Learning for well-being: personal, social and health education and a changing curriculum

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This article explores the current context for personal, social and health education (PSHE) in English schools, and examines what the implications of the ‘Every Child Matters’ (ECM) agenda are for schools in the future and how these changes may affect the profile and provision of PSHE in the curriculum. The author begins by revisiting the most recent Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills in the UK (Ofsted) subject report on PSHE, before moving on to consider both the potential impact of the (2006) duty on schools to promote well-being contained within the recent Education and Inspections Act and the recent review of the English Secondary National Curriculum, which presents PSHE as personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE education), establishing twin, non-statutory programmes of study for personal well-being and economic well-being. He argues that there are now significant opportunities for PSHE to realise its potential through these shifts in context and emphasis. He proposes that in order for this to happen, policymakers and practitioners must embrace the concept of ‘well-being’ as an educational imperative and align and embed it within the drive to raise standards, concluding that PSHE must be given statutory status within the National Curriculum and must, as a result, prepare itself to accept the challenge of increased scrutiny and accountability that this revised status will demand.

Keywords: well-being; curriculum; PSHE; learning; Every Child Matters

Introduction

High quality personal, social and health education is vital to young people’s development in and out of the classroom. It is important that both schools and parents take this role seriously in order to ensure that our young people are prepared for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences they will face in later life. (David Bell, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, 2005)

In 2007, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills in the UK (Ofsted) published the latest in its series of subject-specific reports on personal, social and health education (PSHE). Entitled Time for Change?, the inspectorate’s report opens with a bold declaration:

This is a time of considerable change for personal, social and health education (PSHE): national developments are likely to extend its role in the curriculum. The guidance on Every Child Matters and revised standards for the National Healthy Schools Programme have helped to confirm the subject’s importance. (2007a, p. 2)

But the report goes on to damn PSHE with faint praise; according to Ofsted, while teaching, learning and subject leadership have shown signs of improvement, familiar weaknesses abound. These include the subject’s low status in schools, weaknesses in planning and assessment practice, a level of disconnection between children and young people’s needs and their learning, patchy

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monitoring even with good leadership and management, and a continuing inconsistency of delivery in schools with a lack of specialist provision compromising learning.

Time for Change? (Ofsted, 2007a) is characterised by a not altogether coherent commentary on the state of PSHE. An assertion that ‘too much time and effort have been spent in discussing whether PSHE should be a statutory subject’ (p. 22) raised some eyebrows, as did the report’s treatment of parents, and its focus on the content of magazines read by young people was unconvincing. Its cursory treatment of ‘support services’ (p. 21) was perhaps a missed opportunity to focus more attention on the links between learning in PSHE and pastoral care, an issue which remains a live one in the field.

Given this assessment, few could argue that it is time for change in PSHE. But it is also a time of significant change in and around schools and there are opportunities for PSHE to make the most of this shifting landscape. Ofsted is right that

Many schools are already considering how PSHE might support the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda. Schools already recognise the importance of their PSHE programmes in either coordinating the contributions of different subjects or taking sole responsibility for dealing with the Every Child Matters agenda. (2007a, p. 23)

National policy developments, principally the establishment of well-being as a legitimate pursuit of public policy for children, are predating the shift. The ‘Every Child Matters’ (ECM) (DfES, 2003) outcomes and the integration of local authority services for children into single directorates comprising health, social care and education have major implications for schools. These developments do more than confirm the importance of PSHE; they demand that we take a fresh look at schools themselves – what they are for, and why. We are asked to reconsider PSHE and its position in the light of ECM. If it is indeed time for a change, what exactly is the future for PSHE in our schools?

A familiar tale

‘What did you learn in school today, Johnny?’
Johnny beams, ‘How to be happy, Mummy. I am proud of who I am.’
A lesson on safe sex (Johnny is nine). And an hour of being a good citizen. Not much spelling, little arithmetic. This is the brave new world headed up by Ed Balls and his department. Psychotherapeutic froth has swept notions of education from ministerial minds. (Woodhead, 2007, p. 11)

There remains a difficulty in the public mind in identifying PSHE as a credible or even desirable ‘subject’ in the National Curriculum. Because PSHE has not been presented consistently as necessarily requiring a distinct curriculum focus (QCA, 2000a, 2000b), it has been possible to justify PSHE as cross-curricular, part-curricular, or discretely timetabled, or to omit it altogether. As a result, PSHE is everything and nothing, a concoction of approaches and arrangements that works well when the conditions are right, and when they are not, is anybody really watching?

