

Schools with Soul: A new approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education (SMSC)

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How can we ensure that schools across the UK prioritise the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of their students, alongside their academic development?

RSA Investigate-Ed is a series of investigations on key education issues. Speedier than a commission approach, but more in-depth than a traditional seminar, these investigations offer policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders structured spaces to diagnose problems and generate solutions.

This investigation focused on the curious acronym that is ‘SMSC’: the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils.¹ The duty of schools to promote SMSC has remained a constant in UK education since 1944. Many existing schools have always placed a premium on these qualities, whilst new academies and Free Schools often strongly emphasise school ethos and character development in their initial establishment. The promoting of community cohesion remains a legally established priority. Meanwhile, new learning approaches that focus on developing the competencies to live confidently in a global context are coming to the fore. This explains both why the promotion of SMSC remains a key education issue and why there is controversy about what it means and how schools should approach it.

While such developments are turning the spotlight increasingly on SMSC, at the same time other pressures on schools may be leading to a decline in focus and provision. This investigation arose from a concern that these goals that used to define the purpose of schooling appear to have moved to the periphery, overwhelmed by attainment-related accountability pressures. It appears increasingly

challenging for schools to think about anything other than short-term gains to short-term outcomes. The deeper thinking about the purpose and the development of those values and skills that are at the heart of SMSC, and that are anything but soft, has been rendered far more difficult by the constantly changing terrain of policy initiatives and the attendant focus on narrow priorities.

Our investigation was based on:

- an analysis of a sample of Section 5 school inspection reports carried out by Ofsted between September 2012 and April 2013
- in-depth discussions with staff and pupils in a number of schools with excellent SMSC provision and outcomes
- an underpinning historical analysis of the nature of SMSC or equivalents in the jurisdictions of the UK, including a perspective on current policy

The outcomes of the investigation include:

- a mapping exercise outlining how schools might break down and conceptualise SMSC provision
- a set of design principles for how schools can approach and prioritise SMSC going forward
- key findings and recommendations concerning SMSC policy and practice across the UK

1. For this report, we are using the term ‘SMSC’ as a shorthand for the process of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. We have taken care to avoid over-stretching the term and paying attention to its specificities, but where necessary to describe general trends, we also use SMSC to refer to these forms of development where they might appear under different labels in different systems, such as character education, personal development, or social and emotional skills.

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KEY FINDINGS

CLARIFICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- SMSC promotion is in danger of moving to the margins of all but the most confident schools
- The key reason for the marginalisation of pupils' SMSC development is time – not so much time for provision, as time for reflection about purpose
- Currently, too much school provision has a scattergun approach, lacking an underpinning rationale
- Of all the four aspects of SMSC, it is the spiritual which is most at risk of neglect

