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## Boo Spurgeon

# Student perspectives and reflections on specialist PSHE provision in secondary school

When I was asked to put together an article, I was very keen that young people should have the opportunity to speak. This article is mostly from a fabulous bunch of young people, with whom I have had the privilege of working over the last four or five years.

I was initially recruited in 2005 to set up a specialist PSHE department in a small secondary school in Sheffield by a forward-thinking head teacher, who gave me the job I asked for, rather than the one that was advertised. Citizenship was taught separately. The head at that time, gave me an open book, and supported me as I set up a curriculum that was and still is spiral, incremental in development, and age-appropriate. I have been fortunate to have gathered a small committed team working with me for a fair number of the last 10 years; 3 of us have the PSHE certification.

### Achievements

What we have done and at what stage:

**Year 7** - Anti-bullying, including homophobia, safety including first aid and self-defence, team skills development, health (including SRE and drugs), equal opportunities around disability and some citizenship work around family types.

**Year 8** - Anti-bullying around sexual harassment, equal opportunities around racism, health, including SRE, eating disorders, self-harm and self-esteem, careers, and human rights.

**Year 9** - Mental health, including depression and family conflict, health - a big unit on drugs, and another for SRE, sexual exploitation and domestic abuse, parenthood and careers.

**Year 10** - Until this year, all Year 10s had a lesson a week. This encompassed mental health (suicide), drugs, sexual health, equal opportunities around sexuality, careers, choices

in unintended pregnancy, and loss and bereavement. With a change to the curriculum model, the Year 10s this year have had 5 drop-down days; Careers, Health, Equal Opportunities (sexuality), Loss and bereavement, and Parenthood and choices in unintended pregnancy. This has inevitably necessitated using staff from outside the department. Fortunately, they have been willing to attend training and give it their best, despite not being specialists!

**Year 11** - Careers (post-16 options), relationships, health, mental health and financial capability. This too is destined for drop down days from next year.

With the curriculum model changing again, with new senior leadership, I have spent time moving topics around to ensure that as far as possible, specialists deliver units in KS3 that have traditionally been in KS4.

### Important and valuable

Young people have, over the years, been very clear that PSHE is an important and valuable subject to them. We have tried to make the lessons interesting, fun (although some topics are not fun!), relevant, memorable and interactive. And not much writing!

I passionately believe that young people need the opportunities and space to develop as whole, well-rounded people. PSHE is quite simply the best subject for this. I love that the students start to think for themselves, engage in groups more than they would have chosen, allow me to push them out of their comfort zone, argue back with me or each other, develop their knowledge, and become more empathic. It's not always comfortable, but we have a mutually respectful way of working that allows this, underpinned by the ground rules and the relationships we have developed.

## Questionnaire

I have asked students what they think about PSHE (please note – no money exchanged hands!). The following quotes are taken directly from the questionnaires; the bits I've missed out are because they were said so many times! I only removed one political reference from one comment. All the students who commented are Year 11.

### Q1 – What was memorable about PSHE?

- “The majority of lessons were memorable–I learned something every time”
- “Financial capability: wage slips, cards, dangers of borrowing money, how to fill in cheques”
- “All the sex education-how to stay safe, how to play safe”
- “The sex party! – it was surprising to see how quickly the STI spread”
- “The drugs education – how they affect people”
- “Self defence – unique and unusual – it's physical and was humorous which made it very memorable”
- “The things I found awkward and embarrassing probably!”
- “The whole experience of PSHE has been very memorable indeed!”
- “The unit about domestic abuse and safe relationships – there were signs I wouldn't have thought of. It was taught well and I learned what to do if I or someone else was in this situation”
- “Domestic abuse is unfortunately such a common thing – it will help me identify abuse and what to do”
- “The sex education – it taught me about risks and I'm now able to pass on my knowledge to friends or others who need it. It's also been useful because it taught us that sex is not a bad and dangerous thing all the time, but in fact a good thing when done safely”
- “Everything – because it's so important and shocking at the same time”
- “Safer relationships, sex ed, equal opportunities, finance and bereavement - they are key things to know in later life.”
- “The lessons gave me a chance to open up as a person, and in many ways it was one of the only places I felt comfortable sharing ideas and opinions. During these topics, you feel as though you can say what you think without fear of repercussions”
- “I'll remember lots on mental illness, and also domestic abuse because these are usually taboo topics and seriously misrepresented in the media and in general. If anyone were to bring these up in conversation, I'd like to give them factual information rather than opinion because that's what's usually given topics such as these bad press”
- “The drunk goggles – a chance to learn and have fun whilst doing so”
- “The condoms on plastic penises – it was funny, and we can look back now and still be amused!”
- “It's a key curriculum lesson that I think is a beneficial subject for all students”
- “How to get out of tricky situations”

“Team building activities”

