

Argentina's Therapy Culture: Its Affect on School Counselling

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Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing trend in Argentina to demonstrate deep concern for one's own and others' mental health. It explores the reasons behind the wide use of therapy and the work of psychologists in the country, by using literature to explain the open culture of discussing and addressing emotional issues with a trained therapist and with friends. Included is a discussion of the work of Psychologists (counsellors) in schools in the country and the normality of students attending regular therapy sessions. A case study of one, well established and all age private school is included, using the results of interviews undertaken on Zoom. The approaches to school counselling in the country were discussed with a teacher who is English, one Argentinian teacher and one school counsellor. Comparisons with attitudes related to counselling and its use in England are also addressed.

Keywords: counselling, schools, psychology, therapy, Argentina's affect

Introduction

The educational system in Argentina has four levels: non-compulsory kindergarten to five years; compulsory primary having seven grades, from six to twelve years of age (or until all grades are passed), or the child reaches fourteen years of age. Failure of a year means it is repeated, but students must leave primary at fourteen years of age. Schools at this level may also admit adults, whose previous education was not completed. Secondary (lower) education has two grades from ages twelve to fourteen, secondary (higher) has two grades ages fifteen to seventeen years. Courses prepare students for vocational programmes, including attending night schools, or follow a more academic track. University education (both state and private provision) may follow. Most schools across the country work in two shifts each day with different groups of students; morning eight to twelve and afternoon, one until five. There are massive discrepancies between urban and rural school provision, as the country is so large and apart from in the urban areas, has a scattered population. Rural education has expanded recently, with many more schools being built, but there is a great difference in achievement between state and private schools and urban and rural ones (Argentina Educational System Overview, 2021).

Psychological care in Argentina

CNN news reported (Landau, 2013) that Argentina has the highest number of psychologists per capita in the world and almost half of them are in Buenos Aires, the capital. Research carried out in the country in 2012, reported around 202 psychologists per 100,000 people in the country, far higher than in the next highest country Austria, which the WHO reported as having 80 per 100,000, at a similar time. This ratio in Argentina of psychologists/therapists per capita, appears to have continued to increase lately (Brotherton, 2019). Freudian psychoanalysis, not now commonly used in the world, is still popular there and many citizens see it as an important part of their health care. They are happy to talk about their mental health, their emotional problems and those of their children, to others. Seeing a therapist is normal, not something to be hidden away as shameful, as in many European countries and also the USA. In fact, it appears that many ex-pats resident there, take advantage of this different attitude to problems with emotions and relationships, adopting the local and different approach to mental health care. Korman et al. (2015) describe the move away from Freudian psychotherapy to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in recent years in the country and that terms such as depression and panic attack, have as a result, become part of normal conversations in Buenos Aires. With provision in health care systems for therapy annually, there has been an exponential rise in students who wish to study psychology and join the profession, either as psychologists or counsellors, who may work with adults or with children, both in and outside of schools. Landau (2013) reported that the use of group therapy sessions is common and with most students attending therapy, though few had serious issues. Non-attendance was seen as extraordinary and classmates consider these students must have serious problems, which they are reluctant to discuss. There is it appears, less distinction between physical and mental health in Argentina, than in other countries and a national feeling that anyone who has emotional issues, needs to have professional help. This author further suggests that this may be the result of a large immigrant population, fleeing conflict in other areas of the world and leaving their usual family support networks. People questioned by Landau (2013) suggested that in countries like the USA, people have found a different solution to emotional problems, such as a high work ethic, pragmatic approaches to life and finding one's own solutions to personal problems. This obsession in Argentina of attending therapy, is attributed by Brotherton (2019) to the ups and downs of life in the country. From a booming, prosperous, financially secure country in the nineteenth century, the dream of the easy, rich way of life enjoyed then, was shattered in the twentieth.

This dream transformed into a nightmare in the 20th century and lingers on today. Characterized by prolonged and cyclical periods of economic growth and bust; militaristic violence; state-engineered terrorism and the forced disappearance of tens of thousands of individuals; political instability; and debilitating austerity measures have left emotional, physical, and psychological

scars for many Argentines, past and present. Rupture, failure, precarity, and uncertainty shape everyday life. (Brotherton, 2019, p. 102)

For Argentinians now failure, and uncertainty has become a part of everyday life. It is not one event, but what has been termed as 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011, p. 10).

However, in 2017 the then President, Macri, who had been trying to modernise the country claimed that this obsession with psychological support, was what was aiding the rapid decline of the nation. Mander (2017) reported that the President believed it was childish and encourages the feeling of the people that failure and pain are part of normal existence, echoing the traditional, much loved tango dance, which depicts despair and anger as common in life. He insisted that psychoanalysis would not help prevent the further decline of the country and wanted its people instead, to pull together, to improve the outlook for all citizens. He was voted out of office at the next election.

