

School ethos and personal, social, health education

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(Received 26 August 2010; final version received 21 February 2011)

This paper will discuss research undertaken within a London borough in 2009 that aimed to examine how Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) was perceived and delivered. The ethos of schools was incorporated into the enquiry as a key determinate of both perception and delivery of PSHE. The findings are presented with particular reference to three areas: school ethos, participation and evaluation. The overall conclusion of the study is that staff value PSHE, but with some reservations. Staff believe that PSHE has a positive impact on pupil behaviour. The value placed by schools on PSHE, and how it interrelates with the existing ethos of schools, remains a crucial factor in its provision.

Keywords: *school ethos; Personal, Social, Health and Economic education; participation; evaluation*

Introduction and background to the project

The wider value placed upon Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE)¹ by both policy-makers and campaign groups was confirmed when plans to make it a statutory element of the National Curriculum were introduced into the Children, Schools and Families Bill, which had its first reading in the House of Commons in November 2009. However, clauses relating to PSHE were removed from the Bill just prior to the 2010 General Election with the consequence that it remains a non-statutory element of the curriculum. Uncertainty about the status of PSHE has increased with the coalition government withdrawing funding for the PSHE Continuing Professional Development programme. The Department for

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Education research report investigating ‘new professionalism’ and access to continuing professional development (CPD) concluded that CPD contributed positively both to staff and students in raising standards within schools (Walker *et al.*, 2011). If this is the case then it must be presumed that withdrawal of funding for CPD for PSHE will result in lowering these standards. This withdrawal of funding, alongside the change of policy towards the statutory status of PSHE, perhaps sends a signal about the devaluing of PSHE to teaching staff. However, although PSHE may undergo further reform in the future, there remains a commitment to supporting the well-being of children and young people in education.

This article reports on research funded by the Children’s Services Department of an inner-city London borough during a period when it was thought that the statutory status of PSHE within the National Curriculum was imminent. The provision of PSHE in this borough was variable; some schools were perceived to be example of good practice whilst others offered little, if any, in the way of PSHE provision. The aim of the research, therefore, was to identify those areas of good practice and offer recommendations on how PSHE could be successfully implemented across the borough. A report to this effect was presented to the Education Department in October 2009. The focus of the research was in three areas: school ethos, participation and evaluation.

While the inclusion of PSHE on the curriculum in secondary schools is non-statutory, it does provide a framework for schools to fulfil their statutory obligations to promote the well-being of pupils through addressing key issues of concern around sex and drugs education; healthy lifestyles and managing finances. As an element of the Healthy Schools Programme² and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) strategy,³ PSHE goes beyond formal teaching within the school curriculum; it is an attempt to shape children’s attitudes, values and experiences both at school and in their lives outside school. Research points to the whole-school approach and ‘ethos’ as being central to the development and delivery of effective PSHE:

A healthy school is one that works to develop a whole-school ethos, environment and curriculum that enable pupils to recognise personal qualities, build on their achievements, fulfil their potential and manage their health and well-being. (National Children’s Bureau, 2006, p. 6)

However, alongside debates regarding the statutory status of PSHE there are other disagreements, and some uncertainty, about the identity and scope of PSHE. For example, as suggested above, there is some debate about what the acronym PSHE actually stands for. Whilst it originally stood for Personal, Social and Health Education, there has recently been a move towards substituting economic for education, with the result that it is now commonly referred to as PSHEe.⁴ The scope of PSHE is also under scrutiny. For example, Sakade (2010) reports that whilst some believe that the PSHE and Citizenship curriculums have a different focus, others believe that they are compatible and mutually supporting. The debate here centres upon whether PSHE should be only concerned with the private, individual aspects of the pupil’s life or whether it should also engage with issues related to the public sphere. Similarly,

there is some confusion around the relationship that PSHE has with SEAL, a confusion that was articulated by at least one of the PSHE teachers that we talked to.⁵ Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) provides another example:

