A CULTURE OF WELLBEING: WHY WE MUST PUT POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH AT THE HEART OF OUR SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

For young people, a key priority when rethinking education is considering how education affects our mental health. It will come as no surprise that young people are facing a mental health epidemic, and the education system has become a driving factor in this. Recent policies have fuelled toxic cultures in our schools, which glorify burnout and stigmatise those who rest as scroungers, whilst long-standing, paradigmatic problems have persisted.

Too many young people try to learn in these fear-driven cultures each day – and this was my reality at school. After growing significantly aggrieved, I took action to ensure my school implemented what is called a 'culture of well-being' – one wherein rest is held in equal regard to work. One wherein the positive well-being of all is actively promoted – for it is recognised that positive well-being is an essential prerequisite to learning.

The culture of well-being has created positive change to the realities experienced by young people on the ground – as well as for the whole-school community. In this article, I will introduce the culture of well-being, explain how to implement it in practice, and amplify the plea of young people for education to work with, not against, their mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are facing a mental health epidemic. A survey from NHS Digital (2017) found that 1 in 9 children had a probable mental health condition that year. The Good Childhood Report (2020) reviewed evidence from previous instalments, which demonstrated a mostly consistent decrease in children's happiness with life and school since 2009. The Jacobs Foundation's Children's Worlds Report (2020) compared children's subjective well-being and satisfaction with school across international boundaries and found that children's satisfaction with school is poor in England compared with other nations.

Young people assert that the education system – and, within it, the exam system and standardised assessments – are key factors underpinning these findings,

according to the mental health journal States of Mind (2020). More recent, youth-facilitated research from the British Youth Council (2022) found that young people feel that the education system (again specifically exams) was one of the most significant factors adversely affecting their general health and well-being.

It is worthwhile establishing, however, that it is not exclusively young people who are struggling in schools. Teachers, too, are presently under more pressure than they ever have been before, and the disillusionment this is generating amongst the education workforce is threatening to grind the system to a screeching halt. Education Support's Teacher Wellbeing Index (2020) shows that over half of teachers are considering leaving the profession due to the damage it is doing to their mental health.

There is some significant concern growing amongst school leaders for the well-being of young people. It is evident that exams have always been a driving force behind poor mental health among young people, but recent reforms have exacerbated this problem. In 2015, the UK Government reformed the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) to become more rigorous. This entailed the complexity of content and the difficulty of assessment increasing.

Coursework was discarded in favour of exclusively examination-based assessment taken at the end of a two- or three-year course, as opposed to modular assessment throughout. This was in order *"to end a culture of low expectations"* (The Guardian, 2013).

However, the rigid, high-pressure approach pursued by these assessments has fuelled the mental health crisis among young people. The Association of School and College Leaders (2018) polled their membership on the effect of the new GCSEs on the mental health of their pupils. Of the 606 leaders surveyed, 546 (90%) said they had knowledge that the new qualifications had caused greater stress and anxiety than previous incarnations. Figure one summarises the specific effects of the new qualifications on young people's mental health, showcasing the percentage of those 546 school leaders who testified that the new qualifications were having this effect on their students:

Effect	Value and % reporting problems
Panic attacks	460 (86)
Sleepless nights	457 (86)
Depression	394 (74)
Extreme fatigue	344 (64)
Self-harming	340 (64)
Suicidal thoughts	216 (40)

Figure 1: Effects encountered due to exam-only GCSE format 2017–2018:
Source: Association of School and College Leaders (2018)

The ASCL also stated that the new GCSEs were having an adverse effect on staff well-being as well, since they were on the frontline of helping young people to cope with the poor mental health caused by these new qualifications, increasing the emotional burden of the work they do. They also added to staff workload by demanding time to adjust to the new specifications and grading systems.

Yet these kinds of reforms are not exclusive to the GCSEs. Over the past 12 years, we've seen greater rigour injected into all stages of education. Similarly to the GCSEs, A-Levels are no longer modular, with everything now resting on a final examination series taken at the end of the second year.

