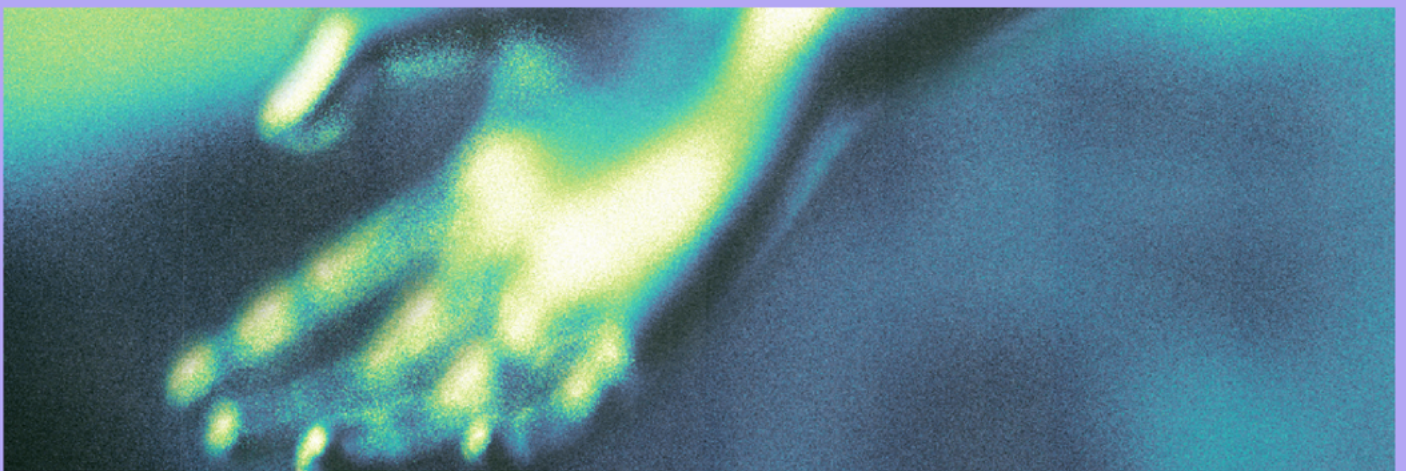


SCHOOLS MANIFESTO

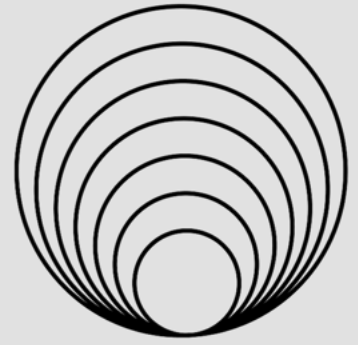
WHAT CAN
SCHOOLS
DO TO
SAFEGUARD
CHILDREN
AND YOUNG
PEOPLE'S
MENTAL
HEALTH?

2024



FELIX MORTIMER

CONTEXT



This report aims to briefly gauge the current situation around mental health provision in schools, amongst students and in conversation with staff. What measures are effective to enhance student wellbeing and which negatively impact mental health of young people in a school setting.

This work stems from the project 2.8 Million Minds, devised by the GLA and Madlove, this project imagined a creative and cultural solution to support mental health care for London's young people.

I have been working on 2.8 Million Minds since it's launch, first as a Policy Officer in the GLA Creative Health team and more recently freelance building a 2.8 Million Minds Network to encourage arts organisations, healthcare providers and young people to work together.

“THERE IS NO POINT TRYING TO FIX INDIVIDUALS IN A BROKEN AND VIOLENT SYSTEM”

NAOMI

A MANIFESTO FOR 2.8 MILLION MINDS

On the 17th of May 2022 three groups of young people presented A Manifesto for 2.8 Million Minds at the Houses of Parliament. It made four simple demands of government, health institutions and arts organisations.

This report is a response to these demands.



THE DEMANDS OF THE MANIFESTO

A COMMITTEE

A Committee for 2.8 million minds; a monthly creative space for young people to become leaders in mental health

STUDIOS

2.8 million artist studios; create a new model of a studio space that supports young people struggling with mental health

A SHARING

A sharing of 2.8 million minds; a biennial festival for young people

HEALING

Healing 2.8 million minds; through training, policy, strategy and advocacy to help advise and imagine simpler pathways for young people to access mental health services, art spaces and more.