A school where the staff generally lacked confidence in teaching PSHE had produced a programme using solely the social and emotional aspects of learning materials, at the expense of other aspects of the PSHE curriculum. The coordinator was unaware of this and attributed this to staff's misapprehension; they felt they had to use the materials as the training they had received on this was the most recent. (OfSTED, 2009, p. 24)

Nevertheless, PSHE is clearly a values-based part of the curriculum and, as such, it would be reasonable to make a link between shared values within schools and how schools perceive PSHE and support its delivery. In effect, the ethos of a school might provide an initial indicator as to whether or not PSHE would flourish and be effective. Therefore one aim of the study was to examine the extent to which the ethos of a school informed the delivery of PSHE. As pointed out by Best (2000, p. 6), discussions about values and ethos can be ambiguous, as definitions are slippery. Best is helpful in identifying the link between attitudes and values. For him, '... attitudes are in turn manifestations of particular *values* which the actors hold ...'. How teachers discuss the students and the issues around the provision of PSHE in schools would be one indication of the values of the teacher themselves, but also the values in a wider school context; the ethos. For the purposes of this project, the relationship between school ethos and PSHE is considered here as mutually supportive; a sympathetic school ethos might support the introduction and implementation of PSHE into a school whilst the presence of PSHE in a school curriculum might assist in identifying and strengthening the core values of that school. The school ethos also supports the impact that PSHE can have on pupils' attitudes, values and behaviour. The reach of PSHE aims to go beyond the school boundaries and shapes the responses of young people in every part of their lives. The effectiveness of PSHE therefore can be identified in some part through discussion with pupils; for example, how far they report on reflecting on their attitudes and changes in behaviour as a result of PSHE sessions. This is something that was addressed directly in the research undertaken.

The working definition of ethos adopted throughout the study, therefore, was that it is an essential characteristic of a school, an agreed set of values expressed formally or informally. School ethos will find its most explicit and formal expression in a mission statement. Our research revealed that although the vast majority of schools taking part in the study have a mission statement, with a clearly defined set of aims and values, staff members were not always familiar with it; however, they were able to articulate the less formal ethos of their school with relative ease.

Participation also creates the space for PSHE to inform ethos and so the research also examined the degree of participation from students and the wider school communities as an indicator of how active and dynamic schools were in delivery of PSHE. Of particular interest here were the techniques that PSHE teachers employed to encourage participation both within the school (pupils and staff) and outside the school (parents and outside organisations). Participation was therefore defined in

three ways; firstly, as students being involved in school councils and actively voicing their concerns through structured channels. Secondly, we saw participation from wider school communities as the active attempt to involve parents in supporting PSHE through visiting schools to discuss issues where they had some expertise. Thirdly, the number of outside visitors and agencies that contributed to the delivery of PSHE was included in our working definition of participation.

The third focus of the research was to understand how staff review and evaluate PSHE within their schools. This was a focus for two reasons; firstly, while such processes could be seen as merely auditing, it was felt that the ways that staff understood the students' experience of PSHE and how this information was subsequently acted upon were both integral to the whole delivery of PSHE and an indicator of how PSHE was valued overall. Secondly, the research sponsors were keen to gather an impression of how effective PSHE was in informing the attitudes, values and behaviour of children and young people and were therefore interested in the ways that schools themselves evaluated its efficacy.

PSHE has been part of the national curriculum for over 10 years, under the Healthy Schools Programme. The Every Child Matters agenda, the Children Act 2004 and the Healthy Schools Programme provide the framework and the impetus for schools to facilitate the development of responsible, autonomous young people who make a positive contribution to their communities.

The Every Child Matters initiative required those working with children to work towards achieving the five national outcomes for children and young people. These outcomes were:

- Being healthy.
- Staying safe.
- Enjoying and achieving.
- Making a positive contribution.
- Achieving economic well-being.

