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Swimming Against the Tide – Establishing a Wellbeing Curriculum

Why Wellbeing? With current developments in technology, the ever-shrinking nature of the world and pervasive influence of the mass media, it is ever more urgent for schools to address the issues that young people face. NSPCC Research (Harker, Jutte, et al., 2013) identified new threats to children's safety, particularly with regards to the digital world. UNICEF's report on child wellbeing in rich countries raises the UK's position from 21st (in 2007) to 16th but shows some worrying findings including high rates of teenage pregnancy, high rates of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) and high cannabis and alcohol use rates among 11-15 year olds (UNICEF, 2013). In order to be able to confront these challenges, we have to help young people to understand and solve problems in creative and innovative ways.

In education, we have a duty, to provide our students, not just with the grades that will help them progress into the next stages of their lives, but also to equip them with the skills and resources to be able to use these grades to the best of their ability and for the benefit of those around them. The aim of Wellbeing is to ensure that our young people flourish, both now and in the future.

Wellbeing at Thomas Tallis School

I was appointed to Thomas Tallis School in September 2008 to set up a faculty that would house PSHE, Citizenship, RE and Careers and draw together elements of the school¹ into a cohesive whole. This culminated in the creation of the Faculty of Wellbeing, the mechanics of which are set out in this article. The model of Wellbeing I developed at Tallis links to the

ideas offered by Erhaut and Whiting² (2008) and resembles the 'Pedagogy of Belonging' proposed by Beck and Malley (2003) in the emphasis on "...the importance of the teacher-student relationship and [the active involvement of] all students in the life of the classroom and the school community". It also has echoes of some of the practical curriculum ideas outlined in "Teaching Happiness and Wellbeing in Schools" (Morris 2009), particularly in the principle that the students should test out ideas for themselves in order to put them into practice in their own lives (p6). Wellbeing is at the core of what I do and permeates my curriculum design, lesson planning and external consultancy work.

There were five core elements to the realisation of the Wellbeing programme at Thomas Tallis – the taught curriculum, student services, student voice, parental involvement, and community interest. Although there has been a change in the structure of Wellbeing at Thomas Tallis for September 2013, I have outlined my original vision in some detail. Firstly, because, although it was still a work in progress, I believe that this is the structure that should be promoted. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, because most of the key elements will remain, along with the underlying ideology.

1. The Taught Curriculum

Wellbeing as a curriculum subject was offered to students (in the 2008-2009 academic year) initially for one hour per week with specialist staff and one hour per fortnight with their tutors and rolled out over three years. After conducting a survey of staff surrounding the

1. Things such as; subject lessons, school trips, student council, the school travel plan, healthy schools, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) working group, Student Voice working group, anti-bullying campaigns and so on.

2. "Holism goes beyond bodily or emotional health, entailing other ideas like spirituality, environment and more" (Erhaut and Whiting 2008, p12).

teaching of PSHE and Citizenship, it was decided that Wellbeing would be taught for three hours per fortnight with specialist staff only³. These lessons were supplemented with external learning opportunities, special sessions and visitors, and collapsed timetable days and were integrated with other curricular areas through whole-school initiatives such as SEAL, SMSC and ECM⁴. The Wellbeing Programme encompassed the formal curriculum areas of;

- Citizenship,
- PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education or Personal Wellbeing),
- Religious Education, and
- Careers Education (or Economic Wellbeing and Financial Capability), including Enterprise.

Units of work were created that aimed to interconnect these areas in a realistic way. For example, a Year 8 unit on Healthy Lifestyles combined: healthy eating; self-esteem and body image; media awareness; government advice and laws; health campaigns; eating on a budget and international comparisons. In the real world, issues rarely arise that require a person to use abilities from just one skill set or knowledge from just one academic discipline. Instead, there may be many different skills, ideas, experiences and beliefs that inform our decisions. For this reason it is essential that young people learn in such a way that will allow them to feel confident and positive in the face of these challenges. In addition, 'new world' issues such as digital Citizenship and social media have opened up new areas of learning which a traditional curriculum does not cater for.