Schools in Argentina

The difficulties in changing this therapy culture reported by so many sources, can be seen in Buenos Aires itself, where one of the main areas of the city has a nicknamed 'Plaza Freud' as there are so many psychologists' offices there and local bookshops are full of books about psychology and psychologists. This culture transmits to the education sector. The schools, however, are not universally equal, in that as in many countries, affluent families choose to send their children to private schools. Many of these educate children from international backgrounds and were founded in earlier centuries by immigrants, thereby having a more global outlook. However, the obsession with mental health seems to encompass these establishments too. The children of the Villas (the local name for the shanty towns) have only the state schools provided for their education and little choice. The rural schools may be one room, one all age class, which works against providing extra support and provision for learning, or mental health issues.

Readiness for learning is a strongly followed theory used in educational settings in Argentina. Jensen (1969) discusses the two forms of readiness which have held sway in education pedagogy internationally. Growth readiness is defined as the development of neural structures that allow the experiences of the child to encourage learning to take place, be absorbed and contribute to a child's development. Contrary to this is the view of the stimulus-response theory, where learning occurs via environmental factors provided by experience. However, this author stresses that physiological development must go hand in hand with experience, if cognitive development is to occur. There appears to be a strong belief in these ideas in Argentina, particularly that of the physiological development stages which it is believed, occur at different times in different children. The beliefs that govern these strongly held ideas are termed neuromyths by Hermida et al. (2016) who claim that many Argentinian teachers have some understanding of neuro science, but tend to

believe popular myths about learning and how the brain functions. One of these popular misunderstandings these authors say is about memory and how memories are stored and retrieved, and another that we only use ten percent of our brain functions.

School counselling

A report on school counselling in a global context of ninety countries (Harris, 2013), stated that it is mandatory in only thirty nine countries globally, but practised in far more. South America countries were in the mandatory category and in Argentina it is provided at all levels of schooling. In most countries, counselling traverses education and psychology and in some areas, but not all, it includes career guidance and advice. The report also suggested that in most countries, the one to one approach was used, but in South America the 'person to person approach has been challenged' (Harris, 2013, p. 2) and other approaches have become more common with the focus on providing counselling within an educational setting. This author states that 'where counselling is mandatory it is positioned between the two professions of education and counselling and is often delivered by experienced teachers with an additional postgraduate level qualification in guidance and counselling, or school-based counselling' (Harris, 2013, p. 1).

The schools, therefore, particularly those in the private sector, are proud of and thoroughly detailed in their online information to parents, on what they offer their students in order to support their mental well-being. One such school teaching younger children, offers a composite explanation of the counselling services they offer. The school is deemed an 'international one', that is, the students are from a wide variety of countries, which the school considers makes them liable to suffer from difficulties with transition to a different culture. The aim from their website appears to be to guide students in these transitions and their development (BACIA, 2021). The term 'guidance' is used to incorporate their strategy to support students in academic work, development and social skills. The main issues, however, seem to be very much geared to emotional matters, not learning. The explanation given, is that what they term 'guidance' is at the heart of what the school offers and that keeping students 'safe' is paramount. The school's website lists the following issues that are at the heart of their approach (BACIA, 2021, no page):

1. Counseling students in academic and personal matters
2. Planning with students for their future educational and career plans
3. Limited testing of students for diagnostic, placement, and counseling purposes
4. College counseling and placement
5. Referral of students and families for outside-of-school counseling services
6. Consulting with parents/guardians, teachers, and administrations on student related issues

The programme offered is designed to help students achieve success in school and career choice, but seems to be very socially oriented, in that anger management and conflict resolutions skills are the only issues specifically named. In addition, the department is also there to support teachers, administrators and parents, in learning how to meet students' needs. The school is proud of this all-round approach and passes students on to private provision if the problem is not being overcome in school. This is not common in schools in England, as generally the school's Local Authority or Academy chain's employed Educational Psychologist is contacted, rather than a private health care counsellor or psychologist. However, as most of those who attend these private schools in Argentina are from affluent backgrounds, private health care possibly covers fees. The children of the Villas and less affluent areas, however, seem to have access to less support, if the problems they face cannot be solved in school. However, a counsellor is provided in every school, as students to some extent, despite the lack of pressure on them academically and the less competitive culture in schools there than in Western countries, are expected to face times of depression and anxiety. This expectation is possibly affected by the therapeutic culture of Buenos Aires and the whole country (Plotkin & Viotti, 2020).

