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## Melonie Syrett

### PSHE teaching in primary schools: The past, present and the future

I became a Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) co-ordinator in 2003, after completing my NQT year. Like many, I was thrown into the position because it was the only subject leader role going and I was given no support whatsoever. I didn't know much about it; there had not been any PSHE in my teacher training degree (and there still isn't now). Speaking to the staff, it seemed that there was no real system for PSHE within the school. There was no prior co-ordinator, no scheme of work, no...well, nothing. At this time, Curriculum 2000 was in place. There was a Programme of Study (POS) PSHE. There was even a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) scheme for PSHE. Yet this school, and later I found most schools, had nothing of quality in place.

New to the role and not one for just leaving something, I signed up to a PSHE co-ordinator course. I was instantly inspired by the passionate consultant who ran the sessions. She spoke with such drive, modelled sessions so clearly and communicated the life skills PSHE teaches so profoundly. As I drove home I vowed to improve PSHE in my workplace.

Over the next few years I set to work. I called an amnesty on resources and plans and audited what the school had (which like most schools turned out to be a huge amount of resources) and tried to create something for the school to follow. I introduced a scheme, made it to meet an individual's needs and able to link the National Curriculum 2000 POS to the topics the school had in place. I made every effort to make it easy to turn into quality units of work rather than blindly following QCA. *"Here we go!"* I thought. *"This is the beginning of the PSHE revolution!"*

#### Deaf ears

Bless me and my youthful outlook! It fell on deaf ears. People just were not interested. All I

heard was; *"PSHE is NOT statutory."* *"PSHE is NOT SATS."* *"PSHE is hard to assess and has NO levels attached to it."* *"PSHE only has to be reported in the end of year report and that's basically just a behaviour comment isn't it?"* *"PSHE is at the bottom of our list."*

Even faced with such apathy my motivation didn't waver. I enrolled on the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) accreditation programme (now run by [Babcock 4S](#)) and took a module on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) within the accreditation. This helped me further understand PSHE, the objectives and the theory. I learned a range of teaching techniques such as distancing, grouping, making the session impersonal, using real situations and having clear rules. I was observed by outside agencies and at the end I had a qualification underwritten by Roehampton University, to prove my knowledge, skills and understanding.

I left that school realising that PSHE, at that time, was there, somewhere: usually lurking about in wonderful county-run courses and qualifications far away from classrooms. The school co-ordinator, however, needed the rest of the staff on board for it to be anywhere near the type of quality-first teaching that would make a difference to young people's lives. There were people in the Local Authority championing it, but really only the co-ordinators in schools seemed interested.

#### Huge gaps

As I moved on, I strengthened my resolve. It was now 2008. I had joined an 'Outstanding' school. Surely a school with a great OFSTED rating would have everything in place! On the surface yes, things ticked along nicely. But once I started digging and looking for all the things a co-ordinator needed I found huge gaps. The behaviour system was excellent. The morale of the children was brilliant. There were many celebrations, religious group visitors and

reflection times. Here and there bits of Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) were going on but no one really seemed to understand its relevance and SRE was taught by those who dangerously used humour to mask their lack of subject knowledge.

When you looked at the provision you could see many great things. There was a whole school ethos. PSHE as an atmosphere was great! But there was also a distinct lack of discrete PSHE teaching. The teaching that was going on was littered with subject knowledge faults and teachers used to laugh off questions that children asked. When it was opened up, the raw picture of PSHE provision was actually quite distressing! Also at this time the money set aside for Local Education Authority PSHE courses had been taken away. You were lucky if there was still a consultant that you could speak to when in need.

### Overhaul

Once again, I tried to overhaul the subject. I introduced a new scheme that was 'the best available' following guidance from the PSHE association. I taught the SRE sessions (utilising the BBC's excellent but now dated Living and Growing DVD) while Year 6 teachers observed, and then over the years we team-taught them. I took over the parent meetings for SRE, which were quite ridiculous affairs, and made them into something that satisfied parent's curiosity and calmed their fears. I turned PSHE from something that (as all too often was the case) people paid lip service to and made it into something of some stature.

Finally there were lessons being taught in each class using a spiral scheme and Sex Education went on really well, in Year 6. But it still wasn't a whole-school, quality approach. SRE didn't run through the school. People were far too scared for that to happen. Assessment for learning didn't really take place. Teachers taught the given lessons but they didn't look at their classes needs and personalise the learning. Why? Because PSHE wasn't statutory. There was no need. People just didn't give their time to PSHE. They didn't even have the skills and knowledge to teach it well themselves. I watched in dismay as literacy and numeracy lessons using the new frameworks were being delicately crafted by teachers. I attended In-

Service Educational Training (INSET) on Assessment for Learning, on meeting your children's needs, on differentiation, on targeting... all geared just to the core subjects.

