ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mental health, resilience and existential literature

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Abstract

In this paper, I will begin by charting some of the conceptions of mental health in young people today, paying particular attention to recent mental health education policies in England. I will focus on the concept of 'resilience' as central to these policies, and how this represents an impoverished understanding of mental health, what it means to 'overcome' mental health issues, and what, in fact, might constitute an 'appropriate' response to the world we (now) live in. In order to explore an alternative conception of mental health in light of this, I turn to an example from existentialist literature—Dostoevsky's *Notes from underground*. On the surface, this novel appears to be an account of a man suffering from a mental breakdown. Ultimately, however, I argue that texts such as this enable us to explore more fully what it is to experience mental health issues, and that also point us to the fundamental vulnerabilities and uncertainties that are an intimate part of being human.

KEYWORDS
anxiety, existentialism, mental health education, resilience

MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

Mental health concerns amongst young people in the UK and elsewhere have been increasingly spotlighted, both in wider public discourses and in the area of education. There is a widespread belief that young people are experiencing more mental health concerns than in previous generations, and the statistics are often quite shocking. In every classroom across England, for instance, it is thought that at least three children are suffering from a diagnosable condition (Brown & Carr, 2019; Thorley, 2016).

But why is this? One explanation often raised relates to young people's increased exposure to social media, and their seeming inability to distinguish between online spaces and the 'real world' (DfES, 2020). These platforms are castigated for endorsing unrealistic body images, for promoting a vapid 'influencer culture' that feeds on this, as well as creating a space in which it is fair game to judge another person with wanton cruelty (e.g. Betton & Wollard, 2019; Kelly et al., 2018). But of course, it is not social media alone that contributes to the 'mental health crisis' among young people. Theirs is also a generation characterised by the 'gig economy' and increasing precarity in the job market. Riddled with student debt, they receive 'diminished economic returns' for their education (Bracke et al., 2014). This is not to mention the intense visibility of social, economic and political injustices along with the rise of right-wing populism. And of course, all of this is amidst the continuing existential threat of environmental destruction. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns for the mental health of young people have been amplified even further (Gloster et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). With restricted movements, isolation, an increased amount of time spent online, unpredictable education and unpredictable futures—not to mention the looming presence of disease and destruction—is it any wonder that one in four young people today are experiencing some form of ongoing mental distress (MIND, 2017)?

In a world that seems to be increasingly characterised by uncertainty—economic, political and existential—education is often promoted as a remedy of sorts. Through education, young people are thought to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complex world, where educational institutions can cultivate the capacity in young people to recognise mental health problems in themselves and others, and to seek treatment where necessary (e.g. Harris et al., 2011). With this also comes the onus on schools and teachers to diagnose mental health problems and to enact school-based interventions that help mitigate them. This seems sensible, given the amount of time young people spend at school. Indeed, schools have become not only the place in which young people are taught *about* mental health disorders. They are also key in recognising (potential) mental ill-health, in part through observing the behaviour of students, as well as acting as a 'protective factor' that reduces the likelihood of developing more serious disorders (e.g. DfES, 2016).

Undoubtedly, recognising the importance of and engaging in discussions about mental health is important, particularly where the alternative has sometimes been to simply ignore these issues altogether. And yet, how accurate is this picture of the mental health 'crisis' in the first place? Might we question whether there has actually been an increase in mental health conditions, or simply a 'narrowing of how we diagnose, describe and respond to experiences of distress' (Farrell & Mahon, 2021, p. 38)? As Brown and Carr (2019) note, 'medicine has become part of the fabric of schooling'. What is important, then, is to think about how mental health is understood in educational policies, including the ways in which an individual suffering from ill-health is diagnosed and treated, and the factors that are thought to cause or prevent those issues from occurring in the first place.

