

HPPC7002 Assessment One: Autoethnographic or Imaginative written assignment**I. Introduction**

The landscape of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England is reportedly currently defined by a crisis (Elgot, 2026; Phillipson, 2026). Reporting on this shows a gap between the rhetoric of "ground-breaking" policy reforms by the government and the lived reality of the students and staff. This disconnect stems from a fundamentally "thin" understanding of wellbeing—one that prioritises macro-level procedural compliance and quantitative performance metrics over the "thick," relational wellbeing that is inherently felt through experience (Gill and Thomson, 2017). In this way, the intrinsic value of education is lost, learning is reduced to an instrumentalised project that is measured through completion rather than the activity of flourishing of the student. This is the tension between 'numbers versus words' (Gill and Thomson, 2019) and causes the reproductive nature of institutional violence as understood by Galtung's concept of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969).

My engagement with this problem is inherently situated. As a practitioner with nearly 35 years of experience across the non-profit, youth service, and educational sectors, and as a parent of young adults with complex SEND needs, I have navigated these systems from both sides. Recently coming to recognise my own neurodiversity, I am now acutely aware of how differently I once interpreted "peace", often equating it simply with "getting the job done". I now realise how that mindset obscured my not understanding the value and use of social norms regarding relational wellbeing. This personal and professional awareness shows how institutional rigidity systematically can prevent neurodivergent students from accessing their right to dignity and risks to well-being in the "swampy lowlands" (Schön, 1983) of the messy, unpredictable classroom.

This assignment is an autoethnographic journey that moves beyond a mere critique of instrumentalised being as outlined by Gill and Thomson (2017) among others. By utilising Wellbeing and Positive Peace theories as a design framework, my initiative for wellbeing offers a practical, restorative alternative to

institutional and self-instrumentalisation. By synthesising insights from Permaculture, Schön's reflective practice, and Galtung's Positive Peace, I argue that I as a TA, and others employing self-conscious awareness (Mead, 1934) can retrofit the classroom into an ecosystem where agency is restored, "thin" procedural compliance is bypassed, and genuine, relational wellbeing can flourish. This portfolio maps my navigation of the friction between system-driven performance and the art of relational teaching, proposing a practical design for wellbeing that honors the lived emotional experience as the true indicator of potential for all. This is essential to challenge the rhetoric of 'ground-breaking' SEND (Special Education Needs and Disabilities) reforms (Phillipson, 2026). My self-reflection helps to make sense of my experiences across time rather than life-long learning being defined by moments of struggle and 'disability', and helps build agency, self-worth, and contributes to a personal identity (Nussbaum, 2001).

II. The Theoretical Lens

To navigate the friction between systemic, metric-driven mandates that are the basis of satisfying 'wellbeing' in policy and the actual lived reality of relational teaching, I employ a framework of theories that function not as abstract ideals, but as practical tools for classroom artistry. My narrative is grounded in the "swampy lowlands" of educational reality, a concept pioneered by Donald Schön (1983). Schön's theory (and the foundational work of Mead (1934) on the social self and identity) compliments Gill and Thomson's take on technical rationality that, unlike the "high, hard ground" of, where problems are neatly defined and solvable through policies which disseminate standardised procedures, the classroom is fundamentally messy and unpredictable. Schön's framework allows me to validate the intuitive, "in-the-moment" decision-making required in a Sixth Form SEN Hub. It provides the vocabulary for what Schön recognises as *reflection-in-action*: the ability to bypass rigid institutional protocols to engage in a "reflective conversation" with yourself and with the situation (Schön, 1983). By embracing this messiness and refusing to view the classroom as a site purely for task-completion, I promote Peace from the perspective of Wellbeing.

If the current SEND system relies on "thin" Wellbeing hindered by instrumentalism then Positive Peace offers a framework for an initiative design that is restorative. Johan Galtung's (1969, 1990) concepts of structural and cultural violence serve as the critical lens through which I evaluate my reflection. These theories do not merely explain conflict; they highlight how institutional rigidity can inadvertently cause harm by prioritising compliance over human dignity. By pairing this critique with Permaculture principles (Holmgren, 2002), I extend the concept of "relational wellbeing" beyond human-to-human interaction to include the environment. In this model, the classroom environment is no longer just a backdrop; it is an active, relational wellbeing partner capable of supporting sensory integration and fostering a felt sense of safety (Valera, 2026). This is where the emotional labour and commercialisation of feeling (Hochschild, 1983) becomes a critical factor in evaluating the efficacy of the practitioner within a rigid system.

This perspective links to the socio-ecological systems approach for SEND, which emphasizes:

- **Environmental Influence:** Recognizing the influential nature of the school environment, both inside and outside the classroom, as a partner in relational well-being (Valera, 2026).
- **Practical Application:** By being aware of how well-being flows, practitioners can make reasonable adjustments to the environment to facilitate better sensory integration and reduce cognitive overload (Valera, 2026).
- **Systemic Impact:** These adjustments can foster a felt sense of safety and belonging, which may help break cycles of reproductive social disability and disadvantage (Valera, 2026).