The National Curriculum assessment (colloquially referred to as the Standard Attainment Tests, or SATs) has also been subject to similar reforms. Here, in a primary school setting, the greater demands placed upon the whole-school community have sparked even more concern and controversy than at later stages due to the younger age of the children affected and the inherent infringement of children's leisure time caused by the greater need for test revision and preparation. Research has suggested that SATs, too, are having an adverse effect on the well-being of young people and teaching staff. Bradbury (2019) surveyed 297 headteachers and interviewed 20 from schools across England. It revealed that 99% of the survey respondents agreed that *"SATs put pressure on teachers"*, and 92% agreed that *"SATs have a negative impact on teachers' well-being."* Regarding the impact on children and young people, 83% of heads agreed with the statement *"SATs have a negative impact on pupils' wellbeing"*.

High-pressure policies lead to high-pressure cultures on the ground at all stages of education. Gill & Gergen (2020) illustrate how children are being led to believe that success is only achievable through accepting the *"tyranny of testing"*. All of this conveys to children and young people that high-stakes testing is the ultimate determinant of success in life, and that the failure to reach the desired standard at a particular point can have devastating consequences for life chances.

I will now take some time to share with you my own, subjective lived experience of the education system, which broadly reinforces the findings of all the literature cited hitherto. Although admittedly, it diverts from the rather nomothetic nature of this introduction, it is important to consider such experience as its qualitative nature conveys the humanity within a particular issue (that is not always possible using quantitative data) and thus illustrates the real impact of a problem on the ground. It also highlights issues that may previously have been overlooked as policy has been shaped almost exclusively by learned experience – that acquired through research, reading and second-hand information gathering. In my case, my lived experience of school was also, so to speak, the *"procedure"* which led me to my *"findings and conclusions"* – the culture of well-being – that will be explained later. The consideration of lived experience is crucial to formulating unique, effective policies and solutions. Otherwise, we risk following

the same procedure repeatedly and expecting different results, which, as Einstein is believed to have claimed, is the very definition of insanity.

MY STORY

I plodded along through most of my education with an attitude of indifference. I was never one to enjoy school, yet I never questioned my circumstances. I simply did what was required of me by law.

However, when I was at Secondary School, there were several occurrences that upset the balance, significantly harming my mental health. A major factor that had profound consequences on my mental health concerned interpersonal conflict and a lack of friends. I had been quite reclusive hitherto, but when I reached Year 8 (my second year of secondary school), my friendship circle expanded, and I became part of a solid group of four boys. I also enjoyed success on the romantic front. I valued these relationships deeply but became paranoid that my friends did not value me in the same way I valued them. I worried that they were going out and doing all sorts of things outside of school without me and that this, therefore, reflected an unspoken fact that I was not as much a part of the group as they were.

This climaxed in an exchange of hurtful words and actions between myself and the other boys. The consequences of this saw me dismissed from our friendship group, and my fears had now manifested themselves in reality. I really was not part of this group anymore. Having been so emotionally attached to these relationships, the sudden loss of them caused my mental health to rapidly decline.

This incident was a pivotal moment, as it instigated three years of manipulation, mind games, and general animosity towards one another. Alliances fluctuated, but it would always conclude with me being isolated again whilst everyone else made amends. Unlike my peers, I did not have other friends to fall back on for support when things went wrong.

I often found myself on the receiving end of various forms of abuse from some of these people, namely death threats and sexual abuse. The very nature of our education system often traps young people in forced association with people who wish to do them harm (and, in many cases, are actively causing them harm), perpetuating the damage and dragging it out.

Around the same time, my younger brother was preparing to take his Year 6 SATs. Although only two years had elapsed since I had taken mine, the UK Government had reformed the SATs quite significantly in that time (as outlined in the introduction.) In stark contrast to the kinds of questions I was expected to answer, 10 and 11-year-olds were suddenly expected to know the answers to questions such as *"explain what the past progressive tense is"*, *"differentiate*

between a subordinating conjunctive and a coordinating conjunctive" and *"set out the definition of a modal verb."* Even at my present age, I would not be capable of answering such questions, but it would have been especially difficult at age 11.