RESILIENCE AS A MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

Since as early as New Labour's 'Every Child Matters' policy in 2003, along with its associated SEAL programme, schools are considered to be key forces in the early intervention of mental health. Through programmes such as SEAL, schools are equipped with new ways of measuring children's social and emotional competence, allowing them to more efficiently 'screen, profile, improve upon and monitor' issues in part to ensure positive student behaviour and academic attainment (DfES, 2010). This push towards school-based interventions echoes wider global movements in response to the 'mental health crisis' in young people, and whereas mental health was traditionally confined within the remit of psychiatry, recent policies see the school as a key player in the prevention of mental health issues (Brown & Carr, 2019; Harris et al., 2011).

For Brown and Dixon (2020), this shift towards school-based interventions represents a general refocusing in public policy, based on the relatively intuitive assumption that adequate social goods such as housing, education and healthcare decrease the chances of socio-economic inequality, one of the leading factors in mental ill-health. But whereas organisations such as the WHO (2012, 2014) explicitly recognise the connection between mental health and wider

social structures, this does not appear to translate directly into the current approaches to mental health education in England. Rather, these policies suggest that the ultimate source of and responsibility for addressing mental health issues is the individual student. Whilst the school can create the environment necessary for mental wellbeing to flourish, it is ultimately the student who must confront challenges, and who must therefore learn to deal with them in the best possible way. Hence, the school and the individual student are co-responsible—the school as that which creates the necessary conditions for the student to do 'well', and the students as those who should take advantage of the opportunities their education provides—including the opportunity to develop *resilience*.

Resilience—best achieved through 'the knowledge and attitudes [that] will support their own, and others' wellbeing and attainment'—is defined as

> the pupils' ability to believe that they can achieve goals, both academic and personal; to stick to tasks that will help them achieve those goals, even when the reward may be distant or uncertain; and to recover from knocks and challenging periods in their lives.

In a recent policy released by the Department for Education (2016) outlining the connection between mental health and behaviour, various 'risk' and 'protective' factors are discussed in relation to the cultivation of resilience. According to this policy (2016, p. 5), having a 'structured school environment with clear expectations of behaviour, well communicated social norms and routines… reinforced by highly consistent consequence systems' are just some of the ways that the school can create an environment in which mental resilience is promoted:

> There are things that schools can do for all pupils, as well as those at risk of developing mental health problems, to intervene early to create a safe and calm educational environment and strengthen resilience before serious mental health problems occur (DfES, 2016, p. 5).

Other examples of risk factors include seemingly 'unchangeable' facts about the individual child's physical and mental makeup, such as 'genetic influences', 'low IQ and learning disabilities' and 'specific development delay and neurodiversity'. There are also risk factors that the school *can* reverse, including 'low self-esteem', 'academic failure' and 'communication difficulties'. Protective factors, too, may be outside the remit of the school, like the student's 'temperament' and 'secure attachment experience'. They also include things like 'being a planner and having a belief in control', having the 'capacity to reflect' and experiencing 'success and achievement'. On top of this, there are also specific areas of the school culture that are thought to increase risk or protective factors, including a culture of bullying, '[deviant] peer influences' and '[poor] pupil to teacher/school relationships', some of which can be mitigated by having 'clear policies on behaviour' and 'positive classroom management'. Interestingly, there appears to be a policy shift here, where what was once a 'pathological' approach to mental wellbeing (i.e. a focus primarily on diagnosing disorders) is now 'salutogenic', where the school can focus on factors that support wellbeing, rather than on the causes of ill-health (Weare, 2010).

In short, creating a 'safe and calm' environment (i.e. one that is not 'hostile, aggressive, chaotic or unpredictable') provides the opportunity for students to develop resilience in facing the normal stresses and strains of their everyday life. This should be considered not only as aspirations for the school but as part of their core responsibilities (DfES, 2016). Of course, building student resilience in the face of challenges or perceived failure does not deny the fact that strength of character alone is not enough when it comes to more serious mental health concerns, such as those that require specialist attention and support. But where students are experiencing levels of anxiety that go beyond the ability to cope with the 'normal stresses of life' (DfES, 2016; WHO, 2012, 2014), or where their emotions fall outside the remit of the 'normal range (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, nervousness)' (DfES, 2020, p. 32), then resilience can allow students to not only confront these challenges but succeed in spite of them.