The PSHE curriculum⁶ played a major role in this initiative by stressing:

- the acquisition of accessible information that is relevant to children and young people's lives and experiences, maturity and understanding;
- the exploration, clarification and development of attitudes and values that support self-esteem and are positive to health and well-being; and
- the development of personal and social skills to enable emotional development and interaction with others as well as making positive health choices and actively participating in society.

However, the Every Child Matters agenda has been reportedly⁷ sidelined by the current coalition government. Practitioners are required to use the term 'help children to achieve more' rather than using the phrase 'every child matters' or making reference to the five outcomes listed above. In addition, the Every Child Matters website has been deposited in the national archive. The government white paper 'The Importance of Teaching' states:

We will conduct an internal review to determine how we can support to improve the quality of all PSHE teaching, including giving teachers the flexibility to use their judgement about how best to deliver PSHE education. (Department for Education, 2010, p. 46)

In light of the observations made above, PSHE faces an uncertain future.

There have always been elements that could be identified as what is now known as PSHE in the curriculum. In 1982 the National Association for Pastoral Care in Education was formed to promote the development of pastoral care and personal-social education within schools. Over the past two decades, since the introduction of PSHE into the curriculum, there have been challenges to its implementation and here we outline three of these major hurdles: the role of the teacher, the curriculum and experiences of young people and, thirdly, the value that young people place on PSHE.

The OfSTED (2007) report in PSHE 'Time for Change' found that PSHE was more effective when taught by specialist teachers, and such specialism might result in the status of PSHE being raised. Watkins (1995) identified a major hurdle for secondary schools since the implementation of PSHE curricula has been avoiding the 'ghettoisation' of courses, with only certain staff being seen as having any responsibility in this area, often new, young members of staff with no clear set of guidelines about curriculum delivery. More recently, Popovic (2002, pp. 12–13) argues that students experience 'little chance to learn about themselves' due to the perspectives of different teachers that tended to be 'contradictory', 'inconsistent' and 'biased'. Mead (2004, p. 22) found that student-teachers reported a lack of confidence and experience with regard to the PSHE curriculum and particularly in terms of Sexual and Relationship Education (SRE). For example, student-teachers reported they were 'feeling their own way' with PSHE delivery. Watkins (1995, p. 128) argues for PSHE to be included in whole school curriculum management to address the entitlement of pupils to maximise their skills and develop autonomy.

Traditionally there has been a problem of a mismatch between the content and messages of the PSHE courses, particularly SRE, and the experiences of the children and young people. The OfSTED (2007) 'Time for Change' report in PSHE suggests that the pressures young people face are complex, and can contradict the ordered way that PSHE material is often presented. Knowledgeable and confident teaching of difficult topics increased the receptiveness of pupils (particularly in terms of SRE) whereas unenthusiastic and unprepared teaching was often treated with indifference or embarrassment. Additionally, the 2007 OfSTED Report highlighted the difficulties of adults talking to children and young people about sensitive topics that have transformed since the time they were themselves teenagers.

A further challenge is related to the importance that children and young people attach to PSHE. The Lord and Johnson (2004) review of research conducted into students' experience of the national curriculum found that learners pick up on the messages implicit in the curriculum regarding 'perceived status' of certain parts of the curriculum and their relevance. The research also found that students focused on 'getting grades' with reported levels of enjoyment of the curriculum decreasing with age. This could have a direct impact on the way children and young people receive

messages within PSHE, particularly given that it will remain a non-statutory element of the curriculum for the foreseeable future.

There has been an attempt to address some of these problems through spreading PSHE across the timetable and viewing the curricula offered in a broader way. Also the use of a tutorial system has strengthened the pastoral care offered to children and young people in secondary schools. Finally, the OfSTED (2005) report on PSHE in secondary schools recommended that schools improve their evaluation and monitoring to focus on the changes in behaviour, values and attitudes of pupils. It would require further research to comment on the advantages or not of specialist teachers, as making comment on this is beyond the scope of this project. Given that the coalition government is not putting further resources into professional training for PSHE teaching, it seems likely that this debate will continue.