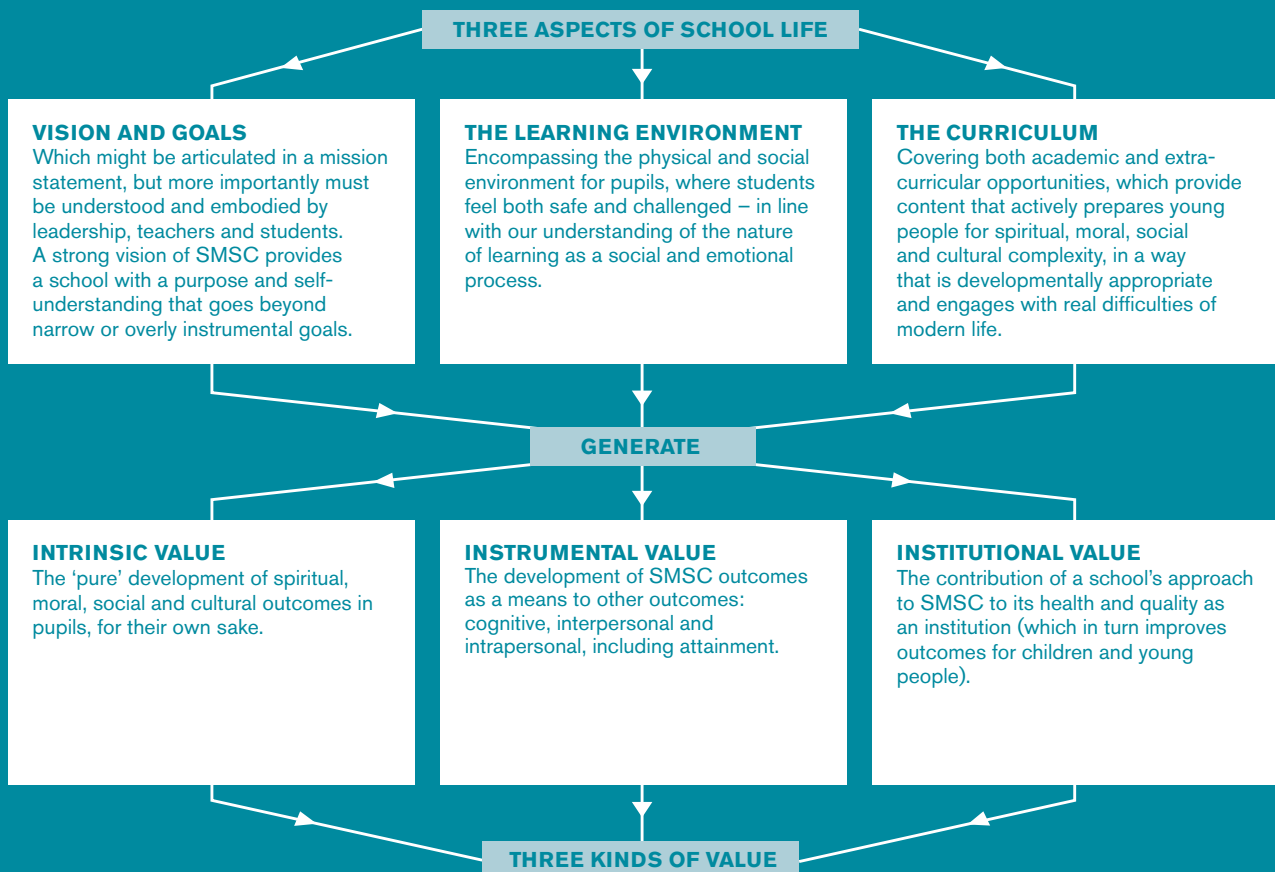
EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

- Schools are largely focused on provision over outcomes
- Accountability levers to improve and quality assure SMSC provision in schools are weak and inconsistent

PLANNING AND DELIVERY

- The leadership and understanding of SMSC promotion is insufficiently distributed
- Governors, parents and the wider community are insufficiently connected to and supportive of SMSC provision
- SMSC development has been disrupted by the online world and internet-bearing devices, but this has yet to impact sufficiently and systematically on the requirements for SMSC provision
- Fear of controversy is leading to an unhelpful 'sanitisation' of schools' SMSC provision and opportunities and superficial relationships between teacher and student
- SMSC engagement and opportunities decline markedly for post-14 pupils

FIGURE 1: CREATING A VISION THROUGH IDENTIFYING SMSC'S PLACE AND VALUE IN SCHOOL



DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOLS

CLARIFY AND ENGAGE

- 1 Make time for reflection to clarify meaning and create a coherent and robust vision and language for SMSC
- 2 Make 'real' space for the spiritual