Resilience also pays a key role in the newly minted *Relationships and Sex Education* policy (RSE) (DfES, 2020).[1] Importantly, the aims of this policy are broader than mental wellbeing and include, for example, ways in which to help

4 | Journal of Philosophy of Education
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students recognise and maintain healthy relationships (whether intimate or otherwise). But mental wellbeing is nevertheless a central aspect here because healthy relationships 'protect' against mental ill-health. From the outset, the policy claims that mental wellbeing is ultimately connected to children's happiness—and who could argue with that? This concern with children's happiness is a concern not simply for the individual child but also for wider society, as a happy child will most likely become a productive citizen later in life. And again, the guidance here helps schools to foster not only an environment conducive to this, but also resilience and character in the individual student, given that resilience is also 'fundamental to pupils being happy, successful and productive members of society' (DfES, 2020, p. 5).

All of this seems sensible, perhaps. In many ways, the building of resilience is not so far removed from one of the central features of schooling today. If we think about it, the school as an institution is structured in such a way that, by its very nature, some students *will* inevitably fail. Without failure, that meritocratic ingredient of competition would make little sense. And so, if we accept failure as an essential part of schooling, then a school should *also* accept its responsibility in ensuring its students can manage this —both within the schooling setting and beyond it.

And yet, by endorsing the view that mental wellbeing can be achieved through resilience, one is by extension endorsing the view that mental ill-health is caused by a *lack* of resilience—in other words, a 'weakness' in the student that needs to be overcome. As Farrell and Mahon (2021, p. 43) recently remarked, mental health is conceptualised in terms of 'vocabularies of deficit', a language that serves to 'pathologise or medicalise the individual' and, in doing so, 'radically simplifies a broad array of emotional and behavioural challenges'. Indeed, isn't the simple 'weighing up' of risk and protective factors a bit too easy? Are mental health disorders amenable to a narrow 'problem-solution' complex? What about those who *appear* to have all of the protective factors in place—a stable home life, a good academic record, a network of caring relationships, an ability to express oneself. Is that enough to ensure that they do not experience mental health disorders in their lives?

Less innocuously, perhaps, these protective factors also imply what Brown and Carr (2019, p. 242) note are the 'cultural expectations of middle-class schooling', where the diagnostic evaluation of disorders not only reflect dubious conceptions of the 'ideal learner'—(pro)active, visibly engaged, sociable, coming from a 'good family'. They also actively perpetuate these constructs by virtue of the expectations placed on schools and teachers, who must *respond* to perceived disorders in accordance with what the policies dictate are '(ab)normal' or '(ir)rational' reactions. This, in turn, pathologises behaviours that *may*, in fact, be appropriate given the situation young people now face, even if, from the state's perspective, these reactions are not desirable. If it is the case that the solution is to simply find other protective factors that help young people overcome their difficulties, then what else would these need to include? Future assurance for young people that the world will not be utterly devastated in their lifetime, that they can look forward to a sense of social and economic stability in their lives, that injustices will be made right? It seems, indeed, that anxiety is a perfectly healthy response to the world we now live in.

One could argue, however, that living our lives in some kind of anxious stupor is not the best use of our time, and so the focus on *managing* our mental health makes sense. This is often the line that policymakers take—how to efficiently strategise about mental health to ensure academic attainment and, ultimately, the ability to fruitfully contribute to society. Mental health disorders are not only individual issues, after all. They are also 'social problems' that pose a threat to the stability of society. As Brown and Carr (2019) convincingly argue, the 'managerialist' approach to mental health is intimately connected to the need to perpetuate neoliberal society. Resilience is not only facilitated by an increase in academic attainment, but also *allows* for continued academic success, thus serving to perpetuate a society that sees the main 'value' of human beings in terms of their performance and '[economic] competitiveness' (Brown & Dixon, 2020, p. 385).