Methods

The data were collected in the period March–July 2009 using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The overall research strategy was the product of dialogue between the research team and the research sponsors. The research team was provided with a list of schools within a London borough, and those that had been identified as demonstrating good practice in PSHE (e.g. as reported by OfSTED) were targeted. The findings from the research must therefore be seen within this context, and not taken to be applicable across all schools. It is possible that where PSHE coordinators feel confident and enthusiastic in the delivery of PSHE in their schools, they are more likely to engage in research.

Teachers with a responsibility for PSHE (normally the PSHE coordinator) were initially invited to complete an online survey. The survey aimed to address issues of delivery, resources for PSHE and the ways and extent to which PSHE was valued in schools.

In total, the online survey consisted of 33 questions divided into four sections. To ensure that the survey was not overly time consuming or onerous to complete, the majority of questions were closed. The first section, 'PSHE and Your School in General', asked questions about the stage of PSHE development within the school, the extent to which it was valued, its relationship with SEAL, whether the school had an explicit mission statement and the extent that this was linked to PSHE. The second section, 'Delivery of PSHE in Your School', concentrated on questions regarding the resources allocated to PSHE including staffing, time and budget together with the extent of relationships with outside agencies. The third section, 'Evaluation of PSHE in Your School', was concerned with the evaluation and review of PSHE provision and asked for details of how this was conducted and the extent to which students were involved in this process. The final section, 'Information about You and Your Personal Views of PSHE', sought to gather more attitudinal data on the personal view of the respondent towards PSHE, including whether they thought that PSHE was having a positive impact on students and the reasons why they believed this. The section also asked for details

of PSHE CPD awards and questions regarding the role and responsibilities of the respondent within the school.

All schools in the borough were invited to take part in the online survey: just over one-quarter of primary schools invited to take part responded; just under one-half of secondary schools; and one-half in the category 'other', which includes pupil referral units, schools for disabled children and a children's centre.

The survey was supplemented by 10 in-depth interviews, of which seven were face to face and three were conducted over the telephone. The interviews were conducted with PSHE coordinators who had responded to the online survey and were selected from a list of priority schools identified by the borough's Children's Services Department as having demonstrated good practice in PSHE. The content of the interview schedule was based upon responses to the online survey. These were individual interviews lasting for approximately one hour. Responses to the questions were recorded in note form and written up by the interviewer immediately after the interview. These interviews were designed to develop a better understanding of the data generated through the survey and focused on the following five areas:

- The role of PSHE in informing the school ethos (both formally in terms of an explicit mission statement and informally in terms of widely agreed values).
- The resources available to deliver PSHE in terms of staff, budget, materials and the involvement of organisations outside the school.
- The delivery of PSHE in terms of space in the curriculum, content and parental involvement.
- The procedures in place for monitoring the delivery of PSHE, including the extent of involvement of pupils in this process.
- The future of PSHE, focusing on how PSHE might be developed and improved particularly in terms of it becoming a statutory curriculum area.

The final stage of this phase of the research involved gathering the views of pupils towards PSHE. In anticipation of the study, a series of focus groups were held in July 2007/2008 with sixth-form students from the target borough who were visiting the university for help with their Sociology A-level projects.⁸ The research team took the opportunity to invite the pupils to run the focus groups themselves with assistance from the researchers, and the results of the discussions were recorded on flipcharts and transcribed immediately afterwards. The first of these focus groups examined the levels of social capital possessed by young people in terms of their participation both inside and outside the school, how they obtained help with problems and the kinds of action they took on issues that concerned them. The second focus group focused on the perceived importance and role of PSHE in addressing issues important to young people. This acted as a pilot for the study and shaped the research design. For example, the results suggested there was a general feeling that adults did not listen enough to young people or take their concerns seriously. It was suggested that respect only went one way, from young person to adult. Adults tended to assume they knew what was best for young people and there was an element of ignorance amongst adults about the world that young people existed in. Their attitudes towards PSHE were mixed.