By treating the classroom as an ecosystem rather than an attainment factory, I can shift my role from a "technical task-manager" trapped in the reproductive cycle of structural disability, to a relational wellbeing practitioner. For example, when I choose to mirror a student's 'stimming' movement or validate their grief, I am not merely being "kind." I am performing a deliberate, theoretical intervention

that restores agency, interrupts the cycle of institutional compliance, and creates the space necessary for students and supporters to learn and flourish together with dignity.

III. Reflection Narrative

The following reflection examines a single-day assignment at a Sixth Form Special Educational Needs (SEN) Hub. This narrative explores the tension between instrumentalised educational practices and relational wellbeing, documenting a series of key interactions throughout the day.

The Arrival

Due to the nature of agency work, the assignment commenced without specific prior notice or preparation. It had been a considerable amount of time since I had completed the requisite training modules independently; consequently, the specific protocols were not immediately fresh in my mind. Walking into the Sixth Form SEN Hub, I experienced significant anxiety. It required a concerted effort and substantial emotional energy simply to leave my vehicle and enter the facility, reflecting the internal pressure of adapting to a high-stakes environment with limited immediate orientation.

The Corridor Interaction

My first significant interaction occurred while waiting to be directed to the correct classroom. I observed a student with complex needs who was non-verbal and rocking rhythmically in isolation. Rather than attempting to distract him or forcibly redirect his movement, I stood alongside him and mirrored his actions. This approach established a connection through co-regulation, a vital aspect of relational wellbeing. He subsequently accepted my arm as we walked toward the classroom; the corridors were calm, and the transition felt harmonious.

However, when we reached the classroom, staff directed me to "just put him in the corner" to read. I resisted this instrumental command, which prioritised convenience over the student's dignity. Instead, I offered him the agency to choose between two books, creating a brief but meaningful

moment of connection. Shortly thereafter, I was informed that I had been assigned to the wrong class and was moved to a different room. This new environment initially appeared chaotic, resembling a clinical or hospital-ward setting more than a traditional classroom. Yet, paradoxically, my anxiety began to dissolve within this bizarreness, as the overt needs of the students demanded an immediate, focused response that moved beyond my internal apprehensions.

The "Instrumentalised" Classroom and the Dismissed Aspiration

Inside the classroom, I observed a palpable disconnect between staff and students. In the absence of a formal briefing, I spent the first fifteen minutes observing the social ecosystem to discern how best to support the students as individuals. While students worked on laptops, the teaching assistants were preoccupied with craft-making for a school fair, and the teacher remained at her desk. The atmosphere was one of technical task-completion rather than relational education. When I noticed a student struggling with maths, visibly despondent because he could not locate his workbook, I stepped in to offer support. By celebrating the aspects of the subject he understood and offering reassurance, I sought to foster a sense of pride in his academic efforts.

During class presentations, I employed "teaching by modelling," asking inquisitive questions to demonstrate genuine interest in the students' findings. When one student identified a local takeaway as a potential place for future employment, I attempted to nurture this spark of agency by suggesting we explore work experience opportunities. However, the teacher dismissed this suggestion, viewing the student's comment merely as the completion of a procedural task. This interaction highlighted the friction between my objective of fostering relational wellbeing and the institutional focus on instrumentalised education. Where I saw a genuine life aspiration, the teacher saw only a technical output, illustrating a focus on procedural compliance over the student's long-term flourishing.

Peer Support and The Climax of Grief

As the students presented their reports, I noticed they were anxious, focusing solely on their own performance rather than engaging with their peers. To counter this, I encouraged active peer-to-peer support. By paraphrasing their findings and facilitating mutual encouragement, I was enacting Schön's (1983) "reflection-in-action." I recognized the inherent value of their mutual support as a core component of relational wellbeing, even as the teacher remained focused on the technical completion of the presentations.

The limitations of a purely technical approach became most apparent during a subsequent performance rehearsal. Several students began to weep, overwhelmed by the realisation that this was their final Christmas performance at the school. Rather than adhering to the rigid rehearsal schedule, I acted as a "relational anchor," sitting with them to validate their grief. This shift transformed a procedural task into a moment of collective emotional processing. By resisting the reproductive nature of institutional rigidity, I created a space for the students to navigate this significant life transition with dignity and support. At the conclusion of the day, teaching assistant peer inquired about my teaching background, asking about how long since I had qualified in SEND. I explained that I did not have any formal training but had extensive experience in complimenting roles and more than that - I had brought up my own 21 year old children severely affected by Autism Spectrum Condition. Despite my initial anxiety, I felt a profound sense of achievement in having successfully navigated the day's complexities through a relational lens.