INTRODUCTION

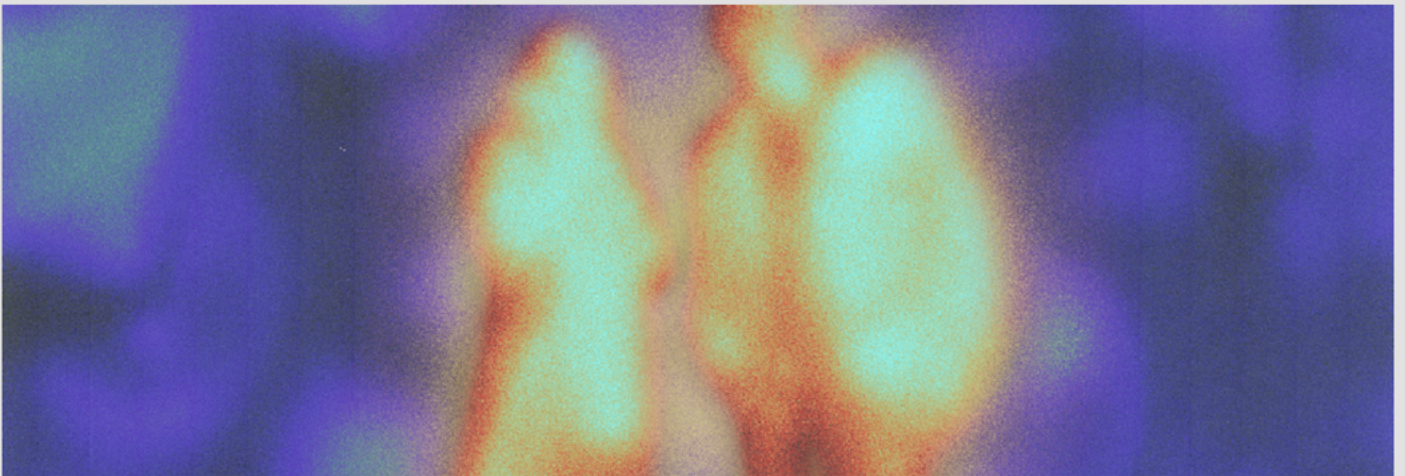


“AT MY SCHOOL, AS WITH THE SCHOOLS OF EVERY TEACHER (PRIMARY AND SECONDARY) I SPEAK TO, THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE STUDENTS IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST THINGS THAT TEACHERS, MANAGERS, STUDENTS AND PARENTS ARE DEALING WITH ON A DAILY BASIS.”

EMMA, ENGLISH TEACHER

There is wide-spread acknowledgement that Children and Young People’s mental health services are in crisis and this is partly as a result of hugely increased demand with [NHS figures](#) for young people with 'probable mental health disorder' up from 17% to 26% from between 2021 and 2023.

I spent some time speaking to students, teachers and others in non-traditional education settings to see what works and what doesn't. This work was by no means exhaustive and would benefit from a larger data-set drawn from a wider range of educational settings especially Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) specialist schools.



THE SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

TALKING TO TEACHERS

I spoke to 12 teachers whose experience spanned private, state, grammar, primary and secondary contexts. Some were just starting out, others had years of experience.

TALKING TO PROFESSIONALS

I also spoke to SENCOs, council officials, university lecturers, and education workers working with asylum seekers.

TALKING TO STUDENTS

I spoke to 10 students from Newham in East London.

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS

Many of my conversations touched on the nuance of this subject how related to social issues, race, background, neurodiversity, sexuality and experience of being in care or being a carer had a impact on mental health of young people in schools.

“SCHOOL ONLY TEACHES ME WHY I HATE IT.”

‘ELEGANCE WITH NO NAME’ BY TYREIS HOLDER AND A GROUP OF 10-14 YEAR OLDS.

There is wide-spread acknowledgement that Children and Young People’s mental health services are in crisis. The level of young people being urgently referred reached record highs in May 2023 three times higher than in May 2019 with [NHS figures](#) for young people with probable mental health disorder up from 17% to 26% in the period between 2021 and 2023.

“WE ARE NOW IN A MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY AND THE GOVERNMENT MUST GET A GRIP ON THE SCALE OF THIS CRISIS. MANY YOUNG PEOPLE ARE HAVING TO WAIT MONTHS AND YEARS TO ACCESS HELP, WHILE MANY OTHERS ARE TOLD THEY DON’T MEET THE THRESHOLD FOR A REFERRAL TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES. NO YOUNG PERSON SHOULD BE LEFT WAITING FOR HELP WHILE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH WORSENS.”

LAURA BUNT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE,
YOUNG MINDS

Arts, Culture and Creativity is a vital tool for prevention, treatment and recovery. Art, music, dance, poetry, movement, performance and working with your hands all have strong and evidenced mental health benefits.