The greater rigour necessitated greater sacrifice in terms of revision & study time, denying these young people the innate liberty of play. In reality, this translated into children spending hours trapped inside, pouring over an array of worksheets and practice papers, which, as previously noted, was a dramatic contrast with my own experience of the same series of exams two years prior – for which I did no preparation at all (I spent all my time outside of school playing) yet still secured good results.

My brother would suffer meltdowns whilst navigating through seemingly endless sheets of paper. I recall all too vividly the sounds of his tears, screams, and anger from those terrible weeks. They still echo in the back of my mind when I think, speak, and write about them now.

When the examinations formally commenced nationwide in May 2016, I quite clearly remember coming home from school to find that the tests had been nothing short of a disaster across the country. News reports were emerging of children breaking down in tears during the tests, and teachers crying too, in their concerns for the children (ITV News, 2016; Ward, 2016; Sculthorpe & Joseph, 2016; Rosen, 2016; Zatat, 2017; Gibbons, 2020).

In my sceptical teenage mind, I interpreted this as a deliberate, calculated action inflicted upon children by politicians – who consciously took the decision to do this, knowing full well what would happen. I concluded it was morally wrong and took a vow to take action in order to get justice for my brother and his peers.

But before I could meaningfully contemplate the educational revolution I had just sworn to achieve for my brother, I came to the realisation that these reforms were not exclusive to the SATs. The GCSE, which I was starting that September, had also been subject to similar reforms. During a particularly difficult class one day in June 2016, we endured a rant about how our exams, too, were now tougher, and that the significant efforts and sacrifices invested by previous cohorts would not suffice from us.

That was a significant moment for me. Immediately, my mind began to race as I feared that I, too, would suffer the same fate as my brother just had with his Year 6 SATs – possibly worse! Having seen what my brother went through, my mind produced distressing mental images of myself drowning under piles of paper, weeping. I realised that what I interpreted as a deliberate assault on young people's mental health was marching on. In my mind, my personal assessment of the situation was this – the Government had just attacked my brother and his cohort, and now, they were coming after me. I felt that my fight against the system had just become a fight for self-preservation.

Going into Year 9, the alarmist culture I witnessed that day firmly embedded itself into my school. Significantly more apparent than it had been prior to the exam reforms, young people were being constantly bombarded with dark and dreary prognostications exaggerating the importance of GCSEs. We were told that, if we were unsuccessful in our GCSEs, we would be, and I quote, *"on Tesco brand bread and beans…unable to provide for your families"* and that our families and friends would abandon us, writing us off as *"failures"*. We were told the only way to avoid this was to consistently sacrifice time in devotion to securing our GCSEs, leading me, at least, to feel like a failure if I dared to take time for myself. It was then prophesied that we would (and should – as it was made out as though there was no other alternative than absolute glory) achieve extraordinary things, and bring to ourselves the laurels of fame. Ordinary accomplishments and occupations were devalued. The consequence of this was that I felt both my prospects narrow and insurmountable pressure being heaped onto me. This was ultimately maladaptive in the endeavour to pass my GCSEs as, whenever I tried to study, my mind would obsessively pour over the prophecies and (what I had been told was) the scale of the task ahead. This generated anxiety that prohibited me from concentrating. My grades began to suffer as a result, ultimately meaning that these prophecies were becoming self-fulfilling.

But the effect of this culture on my grades was not my primary concern. The effect this had on my mental health grossly superseded that in importance. I began to exhibit symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and panic disorder. The OCD occasionally deprived me of the ability to walk straight. One night, whilst out in public, I ended up walking backwards because I had felt a compulsion to do so, weeping as I went, which was a horrendously demeaning experience. Another occurrence saw me put myself in a situation that was physically dangerous.

