On Becoming a Young Person: what does it mean to be an adolescent in an English secondary school?

Susan Davies, postgraduate PhD Researcher (1st year)

With the growing concern in the UK (and globally) about the well-being and mental-health of children and young people in school, a picture is emerging of solutions offered in the form of 'off-the-shelf' packages and short-term initiatives in a bid to respond urgently to what is seen as a developing crisis. More young people (up 20%) contacted Childline in 2018 about the pressure they felt regarding exam results, than the previous year (NSPCC). Positive Psychology theorists (Seligman et al 2009; Claxton 2006) see a quick-fix to the problem - encourage children and young people to think differently, to use 'mindfulness' techniques, to be aware of their own mental health needs and 'increase resilient'. The UK government (2019) wants 'all children in England to be taught how to look after their mental well-being and recognise when classmates may be struggling'. But what do young people themselves feel about their lives in school? Are we unduly problematising the growing pains of young people? Critical theorist, Kathryn Ecclestone (2012) challenges policy discourses that intervene in schools and warns that we are in danger of medicalising such symptoms as 'post-bereavement grief and shyness'. This paper argues for education practitioners to listen in a new way to young people and to act upon what is heard. Using a qualitative approach, through the lens of the person-centred therapist and educator, Carl Rogers, my research study aims to discover how adolescents are talking about their own lived experiences in order to learn what we, as adults, can do to help.

References
