Chapter 54
Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning in Secondary Schools: The Use of Circle Time

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Abstract This chapter examines the case for better relationships in early adolescence. By drawing on data from several research studies, it illustrates how young people aged 8–16 experience an increasing sense of disconnection from adults and peers in UK schools. This disconnection lies alongside evidence to suggest that young people construe success at school almost entirely in personal and social terms. The use of circle time will be offered as an approach that can be used across the age range to foster personal, social and emotional growth and wellbeing.

Introduction

Ever since state education came into being in the United Kingdom, governments and educators have recognised that spiritual, social and moral development are important to learning. Way back in 1944, The Education Act in the United Kingdom stated that local education authorities should

“Contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community...”.

(UK Parliament, 1944, 31.7)

The Education Reform Act (1988) re-affirmed the importance placed on the spiritual and moral dimension of education emphasizing the need to provide a

“balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society.”

(UK parliament, 1988, 1.2)

In 1992, The Education (Schools) Act stated that one of the central tasks of the new system of inspection under the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) would be to ensure a school’s capacity to encourage spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development. The importance of enabling young people to develop in a holistic way is central to the values and aims of the National Curriculum and legislation in England as well as Ireland, Greece, Australia and many other Western
countries, where attention is not only given to cognitive and physical development, but also to the spiritual, moral and social dimensions of life and learning.

In 1999, the UK Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) jointly launched the National Healthy Schools Programme. This initiative enshrined the concept that physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health are fundamental to learning. The 2010 target is to see all schools registered to become accredited with Healthy School Status by paying due attention to the four core themes of personal, social and health education (PSHE), healthy eating, physical activity and emotional health and wellbeing (EHWB).

Arguably, the first and the last of these themes contribute to a young person’s sense of spirituality where it relates to a sane and psychologically healthy development of a sense of “self” and “self” in relationship with others. In this chapter, spirituality is taken to mean a person’s sense of their unique identity and self-worth as a human being where an increasing sense of “self” is accompanied by a greater capacity to value others. Spirituality is not used here in the religious sense, with a response to God or an “ultimate” but in the development of human potential, which encompasses the ability to aspire to and believe in possibilities that transcend the current experience of the world. Intrinsic to this development of the “self” lie the development of an inner life, with insight, aspiration and vision alongside imagination and creativity. This understanding of spiritual development draws on human attributes such as connection, kindness, love and faithfulness and the quest for making sense of ourselves in relation to a greater context—in this case—the school.

As we have seen, the law pertaining to education, in England, enshrines aims and values which focus on the spiritual, moral and social development of young people. Yet data from two separate research projects indicate that, though the students agree that personal and social development lie at the very heart of being able to engage with school and learning, their felt experience is of increasing disconnection from both adults and peers as they progress through school from age 8 to 16 (Years 5–11).

What Kind of Learners Learn?

Between 1999 and 2002, I conducted an in-depth enquiry into what young people aged 11–14 think is important in order to be effective in school. Effectiveness was defined as being able to take part, to engage in school life and to do well in conventional academic terms (Tew, 2002). The study used Kelly’s personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) to inquire into the internal roadmap or constructs that students used to navigate effective engagement with and success in school. The 87 young people who took part in the study made sense of school effectiveness in almost entirely personal, social and emotional terms. They barely referred to the conventional notions of school, such as curriculum subjects, teachers or school systems. For these students it seemed that the most important navigational aids related to “Who am I?”, “How