I experienced panic attacks for the first time ever, having absolutely no idea what was happening when I suddenly started shaking and feeling nauseous at half past 11 at night as my mother had to help me to the toilet as we thought I was going to be sick – I was literally paralysed by fear.

I knew full well that this had come about due to the stress caused by school. I initially displayed OCD symptoms during a particularly stressful series of end-of-year exams in Year 9, where I followed the school's advice regarding hard study time, only to end up with mediocre grades and even worse mental health which eventually had physical consequences. The panic attacks started after we were given only two weeks' notice of the same end-of-year exam series in Year 10, which took place against the backdrop of a significant deterioration of the situation on the social front. Due to all of this, I came to interpret education as a threat – a threat to both my mental health and well-being. Due to the OCD, I interpreted it as a threat to my physical safety as well.

Although I have now thankfully overcome many of these adversities – through a combination of individualised coping strategies (namely meditation) and activism to improve the situation more broadly – I am still haunted by the spectre of trauma. If now, someone were to describe themselves to me as enduring a similar experience to what I had endured, I would, most probably, experience a trauma response that would take me straight back to that night I had the first panic attack. It plagues me to this day. I have been left permanently scarred, never to be fully restored or repaired.

It is almost as if every day will now be a school day in the darkest depths of my subconscious.

Yet I realised something very important – that I was not alone in this struggle. I began to read some of the research cited in the introduction, as well as observing more news stories being printed about young people in similar situations to myself. Eventually, around the time of my entry to Year 10 (autumn 2017), I concluded beyond reasonable doubt that this was indeed a widespread and systemic failure, validating my view that action was necessary and spurring me on even more in a fight for justice. In December 2017, I stood for election as my form's representative to the school's Student Council – and won.

At every Student Council meeting I attended, without fail, I would raise the matter of the prophecies and the nature of communication surrounding exams in discourse between teachers and young people. Yet despite my persistence, every time I raised the issue, my concerns would be dismissed with claims of *"Oh, we have to do that because otherwise, students would have no motivation to learn or study!"*

Not only does such a proposition overlook the fact that learning is innate and instinctive (Gray, 2013), but it also fails to realise that applying such intense pressure is maladaptive for most pupils. Research has consistently shown that when people believe they are being observed and evaluated, their performance in any particular task declines, and those who already have some experience hold an unfair advantage over fresh learners. This effect is particularly acute in academic and intellectual undertakings. Aiello and Douthitt (2001) found that when people are being observed or evaluated learning a difficult skill or thinking creatively, their performance declines as opposed to when they are not.

Due to the school's resistance, Year 10 passed with nothing to show for my tenure on the Student Council. The school had countered me at every turn. When September 2018 arrived and I commenced Year 11 – the final year wherein I would sit my GCSEs – I stood for re-election to the Student Council as the problem was still very much alive. However, with little to show for my first term, I came second in the poll of my form group.

However, the Student Council had shifted to a model of having two representatives from each form group, meaning I did get to sit on the Student Council for a second year despite finishing the election in second place.

Again, I would raise the matter of culture without fail at each meeting until, on one sunny morning in January 2019, at a Student Council meeting, I raised the matter again, referencing specific examples of prognostications given to us by school staff. Due to a disastrous Ofsted report a month prior, it landed on the ears of the staff much differently this time. They shot back aghast, visible horror upon their faces that such words could have been spoken in their school.

This time, it was taken seriously. Following this meeting, teaching staff were advised to cease their use of the prophecies. From here, the school in general began to undertake a cultural shift away from the kind of culture I had endured and towards what I have come to refer to over the years as a culture of well-being. One wherein students are taught the value of rest and hold it in equal regard to work – ceasing to stigmatise those who rest as scroungers. One wherein all members of the school community remain mindful of the language they employ in communicating with each other during times of pressure. One wherein students are actively encouraged to put their mental health first and to always take adequate time to engage in activities that matter to them, for it is recognised that good mental well-being is a prerequisite to academic success.