Practitioner training

Training the practitioners has continued to alter in the early part of this century, as a continuing process of adaptation and change. In the 1990s, it was agreed that Latin American countries should cooperate and provide similar training and that university psychology departments would be linked and learn from each other's practices. Deficiencies in the training were addressed at this time. These included the application of psychological practices in the world outside, including links with social sciences, in particular the links with education. Undertaking research on mental health in general were addressed and included in training programmes (Stein-Sparvieri & Maldavsky, 2015). These authors address the influx of Europeans into Argentina after the second World War; people fleeing from conflict and settling in, what then was a prosperous country, which supplied the largest proportion of the World's grain supplies. This resulted, they say, in the rise of a new affluent social class, who brought from Europe their values and culture. They rapidly became successful business owners and through frequent trips back to Europe, spread local interest towards psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

However, despite the common use of psychotherapy in Argentina there are severe criticisms of practice and the lack of updating of the methods used to support patients with mental health problems. According to Fierro et al. (2018) there is insufficient interest and supervision of practice by the state and a lack of upgrading and modernising of university programmes and the learning of students. This, these authors claim, is a major problem. The first degrees in Counselling were recognised in 1998 and very quickly became popular with young people and this interest in first

degree and Master's qualifications has grown since then (Hohenshil et al., 2013). However, the criticisms of the training programmes continue.

... challenges in Argentina should be faced with a critical, reflective and rational disposition, through the strengthening of communications and relationships with international scholarship, through the improvement of the training and education of psychotherapists and through the prioritization of the well-being of the population's mental health over partisan, subjective beliefs and likings. (Fierro et al., 2018, no page)

Research

Interviews were conducted via Zoom with personnel from one all-age, private, dual language school (intake of children ages two to eighteen) in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Questions focused on how counselling is run in that school and in addition, the opinions of some staff on the effects of the 'therapy culture' particularly on school counselling processes. The teachers are a mixture of Argentinian (majority) and ex-pat British (minority). One of each nationality was interviewed. English teacher (A) and an Argentinian teacher (B) were questioned, as the researcher wished to discover if attitudes to the therapy culture differed between the Argentinian and British teachers, in that particular school. One counsellor was also interviewed, the Educational Psychologist (C). A was alerted to the prevailing culture when, on her first day of employment, she was asked for the name and address of her psychiatrist in London. When she said she did not have one, there was total consternation amongst the staff counsellors.

The school works a full day, as it is bilingual; unlike as mentioned above, most schools in the country which use a two shift system, morning or, afternoon and many teachers work in two different schools. In single language schools, other activities are offered sport, creative lessons etc. in the non-academic part of the day. In the school researched, formally three counsellors had been employed, one for each of kindergarten, primary and secondary levels. Now, however, rising costs have led to a reduction, one is employed for the kindergarten and primary, the other for secondary students. One is an educational psychologist, the other a general psychologist. They each work three days a week, as they have additional employment in the private sector or in other schools. The work and its approach is determined on a case by case basis and the students' needs. In the secondary school the approach tends to be class based with group work, talking over problems and issues as a team work exercise. Also, some individual work occurs to address emotional and academic issues. In primary, more time is spent on observing individual students, one to one work, talking therapy, individual assessments and help with work problems. They are particularly involved with children who have to repeat a year, or a specific subject which a child has to re-sit.

As far as a counselling policy A has never seen one and no policy was offered to the researcher. A considered that most of the counsellors' time was spent on

addressing perceived emotional and social difficulties, not learning problems. This A believes is embedded across the school, with the avoidance of putting pressure on children at its heart. However, she believes a more challenging curriculum would benefit most children and prevent boredom, which affects behaviour. She considers the teaching/learning policy is strongly affected by the readiness/no-pressure culture and needs improving.

A stated that there appears to be, in her experience, little training provided to Argentinian teachers on these learning or emotional issues and that inclusion is extremely important in the culture. This results in children with severe learning difficulties, such as autism and severe dyslexia being admitted (special schools are not of a very high standard, according to A) to mainstream schools. Teachers have received little training on how to cope with such learning problems she feels. But 'Fairness' A believes is more important than fitting the learning to the needs of the child. Carers are provided, but no learning support for special needs, as you would see in English schools is evident. In fact, there is no such department in most schools, A believed. Many parents will not accept their child has learning difficulties, diagnosis is delayed and there is no special needs teacher in this school. Labelling children with a problem seems to be against the culture and teachers appear to lack training in learning issues. This is exacerbated, she believes, by the strong belief, that children take different times to achieve a variety of goals and they will do it when they are ready, that is, the readiness theory. This, it appears, delays any early diagnosis of learning difficulties. In England, where she had worked for several years, early diagnosis and referral is considered essential she stressed. In this school, it appears much learning time is lost in her opinion, as children attend therapy/psychologists in class time for emotional issues, rather than for learning difficulties. A has had difficulty getting agreement to 'push' younger children using setting, so work can be adjusted by her, to match abilities. The Educational Psychologist C did not agree and B said that Argentinian teachers expect the counsellors to alter the work for individual children, not the teachers. A believes that play is the only 'work' considered suitable for younger children in Argentina, when UK's children are already reading. However, A's work has raised questions from parents, as to why children are reading and writing in English, much sooner than in their native language of Spanish. She has had to work hard at persuading the counsellors and teachers in order to be allowed to test children's reading ability, as it could make children 'feel bad' she was told. B and C agreed with this belief. Class groups are organised by C, not by teachers, by asking children to pick people they like, do not like, learn from etc., so class, groupings are social not academic.