2. Student Services

One of the things that can help to transform a school into an institution with the Wellbeing of individuals at its core is the range of provision that is offered to students outside the formal academic curriculum. Part of this is extra-curricular activities. But other important elements are the services that are provided to help support young people through all aspects

of their lives. In this vein, Thomas Tallis already has an extensive system of student support, including learning mentors and professional counsellors. There is also a programme of careers advice and guidance offered through the Connexions service (now provided by Prospects). However, these services often remain outside the routine systems of the school and fall into the reactive category of Wellbeing, more concerned with the repair of problems than a proactive approach to helping young people and members of the school community feel good about themselves and their present and future lives – their wellbeing and their 'well-becoming' (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008 p.6). There have been exceptions to this such as, the Healthy Schools Programme, Connexions programme of careers interviews for year 11, circle-time sessions for Year 7 and the School-Based Health Centre⁵. The prominence of such programmes have waxed and waned as they have been largely dependent on government funding.

3. Student Voice

Essential to the goal of improving the lives of young people, preparing them for the future and helping them to feel valued is the place that we give to them in the educational establishment. The existence of a student council is a first step. However, a student council that has limited power and no more than a token say in the affairs of the school is ultimately an impotent, under-valued and under-used resource. Students need to feel, not only that the student council is there for them, but also that they can have their own say in the way that things are done. A school is for young people. The decisions we make on a daily basis are about them and for them. Young people need to have a real and influential voice in the decisions made for them. Students can be consulted about more than school dinners and uniform, and when they are consulted it should be taken very seriously. Young people who feel that they can make real change and that their opinions count will be happier and live more

3. The survey gathered the opinions of 54 teachers on the place and role of Wellbeing in the school. It found that while most teachers enjoyed spending time with their tutor groups and thought that it is an important area of the school, they also thought that it should be taught by specialist teachers and revealed that they did not feel adequately trained to teach this area. The results of the survey can be found in a powerpoint presentation on the Thomas Tallis website at <http://www.thomastallischool.com/citizenship-wellbeing.html>

4. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) and Every Child Matters (ECM)

5. The School Based Health Centre was designed in consultation with the students, parents, school staff and the governing body. It is an area of the school which is a 'teacher-free zone' and in which different health professionals operate at an information-giving level and are available to provide support and guidance to young people on a range of subjects.

confident lives.

4. Parental Involvement and 5. Community Interest

Securing the wellbeing (and well-becoming) of our young people will require a concerted effort from all of the adults in their lives. Although a significant amount of their time is spent in school, a still greater amount is spent with their families and within the greater community. It is therefore incumbent upon us all to work together for our mutual good. The Wellbeing programme aims to involve parents and generate the interest and involvement of the community in the lives of young people. To this end the school hosts a series of workshops and consultation events, inviting parents, students and community representatives to take part. These are organized on a thematic basis and provide a combination of expert speakers, question and answer sessions, consultation documents and activities. The outcome of these sessions should be to help parents to feel more confident in helping their children with the issues encountered by them in school, as well as feeling more supported themselves by the school and community.

A New Structure

The change in the structure of Wellbeing at Thomas Tallis was brought about by a new driver - new government priorities, changing curricular expectations and changing school structures. There are obviously many different ways in which to pursue an effective programme of Wellbeing in a school and different groups and different leadership will have their preferences. Currently Wellbeing at Thomas Tallis has been restructured to bring the tutors back to having a much more prominent role in the delivery of Wellbeing. While this structure brings with it many challenges, there are also many opportunities. From September 2013, Wellbeing will again be taught by tutors for one hour per week. The course will cover Citizenship and PSHE and retain the thematic and project-based approach. The main challenges of this form of delivery are with regards to teacher training and monitoring. Although having the majority of the teachers in the school delivering Wellbeing will mean that

it does not remain the preserve of only a few dedicated individuals, it remains necessary to have specialist input to ensure that the issues are dealt with appropriately.

Key Challenges

There are a number of challenges inherent in the transformation of the educational institution and in the attempt to bring about large-scale attitudinal change. These are:

1. Assessment,
2. Securing support,
3. Sustainability, and
4. Change Management

Assessing a person's wellbeing is a difficult task. The 'Crick' report called for active citizenship, where success was measured in the real outcomes of real projects undertaken for the good of the school or local community (DfEE & QCA 1998, Section 3 in particular). This echoes the call made for a transformed and transformative education in Terry Wrigley's book and call to action 'Another School is Possible' (2006) - assessment that is intrinsically rewarding, solving real problems, writing for a real audience and dealing with real-world outcomes; encouraging critical thinking; cross-curricular learning and human rights focused school ethos; the suspension of the regular timetable to allow for project based inquiry (Chapter 9). This resonates with the ideas outlined by Black et al., (2002), in the seminal text on Assessment of Learning, 'Working Inside the Black Box' and facilitated the construction of a new type of assessment, reporting and recording system which focused on the feedback given to the students and disallowed grades and other numerical indicators of achievement.

