Improving mental health is an urgent British social policy priority. As demand increases, thinly spread specialist support services are under increasing strain. Calls have been made to provide adequate funding, develop policy initiatives that promote the parity of mental and physical health, and establish multi-sectoral parallel measures including school-based intervention. In particular, the case for preventative whole school approaches has been well made both in literature and by policy makers (Public Health England, 2015; Department of Health, 2015). However, the complexity of this process remains under-explored.

This paper explores the dynamic interaction between a whole county, whole school resilience building intervention (the Academic Resilience Approach, ARA*) and the complexity of existing school climates. Enabling and constraining factors involved in the whole school change process are explored, and the central role of shared values as a system attractor is considered.

Findings from a focus group interview with project leads from the Local Authority (N=5) and semi-structured interviews carried out with a sub-sample of leading, teaching and non-teaching staff in a range of school types (N=15) demonstrate that staff at multiple system levels perceived a dynamic interaction between enabling and constraining factors. The change process involved four key aspects that determined the extent to which schools adopted and embedded the ARA. These aspects were ‘optimal system turbulence’, shared values, the capacity of the ARA to challenge adversity, and emergent change in the school system. Findings suggest that in order to initiate and sustain change, whole school approaches must acknowledge and respond to complex context specificity, including the existing values and needs of multiple stakeholders.

* www.boingboing.org.uk/academic-resilience-approach/