“The financial stuff will be really important in my future, giving me a greater chance to be successful....I will be more able to handle my money, and more able to avoid serious debt with this advice, which is critical. Everyone should be given this excellent opportunity which will help lots in your life”

“Careers – I'll be able to use it forever”

“The sex ed – I had no idea about most of the things to do with this”

“I liked learning about mental health – I like learning about how other people think and feel, and how different mental health issues have an effect on peoples' lives”

“Most lessons are memorable as I have learned a lot of key knowledge”

“The depression stuff because I used to get depression a lot through school because I suffer from a lack of self confidence and anxiety – PSHE has definitely taught me how to feel more confident about myself... I also feel like I've learned way more on how to deal with stuff like people dying. I've also learned so much about financial things”

“The first ever lesson we were asked to write offensive words on a huge piece of paper (this was part of an anti-bullying lesson). At first I thought it was a joke. I realised that PSHE was not a joke”

### Q2 – What did you think about the way PSHE was taught and why

- “Relaxed and comfortable environment”
- “Very effective – the teaching was very down to earth and it was something I could relate to as was the vernacular language”
- “The little fun activities made things easier to remember”
- “Taught well because I learnt a lot of things that I didn't know before”
- “Very well – the teachers worked around the students so we didn't get upset. They teach in a lot of depth so you can understand it more”
- “I liked it – it wasn't just writing and taking notes – it was actually getting down and getting into the nitty gritty side of it”
- “My teachers were very understanding and friendly in the way they spoke. The lessons were friendly, and it made understanding each other easy”
- “We could get involved and learn things ourselves”
- “Excellently taught because the teachers never pressured people into giving their views if they were embarrassed or if people didn't want to share”
- “I loved the way it was taught – some was individual learning, some from other people. In every topic it was different so it was never boring”
- “I think it was really fun and interesting, an essential part of the school week. I haven't gone from a single lesson without having learned something”
- “Amazing because you got to voice your opinion towards different topics without being judged”
- “It gave many different people's views when we were sat in a circle”
- “It was great – the teacher showed us full care, respect and always made us feel welcome. The quality of teaching was very high and I can honestly say the PSHE has had a huge impact on my life”

"I liked that everyone had a voice and opinions are listened to. I like the broad range of topics we covered because a lot of them are important to know"

"Taught very well – maybe due to being comfortable sharing feelings and you don't have the element of 'I'm the teacher' – it's been more of a place where everyone is on the same level. No-one feels scared or embarrassed"

"Excellent as the teachers are laid back and this is important because it suprisingly allows you to listen and understand more about a topic and you aren't constantly being nagged. The teachers were well educated on these topics"

"The demonstrations couldn't have been better"

"Every module was beneficial in our every day lives"

"It has allowed us to be more open and be able to say what we feel. It's made me feel more confident if I needed to talk to my teacher because we learned we can trust them"

"It has been taught superbly – I've been able to answer a lot of the questions. It's all been memorable"

"It always got everyone involved, even if they didn't always want to be"

"Potentially controversial but very useful"

"It allowed us to learn from each other as well as the teacher"

"I thought it was professional and the content appropriate- it respects people's opinions"

"It's a really good way to teach teenagers"

"The lessons were very open and this gives us a chance to voice our opinions – everyone was entitled to their own view"

### **Q3 – What do you think about having it as a specialist subject on the timetable?**

"It's good to have a lesson that is different"

"I will remember everything from PSHE as it's really useful, unlike stupid maths formulas"

"I really liked how masturbation was made very equal – you know, like it wasn't just for boys, but was important for girls too"

"I prefer it as a specialist subject because it sets you up for after school"

"We could learn things only a specialist could teach"

"It helps equip students with important life skills and feel ready for life"

"They know how to teach it well – invaluable"

"If we hadn't had this as a specialist subject, I wouldn't be as aware of the dangers of lots of things and wouldn't feel ready to be leaving school"

"I like it being a weekly subject as it gives us a break from academic subjects – each lesson was valuable and supplied us with vital information"

"An untrained PSHE teacher isn't very experienced about the subject"

"It's always been something to look forward to..... having a specialist makes it easier to interact, shows you the positive side to things, it feels more engaging when you have someone who knows what they are talking about. When the teacher is passionate about the topics, it rubs off on the students"

"It really is essential for us students to be taught this – it's so important"

"I had a non-specialist teacher in my previous school. I'm grateful for having it specialist here because it teaches you so many important things and helps you in the future"

"I found I enjoyed it when we started in (in Y8) – it's made me more confident. I started really quiet, but I have become more confident and I will say things in class"

"I could never dream of not having it on the timetable – when it nearly got taken away last year, we tried so hard to keep it and are glad we still have it"

"Some students may have questions or issues that only specialist teachers could answer. It also makes the trust between students and teacher more reliable"

"I have always looked forward to PSHE as it was a lesson where you could learn real stuff – I've got a lot more idea about what life is going to be like"