This report focuses on the schools and education setting and sees me, an ex-teacher, speak to teachers across primary and secondary as well as students in education in 2023 about their experiences of mental health policies and approaches as well as aspects of the culture across the school setting that negatively and positively impacts their mental health. This report will also touch on the mental health of adults and staff working in these settings.

I will also be using the writing of this report to arrive at potential provocations and actions to be presented at the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Summit in February 2024 in collaboration with Boundless Theatre, Stanley Arts, A Big Conversation, Sounds Like Chaos and National Youth Theatre.

9%

increase in NHS assessments for mental health in young people between 2021 and 2023

71%

of detentions under the Mental Health Act are of girls.

‘50%

of teachers are working from 6pm to 10pm in the evenings’

Joe - Primary School Teacher

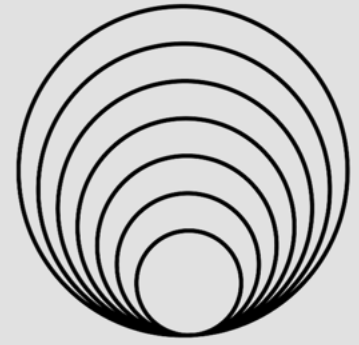
3732

Urgent referrals in May 2023. Three times higher than May 2019.

466 250

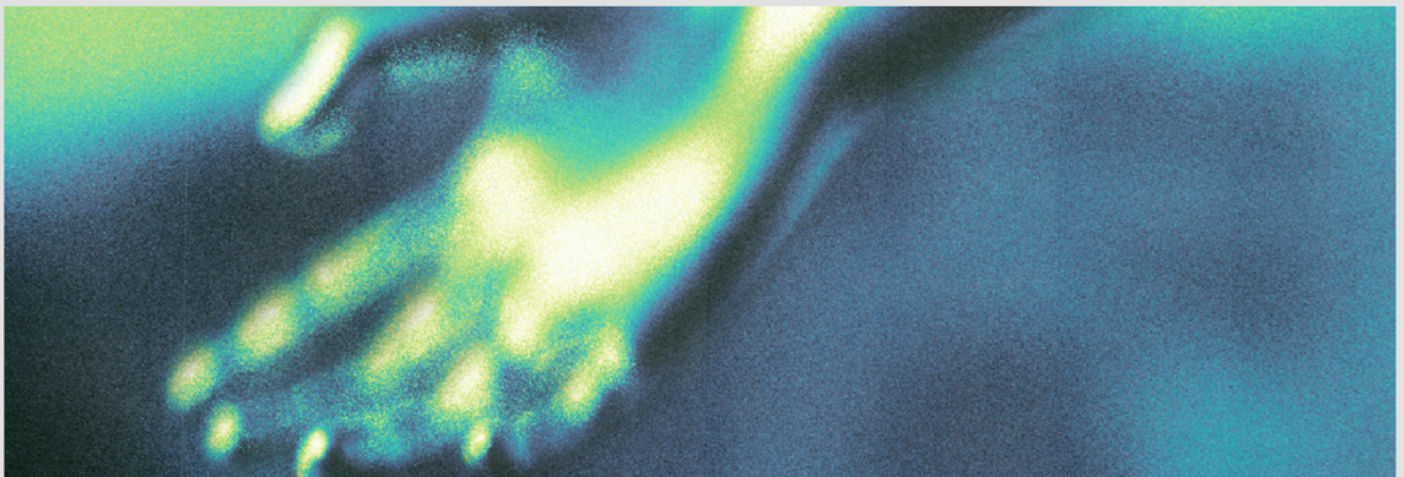
open referrals to CAMHS as of May 2023





It is clear that school is a huge influence on young people alongside their home life and their friends, school and extracurricular activities shape the lives of many of our young people. Schools are also hugely overstretched with their own crisis in recruitment, retention and funding. Teachers are suffering from being overworked and undervalued. The school environment hasn't significantly changed since the Victorian era and the pandemic and associated pressures placed undue stress on students and teachers the effects of which haven't been fully played out. The pandemic did show us that a different way of working in schools was possible and how valuable schools are for providing structure and community for so many.

This report will touch on the policies and initiatives already in place in schools, the contribution of the school environment and culture, the arts and culture curriculum as well as extra-curricular opportunities presented by schools. I will aim to discuss the importance of these to the wellbeing of young people as well as negative contributors. I will also speak from my own experience as a former teacher as well as being informed by ideas gathered during interviews with all those using schools as well as policy makers.



