Sociological perspectives on the mental health and wellbeing agenda in educational settings

A one-day conference hosted by the Education Observatory, University of Wolverhampton and the British Sociological Association Sociology of Mental Health Study Group

<u>Wednesday 9th June 2021</u>, 9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. (British Summer Time)

A virtual event via Zoom

Organiser and Chair: Dr Lydia Lewis, Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton

<u>Selected Abstracts</u>

Keynote presentation:

<u>Towards desired futures? Future trajectories of precision education governance</u>

Professor Kristiina Brunila
AGORA, research centre for the study of social justice and equality in education, University of Helsinki

There is a call for a new kind of understanding for the on-going and future changes in education. In my talk, I will analyse some of the major changes by bringing them together as the emergence of the *precision education governance* (PEG). The PEG is an umbrella concept developed in the pilot project FuturEd led by Brunila to refer to a) increasingly transnational nature of education governance, b) emergence of new powerful partnerships and agendas influencing education and c) the use of behavioural and life sciences in education to deliberately shape human conduct. Education comes always with a promise of a better future and PEG makes no difference. The promise in PEG is an enhancement of the efficiency of education through individualisation and 'precision' through which it becomes possible to assess, control and calculate individuals' learning, and thus shape human subjectivity as its outcome. PEG denotes the arrival of a far-reaching and multilevel form of governance due to economic imperatives and for 'precise' individualized and efficient shaping of human conduct.

In my talk, I will illuminate these changes by using our research on youth education from two on-going projects I lead as an example of how PEG and especially psychologisation as part of it operates in youth education, under what conditions, in what forms and with which consequences.

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Brunila, K. & Ryynänen, S. (2016). NEW RULES OF THE GAME. Youth training in Brazil and Finland as examples of new global network governance. *Journal of Education and Work,* 30(4), 353-366.

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Gendered and racialized 'vulnerabilities':

The intersectionality of violence and mental health in schools in the UK

Maria Tsouroufli PhD, Professor of Education, Brunel University London

Concerns expressed in various socio-political and medical contexts about the mental health and well-being of young people, and more recently the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a strong mental health agenda in schools' policies and an increasing interest in sociological research in the role of socio-economic inequalities, school environments and bullying in mental health. However, despite evidence about gender and racial differences in young people's mental health challenging the individualization and responsibilization of mental health and wellbeing, mental health 'vulnerability' continues to feature as predominantly a psycho-emotional issue, rather than a social problem rooted in structural and cultural inequalities, intersectional systems of oppression and the violence resulting from these arrangements. In this presentation I draw on research findings to demonstrate the

damaging effects of intersectional inequalities and violence in schools in the UK and call for attention and critique of the gendering and racialization of 'vulnerability' in educational discourse, research and policy about mental health and wellbeing.

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Non-Times from Non-Places:

Space and Time in the Everyday Life of PGR Students

Dr Alex Wade and Dr Fadia Dakka, Birmingham City University

This paper introduces theories of space and time to illuminate the experiences of Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs). PGRs have become more important to the functions of universities as they have increased their own focus on being sites of knowledge production and its transfer. The prime aim of a doctorate is to make an original contribution to knowledge and PGRs are often deployed to teach undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. In spite of their proclivity, even desire, to work with knowledge, PGRs continue to occupy a transient, almost liminal position within the HE system which appears to take the elements of being an employed academic, including long hours and responsibility for large cohorts, which become apparent in challenges to mental health and well-being without the element of financial or employment security that goes with it.

This is a situation sped-up by the present and ongoing condition of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the logic of the accelerated academy (Rosa, 2013; Vostal 2016), the digitalisation of academic work effectively and abruptly ended the future of non-places (Auge, 1995) seen in and around higher education as well-intentioned, but maladroit, 'educational hubs' or 'social learning spaces'. These have been replaced by words and phrases, places and spaces, that a year ago had no etymology and therefore no past: 'Zoom fatigue' or 'Quarantinis'. Techniques of projection and distancing through space become key for the knowledge worker in this existence: attaining ever closer electronic links through faster Internet speeds becomes the priority while being physically positioned *away* from urban areas and the non-places of private and public transport links permits safety from a virus of speed and globalisation.

PGRs, in carrying out their day-to-day studies as students, while being quotidian academics are subject to many of the metrics that full-time staff themselves are measured by (Carrigan, 2016). Meanwhile, doctoral work is increasingly beset by problems that are more traditionally experienced by undergraduate students and are exacerbated by the pandemic. These include family care responsibilities, inconsistent (or non-existent) access to digital communications and funding of doctoral research. This is especially in the case of overseas students, where families often carry the (hidden) financial burden. These precarious positions are compounded by notions that have affected entire societies over the past year, time-elastic isolation coupled with a sense that the past is a foreign country with very different rules, norms, expectations and processes and therefore inaccessible without a COVID vaccination passport.

