

PSHE education, pupil wellbeing and safety at school

Associations between PSHE lessons on personal and social skills and feelings of belonging and strong relationships at school – analysis by the University of Hertfordshire and the PSHE Association

Foreword

This short paper sets out research carried out by the University of Hertfordshire on the Health Behaviours of School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, identifying strong associations between students being positive about their PSHE lessons on personal and social skills and feelings of belonging and strong relationships at school. This briefing explores these findings in more detail.

When we were considering these results, we did wonder whether the results were open to challenge because some young people might naturally have a predisposition to a more optimistic outlook about their lives. Those young people might both have a more affirmative view of their PSHE lessons and be more positive about relationships in schools – with the common denominator being their approach to life (being a ‘glass half full’ person), rather than the quality of PSHE education having an actual impact.

Having reflected on this, the HBSC team at the University of Hertfordshire does feel that the analysis stands up to scrutiny for two key reasons: firstly, the data across the HBSC survey shows that young people are prepared to be critical of many aspects of their environments and experiences, so the fact that they appear to highly value quality PSHE education is a positive sign. Secondly, good PSHE education is likely to be provided in schools that seek to foster good environments (we know from [Ofsted’s 2013 report](#)¹ on PSHE that schools judged to be outstanding overall also deliver outstanding PSHE), which creates a virtuous circle, fostering positive life satisfaction, which then feeds into increased positive views about relationships in schools.

A ‘glass half full person’ is not simply the product of a predetermined internal personality. Context and environment play a key role, including issues of gender, culture, age and socio-economic status. As young people traverse adolescence there is a well-evidenced set of both protective and harmful determinants that shape their ability to navigate adolescence successfully. Our research points in the direction of PSHE education operating as a protective health asset – alongside other assets such as school belonging and good family communication. Of course it is just one part of the jigsaw, but an important one.

We also see correlations in our data between good PSHE education and reduced incidences of bullying – a more objective measure – and of course there is much wider evidence on the impact of PSHE education on a range of positive outcomes for young people.

No single study can provide a definitive truth, but we think this data makes an important contribution to knowledge about PSHE education.



Professor Fiona Brooks, Head of Adolescent and Child Health, University of Hertfordshire
April 2016

Overview

Research by the University of Hertfordshire has identified strong associations between students being positive about their PSHE lessons on personal and social skills and feelings of belonging and strong relationships at school. This briefing explores these findings in more detail.

Background

Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) is a unique cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The study is carried out every four years in over 40 countries across Europe and North America. It aims to gain new insight into, and increase our understanding of, young people’s health and wellbeing, health behaviours and their social context. In England, 5,335 young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years participated in the 2014 survey, and the results were published in October 2015 (full report available at: <http://www.hbscengland.com/>).

As part of the HBSC survey, pupils were asked a series of questions about their PSHE education. The PSHE Association and the University of Hertfordshire have undertaken additional analysis of the responses to these questions, beyond the findings which are published in the full HBSC report. This additional analysis is set out below.

Questions on PSHE education

Participants were initially asked whether they had received PSHE lessons. Those who said they had received PSHE lessons were then asked a series of questions about how well different topics had been studied, as set out below.

How well have the following subjects been covered in PSHE?

	Very well covered			Very poorly covered		N/A
a) Health and wellbeing (e.g. learning about diet, physical activity, alcohol, tobacco and drugs)	1	2	3	4	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Sex & relationships (including puberty, pregnancy and contraception)	1	2	3	4	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Staying safe (e.g. road safety, personal safety, and internet safety)	1	2	3	4	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Economics and careers education (e.g. saving and looking after money, understanding different types of jobs)	1	2	3	4	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Personal and social skills (e.g. rights and responsibilities, respect and bullying)	1	2	3	4	5	<input type="checkbox"/>

Methodology

Cross-sectional analysis was performed on those young people who reported having had PSHE lessons in school. Responses to the questions above were recoded into a binary response of ‘covered well’ (1–2) and ‘covered poorly or not covered at all’ (3–5 and including N/A).

Sample

Of the 4,546 young people who answered the question about whether or not they had received PSHE classes in school, 3,748 (82.5%) reported that PSHE had been taught, while 798 (17.5%) reported that they had not received PSHE lessons. The former group represents the sample analysed below.

Associations with the reported quality of PSHE education coverage

We looked at associations between students reporting that topics had been covered well and any wider outcomes. Associations were found between topics relating to personal safety, health and wellbeing, and sex and relationships being covered well and positive outcomes for students relating to bullying, relationships with other students and feelings of belonging at school. High-quality lessons on personal and social skills had the most significant associations with positive outcomes.

Associations with high-quality lessons on personal and social skills

Those who reported that the personal and social skills topic had been covered well were less likely to have been bullied or involved in the bullying of others.

Table 1: Comparison of bullying by perception of personal and social skills coverage

	Number (%) of respondents		P value
	Well covered	Poorly/not covered	
Been bullied in past 2 months	720 (31.9%)	450 (36.2%)	0.010
Bullied others in past 2 months	334 (14.8%)	259 (21.0%)	<0.001
Been cyberbullied in past 2 months	375 (16.7%)	282 (22.9%)	<0.001

Students who reported that personal and social skills had been well covered were also more likely to have a positive view of peer relationships in their classes and a wider sense of belonging at school.

Table 2: Comparison of student relationships by perception of personal and social skills coverage

	Number (%) of respondents		P value
	Well covered	Poorly/not covered	
Agree other students accept them for who they are	1755 (77.4%)	804 (64.7%)	<0.001
Agree they belong in their school	1827 (80.3%)	823 (65.9%)	<0.001
Agree most students in class are kind and helpful	1655 (72.7%)	726 (58.2%)	<0.001
Agree students enjoy being together	1688 (74.5%)	772 (61.7%)	<0.001

Discussion

The findings suggest a strong correlation between well-received PSHE programmes on personal and social skills and wider outcomes for pupils in terms of relationships in school and a sense of belonging. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, cause and effect cannot be directly traced but these are nevertheless significant associations which have been identified previously by Ofsted – the [2013 Ofsted report](#) on PSHE education identified associations between outstanding PSHE and outstanding whole school inspections) and by studies into social and emotional skills programmes delivered through PSHE education (a 2015 [Department for Education](#) research review for example noted strong associations with both non-cognitive skills and academic attainment). These findings contribute to that positive picture.

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¹ The report is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/not-yet-good-enough-personal-social-health-and-economic-education>