PREVENTION

if only the right help had been there earlier on, they wouldn't have ended up in hospital.”
[Children's Commissioners Report 2023](#)

CRISIS

There is inadequate provision in most education institutions to deal with crisis.

RECOVERY

Schools have very varied approaches to support those recovering from long-term mental illhealth.

WELLBEING

There are a wide variety of approaches to general wellbeing in schools but teacher stress and academic stress counteract many of these.

TEACHERS

I spoke to 15 members of staff across the school setting from first year teachers through to heads of year and SENCOs both in the state and private sectors. I asked them about the context within they are working, the emphasis on Mental Health and the support for creativity amongst staff and students. One schools mental health policy was formed in reaction to the death of a student.

Staff I spoke to reflected the NHS statistics that there have been significant increases in instances of mental health issues in schools post-pandemic. There was also a remarkable difference in the way that the teachers in private schools talked about provision in their schools than how state school teachers did.

- Dedicated Mental Health Support Teams
- Drop-in Boxes for Mental Health concerns to SLT
- SENCO leadership in Mental Health provisions
- Learning Mentors
- Trained Mental Health First Aiders on site
- The Umbrella: a selection of bought in services targeted to SEMH
 - Boxing
 - Sport
 - Gym
 - Art Therapy
- All teachers trained in mental wellbeing and resources on INSET
- Mid-lesson Nature Breaks
- Therapy animals including dogs and guinea pigs
- MASH Team
- Rigorous Reporting systems
- Online Counseling
- Chatty Benches
- Drop-in Counseling
- Lego Therapy
- Sensory Room / Private space
- Mile run
- Guided Meditation
- Singing
- Reading
- Dress Up Days
- Out of lesson pass

“WE DO GUIDED MEDITATION EVERY LUNCHTIME OR A LISTENING EXERCISE. TO FORGET ABOUT BREAKTIME WOBBLES. IF IT IS A REALLY WINDY BREAKTIME IT DRIVES THEM CRAZY. IT TAKES THEM FROM A HEIGHTENED STATE TO CALM. WE ALSO DO THIS WHEN I NOTICE THEM FLAGGING, WE WILL DO STRETCHES OR WE CAN DO THE DAILY MILE. WHEN I JOINED IN IT WOULD MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE, THIS BECOMES AN EVERYONE THING. “

JOE, PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER



STUDENTS

I spoke to a group of ten seventeen year-old students in Newham and ran a workshop in how their schools understood their mental health in the state sector.

Many of them expressed that their schools didn't value creativity in the curriculum which was a theme shared by many of the teachers.

Some drew the link between creativity and mental health as well as being a tool to express themselves, their individuality and deal with stress.

There is clearly a big variation in how schools value creativity and expression and their approaches to Mental Health and a general feeling of apathy from the students in how their schools value their mental health and work to improve it.

'I FEEL LIKE THEY FOCUS SO MUCH ON OUR GRADES RATHER THAN THINKING ABOUT HOW ACTIVITIES COULD BENEFIT US IN OTHER WAYS LIKE REDUCING STRESS OR IMPROVING OUR ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS IN THE REAL WORLD.'

MOMINA, 17, NEWHAM

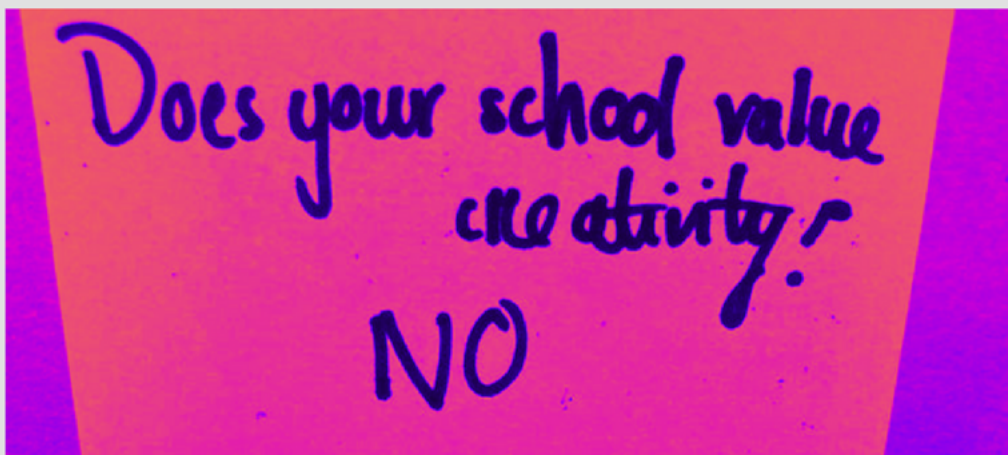
"CREATIVITY IS IMPORTANT AS IT PROMOTES WELLBEING AS EVERYONE CAN EXPRESS THEMSELVES"