Graham Haydon (2005, p. 10) observes that ‘statements from official sources about the scope of PSHE are sometimes almost vacuously broad, sometimes rather frustratingly specific in giving a list without an underlying rationale.’ This reference to the PSHE ‘list’ deserves attention. What Haydon asserts is that it is ‘health’ and health issues that have been the primary concern of PSHE, principally drug and alcohol education, and the statutory elements of sex and relationships education.

It is easy to scoff at Chris Woodhead’s (2007) Dickensian lament for the certainty of spelling and arithmetic, but it is worth remembering that PSHE has long struggled with some less than inspiring learning of its own, a recurring theme for criticism, cited by young people as one of their bugbears with the subject. Famously, Dickens opened Hard Times with:
Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. (1854, p. 1)

An over-emphasis on ‘Facts’, and on topic-based learning in PSHE is another familiar refrain. A subject offered limited curriculum space has limited and narrowed itself in response. It is little wonder that PSHE has failed to realise its true potential.

A changing context
The Children Act (2004) enshrines in law a definition of children’s well-being. We know that definition in shorthand as the five ECM outcomes. Well-being is not new to schools. What is new is the overarching emphasis on well-being as a principal priority in policy and services for children, including the functions of education and schools.

By 2006, there was an emerging sense that schools were engaging with ECM. In research for the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2006), head teachers reflected that they felt confident with ECM inasmuch as it affected ‘standard aspects of school life’ (p. 8) – school improvement planning, the curriculum and healthy eating were referenced as active areas. At the same time, only 10 per cent of secondary schools and 15 per cent of primary schools reported that their ‘strands to address ECM were already in place’ (p. 6). School leaders identified a lack of resources, time to develop the agenda and implement it, and closer collaboration with other services as their key challenges. The sense was that the principles of ECM were largely welcomed by school leaders. Implementation was the issue. For the first time within mainstream education policy, the expectation began to surface that well-being is an educational imperative as well as a moral, social and cultural one.

As far back as 2004, Otero and Burnham-West reported,

There is a case for arguing that results at national level are ‘plateauing’ and significant improvements are difficult to secure. It remains the case that social factors are disproportionately significant in their impact on children’s academic achievement. It may therefore be an appropriate time to focus on the social environment of the learner rather than increasing the emphasis on the technology of teaching. (2004, p. 1)

Two years later, the National College of School Leadership acknowledged exactly this shift: ‘Educational achievement and children’s well-being are interdependent…they are indivisible and an essential part of driving up standards’ (2006, p. 10). And yet it seems that, according to Ofsted, PSHE practice during this period remains largely unaffected in schools, although this is a time of significant growth for the National Healthy Schools programme, which incorporates PSHE as one of its four ‘themes’. However, Ofsted (2007a) does offer four key insights that may yet prove to be pivotal in establishing PSHE as a core curriculum area in the future:

- the impact of the National Healthy Schools programme in providing both a vehicle for PSHE and a means of establishing some consistent and level quality of provision and practice
- the review of the secondary curriculum that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was undertaking at the time
- the role that advisers and local authorities could play in broadening the debate
- the needs of children and young people.

The well-being imperative
In the autumn of 2006, a late amendment was made to the Education and Inspections Bill as it went through its passage into law. This amendment went largely unnoticed. There were other
issues to vex policymakers, educationalists and the media at the time: extending powers of discipline, admissions, choice and diversity, and failing schools.

The lobby for statutory PSHE worked hard to make a case for an amendment to the Bill that would make PSHE a statutory element of the National Curriculum. They failed. But what did happen was potentially as significant. As the Bill proceeded through the Lords, a series of debates ensued that set a changed context for the role of schools and the developing relationship between school standards and well-being. Well-being in this context is defined in policy terms by the Children Act (2004) as:

- physical and mental health and well-being
- protection from harm and neglect
- education, training and recreation
- making a positive contribution to society
- social and economic well-being.