In the context of RSE, the tone is one of 'empowerment'—empowering students to 'identify when relationships are unhealthy… that can have a lasting, negative impact on their mental wellbeing', for example (DfES, 2020, p. 25). Empowerment is about creating the capacity for students to make 'good decisions about their own health and wellbeing', enabling them to recognise what counts as 'normal' behaviour in themselves and in others, and to seek out necessary treatment when something is not. Empowerment also comes from developing specific strategies that allow students to 'calmly and rationally' manage situations that are challenging in some way, including skills such as

'self-control', which gives students the confidence to 'achieve well' and to 'persevere'. By managing one's mental health in this way, there is a tendency to suggest that seemingly irrational responses to situations can be avoided altogether.

I don't want to suggest here that the school has *no* role to play in discussing or dealing with mental health. I'm also not suggesting that serious mental health concerns shouldn't be met with specialist or targeted treatment. At the same time, however, I think it's important to get a clearer sense of what it means to experience something like 'anxiety', and to consider it as a potentially appropriate response *but also* as a condition for being human. There are ways to do this that avoid characterising mental ill-health as a 'weakness' of sorts, or a deficit that needs to be overcome or managed in some way. A 'belief in control' might be seen as a protective factor against something like anxiety. And yet, confronting the fundamental unpredictability of being human in the world seems, to me, to be something we must all face up to at some point. Not only will a 'belief in certainty' fail to prepare us for those moments, but it also seems to be at best naïve, at worst a form of bad faith. I might add that, ironically, 'avoidant behaviour' is also seen as a sign of mental ill-health. But in *not* avoiding it, perhaps there is a better message to send young people than to simply 'get over it', or to strive to attain something that, for all intents and purposes, seems so meaningless in the context of what human beings now face.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest another way of discussing mental health, in the hope that this, too, might be used by practitioners tasked with ensuring the wellbeing of their students. In my mind, mental health is often best represented not in abstract theories or in reductive, mantra-like policies, but in concrete literary depictions of characters who appear to be experiencing mental health disorders, and who can therefore provide a point of resonance that allows us to explore such experiences more fully. Existentialist literature is a prime example of this and thus, in order to explore this further, let's turn to Dostoevsky's *Notes from underground*.

EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH LITERATURE: *NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND*

Notes from underground is often regarded as one of the first existential novels (Frank, 2010; Scanlon, 1999)—novels that attempt to account for the confused, paradoxical and often disorienting experiences of being in the world with others, particularly from the perspective of individuals who are trying to make sense of the apparent meaninglessness that characterises their existence. In doing so, existentialist literature does not shy away from this messiness of lived experiences, but instead embraces the entire gamut of human (inter)actions, whether anti-heroic, revolting, irrational or absurd. Existential novels often begin and end with the inner life of the individual, and like *Notes*, they raise important questions about what it means to be an individual within times of upheaval and crises. Fundamentally, existentialist literature demonstrates how, in spite of the thoughts and actions that any reasonable person might pursue, the individual *need not be reasonable.* Instead, one is ultimately free to act irrationally, as they are 'condemned to construct [the] road' that 'turns out to be going nowhere in particular' (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 30).

On the surface, *Notes from underground* appears to offer a portrait of a man suffering the effects of a mental breakdown. As with many of Dostoevsky's novels, it is told entirely from a first-person perspective. As such, it consists solely in the inner life of the unnamed character, generally referred to as the Underground Man—'his moods, anxieties, his delusions' (Kaufmann, 1989, p. 13). The novel is divided into two parts. The first part is thought to occur in the present, when the Underground Man is around 40 years of age and is living in isolation under the floorboards. The second part consists of a retelling of the series of events that led up to this moment, starting some 16 years previously. Since the story is told from the perspective of one person, it is not exactly reliable, however, particularly as this person appears to be 'mentally unstable'.

