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### Five Years On: are we still swimming against the tide?

In 2013, I wrote an article (Springer, 2013), about the obstacles faced in the delivery of a curriculum that focused on the wellbeing of young people. At that time, I quoted NSPCC research (Harker *et al.*, 2013) and the UNICEF report on child wellbeing from the same year (UNICEF, 2013) as examples of the needs of our young people and demonstrating the importance of an educational programme that addressed those needs. I outlined the Wellbeing programme vision which I had begun at Thomas Tallis School, in order to show what I believed to be valuable in the teaching of wellbeing, as well as point to the inescapable fact that the educational institution is often at the mercy of the prevailing government agenda or individual head teacher's philosophy. I identified five core components of our programme – the taught curriculum, student services, student voice, parental involvement, and community interest – and four key challenges – assessment, securing support, sustainability, and change management. I also stated my underlying belief about how wellbeing should be taught, highlighting the overall structure of the programme along with its accompanying ideology. My assertion was that, “a focus on wellbeing calls for nothing less than a transformation in fundamental institutional structures and a prevailing mind-set that values only what is (currently) measured.” In this, I remain unmoved. The major shift in my thinking has come in what this ought to, or can, look like

in practice.

When I began this project in 2009 a taught wellbeing curriculum was a relatively new and untested idea. We formed Wellbeing as a specialist subject, taught by specialist teachers, within dedicated curriculum time. The ideology guiding its creation and implementation was an extension of my PhD thesis (Springer, 2000), which asserted that education needed to move away from traditional and fragmentary disciplinary structures, towards more holistic and ‘transdisciplinary’ forms<sup>1</sup>. In practice, this meant the creation of a single programme that worked thematically across the subject areas of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), Citizenship, Careers and Religious Education (RE). I'd seen and been impressed with this structure in different contexts; in Canada in the Ontario Ministry of Education's secondary curriculum area of Interdisciplinary Studies<sup>2</sup>, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002) and in Jamaica in the Social Studies curriculum which is taught thematically<sup>3</sup> (Government of Jamaica, 1998). Seeing some of my theoretical ideas put into practice in different ways made me believe that the transdisciplinary project was possible.

As outlined in *Swimming Against the Tide*, five years ago, this project was abandoned due to the prevailing national agenda and the particular vision and philosophy of education driving the school at that time. I had put a lot of time and energy and thought into the Wellbeing

<sup>1</sup> ‘Transdisciplinary’ is a term that I outlined first in my PhD which went beyond the usual conception of cross-disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity. It describes an idea in which subject areas do not merely work together but also take the work and skills of each other to form a new sphere of learning.

<sup>2</sup> “In interdisciplinary studies courses, students consciously apply the concepts, methods, and language of more than one discipline to explore topics, develop skills, and solve problems. These courses are intended to reflect the linkages and interdependencies among subjects, disciplines, and courses and their attendant concepts, skills, and applications, and are more than the sum of the disciplines included” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2002, p5)

<sup>3</sup> I also observed this in an informal non-participant observation in a Teacher International Professional Development Programme visit to Jamaica in 2006.

Curriculum and I wasn't sure that it was going to survive, beyond being an experiment in what teaching Wellbeing to students might look like in practice. The knowledge that my original project had ended (and was unlikely to be revived) made me return to thinking about what I really wanted from the programme and how I could get that in the format I was given. The need for something that addresses the wellbeing of young people has not diminished. Indeed, with recent findings suggesting that young people's happiness is at its lowest since 2010 (The Children's Society, 2017) it could be argued that the need is greater than ever. This need, however, cannot be met through a sole educational *programme*, but rather through new educational structures.

### The New Structure

Whilst much of the content and many of the structures have remained in some form, there has been a shift in the way 'wellbeing' is done at Tallis. This shift has been mainly in relation to what 'wellbeing' is and where it is located. In the first place, 'Wellbeing' is now 'Guidance'. While this seemed at first to diminish the place that child wellbeing could have in the school, I have come to see it as a more accurate representation of what this area aims to achieve; a series of *experiences* that can help to guide a student through the different choices they have to make in life and is equally concerned with their wellbeing as their well-becoming. These experiences may be in a PSHE classroom, but they could equally and often more importantly and usefully be encountered in the students' day-to-day life within the school.