On the one hand they enjoyed the space in the curriculum to discuss issues without the pressure of assessment, but on the other hand the lack of qualification meant that the subject was not always given the same weight as other assessed subjects.

Two focus groups were conducted in primary schools: one with seven Year Two children and the other with six Year Six children. A third focus group was conducted with five secondary pupils from Year Eight. Although groups were mixed in terms of gender and ethnicity, the data were not analysed with these categories in mind. Participants were selected by teachers and invited to take part and, therefore, may reflect the views of more outgoing pupils. The sample was necessarily a convenience one as, at that busy time of year for schools (June and July), the research relied upon those teachers who managed to find the time to liaise with us over arrangements for focus groups to take place.

Focus group questions were worded so that they were age appropriate, but maintained the same aim of generating discussion around themes of pupils' participation in PSHE; what they liked and disliked about PSHE lessons; the impact of PSHE on the behaviour and attitudes of pupils; and the relevance of PSHE to pupils.

Two researchers worked together to collect the data from each focus group. Written notes were taken at the time and later organised into emerging themes.

Finally, the research team attended a borough PSHE Coordinators Network Meeting where findings from the research were presented to the group by the research team. Feedback and questions from the PSHE teachers and coordinators in attendance have fed back into this paper.

Discussion of findings

Overall, it was found that PSHE was well established within schools in the borough, with all of the schools reporting having made some progress in its adoption. This judgement was based upon questions regarding timetabling of PSHE, and the numbers of PSHE teachers taking up the CPD programme. In addition, there is a thriving PSHE teachers' network that meets every term to talk about current issues share resources. Importantly, all of the respondents reported having made some progress in promoting PSHE in their opinion. One important indicator here was that one-half of the respondents had either secured or were working towards a certificate in PSHE teaching. Nearly one-half of respondents reported that PSHE was valued at least as highly as other curriculum areas within the school but a significant minority, around one-fifth, reported it as less valued. This is an area for future research.

The first part of the discussion of findings will focus on ethos of schools, before going on to discuss participation in PSHE, impact of PSHE and finally evaluation of PSHE. The participation and evaluation aspects of PSHE were identified within the study as indications of how schools perceived and valued PSHE. Participation and evaluation can also be seen to be linked with ethos that directly supports the delivery of a PSHE programme. The research sponsors were particularly interested in identifying evidence of pupil behaviour change and personal development through PSHE provision. These findings are presented below.

Ethos

The interviews with PSHE coordinators began with an exploration of the extent to which formal school values, as expressed by a mission statement for example, complemented a more informal set of values that might also indicate an ethos. As set out earlier, ethos in this research is taken to mean an essential characteristic of a school, an agreed set of values expressed formally or informally. We found that often the ethos of a school is organised around the idea of being ‘pupil centred’, ‘fulfilling potential’ or ‘inclusivity’.

School ethos will find its most explicit expression in a mission statement. Given the importance of ethos to a whole-school approach to pupil well-being, it is reasonable to assume that the ethos will marry well with an approach to PSHE. From the questionnaire responses it would seem that the vast majority of schools have a clearly defined set of aims and values.

However, on further investigation, the interviews revealed a more patchy knowledge of mission statements. The majority of respondents were clear about the mission statement of their school even if they were unable to recall the exact wording, but some respondents said that they were aware that their school did have a written mission statement but that they could not say exactly what this was.

Know there is one ... but don't know what it is. Not sure if anyone else would know it either, I would be curious to find out if even the senior managers know ...

However, this patchy awareness of a written statement did not mean that there was no coherent set of agreed values and aims or a strong ethos, and the respondent went on to say how important the ethos of the school was in supporting her role as PSHE coordinator.

How PSHE relates to the mission statement or the informally agreed set of values is more complex. While respondents agreed that there was a strong link between the ethos of the school and PSHE (‘It is a collective effort’), some discrepancies were apparent. One respondent felt that PSHE was a way of educating some staff as well as pupils about the rights and responsibilities of young people.