IV. Positive Peace Intervention (The "Design")

To move beyond the "technical project" of traditional schooling, I propose a restorative design framework that treats the classroom as a living ecosystem rather than a factory floor. This intervention aims to retrofit institutional spaces with Positive Peace principles, converting the "thin" wellbeing of procedural compliance into "thick," relational engagement. By implementing the following four dimensions, we can effectively address the systemic instrumentalisation identified in my narrative.

- **Environment as Relational Partner:** My narrative highlighted how sterile, chaotic environments contribute to "functioning chaos" and sensory overload. We must shift from viewing the room as a backdrop to an active participant in wellbeing. This involves actively adjusting sensory inputs—lighting, sound, and spatial organisation—to reduce cognitive overload. By doing so, we actively dismantle the **structural violence (Galtung, 1969)** inherent in chaotic, disabling environments. Creating an environment that respects neurodivergent needs fosters a "felt sense of safety," which is a prerequisite for learning and a primary mechanism for fostering **Positive Peace** by breaking the cycle of reproductive social disability (Valera, 2026).
- **Relational Anchoring:** In my classroom experience, the teacher's primary focus was task-completion, leaving no space for the "climax of grief" the students felt. Relational Anchoring is a direct counter-intervention to **cultural violence (Galtung, 1990)**, where institutional rigidity normalizes the silencing of human emotion. By shifting from "technical task-manager" to "relational anchor," we prioritize emotional validation over the ticking of boxes. Validating a student's anxiety or grief provides the stability required for **Positive Peace** to flourish, allowing them to process their experience regardless of the curriculum schedule.
- **Active Co-Regulation:** The "corridor interaction" demonstrated that safety must be established *before* instruction. Through techniques like mirroring and attuned presence—moving with the student rather than forcing them to move—we establish a connection that bypasses institutional resistance. This acts as a mechanism to **restore agency** that structural violence typically strips away, enabling a **Positive Peace**-based interaction. This is an intuitive application of **Schön's (1983) Reflection-in-Action**; by mirroring, I am performing a "reflective conversation with the situation," validating the student's biological reality before asking them to engage with the school's reality.
- **Amplifying Agency:** The dismissal of the student's career aspiration was a failure of the "technical project." To solve this, we must actively nurture student interests that have real-world relevance, which challenges the **structural violence (Galtung, 1969)** that dictates only measurable outputs have value. Restoring the student's dignity and agency serves as a foundation for **Positive Peace**. By validating aspirations as legitimate parts of a personal

identity rather than "data collection tasks," we restore the agency that instrumentalised systems systematically silence.

By integrating these four pillars, the practitioner acts as a restorative agent. This design moves education away from the reproductive cycle of structural disadvantage and toward a space where the student's lived emotional reality is the primary indicator of success. It turns the "swampy lowlands" of unpredictable classroom interactions into a fertile ecosystem where both caregiver and student can flourish.

V. Conclusion

Reflecting on my experience within the Sixth Form SEN Hub, I recognize a profound shift in my own professional identity: a transition from a state of anxious displacement to one of transformative agency. At the beginning of my assignment, the "functioning chaos" of the environment and the lack of a clear brief left me feeling vulnerable and alienated, a common reality of agency work that often forces practitioners into a passive, compliant role. Yet, by embracing the "swampy lowlands" of the classroom and utilizing the tools of Positive Peace—mirroring, anchoring, and validating—I reclaimed my capacity to act. I moved from being a mere instrument of a technical, task-driven system to becoming a "relational anchor" for the students I served.

This process has solidified my conviction that the "thin" wellbeing metrics currently mandated by policy—which prioritise administrative compliance and performance data—fundamentally misunderstand the needs of SEND students. They treat education as a transactional "technical project" rather than a relational ecosystem. My experience demonstrates that true wellbeing is not found in procedural outcomes, but in the validation of lived emotional experience. Whether it is a student's grief over a final Christmas performance or a genuine aspiration to work in a local takeaway, these human moments are not distractions to be managed; they are the primary indicators of a student's flourishing.

However, Schön's model of reflection-in-action fails to acknowledge the effect of emotional responses on situations. While his theory is useful for describing instinctual, dynamic decision-making, both his model and the "plan, act, do" cycle which is the basis of the process in Health and Safety and also provided as guidance for the new educational reforms (UK Parliament, 2026) do not account for the impact of emotional state. Specifically in this reflection the emotional context is the transition from professional anxiety to transformative agency that I experienced in the SEN environment. This idea is explored deeper in Section Two.

Ultimately, my practice shows that when we prioritise the student's lived emotional reality, we do more than improve engagement; we dismantle the systemic instrumentalisation that characterises traditional models of attainment. By centering the human experience over the data point, we move toward a vision of education where agency is restored, personal identity is validated, and both educator and student can flourish within a sustainable, relational ecosystem.

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