

John Tomsett, Headteacher at Huntington School in York is one educational blogger you should be following (<https://johntomsett.com/>); and on Twitter (@johntomsett). Has written two books; the first about his ideas on creating a positive school culture (well worth a read!). This second book is specifically about issues surrounding mental health in schools. Tomsett has a really readable style in which he discusses his personal and family history; alongside what works in his school and linked to bigger ideas and the views of others.

This book starts with a quote:

“It used to be the ‘C’ word – cancer – that people wouldn’t discuss. Now it’s the ‘M’ word. I hope pretty soon it’ll be okay for everyone to talk openly about their mental health without fear of being treated differently” – Ruby Wax

The opening chapter of the book talks about the increase in mental health issues in young people, and also the growing obsession with results and the resultant increase in exam anxiety. This is something I have seen an increase in over my 10 years of teaching; and something experienced by my wife, who works in student support at a Russell Group university.

Part of a key feature of this book is interviews with others conducted by John Tomsett; this is with Claire Fox, Director of the Institute of Ideas. She talks, among many other things about the fact we talk about young peoples mental health and in some ways directly tell them they can’t cope with the trials of life. However, what we don’t do is effectively give them strategies to cope. This is something that is really important, and something the school I work in is partially addressing through the Strengthening Minds Programme (<https://strengtheningminds.co.uk/>); although this is not something I am directly involved in.

The book not only talks about mental health issues surrounding young people; but also that of teachers. There are some mental health issues that are linked to the nature of the job; this is summed up by Tomsett on Page 87:

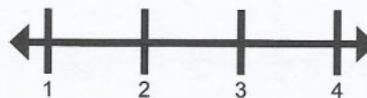
“Teaching is a selfless job. We spend a whole career prioritising the needs of others over our own. And teaching is a bloody hard job. I know we don’t go down a mine to dig for coal, or clean the underground railway track all night, or fight for our country, or perform heart bypass surgery, but teaching expertly for five hours a day takes some doing. When discussing the difficulty of teaching a class of thirty students, Lee Shulman says, ‘The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster’.”

John also discusses the culture of fear in education; linked to the aforementioned pressure on results. He talks about how this culture of fear breeds backside covering. He goes on to say that this can lead to a huge amount of extensive interventions; so that if results are disappointing you can turn around and say that although the results are rubbish you tried lots of things. He talks about the importance of confidence and doing fewer things well.

This is summed up by the image on page 178:

Are we truly great or are we failing?
Accountability

In truly great schools colleagues know exactly what's expected of them. They know what they are accountable for. Everyone knows the students' target grades. They use simple data, which is well understood. There is little data, but what there is really matters. They have great systems for tracking student progress. Everything is transparent and above board; there is no fear or any shocks – just a clear understanding of where every student is and where they should get to. There is small in-school variation. When a teacher's class does underperform that teacher is told that the students' performance is not good enough and a simple support plan is implemented.



In failing schools there is an aversion to having difficult conversations. No one looks a colleague in the eye and says, 'Sorry, but that's not good enough' when students underperform. What usually happens when there is underperformance is that the subject leader will be asked to write a lengthy report, and he or she will spend a long time discussing that report with the head teacher, but nothing else will then follow. There is a lot of data, but a confusing picture. Students' targets are not well known. No one takes responsibility and when anyone asks the question, 'Who owns the child?' a range of different, confused responses emerge.

Tomsett quotes Rita Pierson's TED talk (video here):

Teaching and learning should bring joy. How powerful would our world be if we had kids who were not afraid to take risks, who were not afraid to think, and who had a champion? Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best they can possibly be.

The book then goes on to discuss how this is implemented through the tutor programme. This is implemented through GREAT conversations (Goals-Resilience-Effort-Attitude-Tools). Page 184-190 provides some more details on this and gives questions that are used in framing the conversations. The book then talks about providing strategies for students to tackle

problems; specifically exam papers, and Maths problems (among others).

He concludes by talking about the steps his school is taking to tackle mental health over the longer-term and concludes with his own and his families story. The final section talks about the value of a policy in his school - every student is spoken to by the teacher in every lesson. This is something I try to do, but reading this has resolved me to be more systematic about it.

The book is available on Amazon [here](#).