The relationship between PSHE and ethos of the school was further explored in considering whether or not PSHE was valued as highly as other curriculum subjects. Questionnaire responses show the majority of respondents consider that PSHE is either highly valued or valued about the same in comparison with other curriculum areas. However, this was not the experience of all respondents; for example, one participant felt abandoned with PSHE and believed that it was not taken very seriously by other members of staff; the interviewer recorded in her interview report: ‘I got the sense that she felt quite exhausted by it all’.

When asked about whether PSHE had supported the school's ethos, over three-quarters of respondents believed that PSHE had supported effective relationships between all members of the school community. Respondents defined effective relationships in terms of how pupils were able to shape school policies. The overwhelming majority reported that pupils are involved in active decision-making. The

influence of PSHE regarding the development of school policies is also important; over two-thirds of respondents believe that the school's mission statement is supported by PSHE (although these responses seem to contradict other data that suggest a lack of awareness of formal mission statements).

Notwithstanding the difficulties outlined above, our research supports the argument that school ethos and PSHE can be mutually supportive. Making stronger links between explicitly expressed school ethos and PSHE would help to legitimate and strengthen the messages given to young people.

Participation

Respondents identified pupil involvement as a central aspect of PSHE delivery but for PSHE to be effective, both inside and outside the school, they felt it necessary to engage the support of parents and pupils alike. As the survey data reported above show, PSHE can support effective relationships within school communities. Both survey and interview data reveal that pupils in the schools that took part in the research were encouraged to participate in PSHE in a variety of ways. Around two-fifths of survey respondents stated that their school undertook consultation with students regarding the PSHE curriculum.

Survey responses show that the ways staff tried to evaluate pupils' experience of PSHE involved a range of methods including conversation, writing about elements of PSHE that the pupils enjoyed, showing examples of work to discuss and reflect upon, getting pupils to assess teaching styles, reflection in class, indicating opinion through 'hands up' and, more formally, questionnaires on quality of lesson delivery and pupils' learning.

Pupil self-assessment uses a variety of modes, including mechanisms where pupils are asked about the content of the curriculum and how relevant it is to their needs. One respondent stated that consultation with pupils is formal as pupils are asked for suggestions for improvement via the School Council.

Interviews highlighted the different ways that parents are involved with supporting the PSHE curriculum. In one example, parents come into the school to talk to pupils about the kinds of jobs that they have, others run evenings for parents to come in and hear more about the issues that are presented to pupils through PSHE and are able to give feedback. Parents are kept informed through newsletters, direct communications and consent forms. One respondent said that parents become involved with PSHE through the kind of homework that is set for pupils, which may be about changing something in their daily routine; for example, not watching television for a week. In addition, pupils sometimes take DVDs home, for example on bullying, to watch with their parents. This provides another means of parents being aware of the sorts of things PSHE covers in school whilst at the same time enabling families to learn more about specific issues together.

In special schools, participation and support for PSHE by parents often present additional considerations. There are issues of distances that parents may have to travel in order to attend as schools take pupils from across boroughs, so it may be

more likely that parents are in direct contact with teachers if a particular problem or issue arises. Also parents are more likely to be concerned that topics covered by PSHE may not be appropriate for their children. In these cases the PSHE teachers are supported by the school mission statements and the National Curriculum guidelines to persuade parents that in order to be as independent as possible, pupils need to have full access to information about sex and drugs.

In focus groups there were mixed responses to the issue of pupils' involvement in PSHE content. Pupils in one primary school focus group on the whole believed, and appreciated that they did have a say on the content of their PSHE lessons. Their teacher would guide the lesson but pupils would be encouraged to make suggestions of what they would like the theme to include. An interview with a coordinator from a different primary school revealed a similar approach, explaining that the content of PSHE is 'teacher led but child directed'. If a particular issue arises then the lesson addresses it. In the secondary school focus group, however, pupils did not perceive they had any part in deciding the content of their PSHE lessons. When probed, they felt that this was not a problem as they would not particularly want to have involvement in PSHE in this way.

