollow & Graham, 1997). While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this issue here, it should be noted the retreat from subject or discipline-based knowledge has been the subject of much debate in recent years. This has emerged not only in critiques of therapeutic education, but from critical policy studies and sociologically informed analyses of education, with strong arguments made for the importance of access to 'powerful knowledge', particularly for marginalised and working class students (Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2013).

Clearly, this is a complex issue, but the point to be made is that various educational approaches that critics identify as 'therapeutic' have in fact been underwritten by social justice concerns, be they child-centred philosophies, attempts to make schooling a more positive experience (especially for disadvantaged students), the bias against the academic

curriculum, or the imperative to address poor mental health. Fostering the wellbeing of a generation of young people who appear to be suffering from significant psychological distress raises difficult questions in relation to how this may best be achieved. Research evidence evaluating the efficacy of current strategies is equivocal, particularly in relation to universal approaches that focus on the school environment (Kidger, Araya, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012; Weare & Nind, 2011). More research in this area is clearly needed. Yet, what is also needed, in light of critiques from philosophical, sociological and critical psychological perspectives, is research that can tease out the ways in which various aspects of what is being called therapeutic education, work against, or support longstanding concerns with social justice and equity.

While I have pointed to limitations of the 'therapy culture' critique, this body of literature does raise vital questions, not least of which concern the role of formal schooling and the kinds of personal dispositions that schools seek to foster. Critiques of therapeutic education also highlight that mental health and wellbeing is not only a pressing social problem, but it is also an epistemological and theoretical one. Importantly too, they offer a salient reminder of the value of questioning what is taken for granted. In this regard, we may ask, for example, whether there are lessons to be learnt from the past focus on self-esteem, a concept that many now argue is overly narrow, and the focus on which some suggest has led to undesired consequences, notably a propensity towards self-centredness (Twenge & Campbell, 2013). The embrace of wellbeing appears to overcome some of the limitations of past manifestations of the therapeutic ethos. However, it is arguably an overly broad concept. Although it has a

commonsense meaning, there is much debate about how to define it (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2013), which has important implications for research on how young people are faring, and in turn for the work that schools do in trying to promote mental health. An important issue in relation to arguments about therapeutic culture, be it in education or more broadly, is that much theorising has tended to take place in the absence of empirical evidence (Anderson, Brownlie, & Given 2009; Wright, 2011a).

This offers a challenge for an empirically oriented discipline like psychology, insofar as critiques of therapeutic education may be too readily dismissed as abstract theorising, with a lack of 'data' to support the theoretical claims being made. Empirical studies of the effects of therapeutic culture do suggest that the ways it shapes everyday practice are complex and multifaceted (Brownlie, 2011; McLeod& Wright, 2009; Wright, 2011a). While more empirical studies would be helpful, there is, nevertheless, much to be learned from critical theoretical perspectives that question what is assumed, taken for granted or unexamined. This is a difficult issue, not least because on the one hand, psychological concepts and therapeutic discourses are so embedded in educational policy — and indeed in society — that it is difficult to think beyond this worldview (an effect of therapeutic culture itself). And on the other, there is such antagonism towards psychological knowledges and therapeutic practices in some critiques of therapeutic education that there is little space for dialogue between these positions.

In moving forward, I suggest that approaches to theorising the therapeutic turn in education would benefit from drawing on different

traditions to those that have thus far dominated debates about therapeutic culture. This invites engagement from a range of standpoints, and particularly valuable for the present discussion are philosophical (Cigman, 2012; Hyland, 2006) and critically oriented psychological perspectives (Corcoran, 2012). Whatever the disciplinary position, and whether theoretically or empirically oriented, acknowledgment of the complexity of this cultural turn is crucial. Recognising both problems and benefits offers a way of moving beyond preoccupations with 'the dumbing down' of schooling, the loss of traditional authority, and the incitement of vulnerability. Indeed, capturing the multifaceted nature of therapeutic culture is essential for fruitfully theorising its effects in particular domains and institutional sites, such as schools. In this article, I have suggested that historical perspectives are particularly important in this regard. My own work on the history of student guidance suggests that social anxieties about 'problem youth' and youth with problems are recurrent themes (Wright, 2012a, 2012b). Current practices in schools have histories, and understanding the historical context is critical to understanding and improving current approaches (Farrell, 2010).

Concluding Remarks

While education policy and formal educational aims cannot be interpreted as mirroring what actually happens in schools, they do offer important insights into aspirational, organisational and practical dimensions of schooling, including the ways in which therapeutic notions of the self and education have been institutionalised into official discourse. Education policy in Australia from the late 1960s to the present does reflect the adoption of an increasingly therapeutic approach to

schooling, reflected in concerns with individual development and emotional and psychological wellbeing. However, to suggest that there has been a wholesale abandonment of traditional aims and objectives of education would be to overstate the extent to which concerns with the individual have eclipsed longstanding objectives of schooling. What statements of educational aims do suggest, I have argued, is a more complex connection between the therapeutic and social justice and equity concerns, evident in the ways in which policy makers and schools have tried to grapple with significant social change, including rising participation rates, greater levels of retention, and increasingly diverse student populations. And this rather complicates arguments that critics of therapeutic education have thus far advanced.

There is, I suggest, a productive dialogue that is yet to be had, bringing together psychological, sociological and historical perspectives, in order to think critically about current educational directions aimed at promoting youth mental health and wellbeing. While the idea of promoting wellbeing is widely embraced in contemporary educational policy, we have at present a limited understanding of the varied ways in which schools across Australia are responding to this policy directive, and even less concrete understanding of the effects of current approaches. Concerns have been raised that economic agendas may compromise the implementation of initiatives aimed at promoting wellbeing (Wyn, 2007), and there has been debate internationally about whether existing approaches are even effective (Craig, 2009).

In light of the present emphasis on student wellbeing, there is a strong warrant for unsettling this taken-for-granted concept and critically interrogating its value, both for both schools and for understanding our aspirations for young people today (Wright & McLeod, 2014). Developing better understandings of the rationales that drive policy and practice, and their effects in schools and on young people, is crucial for generating robust responses to difficult educational questions, such as where resources can best be directed, how to balance the needs of all students with those who need more support, whether current strategies can accomplish desired outcomes, and finally, consideration of what might be undesirable consequences of the application of particular policies or strategies.

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