"I was pleased it was on the timetable as it's important – it was in detail"

"Helped us forget about the stress of other lessons and exams"

### **Q4 – What you have gained/how you have changed/ how it's helped you**

"Valuable life skills, furthered my understanding, changed my opinion on some things now I know more information"

"How to deal with real life situations"

"It's made me realised all the different problems young people could develop – this is more relevant to me"

"Made me more aware of racism, bullying and financial aspects"

"It's changed me to be able to see problems that people have"

"I've gained a lot of knowledge which has made me feel more prepared for the real world"

"I have a greater understanding of the world that I would never have experienced elsewhere"

"It has genuinely made me more knowledgeable about life"

"How to stay safe and healthy in sex and relationships"

"A lot of social knowledge which will help me in life. About decisions I will have to make and how the choices will affect me"

"It's vital info"

"How to deal with delicate situations. I feel like I am more confident and that opinions and ideas I have are not a far cry from others; I like to feel part of something"

"I used to be homophobic, because that's how I was brought up. I got quite a lot of grief from other students because of it. I'm not at all any more. PSHE totally changed my mind"

"PSHE has made me a more understanding and less judgemental person. I am completely fine in conversations about things like sexuality when beforehand I was uncomfortable because I didn't understand"

"It's helped me an awful lot, teaching me about how to live safely, happily and successfully, how to manage life"

"It's helped my confidence but also let me express my opinions more with all the group activities we have done"

"I have gained confidence – I wouldn't speak to more than one person and now I will speak in front of a class"

"It's definitely helped – it's sort of training us for the world"

"I know now things I would never have known"

"I have gained invaluable experience on how to live my life ethically, financially and socially.... With the expert advice being given by specialist teachers who have a huge positive impact on students"

"How to treat people.....and what I need to do to have good health"

"A lot of skills that are important in today's age. Sociability, understanding other points of view has made me look at stuff from other perspectives which again emphasised the importance of PSHE as a lesson of social infrastructure for individuals"

"Confidence"

"My confidence has increased a huge amount. We are allowed to talk our mind and are not judged. The teachers understand"

"Key knowledge for a safe healthy life"

"Information about important life skills, in a fun memorable way. It's helped me make decisions"

"Life skills, and has made me think about things that wouldn't have crossed my mind"

### Q5 – What would you have liked more or less of and why?

Many responses indicated that they felt everything had been covered the right amount and well. Of those who commented otherwise, no one said less of anything.

Many students said more on money management

Some said more on job seeking

More on racism

One student said more on death and bereavement should be done lower down the school and not just Y10

More about drugs because it's interesting

More about transgender

Something on crime

More on the science behind mental health conditions

Anti-bullying

Sex education

### Q6 – What would you say to head teachers about PSHE?

Every student said it mattered, was useful and should be on the timetable, that it was significant and should be kept in the curriculum as a lesson a week with a specialist teacher.

"It teaches you life skills and is a very valuable lesson, that it should be done, even though it is not graded, that it should be specialist taught so that everyone has a similar experience. One person said "keeping it on the timetable did students a massive favour. Schools should

teach students how to be decent members of society socially as well as knowledge-wise"

"It should be given to every pupil as a specialist subject as advice is given and vital things are taught which I know I will take and use throughout my life. I wouldn't feel as confident and ready to be going out into the big wide world if I'd not had specialist PSHE for the last 4 years"

"It should be compulsory because there is no other subject that teaches you about the reality of life"

"You can't do personal development in a day per half term"

"It's essential – a chance to learn stuff you actually need. I will never use *Pythagorus* but I will need money advice and help with death and bereavement"

"It should be taught in all schools"

"Without PSHE, students won't know the risks of sex, drugs etc"

"No one should be left unknowing about what's ahead"

"It's highly important and ensures people have confidence with who they are and to treat everyone fairly"

"It's a step in the right direction for an understanding of society that is multiracial"

"People have a voice"

### Q7 – What would you like to tell the Government?

Most students said 'see answer above for this' ie Q6

"Removing PSHE is an incredibly stupid thing to do. I realise the government wants to make exams harder and turn us all into pompous automatons, but I'd rather be equipped for real life"

"It should be compulsory for every school to teach it with a specialist teacher as it is essential"

"Almost everything I was worrying about how to handle in the future I have learned how to handle in the lessons"

### Final comments

It seems clear that this is a subject that when taught well, is valued highly by students; they enjoy it, find it really useful, it does develop them personally and they feel better equipped for the future. They say time and again that they like being able to explore their views in a safe setting without being judged, recognise the skills and knowledge and benefits of a specialist teacher, and feel positive about the relationships they build with each other and staff. I think the views of young people are articulate, honest and need to be heard.

#### Acknowledgements

A massive thank you to the Year 11s for all their comments, both verbal and written; they have been a joy to work with.