However, PSHE is a subject that is liked and valued. Across all three focus groups, pupils expressed a wish for 'more PSHE'.

Sometimes PSHE lessons are too short, we could have three lessons a week, could have more. (Year Six pupil)

This pupil's comment sums up the views of many. Unsurprisingly, then, suggestions for improvements to PSHE from pupils included making lessons longer and/or more frequent. A further suggestion was for more in the way of creative activities such as making a slideshow, interactive group work and hands-on activities including role-play. Whilst pupils across school year groups shared many similar views about subject matters and the sorts of activities they would like more of in PSHE lessons, concerns amongst Year Six pupils about the transition from primary to secondary school came to the fore. Indeed, one of the key differences between Year Two and Year Six pupils was that frequent references were made by Year Six pupils about wanting to learn, during PSHE lessons, how to make new friends when moving to secondary school.

Impact of PSHE

Pupils were asked about the sort of impact PSHE had had on them and whether it changed the way they thought about things. Overwhelmingly, pupils reported how PSHE 'makes you aware of other people'. Pupils across all focus groups showed a keen interest, in particular, in sharing and learning through PSHE about feelings and emotions, and awareness, especially of how emotions get acted out and the impact, then, on others. For younger pupils in particular, friendship issues and 'how to be kind to others' were prominent. Year Two pupils, for example, spoke about feelings associated with being excluded by others, bossiness, and falling out and making up again with friends.

Pupils described how they had learnt to think more about how they treat other people; thinking before they say something to someone; being aware and/or sympathetic towards other people's feelings and perspectives on things; the ways in which other people may treat them and, if in a negative way, the best ways of managing this; the sorts of people who are 'safe' and those who should be avoided; and learning how to 'calm down' and 'walk away' from someone, especially if feeling angry. Learning PSHE has had an impact on other types of behaviour also. One pupil emphasised and others agreed that:

it's [PSHE] changed mine and people's behaviour in school, for example not so rowdy and they're not picking on people so much. (Year Eight pupil)

This quote above from a Year Eight pupil refers to the issue of bullying that was raised by pupils across all focus groups and that became a dominant theme, especially amongst secondary school pupils who emphasised the value of learning through PSHE about bullying and how to best deal with it. The view that more learning around bullying in PSHE lessons would be useful and relevant was shared by all pupils in this group 'because bullying is something that goes on every day' (Year Eight pupil).

Evaluation of PSHE by schools

Evaluation of any part of the curriculum is concerned with how effective it may be in achieving stated aims. For PSHE the aims are shaped by a heightened awareness of 'risk' and 'risky' behaviours that young people may be exposed to (Evans & Evans, 2007).

Less than one-half of the schools participating in the survey have any formal means of evaluating PSHE. Schools responding to our online questionnaire that do evaluate PSHE use the following methods: lesson observations, scrutiny of planning, peer observations, and involvement of pupils. These results were disappointing; given that PSHE is not formally assessed and leads to no formal qualifications we would argue that an imaginative evaluation that goes beyond simply auditing is an essential component in improving the student experience and raising the profile and value accorded to PSHE. In this sense, evaluation should be an integrated element of PSHE that includes a continual dialogue between students and teachers.

Of the schools in our survey that have consulted with pupils on questions of impact of PSHE, the impressions of respondents vary, but overwhelmingly they believe that PSHE has a positive influence on pupils. Three-quarters report that they have observed changes in behaviour that they attributed to PSHE.

