

**Title:** Critical Analysis of Peace from the Perspectives of Well-Being in Policy and Practice of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England.

### **Introduction to Assignment Two: From Relational Practice to Structural Critique**

Assignment One was an autoethnographic journey that explored the "swampy lowlands" (Schön, 1983) of an SEND 'Hub' in Wales. Wales has already undertaken education reforms through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 which are very similar to the new reforms set to take place in England, as detailed by the government in *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (2026). Applying the lens of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969) and the theory of relational well-being (Gill and Thomson, 2017), the first section of this portfolio mapped a professional evolution; from an anxious practitioner trapped in "functioning chaos" to a facilitator of relational well-being validating the lived emotional experience of students and myself. The reflective process reveals that individuals have the capacity to act in the interests of well-being in practice. We can mirror, anchor, and nurture student agency, not merely as a display of personal kindness but as a deliberate, theoretically informed practice intervention against the institutional instrumentalisation of SEND education.

However, as Schön's model of reflection-in-action demonstrates, the practitioner is restricted by the physical environmental space they inhabit and bound to the socio-ecosystem in which they operate. Additionally, instinctual choices made through reflection-in-action are affected by the inner emotional state of the practitioner and their own personal framework of ethics and values, as demonstrated in my positionality statement. Therefore, while my first assignment established that an individual can act as a restorative well-being agent, it also highlighted the fragility of such an approach when faced with a system driven by attainment and procedural compliance rather than human flourishing. This necessitates a shift in focus: from the personal practice of "reflection-in-action" to a rigorous interrogation of the structural forces that shape, and often stifle, well-being in the policy and practice of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England.

This second assignment, therefore, moves from this autoethnographic focus (although some autoethnographic examples are included) and with a more academic focus this writing critically analyses the policy landscape underpinning SEND provision in England. The following sections will:

1. **Deconstruct the Epistemological Crisis:** I will examine how the prevailing dichotomy between the medical and social models of disability creates a "technical-rational" paradigm, which prioritises standardised metrics over holistic, "thick" well-being (Gill and Thomson, 2017).
2. **Interrogate Structural Violence:** By drawing on the work of Galtung (1969) and Dewey (1938), I will argue that current policy—characterized by the pathologization of student agency and the instrumentalisation of staff—functions as a form of cultural and structural violence, systematically limiting the potential for growth.
3. **Propose a Restorative Framework:** Finally, I will advocate for a Whole School Approach (WSA) not merely as a counselling intervention, but as a systemic necessity. By re-imagining the school as an ecosystem of "communal agency," I will demonstrate how we can shift from a culture of fear and blame to one that centres dignity and relational well-being as the primary indicators of success.

By synthesising these theoretical critiques with the lived realities identified in my earlier reflection, this analysis seeks to show that the move from medical pathology to relational flourishing is a prerequisite for improving well-being in the policy and practice of SEND in England. The current educational landscape for Special Educational Needs (SEN) is anchored in a persistent, structural tension between the medical and social models of disability. Prevailing policy frameworks frequently adopt a medicalised, reductionist view, treating neurodiversity not as an expression of human difference but as a deficit requiring intervention, surveillance, and management. This approach fosters an institutional culture of "fear and blame," wherein educators and practitioners operate under the constant pressure of procedural compliance to mitigate institutional liability. When well-being is approached through this narrow, medicalised lens, it is instrumentalised; it becomes a metric to be tracked, optimised, and reported rather than a holistic state to be nurtured. This shift effectively prioritises the "Technical

Project" of administration (Lawler, 1989) over the genuine, normative flourishing of the individual. As argued by Kickbusch, Gordon, and O'Toole (2012), this reliance on narrow, outcome-driven metrics represents a significant policy failure, as it ignores the interconnected nature of a child's cognitive, physical, and social development. This essay will argue that the pathologisation of agency—manifested in practices such as informal diagnosis—is a symptom of a failing system, and that a Whole School Approach (WSA) acts as the necessary restorative theory to shift the culture toward "relational flourishing."