Indeed, the Underground Man represents a 'tangled mess of tensions and contradictions' (Roberts, 2012, p. 218). He is narcissistic but with an acute awareness of others. He is arrogant though extremely insecure. He lacks empathy and yet is also highly oversensitive. He refers to himself as 'civilised' but is also irrational in much of his thought and behaviour. He consistently proclaims his superior intelligence and yet hates his outward behaviour—and, indeed, his own body—for betraying this. It appears that the Underground Man is unhealthily obsessed with the minutiae of

conversations and of situations he is affected by, and he is often tormented by suspicions about what *they* (both his readers and other characters in the book) think of him. He spirals into dreams of revenge towards others, often for the slightest misdemeanours. At the same time, he is persistent in his attempts to 'prove' himself to others, and thus very rarely enacts the revenge he so often fantasises about.

When, in the second part of the novel, he makes a fool of himself in front of some old school friends who then leave him alone in a bar, such contradictions appear throughout his train of thought:

> These oafs think it was a great honour for me to have a seat at their table, and don't understand that I am honouring them. That it's I, I, that's honouring them and not the other way around! 'How thin! Your clothes!' Oh! Those damn trousers. Zverkov noticed the yellow stain on my knee straight away… and all the rest of it! Now, at once, this very minute, I must get up from the table, take my hat and simply leave—without saying a word… to show my contempt! And tomorrow anything, even a duel. Bastards. As if I cared… They may for all I know think… Damn it all! I don't care… I'm leaving, this minute!… Of course, I stayed (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 69).

It is highly unlikely that these old friends of his are thinking any of this at all—they barely even notice him, in fact, which the Underground Man *also* seems to be aware of. Importantly, these apparent paradoxes in the inner life of the Underground Man mean that, as a character, he is difficult to gauge. Is he the way that others see him? Is he projecting onto others what he thinks of himself? Is the mockery or indifference of others what drives him to live a life escaping from the wider world? To what extent are these projections accurate? Do they capture what people *really* think about him? And does this even matter in the context of his own self-understanding?

Another example of his tumultuous relationship with others appears in the second part of the novel. Whilst out walking, the Underground Man enviously witnesses someone being thrown out of the window of a tavern. He then enters with the hope of provoking the same reaction, perhaps as a way to test whether he can, in fact, elicit an emotional response from another person. There, he sees an officer, and, standing in his way, waits for the final blow. Ultimately, however, he recounts a very different outcome:

> …he picked me up by the shoulders and, without a word, without warning—and without explanation— transferred me from the place where I was standing to somewhere else and went on as though he hadn't noticed me (Dostoevsky, 2010, p. 48).

The Underground Man is furiously insulted:

> I would have forgiven him if he had beaten me, but I simply could not forgive him for having so definitively transferred me without even noticing.

He thinks about standing up to the officer, to confront him for his 'treating him like a fly'. Instead, he cowers away, and carries a grudge with him that will last for years. The hatred he feels towards the officer (who, by most standards, would have simply forgotten the brief encounter by now) continues to fester as he contemplates absurd acts of revenge that he never carries out—following the officer to his home, caricaturing him in a story and planning (but failing) to send it to him, challenging him to a duel. Finally, he decides on his plan of attack that will 'work'. He makes sure to dress for the occasion, something he agonises over for quite some time. Eventually, he follows the officer to the port, and, walking in the opposite direction to him, attempts to either make the officer 'side-step' out of his way or to collide with him. Ultimately, he loses his nerve, side-stepping in time to allow the officer to leave without noticing him. Later that night, he becomes ill and feverish at the thought of his failure, but decides that this was, in fact, the best possible outcome. Indeed, in his efforts to convince his readers that the officer was merely pretending not to notice him, he is also attempting to convince himself that this pretence indicates the two are on an equal footing.