"CREATIVITY IS IMPORTANT AS IT PROMOTES INDIVIDUALITY AND CAN CREATE TRANSFORMATIVE ART"

"OUR SCHOOL DOESN'T VALUE CREATIVITY. THEY AREN'T EVEN MINIMUM EFFORT ON CREATIVITY. ALL TALK AND NO ACTION."

"OUR SCHOOL VALUES CREATIVITY BECAUSE FOR SOME PEOPLE IT IS THERAPEUTIC AND ALLOWS THEM TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES AND THEIR FEELINGS"

"CREATIVITY IS IMPORTANT TO MENTAL HEALTH AS IT CAN HELP AS A WAY TO ESCAPE STRESS."



ISSUES

“So much of a child’s wellbeing will be down to things such as their relationships with family and friends, their participation in education, or their experiences of the online world. That is why a preventative approach is essential.”

Children's Commissioners Report 2023

Foreword Rachel De Souza

The biggest issues as described by teachers and students were:

- Stress and anxiety trying to fit in
- Lockdowns
- Struggle to self-regulate and communicate emotions
- Academic pressure to perform exacerbated by teaching staff
- Bodily changes
- Self-harm
- Social Media (messaging and video)
- Eating disorders
- General Anxiety
- Neurodiversity impacting Mental Health
- Gender-identity
- Grief
- Behaviours linked to use of drugs and alcohol

“IN MUSIC LESSONS WE HAVE INTERACTIVE PROPS THAT BRING SONGS AND STORIES TO LIFE AND PARTICULARLY IN EARLY YEARS (3-5 YEAR OLDS) THESE CAN TAKE CHILDREN INTO BEYOND IMAGINING THE STORY OF A SONG AND ACTUALLY EXPERIENCING IT THROUGH THE PROPS (EG A LYCRA POND WITH A FROG PROP FOR A FROG SONG, AND A GUIRO INSTRUMENT FOR THE ‘CROAK’ SOUNDS) - I LIKE TO THINK THAT THESE MOMENTS ARE JOYOUS FOR THE CHILDREN AND WOULD HELP TAKE THEM OUT OF ANY POSSIBLE DARK PLACE MENTALLY.”