A less pragmatic conceptualisation of well-being is offered by Huppert, Baylis, & Keverne (2005), who describe well-being as ‘more than pleasant emotions, it is a positive and sustainable condition that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish…. Resilience is key – the ability to develop and thrive in adversity is central to well-being’ (2005, Preface). Interestingly, the debates that accompanied the proposed amendment to the Bill as it passed through the Lords can be understood according to either definition in this instance.

Baroness Morris of Yardley (Hansard: 17.10.2006: Column 662), formerly Secretary of State for Education, began by arguing that committing the promotion of ‘well-being’ into primary legislation, alongside now common terms in education such as ‘standards’, ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’, had a declaratory value and was essential to ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people in schools now and in the future. Moving to accept an amendment to the Bill to include the duty on governing bodies of maintained schools to promote the well-being of pupils, following a third reading in the Lords, the schools minister, Lord Adonis, accepted that

there is real value in sending a message to teachers and other professionals working with children that raising educational standards and promoting pupil well-being are mutually reinforcing. Stating unambiguously in primary legislation that school governing bodies have a clear duty to promote well-being will help to speed the delivery of the undoubted premium on school standards that arises from the improved well-being of pupils. (Hansard: 30.10.2006: Column 63)

It is the declaratory value of this amendment, then, that is significant, perhaps, in finally establishing Haydon’s (2005) ‘underlying rationale’ for well-being in schools and laterally for PSHE, which is largely concerned with personal, social and emotional development – key in building resilience and enabling children to flourish.

What the government refused to do was to ask schools to do more; what it conceded was that schools were for something other than standards and achievement, signalling a shift towards prioritising children’s well-being as a matter for school improvement. The well-being duty came into force in September 2007. But schools and the agencies that support them have not yet had either the opportunity, or the support they need to evaluate how this duty may affect them in practice. The delivery of a curriculum in schools that supports well-being will be one critical component, but there are others.

**Curriculum reviewed**

According to Professor John White (2007, p. 14), ‘The short history of the National Curriculum has been a lesson in how not to organise an educational system.’ White argues that the failure to
realise aims for the National Curriculum prior to making foundation subjects statutory was a critical error.

He sees the aims outlined in 1999 as offering a useful starting point for a curriculum, one that would be largely about enabling children to lead what he calls, ‘a flourishing personal and civic life in a modern liberal democracy’ (p. 12). Unfortunately, the development of these aims followed the establishment of the subjects themselves. Consequently, subjects had never been considered nor organised with the curriculum aims in mind, so there was little match between the new aims and the old subjects.

In fact, his view is that the National Curriculum of 1988 was essentially aimless, forming a traditional, academic curriculum with its roots somewhere in the middle-class schooling of the mid-nineteenth century.

It is hard to escape the suspicion that there is a connection between the failure of PSHE to take hold after 2000 and this notion of an aimless curriculum in which the power of individual subjects largely dictated prioritisation, curriculum resources, subject credibility, and teacher time and expertise. White reflects,

> It would have been a pedagogical miracle in 1999 if the subjects had abandoned ways of operating built up over more than a century and made themselves servants of the new aims.…If teachers noticed [the aims] at all – and few seem to have done so – they rushed past them to find what the programmes of study or level statements in their own subject required of them. (p. 13)

The roots of Ofsted’s repeated findings about the status, structure and delivery of PSHE are, perhaps, here after all, tucked quietly away in the very foundations of the curriculum itself. Without a driving educational imperative; a credible educational rationale for its inclusion; indeed, a genuine profiling of its importance in the curriculum at all, PSHE has struggled to gain a foothold despite all the genuflections over the years to its importance and relevance.

In July 2007, the QCA completed a major review of the secondary National Curriculum (www.curriculum/qca.org.uk). The revised (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d) curriculum begins by setting out the aim for young people to become:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens.

Alongside this, the QCA has paid renewed attention to a curriculum imperative that is of particular significance to those interested in PSHE – personal development. The scope of personal development is predictably broad: ‘Personal development in school is the means by which all young people are supported in their spiritual, moral, physical, emotional, cultural and intellectual development according to their needs’ (QCA, 2007a). According to the QCA, a curriculum that supports personal development is ‘one of the main ways that a school can demonstrate its contribution to the Every Child Matters outcomes’ and, by extension, to the promotion of well-being.