This, of course, is clearly an over-the-top and unhealthy reaction to what is otherwise a meaningless encounter. If the Underground Man could simply understand or acknowledge this, if he could simply learn to *manage* his thoughts, perhaps he could be more *resilient* in the face of his failures, and thus less tortured by what are insignificant events in the grand scheme of things. Many critics of *Notes* have taken to analysing his psychological state in this regard. For example, the Underground Man has been interpreted as emblematic of adolescence, demonstrating the qualities of someone who has not quite reached the age of maturity—egocentric, exaggerative, consistently projecting the ambivalence he feels about himself onto others (e.g. Anderson, 1990; Bakhtin, 1984). By 'pathologising' his behaviour, he is shown to be 'abnormal' in his transgressions, and in turn, suggestions for how one might 'treat' an individual in a similar state can be developed.

But rather than pointing to where we might 'use' a character like the Underground Man in order to demonstrate why something like resilience is important, perhaps we can instead engage with the story to reconceptualise what resilience actually means, or indeed, to question the extent to which we can ever engage with ourselves in line with the rationalistic demands of mental health policies. Arguably, the Underground Man *does* show resilience in the ways in which he reinterprets events such that they correspond to a more favourable narrative for his self-identity. Indeed, such reinterpretations allow him to 'overcome' his feelings of inadequacy and failure, and isn't this precisely what resilience is all about? And whilst it may be easy to dismiss the Underground Man's inner musings as pure irrationality or as pathological, isn't there an element of what he does here that is true of all of us in some way? How often do we think, embarrassed, about how we have behaved in the past? How often do we try to 'reinterpret' what happened in order to quash this sense of shame? To what extent does that shame and the way we have responded to those events—in both the moment itself and retrospectively—become part of our own self-understanding?

For philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, shame is something we *only* experience in the presence of others. It arrives not on the basis of 'rational' reflections on situations, but rather as an 'immediate shudder that runs through me from head to toe, without any discursive preparation' (Sartre, 2018, p. 308). Whether a person is actually present to witness my moment of shame, or whether they in fact even care about what we did—in short, whether or not the reason for our shame is rationally justified—we can often not help *but* feel ashamed. And often, for Sartre, the only way out of this is to 'objectify' the other: to deride them, to dismiss their ideas about me as being a 'false portrait' that fails to capture who I really am, as the Underground Man attempts to do with the officer. Such avoidance is momentary, however, as for Sartre, we are inescapably as the Other sees us. Thus, any attempt to quash these feelings of shame, in which we come to know ourselves through the eyes of others, is a form of bad faith. Might we also say this of the avoidance tactics inherent in the resilience agenda?

Perhaps what the Underground Man enables us, then, is not only the means to explore experiences such as shame and anxiety in all their complexity, but also the idea that no human being is ever 'one thing'—neither simply rational nor irrational, but rather something in between or even beyond these binaries. As Roberts (2012, p. 216) remarks, the Underground Man serves to '[unsettle] us as reasoning being', challenging our most cherished assumptions about why we react to situations in the way we do. In doing so, he demonstrates the limits of a purely rationalistic understanding of humankind, an understanding that underpins concepts such as 'resilience', where, as we saw above, one can be taught to 'calmly and rationally' deal with their emotions in a more appropriate way. But experiences such as shame and anxiety are 'pre-reflective' in a sense—they occur not on the basis of our thoughts about what is 'appropriate' or not, but are *already there* in the very moments of encounter with others in the world.

