

MSP Briefing

Personal and Social Education (PSE)

My role as Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people in Scotland with particular reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The following briefing is informed by the UNCRC and in particular articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC which outline the aims of education, laying particular emphasis on the development of the child; and the UNCRC's overarching articles 2 (best interests), 3 (non-discrimination), 6 (right to life and maximum development) and 12 (the right to have an opinion, express that opinion and for due weight to be given to it)¹.

In my experience, Personal and Social Education (PSE) describes classes which are used to cover a broad range of important topics, including:

- financial literacy;
- personal safety;
- road safety;
- sexual health and healthy relationships;
- alcohol and drug awareness;
- grooming and online safety;
- bullying;
- citizenship and human rights, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These topics include skills that are vital to the health and wellbeing of children and young people. They address experiences and outcomes across the curriculum and provide important skills for learning, life and work and in exploring these children learn important deeper learning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and both written and oral communication.

Children have a right to receive good quality information on all these topics. They are as important to children's lives as literacy and numeracy – indeed Health and Wellbeing is the third pillar of Curriculum for Excellence. Yet what is covered within PSE and the amount of time given to each topic varies significantly between local authorities and even from school to school.

Curriculum for Excellence allows schools to develop their own curriculum, but a lack of specific guidance on PSE means that children are not consistently receiving the learning

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

opportunities they should be able to expect and PSE is not always given sufficient importance within school curricula.

In some cases, particularly the area of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenting (RSHP) education, the lack of specific guidance can lead to deficits in a child's education, with the potential to have a negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

The concept of evolving capacities balances the recognition of children as active agents in their own lives, entitled to be listened to, respected and granted increasing autonomy in the exercise of rights, while also providing them with protection in accordance with their relative immaturity and youth. This provides the basis for an appropriate respect for children's agency without exposing them prematurely to the full responsibilities normally associated with adulthood. PSE is an important area through which children can explore important – and at times controversial – issues in a supportive environment, preparing them to be active contributors to society.

PSE presents an excellent opportunity for secondary schools to use the cross-curricular approaches which should be at the centre of Curriculum for Excellence. Schools have the opportunity to deliver this part of the curriculum with more flexibility than certificated courses and should be utilising the expertise of staff from across the school and from within the education authority, as well as making use of the expertise that exists in partner agencies from across the public, private and third sectors. Aspects of PSE can also be delivered in conjunction with other subject areas, such as PE, English, maths, sciences and social subjects as part of the Broad General Education.

I support the Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) campaign which calls for education, particularly PSE and RHSP, to be inclusive of LGBTI identities and relationships.

Research by TIE, Stonewall and LGBT Youth Scotland shows that in many cases children do not receive LGBTI inclusive education, nor are teachers delivering PSE confident in addressing this issue. It is therefore vital that teachers are properly trained and have access to appropriate resources to support them in delivering this and all aspects of PSE. This must include resources appropriate for use in primary schools, where RSHP education is usually the responsibility of the class teacher. Education Scotland must ensure that their website clearly signposts appropriate materials and resources, as well as highlighting best practice in this area.

Likewise, anti-bullying education needs to be rights-based and focussed on positive relationships, as outlined in the National Approach to Bullying. It must include identity-based bullying and be LGBTI inclusive. It must recognise that no young person should be bullied for any reason and encourage children to appreciate and value differences.

PSE is central to preparing children and young people for the adult world and children have a right to receive the information they need to live in the modern world and to keep themselves safe and healthy. However, in the absence of explicit guidelines of what PSE should cover, not all children currently receive this. Curricular flexibility should not mean children miss out on knowledge and skills so essential to realising their rights.

PSE, and in particular RSHP, is the one area of curriculum where more explicit guidance of what should be covered is required, and I would encourage the development of this. It is also essential that the delivery of PSE within individual schools is monitored, to ensure all children receive their entitlements.

For further information relating to this briefing, please feel free to contact my Policy Officer, Megan Farr, in the first instance via megan.farr@cypcs.org.uk.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tam Baillie". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tam Baillie
Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland