

Life skills and life chances: the social mobility case for statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education

When it is delivered by trained teachers in line with best practice principles,¹ PSHE education has significant potential to boost pupils' life chances, helping them to develop the character, resilience and skills they need to succeed academically and in the workplace and reducing barriers to learning, particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils. This paper sets out these benefits in further detail and explores how statutory status for PSHE education could help to realise the huge potential of the subject to:

- Boost academic success, particularly amongst disadvantaged pupils
- Build character and key skills for life and work
- Support employability
- Remove barriers to learning

In all of these areas, there is clear evidence that the most disadvantaged pupils are those who can benefit most from PSHE education. The evidence suggests that PSHE learning helps disadvantaged pupils to perform better academically and narrow gaps in life chances with their more advantaged counterparts. Statutory status for PSHE education would help to ensure that preparation for the workplace is guaranteed not just for more advantaged young people with strong networks but for every school pupil. It is worth noting that PSHE education is already compulsory in independent schools and the campaign for statutory status would simply bring state schools into line with the independent sector.

Academic success

There is strong evidence to suggest that the focus of PSHE education on health, wellbeing and key skills has the potential to significantly aid academic attainment, particularly amongst disadvantaged pupils.

The academic benefits of PSHE education in terms of improved attainment are significant: a group of leading academics in an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* recommended statutory status for PSHE education,² noting that *'education and health are synergistic ... students in better health do better academically'*, identifying countries such as Finland and Singapore which have better academic success than England and place a greater emphasis on pupil health. This finding is backed by a DfE-commissioned report which found that pupils with higher levels of emotional wellbeing have higher levels of academic success,³ and is further emphasised by Ofsted's finding that outstanding schools almost always have outstanding PSHE education.⁴

Research also suggests that programmes to build the non-cognitive skills developed through PSHE education (set out in more detail below) impact on pupil attainment, attendance and behaviour: an

analysis of over 200 social and emotional skills programmes⁵, predominantly delivered through PSHE education, demonstrated improved attitudes and behaviour in pupils and an 11% improvement in academic achievement. Similarly, a study of emotional resilience programmes found short-term improvement in attainment rates, particularly amongst those eligible for free school meals and pupils who had been performing at below national average in maths and English.⁶ The Education Endowment Foundation⁷ recommends such programmes as a way to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

Building character and key skills for life and work

The non-academic skills and attributes acquired through PSHE education – often termed ‘character’ – have a positive impact on life chances as well as being key to boosting the employability of school-leavers and improving social mobility.

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has demonstrated the impact of non-cognitive skills on academic attainment and employability.⁸ An evidence review⁹ by Heckman and others concludes that these skills and attitudes are malleable into adolescence (and comparatively more so than cognitive skills), with teachers playing a measurable role in their development. Research suggests that the kind of classroom-based learning delivered through PSHE education can develop these social and emotional skills: reviews by the Department for Education¹⁰ and the Education Endowment Foundation¹¹ have concluded that there is strong evidence that these programmes have a significant impact on attitudes, skills and emotional outcomes. In doing so, PSHE can help to narrow gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their more advantaged peers.

In 2016, the PSHE Association worked under funding from the Department for Education’s character education grant programme to redevelop the PSHE education curriculum to focus more on key skills and attributes. The revised curriculum was trialled by 12 schools (both state and independent) and was launched in summer 2016¹².

Employability

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the British Chambers of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors have all called for an education system that provides all school-leavers with key skills and characteristics to thrive in the world of work. Studies suggest these skills could have a £100bn impact on the UK economy and PSHE education could be a key subject in which these skills are developed.

PSHE education gives pupils information on the world of work, challenges stereotypes about career options and helps pupils to develop the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. These are opportunities more advantaged young people may gain through their schools if they are educated independently (in which case PSHE is already compulsory), or through work experience opportunities provided through networks of friends and family. As set out above, there is strong evidence that these skills can be developed through classroom-based activity such as PSHE education. The impact of improving employability skills in schools could be significant, not just for individual pupils but for the

whole economy: according to a CBI-backed study, such skills could make a £109bn contribution to the UK economy over the next five years.¹³

A 2011 study showed that such skills are more important in determining life chances at age 30 than academic qualifications.¹⁴ Businesses want such skills too. As Neil Carberry, CBI Director for People and Skills, puts it: *“the right attitudes and attributes in people such as resilience, respect, enthusiasm and creativity are just as important as academic and technical skills”*.¹⁵

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has recommended ‘*purposive*’ action to develop these non-academic skills and attributes to tackle intergenerational disadvantage.¹⁶ More recent research from the Commission into non-educational barriers to top jobs demonstrates how important employability skills are to employers, and how disadvantaged pupils have fewer opportunities to develop these skills.¹⁷ Independent schools, in which PSHE education is already an expectation, recognise the importance of these skills and place a much greater emphasis on the subject: 30% of the demand for training from the PSHE Association comes from the independent sector in spite of that sector serving just 7% of the pupil population.

There is, therefore, an imperative for state schools to ensure that their pupils have the same opportunities to develop these crucial skills as their independent school counterparts. However, PSHE Association research shows that just one in three business leaders think schools are doing enough to equip pupils with skills for work.¹⁸ The CBI,¹⁹ the British Chambers of Commerce,²⁰ the Institute of Directors²¹ and the Federation of Small Businesses²² have also made this point. It is therefore crucial that there is space for state schools to develop these key skills; according to a PSHE Association/YouGov survey, 85% of business leaders would support a move to statutory status for PSHE education to ensure that all pupils develop these key skills.²³

Removing barriers to learning

There is strong evidence that health and wellbeing are positively associated with academic achievement. PSHE education can help to improve health and wellbeing thereby removing barriers to learning.

A recent international Cochrane Study²⁴ suggests that when pupils receive lessons on sex and relationships, disclosures about abuse and exploitation increase significantly. Recent surveys involving 15,000 British adults²⁵ suggest that those who cite school lessons as their main source of sex and relationships education were less likely to have had first intercourse before age 16 and more likely to say that both partners were consenting. A series of international studies²⁶ show that school lessons reduce unplanned pregnancy rates.

There is strong evidence of the health impacts of the kind of learning provided by PSHE education: a recent Cochrane Review²⁷ demonstrated that health education programmes like PSHE education, as part of a whole-school approach, can improve pupils’ health behaviours, positively affecting their diet and lifestyle and reducing substance misuse; it also showed promising results in relation to reducing bullying and violence. A DfE review of PSHE education provision²⁸ also found a range of positive outcomes from PSHE provision, including improved attitudes to health, being able to deal with personal difficulties and improved behaviour. A Cochrane review of universal preventative programmes²⁹ shows that such programmes are connected with reductions in the use of alcohol, tobacco and cannabis by young people.

According to a meta-analysis³⁰ of 75 studies on universal school-based social, emotional and/or behavioural programmes, these lessons could benefit pupils in seven outcome measures including social skills, antisocial behaviour, positive self-image, mental health, and prosocial behaviour. A Cochrane Review of the Health Promoting Schools programme³¹ also identifies an impact on bullying. The impact on behaviour, attainment and wider outcomes is clear.

The state of current provision

The huge potential of PSHE education to improve social mobility set out above is not being realised, with provision at all key stages ‘not good enough’ according to Ofsted and the situation ‘deteriorating’ according to the Commons Education Committee.

In 2013, Ofsted published a report into current PSHE provision. Entitled *Not Yet Good Enough*,³² the report suggested that while provision was outstanding in 20% of schools (almost all of which were schools rated outstanding by Ofsted in their most recent whole-school inspection), provision needed improvement in at least 40% of schools, with lessons too often delivered by teachers with insufficient training and curriculum time.

The Commons Education Committee has concluded that PSHE provision is ‘deteriorating’,³³ an assessment backed by Department for Education data which suggests that provision decreased by over 32% at key stages 3 and 4 between 2011 and 2015, demonstrating the urgent need to act.

The case for statutory status to improve provision

As set out in the previous section, PSHE education provision is not good enough in schools despite the importance of the issues it covers. Here we set out the case for statutory status in order to ensure that all pupils receive the ‘curriculum for life’ they need and deserve and to ensure that all teachers are trained and supported to teach it to a high standard.

The links between non-statutory status and reduced quality of provision have been made by leading education unions including the National Association of Head Teachers,³⁴ the Association for Teachers and Lecturers,³⁵ Voice,³⁶ the National Union of Teachers³⁷ and the NAHT Edge,³⁸ as well as the National Governors Association.³⁹ PSHE Association members in schools directly link non-statutory status to a number of trends which limit the quality of provision, including:

- learning delivered through occasional off-timetable ‘drop-down’ days rather than regular timetabled lessons which build learning week by week
- schools giving responsibility for PSHE lessons to teaching assistants or teachers with spare lessons, rather than teachers with training in the subject
- PSHE leads having fewer resources and lower status in schools than other subject leads/departments
- perhaps most worryingly, pupils believing that the subject is not valued by their school.

Initial teacher education at present places little emphasis on PSHE education, and uptake of the national PSHE CPD programme has fallen by 90% since 2010.⁴⁰

Support for statutory PSHE education

Statutory status for PSHE education is supported by:

- Business leaders: 85% of business leaders support statutory status according to a recent YouGov survey undertaken on behalf of the PSHE Association.⁴¹
- Teachers: an NUT survey showed that 88% of its members want PSHE to be statutory⁴² and teaching unions NUT, NAHT, NAHT Edge, Voice and ATL have all called for statutory status.
- Parents: 92% of parents say that all schools should teach PSHE education.⁴³ Statutory status is supported by leading parent bodies including Mumsnet, Mothers' Union, PTA UK (the national body for parent-teacher associations) and the National Governors Association.⁴⁴
- Pupils: 92% of young people receiving PSHE lessons say that all pupils should receive them.⁴⁵ The UK Youth Parliament has made '*a curriculum for life*' a campaign priority for four years in a row.⁴⁶ Statutory status is backed by Girlguiding, the British Youth Council and UK Youth.

Conclusion

When delivered by trained teachers in partnership with communities, parents and pupils, PSHE education can contribute to a range of positive outcomes for children and young people: improving their academic performance, preparing them for the workplace, building the character and resilience they will need to thrive in a changing world and removing barriers to learning. There is clear evidence that disadvantaged pupils benefit most from this kind of learning, thereby reducing gaps in life chances between those pupils and their more advantaged peers, but this potential can only be fulfilled by raising the status of the subject.

Raising the status of PSHE education would send a clear message about the importance of a subject currently in the uniquely vulnerable position of being both non-examined and non-statutory in state schools. It would send a message to schools about parity of budgets and status for PSHE leads and it would bring statutory duties on schools into line with government ambitions to deliver positive outcomes on life chances and social mobility. It would also send a clear message to business leaders that their concerns about the school system building pupils' employability skills were being heard, and bring the state school sector into line with the independent sector, ensuring that disadvantaged pupils received the same opportunities.

The government has raised the stakes in terms of school performance in academic subjects, and if this is not balanced by raised expectations for PSHE education, standards of provision will continue to be unacceptably low, leaving millions of young people educated in the state sector without the skills and attributes to thrive in the modern world. The Ofsted *Not Yet Good Enough* report was based on visits to schools in 2012. Four years later, evidence suggests that the position is rapidly deteriorating, creating a huge gap between provision of PSHE in the state and independent sectors. Statutory status would arrest this decline and be a catalyst for positive change: initial teacher education providers, CPD providers, headteacher trainers, local authorities, academy chains and others would have to respond. The support for statutory status from such organisations demonstrates that the education system stands ready to respond to leadership from government.

The campaign for statutory status is supported not only by 85% of business leaders but also by 88% of teachers, 92% of parents and 92% of pupils. It is time that these calls for a rigorous curriculum for life are finally heard in the face of clear evidence that doing so will boost social mobility significantly.

PSHE Association, October 2016

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