DOMINIC, MUSIC TEACHER



HIGHER EDUCATION

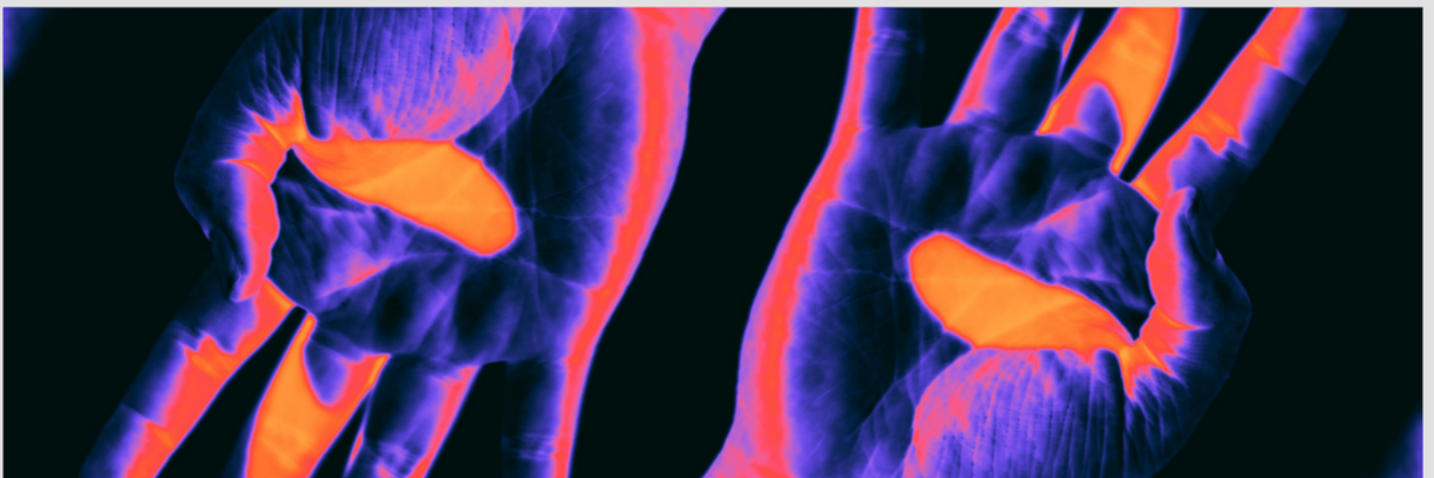


I spoke to **Mah Rana**, a tutor in Jewelry and Metal at the Royal College of Art. I was interested in her perspective on higher education especially as she runs a module called 'well-making' which is inspired by her lived-experience of caring for her mother while she had dementia and the accompanying stress she then felt. Mah and her mothers spaces were transformed when they began crafting together as she documents in [this film](#). Mah will now continue this research into space in a phd on the subject.

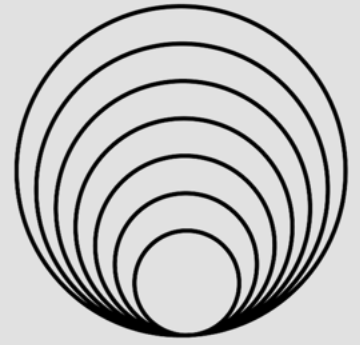
"When I teach students now It's noticeable in the themes that it is about addressing mental health issues about them and other people."

Mah identified that students came to her course to help to deal with anxiety, social media and digital hoarding and found the action of working with their hands and constructing 3D objects enabled them to work through their feelings and express themselves in a safe way. She shared stories of a student who was a left-behind child, left in a rural area of China while her parents worked in urban areas. She used her experience of separation to then start a group for other left-behind children to then make collaboration jewelry pieces. She had another student exploring her phobia about fish, and she made some amazing cutlery pieces that were about anxiety, isolation, feeling disconnected from the world and others.

There were several interesting themes which emerged in our conversation: the power of working with your hands, the strength of passing down activities between families or peers and the specificity of these activities for specific neurodiversities.



VULNERABLE GROUPS



Similar themes emerged when I spoke to **Dima Karout** who works for Play for Progress and runs their Women and Musicians led programme. Dima uses music and art to lead therapy for unaccompanied minors who are asylum seekers in Croydon.

Dima led me through the conditions that she puts in place to support her participants who have all experienced trauma and many have very limited support systems. The conditions which were specific to her classes but have application to all education settings and I have written them on the next page.

“THE HUMAN BRAIN - THE ENVIRONMENT WE INHABIT, WE ALWAYS THINK WE ARE LEAVING A TRACE (PLASTIC OR DECORATING) BUT THE ENVIRONMENT LEAVES A TRACE ON OUR HEADS. WHERE YOU LIVE, THE PLACES YOU INHABIT SHAPE WHO YOU ARE AS A PERSON. ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND THIS YOU UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT.”
DIMA KAROUT

She noticed that some young people come and observe and then the next day they might be teaching others. She also had two suggestions

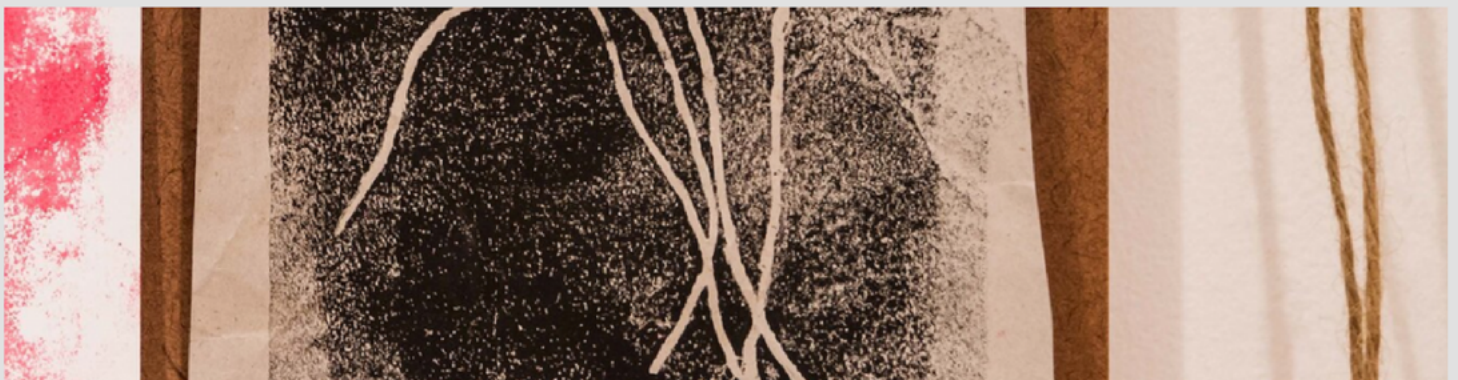
- Equip young people with the tools they need to help themselves.