As the culture developed, the school initiated better mental health training for all its staff. They increased the support offered to Year 11 students during exam season, facilitating mindfulness workshops and significantly altering the manner in which they communicated about the exams to young people. The contrast in the manner in which the school communicated to Year 11 students about the exams is evident when comparing how they handled the final Friday before the exams in 2017 and how they did it in 2019:

- In 2017, they put the pressure on by playing *"The Final Countdown"* by Europe over the school intercom just before everybody went home.
- On the same Friday in 2019, however, they delivered a laid-back assembly reminding Year 11s to take time for themselves over the weekend. *(Although I am keen to stress that this alone is too little too late – healthy communication must be woven into discourse at all stages of education, not just when it comes to the final exams, and support should be offered to the more junior cohorts as well.)*

They also established an annual Well-being Week which took place each October, where the final lesson of the week ended 15 minutes early and time was dedicated to resting. Pupils were also given chocolate bars during this time to add to the relaxed atmosphere. Such a thing as this would have been unthinkable under the old culture.

About three years later, the school received an Ofsted inspection. Its previous inspection, conducted in the December of my Year 11, approximately one month prior to the introduction of the culture of well-being, condemned it as inadequate in all areas. It was labelled as one of the worst schools in the whole country.

However, in its most recent inspection – its first since introducing the culture of well-being – its rating for *"Personal Development"* has risen to *"Good"*, and on the first page of the report, in only the second paragraph, it is noted that pupils appreciate the support they receive from staff, especially in the field of mental health and well-being.

By introducing the culture of well-being, changing course and actively listening to pupils' voices, the school environment significantly improved, demonstrating the impact even a basic shift towards a culture of well-being can have in improving the fortunes of even the most struggling schools.

THE CULTURE OF WELL-BEING:

The definition I have come up with for the culture of well-being is as follows; *"A school culture which holds positive mental & physical well-being in equal regard to academic rigour & success, a low-pressure environment where trust is placed in the innate ability of young people to learn and the school undertakes meaningful, effective and co-produced initiatives to improve the wellbeing of all members of the school community, and endeavours to ensure the sociocratic, inclusive and egalitarian governance of the school."*

Regarding operationalised actions, the culture of well-being is scalable in proportion to the level of ambition of those implementing it. A culture can be changed by altering the manner in which we speak, yet, as outlined in the introduction, cultures can also be impacted by policies and structures. The unhealthy culture in my school became significantly more acute once the reality of the reformed, rigourous GCSEs had set in. The tougher tests made for a tenser environment.

Especially in the context of mental health, it is also important to consider the concept of psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003) as an explanation as to why the culture of well-being must also consider systems-level change. The concept suggests that we should evaluate mental health interventions in terms of the extent to which it examines the role of systems and structures because these too wield great influence on mental health. The more the culture of well-being challenges problems embedded in systems, the more psychopolitical validity it would have, implying a greater ability to improve mental health – the ultimate objective for the culture of well-being.

As I wrote my speech for the Rethinking Education conference, I conceptualised a tiers of change model for the culture of well-being, which shows how it can be something quite simple, or it could be a much larger systemic change:
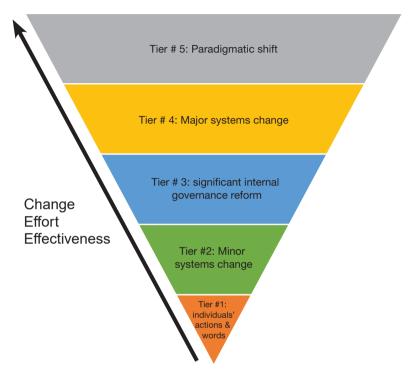

Figure 2: Tiers of change within the culture of well-being.

The increasing size of the segments on the graph visualises the degree of change each represents, the level of effort required to implement them, and also the effectiveness of each in achieving our overall objective of improving mental health and implementing a holistic culture of well-being.