Without a specialist faculty I felt constrained. However, sometimes constraints can bring out our most creative ideas. And so, it turns out, my original concept was too limited, too compartmentalised, despite my overarching transdisciplinary ideology. I realised that the taught curriculum is not the main thing, and nor can it be in a national context in which the range of structures for organising PSHE is almost infinite, and with many schools not giving any curriculum time to it at all. We in the field have been a bit obsessed with the taught side. I am not for a moment suggesting that we shouldn't keep

fighting that fight, but where the hours allocated to a subject area can come and go at the whim of a head teacher, we need to give more attention to structural change. I say this even as PSHE looks to become a statutory subject. As the evolution of Citizenship has shown, becoming statutory does not guarantee a respected place in the school curriculum. That place can only be guaranteed by creating a space within the school ethos and school structure that makes abandoning the project much harder.

So, what does the wellbeing project at Tallis look like at this point in time? The core components of the programme outlined 5 years ago – the taught curriculum (reduced from one hour a week to one hour a fortnight), student services, student voice, parental involvement and community interest – are still in place and valued and in a continual process of improvement. However, these are also (potentially) specific and discrete projects that are more subject to, what we might think of as seasonal changes in national or school policy or staffing. The main shift in this programme has been to turn our attention to more long-term and institutional structures. This falls under three main headings, each of which is more expansive than the previous; cross-curricular projects, whole school events and school ethos. The expansion of this side of the well-being programme has meant that the reduction in discrete teaching time has not translated into a diminished focus on student wellbeing.

### Cross-curricular Projects

We have a number of schemes of work in which PSHCE works alongside other faculty areas. This strategy helps to claw back time for the PSHCE curriculum, which is often extremely limited, and was one of the things that I was most worried about in the move to the new structure. Some examples of this method of working have been; The Anne Frank Schools Programme<sup>4</sup> (on the theme of anti-discrimination with History), Learning from Kenya (on the theme of identity and globalization with Geography), Playdagogy<sup>5</sup> (a sports-based disability awareness-raising programme with PE), and Story Jam<sup>6</sup> (learning key personal skills

<sup>4</sup> This is a national programme available to schools. For more information see <https://annefrank.org.uk/education/schools-programme/>

<sup>5</sup> An international project through PLAY international and Cambridge House. For more information see <http://playdagogy.org/en> and <http://ch1889.org/blog/2016/playdagogy-shortlisted-social-innovation-award-beyond-sport-awards-2016/>

<sup>6</sup> A London-based group. For more information see <https://storyjamjar.com/the-galloping-horse-tour/>

through story-telling with English). Most of these kinds of projects also enlist the help of external agencies and this results in a greater level of engagement from non-specialist staff, as well as contributing to the expansion of the numbers of people students interact with.

There are justified criticisms levelled at cross-curricular work, with many people of the belief that it is merely a way to do nothing at all. This fear however, is not an inevitable outcome of a transdisciplinary programme. With sufficient buy-in, efficient organisation and good PR it actually works exceptionally well and is really what we should be aiming for. We are currently trying to prepare students for a new world and new global and personal challenges. The most significant global and local problems of the modern age need access to all areas of knowledge for their solution. We need specialists, of course. But specialists who have a broad knowledge of their context and an understanding that what they do will not remain in their limited sphere. A discrete subject is perhaps the easy option when really we should be expanding the reach of child wellbeing into all areas of education.

### **Whole School Events**

With a reduction in set curriculum time we also decided to implement whole school drop-down days. These are not unusual in schools and I have experienced them in many institutions. Although the general idea of suspending the usual curriculum and doing work on a particular theme remains, our 'drop-down days' are different for a few important reasons.

The first is in the name - Community Days. We named them this in order to move away from the idea that we were just rearranging the day and in order to focus on the idea working together as a community in cross-disciplinary, cross-age ways. The days are promoted as strengthening our community and (as with the change from Wellbeing to Guidance) the new labelling has been significant. Another difference is in their structure. We hold three Community Days around the same time each year and each day has its own flavour and added name.

The first Community Day is called Tallis Choices and works as a more traditional 'drop-down day' with year groups attending a range of different workshops on a rota. The workshops are related to the needs of each particular year

group and linked to the whole school Tallis Habits and Tallis Character (discussed in further detail in the next section) with students returning to their tutor groups at the end of the day to reflect on the sessions they have attended and how they fit into their personal and school life.

The second day of the year works through subject areas and is called Tallis Citizens. The timetable remains the same throughout the day, except for an injected tutorial at the end of the day. All lessons for that day are linked to a particular theme which changes annually, such as protest or globalisation or spirituality. As students go to each lesson their plenary task is the same; to fill in a 'passport' which has them reflect on the theme and its links again to habits of mind and moral character traits.

The final community day of the year is called Tallis Voices and is designed to hear what students have to say about a particular theme, rather than give them information or teach them about something specific. The day is structured in vertical groups with students working in mixed age groups on a school-wide project.