We are to support them to be less stressed and we also have a therapy team but how can they do therapy without being able to speak?

- Take young people to cultural experiences. Dima took her young people to Tate, Horniman Museum, British Library and the British Museum.

“They went to the African section in the British Museum, they went to every single different caption. I can’t comprehend how this helped them but i know it did in a thousand different ways. They were so mesmerised that their own countries and craft were there.”

- Be considerate of the environment that learning takes place in.



DIMA'S CONDITIONS FOR CREATIVITY

- **CREATING A SPACE WHERE EVERYONE CARES ABOUT YOU**
- **CREATING A SPACE WHERE IT'S OK NOT TO KNOW THE ANSWER, TO MESS UP OR TO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH.**
- **A SPACE WHERE THERE IS FOOD AND DRINK AVAILABLE.**
- **A SPACE WHERE EXPERIMENTATION AND PARTICIPATION IS ENCOURAGED BUT NOT NECESSARY.**
- **A SPACE WHERE YOU CAN WORK WITH YOUR HANDS AND USE YOUR WHOLE BRAIN ON A TASK.**

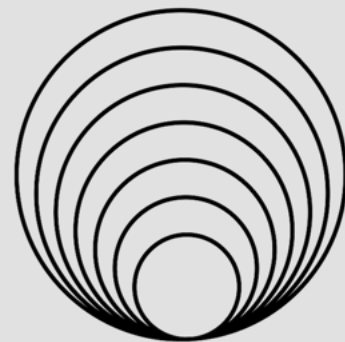


“SO MUCH OF A CHILD’S WELLBEING WILL BE DOWN TO THINGS SUCH AS THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS, THEIR PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION, OR THEIR EXPERIENCES OF THE ONLINE WORLD. THAT IS WHY A PREVENTATIVE APPROACH IS ESSENTIAL.”

**CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONERS
REPORT 2023**

FOREWORD RACHEL DE SOUZA

DISCOVERIES



I was particularly struck by how Art, English, Music, PE, Drama and textiles were talked about. Subject teachers didn't connect the ideas of mental health with the particular subjects but with what they enabled. Teachers talked about the benefits of a change of pace, of working outside, of students working with their hands, of reading, feelings of belonging, feeling connected and part of a collective.

These characteristics were more immediate when it came to the mental health benefits than the sheer enjoyment of a subject, in fact when subjects were referred to it was often in the negative of students being anxious that they 'can't draw' 'can't sing' and this sense of being the best at something was actually a contributor to anxiety.

When I drew teachers' attention to the individual subjects and how they have different impacts on mental health and enjoyment again, activities were at the forefront of discussion and seemed to be wrapped up in students' personalities; some enjoyed reading, others drawing. There was a widespread acknowledgement of the therapeutic benefits of creative activities but not necessarily as they were outlined in rigid curriculums.



“WE HAD AROUND 100 STUDENTS INVOLVED IN OUR SCHOOL MUSICAL THIS YEAR, AND IT HELPED ENCOURAGE STUDENTS WITH LOW ATTENDANCE INTO SCHOOL. IT HELPS PROVIDE A SENSE OF BELONGING AND TOGETHERNESS THAT CLASSROOM LESSONS CAN'T ACHIEVE.”

JOSH, SCIENCE TEACHER

‘OUR SCHOOL DOESN'T VALUE CREATIVITY PAST A CERTAIN POINT - THEY DON'T OFFER ART OR OTHER CREATIVE A-LEVELS ONLY ACADEMIC SUBJECTS. I'VE BEEN THERE 1 YEAR AND WE HAVEN'T DONE A SINGLE CREATIVE THING IN YEAR 12 WHICH WAS A SHOCK FOR ME BECAUSE MY LAST SCHOOL WOULD HAVE WHOLE DAYS DEDICATED TO DIFFERENT CREATIVE ACTIVITIES’

NOWSHIN, 17, NEWHAM

DISCOVERIES



Meeting education professionals and students and discussing mental health feels like only the beginning of a wider conversation which sits at a huge intersection between **education**, the **arts**, and **mental health**.