Traditional institutional structures still form a barrier. Secondary school teachers in particular can be fiercely territorial when it comes to their subject areas, much of which is understandably due to the fact that it is the performance of the students within that area that they are judged upon. This makes garnering support from those already within the traditional system very difficult. Many teachers are dubious of anything that is not seen to have sufficient academic rigour. Many teachers and students question use of curriculum time for non-GCSE options. Citizenship and PSHE have often been seen as

'time-fillers' and the move towards a more holistic view of education through the development of Wellbeing is beset with similar criticisms. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it is the parents who are most receptive to the idea of time and space dedicated to the development of their children's wellbeing, as well as being the most sceptical. While the spectre, of OFSTED and league tables, loom large it will remain difficult to secure commitment to the idea of wellbeing sitting equally alongside more traditional academic subjects. Top level government and SLT commitment is needed to ensure the sustainability of any Wellbeing programme. However, even without the specific blessing of the national Government, much can be done in an educational setting in which the leadership fully supports the development of student wellbeing.

Lessons from Consultancy

As well as leading the introduction and implementation of Wellbeing in Thomas Tallis, I have undertaken various consultancy projects in the creation and use of audio-visual materials related to Wellbeing. This has provided me with valuable lessons both in terms of teacher training in school and external perceptions of education and teaching. The experiences of working with production companies and media groups, and presenting at conferences on topics relating to the PSHE and Citizenship aspects of Wellbeing, have shown me that there is indeed widespread support for the idea of Wellbeing in schools among teachers and external stakeholders. I have often been surprised by the reaction of people on the periphery of education to the idea of wellbeing in schools – these people, like the parents and carers of the students, can be sceptical but are overwhelmingly supportive of the idea. The plethora of research around the topic of wellbeing and its impact on achievement and life satisfaction of young people also indicates a wide-spread support that is not replicated in current government circles, or indeed in many examples of school leadership. This means that my consultancy role serves a two-fold purpose. One is that it keeps me optimistic and focused on what I believe about wellbeing in education. Having the external support and examining the external research shines a light on what I may

otherwise have missed by focusing on the 'naysayers'. The second is that I am able to structure my advice and guidance around the main tenants of wellbeing, thus broadening its scope and audience. The focus on a student's wellbeing does not take away from the drive for achievement or progress. Rather, it enhances it and this has been something that I have been able to contribute to through working in a consultancy role.

Conclusion

The creation of a new faculty, with a new educational imperative, within an old structure, will always be difficult. I believe that the capacity exists but the systems currently in place do not support the work that is needed to transform the lives of children and young people. A focus on Wellbeing calls for a transformation of institutional structures and prevailing mindsets that values only what is (currently) measured. That said, the ultimate aim is to be able to help children and young people to flourish, both now and in the future. The Wellbeing Manifesto (Shah & Marks, 2004) suggests one area where the Government could act is,

*4. Create an education system that promotes flourishing
The purpose of the education system should be to create capable and emotionally well-rounded young people who are happy and motivated. (pp.2-3)*

In the same way that old institutional structures have been inadequate to deal with large-scale cross-cultural and cross-national issues such as the environment and globalisation (Springer 2000; Robinson 2009), so are they inadequate to deal with new ideas like Wellbeing. Such themes require different ideas about intelligence, knowledge and education. There is a necessity for evidence-based programmes that support this new pedagogy to help educational leaders to break the mould of the testing culture, and to suggest alternative ways to assess progression. We must also look towards new models of school leadership that allow leaders to determine what is best for their individual circumstances without the straight-jacket of national targets and unrealistic expectations. In order to build capacity in this field more work will need to be done looking at the advantages of promoting Wellbeing models

and utilising longitudinal studies to show sustained benefit. Obviously, if adults do have such a substantial role in the Wellbeing of young people then the teacher's role is clear. But teachers can only do so much in a society that focuses only on the measurable, and often financial, outcomes. What is required is a fundamental change in the way we educate our young people to ensure they really do flourish.

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