

THINKING SPACE



Editorial Comment

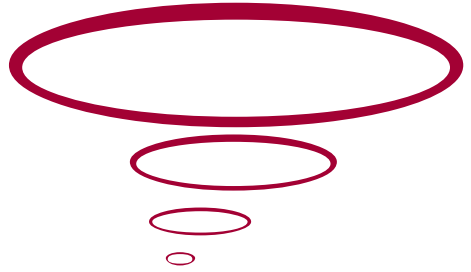
Aniela Wenham

THINKING SPACE provides a medium through which we are able to engage with more exploratory ideas for research, policy and practice. The editorial team recently received a submission of two pieces of writing from a young writer, Martha Davies. The first piece of writing, *Be Yourself* powerfully illustrates Martha's thoughts on what it means to be a girl growing up in contemporary society and won the Junior Laureate prize at the Arts Richmond Young Writers festival in 2014 for this essay (see <http://www.artsrichmond.org.uk/news.php>). This piece of writing is complemented by the accompanying *Thinking Space* article by Ali Hanbury and Ali Ronan that reflects upon the position of young women as they negotiate emerging discourses of 'resilience' within the field of sexual health.

The second submission from Marth Davies provides a glimpse into the demands made of young people within the current education system. This piece succinctly highlights the potential implications associated with the high levels of success young women are expected to achieve. Worryingly, this is also placed within a context that expects young people to take individual responsibility for such success at a time when educational expectations have been increasing rapidly. Reflections on what it means to be young and female, draw attention not only to contemporary notions of 'resilience', 'success' and 'failure', but also the diligent ways in which young lives continue to be scrutinized and subject to the surveillance of powerful 'others'.

Youth & Policy aims to highlight and critically debate contemporary issues relevant to young people in society. Martha Davies' writing provides a powerful reminder that behind policy frameworks, research and practice are the experiences and reflections of young people themselves. At a time when we are experiencing the decimation of youth services and provision these voices can so much more easily be silenced and forgotten.

THINKING SPACE [1]



Be Yourself

Martha Davies

“BE YOURSELF”.

Two words you’ve heard so many times. “Don’t be afraid. Be who you want to be.”

“Be yourself” says society. Those words that ring in your ears as you gaze at the models on the covers of magazines. That phrase in the back of your mind as you sit in front of a mirror, resenting the face that stares back at you. Hating it. Wishing you looked like the pretty girls; the girls you think everyone wants you to be.

Because, doesn’t anybody see? Doesn’t anybody realise? Everyone has insecurities. Each time you look at that magazine, each time you glance at yourself in the mirror, you feel it. The envy. The anger. You don’t want to be who you are. You want to be like the other girls; the girls on television, in the magazines, in the music videos. Like the girls at school. The ones that get noticed. The ones that are popular.

But there are things you don’t see. Behind closed doors sit people at computers, airbrushing, photo shopping. With each click they are manipulating you, twisting you. Those girls, those models, they’re just hiding. Behind the cameras and the makeup. They aren’t who you want to be.

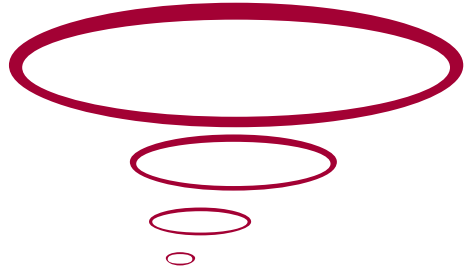
But each day, if you aren’t comparing yourself to someone, you’re being judged. By the girls at school. By the beady eyes of society. Are you sad? Skinny? Big? Intelligent? Are you pretty? Are you confident? There is no right answer. There is no escaping judgement. And each day at school, with exam after exam passing you by, you begin to notice the grades. To anyone else, they are just a simple scattering of letters marked on a piece of paper. But to you, there is more. They are the grades that define you, no matter how hard you have worked, or how much it means to you. You notice it, and then, then it begins to mean something.

So you begin to wonder, question yourself. The doubts flood your mind, coming in droplets at first, preparing for a tidal wave. A river of uncertainties, of fears and reservations. You aren't sure anymore. You have been compared to too many people, judged too many times.

And then, people ask: "Why?" "Why feel this way?" "Why do this to yourself?" They see the scars on girls' wrists, the bags under their eyes. They notice the clouds above their heads, the way they can't quite connect anymore. Some think it is a tragedy. Others, a way of seeking attention.

But the truth is, it is none of this. Society cannot control their judgements. It is a problem too big to conquer. And know this: being yourself is the hardest thing to be, in a world where nothing is acceptable but perfection. Perfection is impossible, unreachable, unattainable. You are only what the cameras, the media and the harrowing yet habitual glare of everyone around you judges you to be. Don't strive for perfection. Strive for knowledge. The knowledge that you have control over who you are, despite the views of anyone else.

THINKING SPACE [2]



Education is not about Exams

Martha Davies

THOSE CHILDHOOD DAYS, with no school, just play, no rules or regulations. Something we all seem to miss, when we end up like this, in the never-ending stream of tests, sums, and vocabulary lists. We gaze down at each new task with a feeling of dread as we cram into our head everything the teacher's said. We daydream of being eighteen anticipating the breaking of a routine that has come to feel increasingly obscene. No early rises filled with half-broken disguises hiding tired eyes. It's drilled into our minds that the progression of humankind depends on our qualifications, it's an expectation that comes with every equation, every essay and translation. And I'm not saying that these five years at school are not helping to improve my knowledge, or send me off to college when the whole cycle will repeat. I'm just saying that when we spend hours revising facts and figures with such vigour hoping to trigger the results we need, we forget that some of our generation's greatest minds dropped out of school, broke the rules to follow their own. They are not known for the GCSEs they achieved or whether or not they would succeed the grades on their report cards. Great people are known for being able to inspire, to work hard and dream big, to reward and to forgive. It doesn't matter if they don't know the value of x or if they got an A on their school project. Education is not about exams, or grades, or finals. Because they never prepare us for the biggest test, which is learning to face the challenges in place long after we leave education. We need to brace ourselves for the realisation that although school has taught us, shaped us, made us, there is more to life than this, so many things that go amiss when we think of what lies ahead as our lives further unfold.