I will now proceed to provide a more detailed summary of each tier, what it involves, and how it can be implemented:

Tier #1: individuals' actions and words:

In its most basic form, a tier-one culture of well-being involves detoxifying communication between members of the school community. Instead of employing the kinds of prophecies I outlined earlier, being honest about how important exams really are, appreciating the sensitive nature of the subject, and not saying anything that will place too much pressure on students.

However, this has to be a two-way street. Teachers, too, are often on the receiving end of the toxic culture within schools. Although this is not fully the fault of the young people, there are things they can do to help implement a culture of well-being in their school. They should refrain from taking out their frustrations on teachers and work harder to restore damaged relationships with their peers, being proactive in conflict resolution by reaching out to friends they have fallen out with and inviting them to make amends, endeavouring to expand their capacity to forgive, so that nobody finds themselves as isolated as I did.

Tier #2: minor systems change:

As we move up the pyramid, we begin to shift away from individual actions and towards systems-level reform.

Within tier two, this concerns internal school changes that mainly focus on simple provisions that the school can provide in and of itself, or can find another, local agency to provide, without major top-down reform. The school will amend its own policies to increase the provision of support, both proactive and reactive, for young people's well-being.

This may draw upon some of the learnings from my old school and involve things such as a Wellbeing Week with more free time. It could look like the provision of non-academic enrichment activities and the creation of time for this – perhaps allocating a few sessions in the week to non-academically rigourous activities – especially those which involve giving back to the community and doing genuine, meaningful good. These serve to give pupils a proper break from their studies, giving them some respite. But what it also does is ensure that the personal development enjoyed by young people in education is much more holistic and diverse, and therefore better prepares them for the non-academic world of work which they will eventually progress into.

Also within tier two, schools may make endeavours to provide solutions to bullying and interpersonal conflict. It is harder to propose policy solutions to address this issue, for some people will simply conduct themselves in an unpleasant manner regardless of what is occurring at a systems level. However, there are some actions that the school can take to improve this situation.

Detoxifying communication and nurturing a culture of kindness is one of the more proactive solutions – and this links nicely to tier one. Schools could also proactively offer and facilitate restorative justice mediation sessions in order to encourage healthy dialogue between disputing peers, ensuring this offer is well-publicised.

This would enshrine a means of conflict resolution within the school system. It is here we begin to see the distinction between tiers one and two. Tier one is about individuals altering their behaviour. Tier two is about systems change for the whole school.

Tier #3: significant internal governance reform:

There may be some initial scepticism as to how significant internal governance reform links to the culture of well-being and supporting mental health. Tier three relates directly to Prilleltensky's work surrounding psycho-political therapy, as well as the logical assumption that, if given the power to shape their environment, members of the school community would not shape it into something that harms their wellbeing.

It also ensures members of the school community feel a sense of control over their circumstances, easing innate anxieties that arise when we are not in control of our circumstances. Allowing members of the whole school community to hold a significant stake in the governance of the school also helps people to feel as though they have a sense of purpose in life and they have a role to play in the school community. It also helps to demonstrate to the young people that they have skills, talents, and merits valued by society, which enhances their morale and sense of self-confidence, building their ability to acknowledge their assets.

Referring back to the concept of psycho-political therapy, significant internal governance reform can also be a reactive therapy for those young people who may have already been traumatised. If a young person, as I did, is able to see their strife and trauma being applied in a constructive manner to identify problems within the school and prevent other young people from suffering what they had suffered, then they may feel as though there was some purpose in their suffering and it helps them to come to terms with what happened. This is how my story came to a satisfactory conclusion. My lived experience of the toxic culture, and the trauma I suffered within it, was used to inform positive change that prevented other young people from experiencing what I had at school, and in addition to the further work I have done on the issue since has helped me to feel better about what happened.

At a higher level within tier three, this governance reform would draw inspiration from Daniel Greenberg's Sudbury Valley School and its sociocratic school meeting, where all members of the school community come together on one body to govern the school through compromise and universal consent where possible as opposed to winner-takes-it-all voting – although standard democracy can be used to resolve stalemates if needs be.