By now, I had been in charge of PSHE for 9 years. In each school I had worked in, and when talking to other co-ordinators, the picture had been similar. In fact, the schools I had been in had been better than other colleagues' provision and that is scary! When I joined my current school in 2011, an inner London school in Special Measures, I instantly noticed something completely different to my previous experience. In my summer holiday, I was contacted by the previous co-ordinator. She wanted to share her action plan, tell me her provision and show me the assessment procedures the school used! There was a scheme in place! SRE ran through the school! There was also a complicated assessment tracking system, but a tracking system no less! I held a little flutter of excitement in my heart but didn't allow any more than that. I knew what I was likely to find.

### PSHE as a core subject

This time my pessimism was unwarranted! Gradually, as I met with the headteacher, I began to notice that she regarded PSHE as a core subject. She had turned the school around from being in special measures by firstly implementing PSHE across the school. She looked at the relationships the staff had with the children, parents and each other. She looked at how conflicts were resolved, how difficult situations were approached and how people spoke to each other. She created a whole-school approach. A kind of PSHE-based atmosphere. She implemented a yearly programme of SEAL so that the whole school would be focussing on particular themes at the same time. And then... she employed a trained PSHE co-ordinator!

I set to work. There was already a spiral SRE scheme in place (from reception to Year 6!), so I introduced the spiral scheme I had used for other themes in PSHE. I led INSET and modelled teaching sessions. I showed how to plan for PSHE, how to assess PSHE and how to provide personalised learning. I taught SRE at Year 6 and provided support to others. I taught teachers how to use distancing techniques if they didn't know an answer or were worried about answering questions. I wrote a clear

policy for both PSHE and SRE that detailed exactly HOW we taught and WHY we taught that way. The difference here was that the headteacher wanted this to happen and actively, publicly supported it.

We decided to sign the PSHE Association's School Charter for PSHE. (PSHE Association, 2014) We displayed it prominently in the reception, announced it in the school newsletter and used the logo on our website and letter heads. During INSET, I explained the impact that signing the charter would have on the school. How it meant we were a school that was working towards outstanding PSHE provision. It gave me extra 'oomph' in developing provision school wide.

Knowing full well that PSHE was fully supported in this setting, I approached the headteacher about going for the PSHE Association Chartered Teacher award. I researched the standards that I needed and recognised that I had much of the knowledge and evidence to hand. She agreed! I took time to collect evidence from files and observations I already had and did a little extra research in areas I needed updating. I built my file and presented it to the Head. She asked me questions to check my understanding and asked me to talk her through different pieces of evidence. She then booked a time to observe me to see this theory in practice. We then signed the forms and sent it off to the PSHE Association.

### **Chartered Teacher**

Since receiving the Chartered Teacher award, my personal PSHE career has gone from strength to strength. The PSHE Association announced my achievement on their website and Twitter and also the school celebrated the award. Shortly afterwards, we were invited to present to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children at the House of Commons. There were over 20 people in the public gallery, many of importance to PSHE in schools and in the wider community. People began to ask me questions to find my professional opinion! I later returned to the House of Commons after being invited by an MP, present at that meeting, to pick my brains on PSHE.

Since 2011, PSHE has evolved in my current workplace. It is no longer something teachers ignore. PSHE is everywhere. Our whole school

assemblies focus on a PSHE theme each half-term. There are displays around the school. PSHE is assessed at the beginning and end of each unit at least. Lessons are scheduled per week, in half-termly themes through a spiral curriculum, from Reception upwards! Year on year, our children build on their knowledge. Staff are more knowledgeable. INSET and training takes place. Teachers know who to go to and they know that they are getting good advice. They have the opportunity to see good practice in action and have their lessons jointly planned if they feel less than comfortable. We have parent meetings each year for SRE at their child's maturity. They know they are listened to. The parents know what we are teaching. I am visible as the co-ordinator; people have a face that they can go to. Our PSHE goes wider than just the school - we have links with the local library, we have celebratory assemblies and put on productions and enterprise fairs which are open to the local community.

We have had many visits to view our PSHE provision and to discuss what can be done to improve PSHE in schools. I've hosted a Baroness, an MP, the curriculum leader of the DfE and the subject leads from the DfE. I've supported other school teachers in their provision. We have a CPD programme of observations of quality-first PSHE teaching. I've also developed resources for the PSHE Association.