Throughout the novel, the Underground Man constantly oscillates between a person deserving of our pity, to someone unpleasant and narcissistic. But as Roberts (2018, p. 9) notes elsewhere, the Underground Man is also someone deserving of our compassion. What this would involve is moving beyond the purely psychological interpretations of his character in order to attend to him as a *particular* 'flesh and blood human being', someone that can never be fully grasped or understood. Indeed, the tensions and contradictions he embodies—between himself and others, between rationality and irrationality and between reason, will and emotion—signal the fundamental *pluralism* of being human (Bakhtin, 1984) that is ill-appreciated in the policies on mental health. Like human beings, there is always something about the Underground Man that remains unrevealed: an inner life not immediately public, a person constantly

redefining himself through redefining those events that 'made him' who he is, but also, through his turmoiled relationship with others. Individuals, too, are a tangled mess of sometimes contradictory thoughts—about themselves, about the world and about others. Novels such as *Notes* reflect not only the suffering that is an intimate part of our relationship with others, whether self-fabricated or not. For Dostoevsky, there is a profound value in such suffering, since it pushes us 'into unfamiliar, sometimes frightening, experiential and cognitive territory' (Roberts, 2012, p. 210).[2] In one sense, the Underground Man's choice to occupy dark spaces represents a revolt against an overly rationalistic understanding of ourselves, of the world and of others, and an overly rationalistic understanding of how we respond to these. And like all good satirical novels, it encourages us to confront ourselves with the same level of devastating rigour.

THE VALUE OF LITERATURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

What is the value of *Notes from underground* for something like mental health education? Isn't there a danger of fatalism here—that by showcasing such extreme examples of mental ill-health, we are shirking our responsibility in teaching children to manage such experiences, to move past them and to get on with their lives? In one way, the Underground Man *has* found a way to escape mental health illness—through his resilient reinterpretations of events in line with the fallacies of his success, and through living a life that avoids the interference of others. And yet, why is it that he remains so distressed? By exploring such questions in a collective educational setting, perhaps something *more* than the mere management-driven response to mental health can ensue.

Indeed, I want to argue that, ultimately, *dwelling* on such experiences is valuable, even if only momentarily. With the race to always move forward, to progress, to succeed, to continually develop, to commit to lifelong learning, to become increasingly competitive, to become instrumental for the growth of society, the economy, the planet—isn't there a time and a place for us to be attuned to experiences of disquiet? And that, I argue, points to one of the unique tasks for philosophy and for literature, not to mention the wider domain of the arts and humanities, where more sensitive, realistic, but also uneasy, destabilising and confronting portrayals of mental health exist. I want to argue that these portrayals are valuable, not only in the sense that they expose us to accounts of mental health that are not solely focused on overcoming them, nor do they succumb to heroic feats of resilience that suggest all other responses are inadequate. They can also provide a means for students to account for their *own* experiences of mental health in more existentially sensitive ways, where the value of such accounts lies in not only what such experiences can *do*, or what *we can do* with those experiences, but what, in fact, they *say*—about our collective vulnerabilities and uncertainties, and about the risk and ambiguity that is an intimate part of being human. Ultimately, the suggestion that overcoming mental health issues, such as anxiety and vulnerability towards others, by simply being more 'resilient' or by increasing the number of 'protective factors' in our environment fundamentally denies this part of the human experience, and thus represents not only a wilfully naïve response to the world we now live in, but also an impoverished—and, in some ways, *non-human*—account of what it means to exist in the world with others.

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ENDNOTES
[1] This policy was implemented not without controversy (Whittaker, 2019), but its controversy is not directly related to its focus on mental health.

[2] In Roberts (2018), the importance of suffering is discussed in relation to *The brothers Karamazov* and the concepts of 'active love' in Dostoevsky and 'attention' in Iris Murdoch, the latter of which is defined as a 'just and loving gaze upon an individual reality' where we encounter others not abstractly but as particular human beings. Our relationship with others is infinitely perfectible in this sense and can also be embodied through our relationship with fictional characters such as the Underground Man. See Roberts and Saeverot (2018).

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10 | Journal of Philosophy of Education
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