There are also many contributing factors that demand their own investigations: neurodiversity, race, class, those who are looked after and looking after as well as the long term impacts of the pandemic. There is a significant on going conversation with Black Thrive who are taking these lines of enquiry into Primary schools in five South London boroughs.

The list on the next page was the actionable points that students and teachers fed back to me.

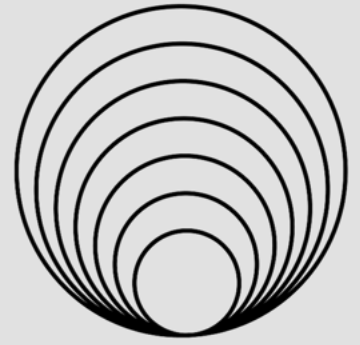


Many of my conversations echoed the findings in the Centre for Cultural Value's report [Young people's mental health](#) which looked at 20 peer-reviewed primary research studies on 11-25 year olds wellbeing.

That report's key findings included:

- Music programmes were most represented within the literature, with music composition and lyric writing in particular offering young people a creative outlet, as well as a way to cope with challenging circumstances and reflect on trauma.
- Some of the studies demonstrated that engaging with culture helped young people cope with difficult feelings and acts as a distraction from negative thoughts. The phrase 'safe space' was a recurring theme in the literature.
- While there's promising evidence of the positive value of cultural experiences, there were some instances of increases in challenging behaviours or participation leading to a re-living of traumatic experiences.
- Qualitative evidence was strong, but we could not draw meaningful conclusion from the quantitative evidence we looked at. There is a need to further explore concepts of safe spaces, the role cultural practitioners have in these complex contexts and to look at longer-term outcomes through mixed methods of research.

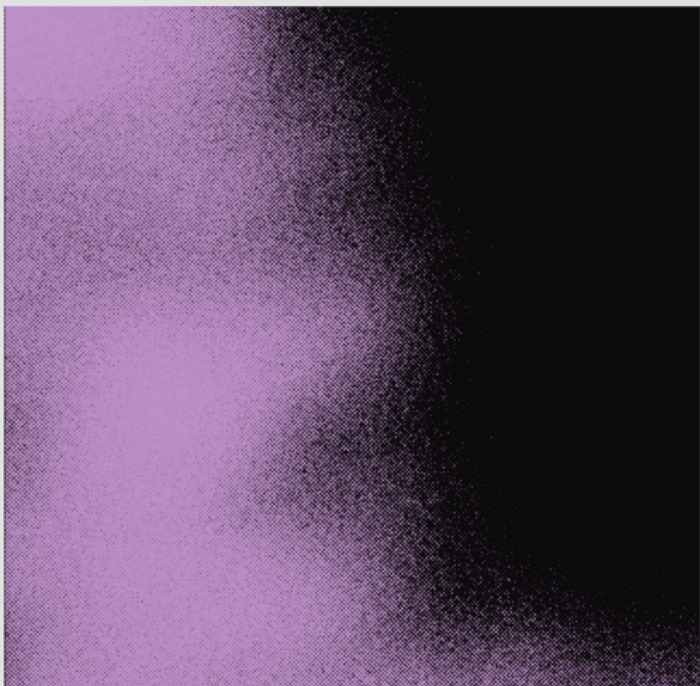
DISCOVERIES



There is clearly an overwhelming need for better mental health in Schools. Amongst teachers and students they are under resourced to adequately respond to these needs.

It is also important to acknowledge how shared experiences, creating a sense of belonging and safety and peer and teacher support enhances the mental health of those in the school system. Creativity and the arts plays a huge part in creating these conditions.

This report is only a very broad brushstroke of some of the issues and ideas that come up when talking to those interacting in education. It would be valuable to continue this work in more detail to work to build connections and case studies to be shared.



WHAT WE CAN DO

- HIGH QUALITY ARTS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES
- OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM
- QUICKER ACCESS TO EXTERNAL AGENCIES AND COUNSELING
- EASIER INTERNAL / EXTERNAL REFERRALS
- MORE OPTIONS TO STUDY MUSIC, ART, DRAMA
- SPACES OTHER THAN THE CLASSROOM TO BE IN
- SPORT
- FEELING OF BELONGING
- ACTIVITIES THAT PROVIDE A MORE RELAXED ENVIRONMENT THAN LESSONS
- FLEXIBILITY FOR TEACHERS TO WORK
- REVERSAL OF CUTS
- MORE AFTER SCHOOL CLUBS
- FOUR DAY WEEK FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF
- WELLBEING DAYS
- STAFF WITH SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT WELFARE





Big thanks to all students,
teachers and education
professionals who
contributed to this report.