Current educational policy concerning SEND is under intense scrutiny. In practice, the challenge is to navigate a "technical-rational" paradigm where procedural compliance is rationalised over human flourishing. The framework operated by the government views SEND through a medicalised lens, for example, viewing neurodivergence as a deficit to be managed, measured, and mitigated. By focusing on standardisation, policymakers treat education as a "Technical Project" (Lawler, 1989), where well-being is instrumentalised and converted into a metric rather than being nurtured as a holistic state. Following the vision of "relational well-being" as presented in the first section of this portfolio and as defined by Gill and Thomson (2017), practiced well-being is not a static output but a relational, dynamic process rooted in the quality of human connection. The current government rhetoric regarding a crisis that "ends now" is characterised by *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (2026). This policy strategy document outlines the framework for reforms that offer only a "thin" understanding of well-being, focusing on narrow benchmarks rather than the "thick" realisation of agency and connection.

### **The Epistemological Crisis: Medical Models and "Mutually Entangled" Domains**

The dichotomy between the medical and social models of disability is central to this crisis in SEND provision. Gill and Thomson's (2017) research assists in understanding the nature of this conflict; they argue that personal well-being and structures are "mutually entangled." By using the term "mutually entangled," they demonstrate how the personal (internal state, emotions, and well-being)

and the structural (policy, institutional rules, and the physical environment) are not separate entities. One cannot meaningfully address one without the other. The medical model of disability fundamentally frames disability as a "personal tragedy" or individual deficit, viewing the impaired individual as the object of clinical treatment rather than an active participant in society. By defining neurodivergence through this pathogenic lens, institutions focus on "fixing" the individual—standardising them to align with normative expectations—rather than addressing the environmental barriers that create disadvantage. Owens (2014) argues that the medical model of disability is a reductionist approach that obscures the relational reality of well-being by shifting the burden of adaptation entirely onto the student. In contrast, the social model of disability recognises the barriers in society that disadvantage individuals. This language is reflected in how students are categorised. In Wales, SEND is framed as Additional Learning Needs (ALN). It is pertinent to consider the effects of language on the framing of disability status and services; however, space here does not permit a full exploration, and future work should take this into account. The administrative burden in education, or the "technical-rational" paradigm, converts education into a goal of procedural compliance—manifested through informal diagnosis and surveillance—rather than the holistic flourishing of the child. The medical model fails because it isolates the "problem" within the child's neurobiology, ignoring the relational and ecological context. When schools adopt this medicalised gaze, they inadvertently pathologise student agency.

It is important to differentiate between "pedagogical observation," meaning the teacher's assessment based on an informal medical model framework, and "clinical diagnosis," which is a multi-disciplinary clinical process involving trained professionals such as pediatricians or psychiatrists. I have been struck by instances of teachers offering informal diagnoses of "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (PDA). Diagnoses and instructions to accommodate PDA by those not medically qualified function as mechanisms of control. The result is the isolation of the student from their peers and staff by denying them access to the relational context of the classroom. This is a form of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), as it dismisses the student's

legitimate response to an overwhelming environment as a deficit. A teacher's role is to observe learning and behaviour in a specific educational context. When a teacher applies a psychiatric label like "PDA," they step outside their professional remit, applying a "clinical gaze" without the necessary clinical training or ethical protections. This restricts the pupil's potential for "growth" as described by John Dewey (1938) or a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006). By reducing the educational environment to standardised, transactional tasks distributed through categorisation markers, policymakers erode students' capacity for flourishing. As Foucault (1977) suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, the act of categorising individuals is a technology of control that prioritises institutional metrics over human connection.