Tier #4: major systems change:

From this point onwards, the changes required to implement each tier become near impossible for one individual school to implement at the local level, and instead require policy changes often at the behest of national government. Yet the link

between national policies and the culture of well-being on the ground is prominent enough to warrant consideration being given to how policy changes at such a high level could advance the cause of wellbeing.

Some examples of policies that may support a tier four culture of well-being might be assessment reform, such as undoing the 2015 reforms that made the qualifications I sat more rigourous. From a teacher's perspective, it could look like reducing workloads and improving working conditions in the education sector. Anything which helps to minimise undue pressure.

Tier #5: paradigmatic shift:

Tier five would see a fundamental and historic paradigm shift in how we educate young people, taking them out of an environment wherein competition with one another is encouraged, where pupils and teachers alike are placed under strict deadlines and heavy workloads, and actually removing the concept of a mandated curriculum and forcing young people to go through the experience of having to invest great amounts of time and energy in things they have no natural interest in.

Instead, this tier would involve emancipating young people and allowing them to follow their passions, trusting in their educative instincts, and unleashing the learning power of play.

In my view, it would constitute a widespread adoption of the Sudbury Valley model, and making this type of education widely available to all. Essentially, non-fee paying Sudbury schools available over a large geographic range.

DISCUSSION

If all tiers were implemented fully, the culture of well-being would have a significant impact on addressing the youth mental health epidemic. It has already been established that education is a key variable influencing young people's mental health. The first three tiers of the culture of well-being would address the immediate factors within schools that spawn because of the pressure from above, as well as putting both proactive and reactive support measures in place to mitigate the impact of the policies on peoples' mental health. The latter two would remove that pressure from above, addressing the problem at the source.

Of course, it would be wrong to claim that education is the sole driver of poor mental health among young people. The British Youth Council report, for one, highlights several other societal influences on young people's mental health, namely social media and discrimination. But the significant role played by the education system cannot be overlooked or denied, and although the culture of

wellbeing is not the magic bullet that will end this crisis, it would certainly make a significant dent in it – if implemented properly and holistically over a large area.

For me personally, the research outlined in the introduction proves to me that many young people had (and are having) similar experiences of education to what I had. It is similar to the evidence which initially drove me to the conclusion in 2017 that what I was experiencing was a widespread problem and spurred me to take action.

A call to action is how I want this paper to be interpreted. It is all well and good having it written down, but this article will only have any meaning if those who are in a position to do so apply its recommendations in the real world.

Anyone who is a part of a school community: young people, teachers, parents ETC, have the power to immediately commence the implementation of tier one within their school by being more considerate with their language and how we interact with each other. They can also take some steps toward tiers two and three.

Anyone and everyone can join in the campaigning and advocacy required for tiers four and five to be implemented. There are a variety of actions one can take to begin working towards these:

- Join a campaign group or start working with charities that are passionate about this issue. Sign up for their mailing lists to receive opportunities to take action.
- Speak to a local MP about these issues. *(Of course, if significant numbers of MPs suddenly started hearing from constituents about one issue, that issue would then be propelled to the top of the political agenda.)*
- Young people can speak to their local Member of Youth Parliament or Youth Council about this issue to put it on their radar. They could also join a Youth Council.
- Seek out and participate in surveys and research that are looking into the issue to help build the evidence base.

Despite the scale of this issue and the challenge it presents, we can be reassured that it is within our influence to work towards addressing the mental health epidemic. There are a variety of options available to us, ranging from all-encompassing systems change to simple actions we take and words we say when interacting with one another.

May we experience a rekindled desire to be kind to each other, and to build a kinder, and therefore more functional, system that works for everyone.

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Speight served as the Member of Youth Parliament for Blackpool between February 2019 & March 2022, and now serves as the representative for the North West on the Youth Parliament's Steering Group. He also works in a paid capacity to improve education for the whole school community, particularly with regards to the culture of well-being.