While this material world of postmodernity, manifested in the seemingly incessant proliferation of non-spaces cafes in libraries, mass transit systems and waiting rooms appears to have fallen away, the 'non-time' we operate within offers a salient moment for the theoretical interrogation of the places and times of PGR study, both prior to and following the pandemic. Using work from across the scope of the social theory of space, time and everyday life (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; 2004; Virilio, 2008) with a special emphasis on knowledge production in esoteric spaces and times, this paper will explore the challenges and benefits of PGR study in what history – if the future does not subsume the past – will recall as a revolutionary moment.

References

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Mad student organizing and the emergence of Mad Studies in Canada

Danielle Landry, Lecturer, Ryerson University; PhD Candidate, York University, Canada

What does mad student organizing have to do with the blossoming of Mad Studies? And how might those of us located within post-secondary institutions encourage and support the independent organizing of mad students? Drawing on Canadian scholarship in Mad Studies, I distinguish between the dominant mental health and wellness offerings of educational institutions and distinct forms of grassroots organizing led by and for mad students (Reid et al. 2019, Reville and Church 2016, Snyder et al. 2019). This presentation reflects on my past engagement with mad student intra-university organizing in Toronto. Sifting through archival materials, personal writing and correspondence, I contemplate how my involvement as a past organizer in a radical student-run peer support and advocacy group, has shaped and informed my activism and scholarship within the field of Mad Studies. Connections are made between

the activist knowledge-practices fostered within mad student organizations, groups and activities such as these and the growth of Mad Studies in Canada and beyond (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell 2008). In doing so, I argue for the need to dodge institutional buzzwords and open up spaces within and across post-secondary institutions for mad students to get organized around issues of concern to them, on their own terms.

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<u>Drawing on our emotional intelligence during the pandemic:
tales from the NHS front line</u>
Catherine Lisseman,
University of Wolverhampton and Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust

Recently, the NHS has faced its greatest challenges since its creation. The impact of COVID-19 has been felt throughout the system, compounded in quantity and quality of care provided by frontline staff. In this talk, I will be exploring the narratives from those who delivered front line care, those who supported our front line, and in-house mental health experts who have supported our staff through this pandemic as the NHS moves on to service recovery and restoration. Reviewing these narratives through a lens of emotional intelligence, self and social awareness, I will explore the impact of COVID-19 on the macro and micro cultures.

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Mental health and further education: what role for mental health nurses?

Professor Rob Smith and Dr Jonathan Gadsby, Birmingham City University

This talk will be presented in two, related halves. The first part will draw on primary research into mental health and well-being in further education (staff and students) prior to and during the current pandemic. Further education had endured a decade of severe budget cuts under successive governments' austerity measures prior to the outbreak (Duckworth and Smith 2019); this, despite having a student population disproportionately drawn from the poorest areas and families. There was already considerable evidence of further education teachers having to address significant mental health and well-being needs of students (Smith and Duckworth 2020). The pandemic appears to have ratcheted up the seriousness of the issue of mental health and well-being and, as a consequence of the additional work further education staff have had to undertake to adapt to Covid conditions, there are important questions to be asked about teachers' well-being and colleges' responses to those needs. The first half of the talk will explore this data.

With the connection between mental health and wellbeing and education heavily underscored by the pandemic, staff in schools and universities may soon be inviting mental health nurses into their schools, colleges and universities with only a minimal understanding of the kind of theoretical and values bases they bring in with them. The second half of the presentation will explore the contested nature of mental health concepts and the instability of current constructs of professional identity in mental health nursing. As a discipline, mental health

nursing is divided between acknowledging the 'social determinants of mental health' and the 'medicalisation' of mental health that appears to enable a stratified society while deflecting attention from social inequalities. Positioned between these contradictory knowledges, mental health nurse education can leave nurses with an identity caught in an unresolvable conflict of values and ideas.

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**How should we respond to the mental health and wellbeing agenda
in adult community learning? Exploring the role of creative arts provision
Dr Lydia Lewis
Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton**

The purpose of this presentation is to engage critically with debates surrounding the mental health and wellbeing agenda for adult community learning (ACL), with particular consideration of creative arts provision. It will draw on an ethnographic project involving five creative arts ACL groups in the West Midlands (spread across the areas of visual arts and creative writing), one poetry group based in a mental health service user-led organisation in London, and one mental health art studio in London. Of the West-Midlands ACL groups, one was targeted for mental health recovery, one was targeted for wellbeing, and three were open access. Fieldwork involved participant observation, interviews and group discussions with attendees, and interviews with volunteers, ACL/art therapy practitioners and managers.

The presentation will outline some of the reasons why creative arts practices are often considered beneficial for promoting participation and inclusion in response to mental health and wellbeing needs. It will then interrogate three key themes in relation to creative arts ACL: (1.) the problematic effects of a prevalent discourse of 'confidence and self-esteem'; (2.) art activity as empowering or anaesthetizing; and (3.) the role of the provision in helping people to deal critically with social problems, the processes involved, and implications for ACL curricula and pedagogy.

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