This also aligns with Goffman's theories on stigma; a pseudo-medicalised gaze isolates the "problem" within the child's neurobiology rather than incorporating the school's ecological structure (Owens, 2014). By labelling a student's reaction to an inaccessible environment as a behavioural pathology, the institution absolves itself of the responsibility to change its structural ecosystem. As schools are institutions, this forms a type of structural violence (Galtung, 1969). In the context of the provided examples, informal diagnosis shifts the burden of adaptation from the school to the student. If the student is "pathological," the school is relieved of the duty to alter an oppressive culture. This failure causes "internal psychological damage" inflicted by an environment that ignores the child's relational needs.

Additionally, biological processes allow the medical model to incorporate emotional synchronisation, such as the "crying example" in the first reflection which I inadvertently initiated. This contagion of response follows personal identity and representation issues regarding the response to violence, which requires much more deeper exploration than space allows here..

The medical model of disability can be further deconstructed to move away from a "pathogenic" framework toward a "salutogenic" approach (Antonovsky, 1979). Salutogenics focuses on the origins of

health and resilience, whereas the medical model reduces the student to a set of symptoms. The result forces the student to adapt to an environment that is often hostile to their sensory needs. A salutogenic perspective evaluates the school environment based on its ability to support a student's "Sense of Coherence" (SOC). As touched on in the first assignment, coherence is congruent with well-being (Kickbusch et al., 2012). For an educational experience to be health-promoting rather than reductive, activities should be intrinsically valuable—comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. Currently, the traditional school system undermines coherence by imposing rigid behavioural "compliance," making school life feel incomprehensible to students. A significant realisation occurred when I understood that students often attend school for the sake of attendance itself, which enabled me to understand how educators and parents may pathologise "difficult" behaviour to excuse their own struggles with management. By replacing this deficit-based model with activities of intrinsic value, educators can transform the classroom from a site of structural violence into a resource-rich ecosystem that actively nurtures everybody's capacity for flourishing.

### **The Economic Drivers and the Cost of Relational Failure**

It is ironic that inclusivity is a goal for education reforms, giving the impression of treating everyone the same for the common good. Those in practice might argue that there is a lack of professionally qualified staff to provide the necessary well-being support, as reported in the media. Practitioners like teachers are assuming diagnostic responsibilities in a potentially harmful way, while the integrated Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process in the future will be reserved for children with complex needs only. The practice of informal diagnosis in the classroom as already mentioned is likely to continue and extends to how parents perceive their children's abilities. Communication of new Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) could potentially align teachers and parents in viewing the "problem" as residing within the child. Historically, however, a parent-teacher divide has persisted, exacerbated by physical and professional separations. For instance, I observed an incident where teachers pulled down blinds and turned on lights to physically separate parents waiting outside from the activities happening in the classroom, creating a literal barrier.

Although professionals are often separated by the governance of education, health, and social care, educational psychologists remain in high demand. Education Psychologists could hold the key to future improvements as they consider a holistic approach. Therefore, to remedy these systemic problems, more educational psychologists must be trained and made available as sources of advocacy for children with SEND.

However, the availability of educational psychologists is hindered by the fiscal unsustainability of the current system. Significant funds are spent on Teaching Assistants (TAs), often creating a "Velcro effect" where the school assumes needs are met simply by having more "hands-on" support (Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. 2015/2019) . As indicated in the previous section, TAs are sometimes used inefficiently to make school activities "look good", such as finishing crafts for sale, rather than meeting students developmental needs. Furthermore, many schools employ staff through agencies at a significant cost. This financial deficit is often blamed on children with SEND rather than being recognised as a direct symptom of the failure of relational well-being; blaming child-behaviour rather than institutional failure (Runswick-Cole, 2024). It is notable that these failures are occasionally framed as achievements by politicians; for example, my local MP Tom Hayes celebrated in a posted newsletter his securing £4 million for SEN in my area. Yet, as most will not realise, much of this funding is diverted to local authority legal fees rather than supporting the SEND pupils in the classroom. With Local Authorities (LAs) facing a cumulative deficit projected to reach £17.8bn by 2029 and surging demand for EHCPs, the system is at a breaking point. This indicates that education reforms may not be for the benefit of the children, but rather to mask budgetary failures; it is an economic consequence of treating well-being as a commodity rather than a relationship.