If children in the kindergarten or primary school are experiencing problems, the parents can be called in to see the counsellors, not teachers. There are discussions about the home environment. The counsellors (A, B and C all agreed), send a form to the teacher, asking about the child's attitudes to work homework and its behaviour. A discussion follows with the counsellors and the Headteacher. Teachers, said both A and B, do not generally contact parents as they do in the UK.

Asked if the concern not to stress out and worry children affects their progress, the answer from A was a strong 'Yes'. She had tried in the early years to use a more Reception Class approach, not a kindergarten one, but had been told this would be too stressful, asking too much of the children by the counsellors and other teachers. However, the children A said, 'are taught to write in capital letters, which I deplore and then have to relearn to write in lower and upper case, so confusing'. She was told too much pressure and stress would badly affect the children; too early reading could make some students feel failures and B and C agreed with this idea. A has had to work hard to be allowed to test children's reading, as it would stress them she was told and unnecessary. Eventually she has convinced C and the other counsellor, that this is untrue and believes she had to some extent brought B round to her teaching process, supporting children's learning. B and C to some extent agreed that they had been surprised with the progress made by the children under A's direction, seemingly without stress resulting.

For those students who have difficulties with which the school cannot cope, all respondents explained that they are referred to licensed Educational Psychologists, or therapists outside of school. This produces massive numbers of reports for teachers and in-school counsellors to read and the children involved have many therapy sessions, resulting A believes, they miss a great deal of learning time.

Responses from C and B demonstrated clearly the different culture to that prevalent in English schools, they had been, in all their training warned about the problems children could face if 'pushed, tested and made to feel failures'. These respondents both raised the problems of over-testing, common they believed in English schools and both held firm beliefs that the theory of 'readiness' for learning was essential and that children reached this in their own time. In particular, C stressed the mental health issues for children, pushed into too early competition and before they were 'ready to learn'. In addition, she concentrated a great deal on the social concerns of the students. Problems in their families, she claimed, often had an enormous effect on their behaviour and their ability to learn. The need to be 'happy, belong and feel valued', she believed, was very important for learning. B agreed with this, but admitted that the way reading was taught by the English teacher, had to some extent 'surprised the staff about how quickly the younger children learned a foreign language and became fluent in it, before acquiring the ability to read and write fluently in their own language'. When questioned about her training which was for five years, she admitted that little had been covered on children with special needs and that it was difficult to work with children of widely varying abilities in the same group, without special training on issues such as dyslexia and autism, to name just two challenges that the teachers faced. However, both B and C agreed that therapy was very helpful in addressing personal problems for the students and that B and the other Argentinian teachers, felt well supported in the school by the counsellors, who were the ones to contact parents, suggest therapy etc.

Conclusion

It appears from these findings that the culture of therapy, supporting mental health and not pushing or stressing children, are at the heart of educational practice in Argentina. There is a belief generally held in the community it appears from the literature and the research findings, though these latter are of a limited nature, that most problems in life are caused by emotional and social issues and can be addressed by therapy. This was evident when A, who suffers from asthma, was asked by the school counsellors why she was not attending therapy to 'cure' it, as the cause must be emotional or social stress problems. The limited research undertaken here is strongly supported by the available literature which demonstrates the strength of the therapy culture and the insistence on waiting until children are ready to undertake certain tasks. In addition, the findings support the idea that the main concerns of the school counsellors are related to social and emotional difficulties, not to those associated with learning. Teachers seem to be some distance from the work of the counsellors and learning difficulties seem not to be high on the list of perceived problems, nor is early diagnosis considered as good; possibly because this would label the children. It does appear as if teachers' training is not sufficiently focused on learning difficulties and how these need to be addressed and the schools do not seem to have such departments to deal with children with special needs, related to learning problems. Labelling a child as having those, appears to be quickly rejected as harmful, where labelling them with emotional or social problems is not problematic. Possibly children in England are too stressed, over assessed and too pushed to succeed, but sadly it appears that Argentinian children may not be meeting their potential due to this 'care not stretch culture' and the wait till they are ready approach. It is possible the two countries' education systems could learn from each other.

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