Joining a school with PSHE at its heart and becoming a Chartered Teacher of PSHE has enabled me to bring PSHE out into the open. It is a visible subject in the school. Being the co-ordinator has changed. Rather than slowly making a tiny difference to the provision in my workplace and facing an uphill struggle, I am now co-ordinating an active subject. My knowledge and skills are valued and respected by a growing community. I am part of a wider community of people passionate about PSHE and my work has been greatly enhanced.

But I am one drop in the ocean. I have fallen on my feet in a place that puts PSHE on a pedestal and realises the effect that a whole school PSHE approach and discrete, tailored, quality first PSHE teaching can have on an institution. There are more of us out there. I know this from the workshops and meetings I attend. There are people who value PSHE.

Similarly, there are teachers on that first step, just where I was, 10 years ago. They still fight to have their voices heard. They still push to get time in a staff meeting or to get a PSHE scheme taught in their school and in some cases PSHE provision has not moved forward in a decade.

### The future

And what about the future? Well our Education Secretary has managed to take us down from having guidance in the National Curriculum 2000 to having the measly phrase *'All schools should make provision for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE)'* (DfE, 2013). Well thanks for that, Mr Secretary. We 'should' be teaching PSHE and SRE. We don't actually 'HAVE' to, but just should.

Confusingly, OFSTED will actively look for it in their inspections. In a report published in 2013, it was stated that there was *'a close correlation between the grades that the schools were awarded for overall effectiveness in their last section 5 inspection, and their grade for PSHE education... All but two of the schools graded outstanding at their last section 5 inspection were also graded outstanding for PSHE education and none were less than good'* (PSHE Association, 2013).

So, what do we do? In a world where social media seems to be cultivating cyber bullies, alter egos, ridiculously posed or Photoshopped selfies and grooming, in a world where terrorism is always on the tip of people's tongues, in a world where 11-year olds become pregnant and keep it secret until it is far too late (Daily Mail, 2014), in a world where we are constantly barraged with sexual references, images, storylines and vocals, in a world where pregnancy is disposable in the pursuit of fame (Metro News, 2014), in a world where gang culture is on the rise, in a world where readily disposable credit and payday loans are on the uptake...in this world, today's world, where Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education 'should' be being taught. It just does not add up.

I worry for the state of PSHE. I worry that it will take something horrendous to wake up those that rule our education system. We are just not literacy and numeracy drones. We interact with people daily. We meet people, we fall in love, we might have children, and we need to budget and save and interact with

others. We need to know who to turn to for help. We need to care about ourselves. PSHE should be statutory. It isn't a soft subject of skills that you can learn by osmosis. It needs to be actively taught and taught well.

In the wider scheme of things - even if the government won't give us new guidance on PSHE, there are now new POS developed by the PSHE Association (PSHE Association, 2013a). Resources exist for people to bring their PSHE teaching into the 21st century. DfE 2000 guidance is just not relevant anymore. It's 14 years old.

### In an ideal world

Looking to the future, in an ideal world PSHE in schools would be statutory. It would make it something that HAD to be taught in schools. But by no means does that create the conditions for amazing PSHE education. It needs to have high status in schools. Co-ordinators need to have training by passionate PSHE trainers so that they come away with fire in their bellies ready to share the importance of PSHE with their staff. Headteachers need to see the impact high-quality, school-wide, PSHE has on their students and to cultivate this with their staff.

There should be an expert in each school or at least in each cluster of schools that can support, model and help craft PSHE in each environment. Every school needs someone on the ground who works tirelessly to improve PSHE in their workplace; someone who can train, motivate and monitor PSHE throughout the school, making changes where necessary. Each school needs someone who meets with parents and helps them to understand the curriculum and can help to quell their fears and understand that it is maturity relevant content for their children.

If this was the case...and it started tomorrow, in 7 years' time some really confident, knowledgeable young people would be going to secondary school, ready to face the pressures of teenage life and adulthood. They would be ready for the next stage of PSHE and if the same kind of passion went with the children to the end of their educational days we would have wonderful young adults being let loose in society. They would assess risk, resist peer pressure, and know who to go to when they needed help. They would value themselves and

others and make decisions based on what they felt was best for them. Teenage pregnancy and abortion rates would drop. STD rates would lower. Crime may reduce, lives could be saved and all in all, in this perfect PSHE world, people would be happier.

So for the future of PSHE and the future of our society, we should not give up. Support is out there for co-ordinators, teachers and headteachers. There are 17 Chartered Teachers of PSHE and that list is growing (PSHE Association, 2012a) There are consultants, Local authority workers and even people in the DfE and Parliament who are there championing PSHE! One day, hopefully not too far away, PSHE will be statutory and I can dream that one day too, it will be classed as a core subject.

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