**Webster, R. and Blatchford, P. (2019) *The Making of a Teaching Assistant: Learning from the Experience of Classroom Support*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.**

The legal environment reflects this disconnection. Local authorities currently spend over £150 million annually on legal action to fight parents in tribunals, despite LAs losing approximately 99% of these cases. This litigious "war footing" consumes funds that should be directed toward frontline support. From the perspective of Gill and Thomson (2017), this is the result of reducing education to "neoliberal transactions". When the state treats care as a transaction, it destroys the "relational peace" and trust necessary for a community to function, leading to a system where conflict is the default state. By opting for defensive, legalistic containment strategies, schools prioritize "institutional rigor" over the "relevance" of the student's emotional lived experience—a choice that proves both ethically and fiscally disastrous.

### **Toward a Restorative Framework: Whole School Approach (WSA)**

A transformative move toward positive peace requires shifting from "single-loop" feedback—labelling, stigmatising, and punishing behaviour—to "double-loop" feedback, which critically questions why the environment provoked the behaviour in the first place (Schön, 1983). A Whole School Approach (WSA) acts as the restorative theory necessary for this transition, moving away from a "technical-rational" mindset and toward a systemic process for change (Kickbusch et al., 2012). Unlike the medical model, which isolates the "problem," a WSA views behaviour as communication and recognises that relational well-being is the most essential data point (Gill and Thomson, 2017). However, a WSA does not happen just because a policy is in place; it requires an internal ethical framework and professionalism from staff. For example, when I asked a friend of many years experience working in schools how I should go about reporting the harmful practises I have witnessed, such as leaving a child crying for hours, she said there was no point because "they wouldn't do anything about it." This highlights the implications of a system where the culture of fear and blame persists despite recommended reforms like the "plan-do-act" model, which interestingly is the same continuous feedback model as recommended by the government in its Health and Safety legislations - in which I am professionally qualified.

Following Gill and Thomson's (2017) definition of relational well-being, practitioners will benefit from using this double-loop style feedback to repair the "internal psychological damage" to themselves and their pupils caused by the institutional system. For example, when, as described in the first section, students began to cry at the Christmas performance rehearsal, a single-loop approach would have been to rush them back to the "technical task" of rehearsal or back into the classroom rather than allow this display of relational wellbeing. A restorative approach, however, validates the grief, treating the student's emotional state as a primary indicator. To improve wellbeing in SEND in theory and in practice, a restorative wellbeing practitioner can explicitly praise peer-support and reconcile human connection with each other and within the physical environment. This "Ecology of Praise" is a practical case study in how a WSA, enacted on a personal level, helps transform a school culture from a state of fragmented anxiety into communal agency and flourishing. By embedding "Reflection-in-Action" (Schön, 1983), educators, and pupils can move beyond the "frantic busyness" of management and endurance toward being ambassadors of relational wellbeing.

### **Conclusion: Toward improving Wellbeing for SEND in Theory and in Practice.**

The move from medical pathology to relational flourishing is a prerequisite for peace. As Galtung (1969) identifies, true peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the presence of the conditions for human flourishing. The informal labelling of students and the instrumentalisation of staff represent the "cultural violence" that underpins the "structural violence" of our education system. To achieve structural Positive Peace, policy must evolve from measuring the product of learning, and the cost of defending that measurement, to nurturing the process of *being*. This follows the theory by Gill and Thomson (2017) and others. Dignity is not a variable to be balanced against fiscal convenience; it is the fundamental foundation of any educational framework that aspires to be genuinely peaceful. By cultivating relational ethics and social bonds, we can repair

the damage inflicted by the current system and create an environment where communal agency—not fiscal scarcity—defines the educational experience and continuously improves the potential for Positive Peace for those that follow us.

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