The Community Days were our starting point for ensuring that child wellbeing (and well-becoming) were sited across the school, in all subject areas and with all members of staff. We have built on the success of these days and now also have a bespoke work inspiration programme called Dream Bigger, an annual Democracy week in which we hold mock elections related to whatever is happening locally or nationally and a Careers Week where subject areas incorporate careers information into their usual lessons.

Due to initiatives such as these, students are used to encountering a range of personal and civic development issues across all aspects of school life.

### **School Ethos**

Thomas Tallis is unusual in that its mission is expressed in a deep commitment to some specific human values. We believe that creativity is crucial for young people's development so it runs through all our disciplines and we have a long history of engaging young people in design thinking, problem-finding and solving, and working with expert practitioners from outside school.

Our deep commitment to these ideals has resulted in two signature movements within

school - Tallis Habits and [Tallis Character](#)<sup>7</sup>. Together, these form the academic and moral character of the school respectively and frame all the work that we do. The formation of Tallis Character in particular was the result of wanting to find a way to encompass and develop the wide variety of experiences and activities that students could have access to and to encourage a community in which our behaviour and relationships were guided by a set of core moral values. Over the course of three years, we established five core values – our Tallis Character traits – in consultation with staff, students and parents and it has become central to all of the work that we do around student development and wellbeing. Over the last two years this has been added to with a new Community Framework. The Community Framework is both practical and visionary in that it is a planning document for the development of the Tallis Community (both in school and with the wider local community) as well as a vision of the kind of community we want students to create and be a part of. It has also meant that a number of ‘wellbeing’ projects have been undertaken this year by many different members of staff, including themes such as supporting transgender students, engaging students as care ambassadors, working with local businesses and courses for parents.

All of this is underpinned through our holistic and whole-school Inclusion Framework. This framework highlights three areas – safeguarding, learning and wellbeing – that are seen not just as the preserve of targeted groups but as a universal entitlement for all students. This strong and significant piece of work, developed in consultation with key staff and delivered as a part of whole staff training, serves to ensure that student wellbeing and well-becoming remains a core aspect of our work, regardless of where or if it retains a formal curriculum space.

The impressive thing about the new structure of ‘wellbeing’ at Thomas Tallis is in the expansion of where and by whom it is delivered, through the development of whole school strategic and operational structures. Attention to values and ethos brings people in and garners support in a way that sending out (albeit

excellent) lessons to non-specialists really doesn’t (even a specialist faculty doesn’t). School ethos is what we might think of as the context that would allow something like student well-being to take a more significant place in the educational institution. Twenty years ago, the DfEE, (1998), suggested that a school’s ethos “... is reflected in the way pupils relate to each other, how pupils relate to staff, and how the school relates to the community it serves”. If the school ethos can be developed over time through the establishment of regular and valued events, and ultimately through the creation of accepted whole-school institutions, then the task of supporting students’ well-being and development does not just depend on the delivery of some infrequent lessons. These kinds of structures, that contribute to the overall ethos of the school, are much less able to shift with without significant work and potentially opposition from a large part of the school community.

### Dealing with the Challenges

In addition to expanding the key principles of my original programme, the new conception also deals effectively with many of the challenges thrown up by the delivery of specialist programmes. The whole process of weaving something into the school ethos, from conception to consultation to development to realisation, means that issues such as change management, securing support and sustainability are naturally addressed. If you have brought the community with you as you develop a particular institution, then you will naturally have a group of people who feel invested in the outcome. Having a long-term plan (generally around 1-3 years) for the implementation of any new development means that it can be built up slowly so that people become used to the idea and are more able to incorporate it into their own educational ideology. Guidance is now not only something that is taught through a few PSHCE lessons, but is woven into the fabric of the whole school in a way that a dedicated subject area just can’t do. We have made everyone a ‘specialist’ teacher. This doesn’t mean that they don’t sometimes need specialist support (which is available) but that the whole staff has a responsibility for the

<sup>7</sup> Tallis Character is a set of five moral character traits – kindness, honesty, respect, fairness and optimism – which we use to guide our behaviour and relationships. These are separate from what the Jubilee Centre for Character Education calls performance traits, civic traits and intellectual traits (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Within this model, our Tallis Habits might be characterised as ‘performance traits’.

delivery of student Guidance. This has all meant that people are invested in the area to such an extent that merely 'abandoning' it becomes impossible.

### New Challenges?

So, as I look back over the last five years from a more dispassionate position, it is clear that the decision to be made ought not to be whether to swim with or against a tide that is dictated by an external agenda. There are, in fact, a multitude of options available to anyone or any institution brave enough to mark out their own course. I would even go so far as to suggest that, in this modern world of fast-paced change and future uncertainty in so many things, that there is really no other way to proceed.

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