The focus groups conducted with students asked about how PSHE changed behaviour and attitudes. The responses were positive. Overwhelmingly, pupils reported how PSHE 'makes you aware of other people'. Awareness of others included pupils learning to think about how they might treat other people; thinking before they say something to someone; being aware and/or sympathetic towards other people's feelings and perspectives on things; the ways in which other people may treat them and,

if in a negative way, the best ways of managing this; the sorts of people who are 'safe' and those who should be avoided; and learning how to 'calm down' and 'walk away' from someone, especially if feeling angry. Learning PSHE has had an impact on other types of behaviour also. One pupil emphasised and others agreed that:

it's changed mine and people's behaviour in school, for example not so rowdy and they're not picking on people so much.

The issue of bullying was a dominant theme that came out of focus group data. In relation to being a 'victim' of bullying, some pupils reported feeling more confident in who they are and in what they say. Pupils value and enjoy learning through PSHE about bullying and, in many cases, would like more of this because bullying is seen as an 'everyday issue'.

Conclusion to the research

It was clear from our research that PSHE remains an important part of teaching and learning. The research addressed central questions of school ethos, participation and evaluation in relation to PSHE. The ethos of schools underpins the aims of PSHE in addressing young people in a whole school environment, and having a strong ethos was not dependent on knowing a formal written mission statement. Regarding participation, PSHE was a means of creating a dialogue between pupils, staff and parents, with PSHE supporting effective relationships within schools and in the wider community. This dialogue creates opportunities for parents to participate within schools as well as for pupils to get their voices heard and influence school policy. PSHE delivery in special schools presents other challenges as parents often need to be persuaded that their children are entitled to learn about issues discussed through PSHE. The issues raised in special schools would benefit from further research. Finally, evaluation of PSHE was inconsistent, but anecdotally teachers and pupils felt that PSHE has a positive impact on pupils' behaviour and attitudes inside and outside of school. The pupils themselves told us that PSHE had helped raise their awareness of other people's feelings and think about others in different ways.

Overall, from the survey returns and the interviews, staff involved in the delivery of PSHE were positive about it becoming a statutory part of the curriculum. They believed that it would give PSHE and its teaching additional status and recognition. This is particularly important given the 'perceived status' of PSHE referred to earlier and how pupils interpret this. The focus groups raised the issues that pupils themselves found important, in particular bullying and getting on together. In collaboration with teachers, future evaluation of PSHE could build on participative methods like focus groups, and supplement them with more innovative ways of engaging pupils such as using video or role-play. New technologies could also be employed usefully, such as social networking sites or audience response technologies to gather pupils' views. These evaluative techniques could then be embedded within PSHE classes.

To end on a note of caution, however, the last minute change in policy regarding the curriculum status of PSHE, and the uncertainty surrounding the intentions of the

new coalition government, will not provide any reassurance at the moment to those involved in PSHE provision. The challenge will be to ensure that the committed staff who have great experience in the delivery of PSHE, development of materials and links with outside agencies and organisations are in a position to continue with this work in a flexible way.

Notes

1. Here we are using the definition of PSHE used by the PSHE Association, who include the 'economic' content of the curriculum. Available online at: <http://www.pshe-association.org.uk/>.
2. Available online at: <http://home.healthyschools.gov.uk/>.
3. Available online at: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/.../seal_learning/.
4. The addition of 'economic' may have been attempt by the last New Labour government to add a more practical element to the content of PSHE.
5. Indeed, we have encountered similar uncertainty from other teachers outside this project.
6. Available online at: <http://www.pshe-association.org.uk/>.
7. Cited in N. Puffett's 'Children & Young People Now' (10 August 2010) based on information from a leaked internal memo from Michael Gove. Available online at: <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/1021116/Government-clarifies-ban-Every-Child-Matters/?DC-MP=ILC-SEARCH>.
8. A reviewer of a previous draft of this paper expressed concerns regarding the ethical implications of using students in this way. The authors would like to stress that the primary purpose of these sessions was to provide the students with experience of running and participating in a focus group. The students were free to express 'informed dissent' by not participating if they so wished. However, we found the discussions to be lively and informative and the teachers present encountered opinions they sometimes found challenging. We ensured that the contribution made by the students was compensated for by offering advice on their Sociology projects on both an individual level and a group level.

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