The QCA’s vision for the curriculum is, of course, much wider than the subject blocks of the National Curriculum. Rightly, personal development is seen as integral to the child’s entire experience of school, in and out of the classroom; in school and beyond. But the QCA calls for this experience to be planned and coherent. Without a coherent values framework and a supporting ethos in school, personal development opportunities cannot be planned, and cannot be coherent. To support this focus on personal development, the QCA has introduced what it calls ‘personal, learning and thinking skills’ (PLTS). Undoubtedly, this is also a vision for a curriculum that prioritises skills development and values concept over content, rarely strong aspects of most PSHE provision. The PLTS set is designed to complement the functional skills of English, mathematics,
and information and communication technology (ICT). There are six groupings of skills under the following headings:

- independent enquirers
- creative thinkers
- reflective learners
- team workers
- self-managers
- effective participators.

It would be hard to argue that good, effective PSHE provision should not or could not make significant contributions to the development of these skill sets – in fact, the PLTS sets play strongly to the learning that PSHE can deliver. And it is the newly, and rather clumsily, titled ‘personal, social, health and economic education’ (PSHE education) that makes a ‘special contribution’ to personal development, according to the QCA (2007a) and to Ofsted.

New challenges, new opportunities

But there is an additional challenge for PSHE education since the secondary review. PSHE education is made up of two programmes of study. One, personal well-being is a refreshed PSHE, redrawn against the QCA’s vision of a leaner curriculum with a focus on skills, processes and range for learning, rather than on content. The other, economic well-being and financial capability, draws together the previously separate elements of careers education, enterprise and business education, work-related learning, and financial capability – the components of which are statutory.

Aligning economic well-being and financial capability with personal well-being emphasises how the QCA views PSHE education as a key curricular driver for well-being and for ECM. The practical challenges for schools are twofold:

1. to manage more curriculum congestion around PSHE and respond to the organisational challenges that this alignment brings in order to balance the quality of learning across personal well-being and economic well-being programmes.
2. to make conceptual sense of the relationship between the two programmes, which are presented as largely disconnected.

Both challenges bring significant opportunities.

Curriculum congestion is nothing new for PSHE. Discrete curriculum space is hard enough to come by as it is, and PSHE is used to sharing space on the timetable with citizenship. Additionally, in practice, PSHE time is also being squeezed by the National Strategy’s Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (DfES, 2005; 2007).

SEAL aims to encourage children to develop a skill set that will help them understand and manage their own emotions as well as applying their knowledge of their own emotions and processes to their interactions and relationships with others. This developing emotional literacy is designed to support relationships, behaviour and learning, and the programme has been well received. The primary SEAL and the emerging secondary SEAL programmes are no rival to PSHE. In fact, SEAL is better described as a whole-school approach with a curriculum focus, and the concepts and coverage are largely complementary.

The issue for schools has been, again, the lack of an underlying or clearly unifying rationale for PSHE and SEAL, both of which are perceived as tapping into broadly the same vein – something about ‘emotions’ but not subject learning – and which, in some schools, under pressure with little curriculum space, have melded into a curious and sometimes undesirable
hybrid. This is compounded by many teachers’ own lack of confidence in delivering what can be some complex universal learning – it is perhaps no surprise that in the evaluation of the secondary social, emotional and behavioural skills pilot programme, the headline finding was that ‘the greatest impact in the schools was on teachers’ attitudes towards the idea of social, emotional and behavioural skills and their understanding of how to develop these skills systematically within subject lessons’ (Ofsted, 2007b, p. 4). Those who approach PSHE from a personal well-being perspective and those who approach it from an economic well-being background fear a further blurring within PSHE provision as schools move to implement the new programmes.

