Mental health discourse in education: Why practitioner psychologists need theory

Tom Billington
Professor of Educational and Child Psychology
School of Education

18th Biennial International Society for Theoretical Psychology
Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen
21st August 2019

Tom presented the paper as part of a symposium - Education’s measure: Today’s student, tomorrow’s citizen - with Professor Jeff Sugarman (Simon Fraser University, Canada) and Associate Professor Tim Corcoran (Deakin University, Australia).

The presentation focussed on Tom’s experience as both a researcher and a practitioner (in the family courts and also education settings) and the argument was made for ways of practising psychology that are founded on William James’s dictum that ‘...the faculty [mind] does not exist absolutely, but works under conditions; and the quest of the conditions becomes the psychologist’s most interesting task.’ (James 2010 [orig.1890]: 1).

Tom concluded that practitioner psychologists need to:

Find ways of:

- problematizing the demands to measure young people’s lives;
- identifying spaces in which we can challenge deficit models of the person.

Develop and maintain specialisms in:

- the experiential – subjective, emotional lives of children and young people;
- the relational – the nature of human relations across communities, schools, families;

Change the curriculum:

- from a focus on psychopathology to consideration of theoretical principles;
- from processes of identifying and specifying difference to working out ways of reconstructing the environmental conditions that support young people’s wellbeing.