Delivering the Ashby lecture at the University of Cambridge earlier this year, Professor Lord Richard Layard of the London School of Economics dwelt on the teaching of values, drawing these two concepts together neatly: ‘Despite huge increases in living standards, people in Britain, the USA and Japan report themselves no happier today than people did 50 years ago’ (2007, p. 2). He suggests that the key factor in arresting a proportionate rise in happiness and well-being in rich countries has been a corresponding rise in individualism, characterised as

the view that a person’s main goal should be to make the most of himself, or more vulgarly to be as successful as possible compared to other people. Put that way it is, of course, a zero-sum game, and if that is what people value there is no way our society can become happier. To become happier we have to move to a positive sum game in which we each care positively about the well-being of others. (p. 4)

Layard proposes radical reform in schools as a critical element of the solution. He calls for an ‘educational revolution in which a central purpose of our schools is to teach young people about the main secrets of happiness for which we have empirical evidence’ (Layard, p. 4). Happiness is not a neutral construct in any environment, perhaps least of all in education and schools; well-being, however, is. He, as others do, places the curriculum imperative for this ‘revolution’ primarily with PSHE. It is a tall order.

The credibility of PSHE in schools cannot withstand too many more blows, and it is vital that a sound, coherent and practical case be put to local authorities and to schools to smooth the passage of PSHE education into the revised secondary curriculum from 2008. How national agencies, local authorities and schools manage the transition of PSHE to PSHE education may be of critical importance to the future of the subject as a whole.

Support for teachers and for teacher expertise has also been a recurrent motif. Although the PSHE continuing professional development programme has been welcomed, well used and well liked, it would be hard to argue convincingly that this professional development support has any obvious parity with the programmes of initial teacher education that support the development of our English, mathematics or ICT specialists, for example, and few would still argue that PSHE is anything less than a specialism. Increasingly, it is clear that teacher education in general recognises the need to develop an approach to pedagogy that plays much more closely to the ECM agenda. Of course, many teachers instinctively recognise that a narrow focus on cognitive development and the testing of this development represent a highly restricted vision of education. Kirk and Broadhead (2007) in a paper for the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers offer a direction, identifying a ‘significant shift in the political discourse from the promotion of learners’ achievement to the cultivation of learners’ achievement and well-being’ (2007, p. 3). The challenge for the next generation of teachers is clear:

Tomorrow’s teachers will therefore inhabit and expect to flourish in a very different professional world. They will find themselves in schools in which the proportion of teaching support staff has markedly increased; they will be professionally accountable for their contribution to improving the outcomes for children, in terms of their basic needs; they will be required to display a deeper sensitivity and responsiveness to the well-being of learners. (p. 7)
Conclusions
The future of PSHE is inextricably bound up with the transformation of schools through ECM and through the development of well-being as a school improvement imperative. Well-being is not an alternative to standards and achievement; it is its critical partner – this shift presents us with a renewed impetus. Is this an opportunity to reclaim and refocus our attention on a broad, inclusive vision for education and for learning that a culture of excessive testing has gradually eroded?

The key challenges for schools and for the PSHE field as a whole now with regard to PSHE are several. Firstly, the connection that PSHE makes with the role schools play in supporting, developing and protecting their children and young people is key. There is a new imperative for schools to improve links with children’s services and multidisciplinary teams. According to NFER (2006), this is proving the most challenging element of the ECM jigsaw for schools. PSHE is fundamentally concerned with children’s lives – there are times when, during the course of this learning, children and young people require more support. Linking PSHE into pastoral care systems, extended school provision and local services does not diminish its position as a ‘subject’. Rather, it emphasises the essential value of PSHE to children and young people and the relevance learning has in their lives.

The second is for schools to embrace the concept of learning for well-being and to develop and shape a curriculum in schools that genuinely prepares children and young people for life. In order to do this, there must be greater emphasis on children’s participation in their own learning. PSHE education needs to provide a place in the school curriculum for students to explore their perspectives on contemporary issues and reflect on their identities, relationships and place in society.

Third, PSHE cannot continue to eschew assessment. If PSHE seeks an equal status with other subjects, (a) it must be given the opportunity to organise, resource and perform as other subjects do, and (b) it must accept the responsibility, scrutiny and accountability that comes with this status. PSHE must find ways of universally assessing the learning that takes place in the classroom and the impact it has on well-being.

Finally, it is time to make PSHE a statutory subject in the National Curriculum. There is no longer any sense in not doing so. There is some excellent practice in many schools, supported by their local authorities, but we need to go further to make this learning an entitlement for all children and young people. Government risks undermining its own agenda for children in schools, both to raise standards and to promote well-being, if it does not reconsider. This imperative is moral, it is educational, and it is political. The time for change is here – the time to act is now.

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