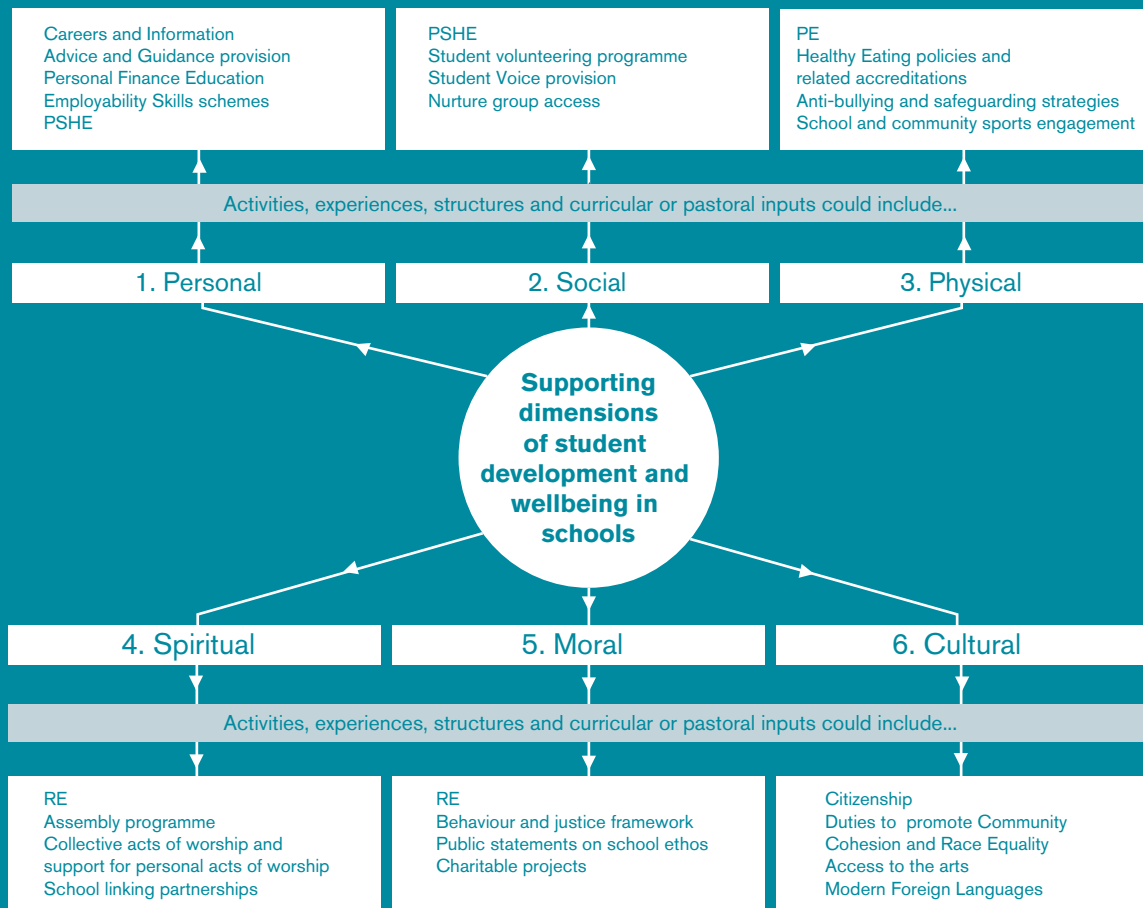
EVALUATE AND MEASURE

- 3 Develop intelligent accountability and self-evaluation frameworks
- 4 Retain a relentless focus on student learning and narrowing gaps in SMSC outcomes

PLAN AND DELIVER

- 5 Locate SMSC provision in multiple but specific areas of schooling, avoiding the 'everywhere and nowhere' dilemma and create real opportunities for explicit student outcomes
- 6 Nurture effective, creative leadership for SMSC at all levels
- 7 Sustain provision for SMSC throughout the teenage years
- 8 Understand the impact of and exploit the potential of new technologies, and embrace controversy and complexity
- 9 Engage with resources and opportunities beyond the school gates

FIGURE 2: BRINGING SMSC TO LIFE: IDENTIFYING A RANGE OF DELIVERY CHANNELS AT SCHOOL LEVEL



Key Recommendations

We have developed nine key recommendations to help to stimulate discussion, debate and action. Although aimed primarily at England, we hope that they might resonate beyond its borders.

1. Everyone involved in education in the UK

should designate 2015–16 (the academic year after the next general election) as a “year of reflection” when:

- no schools-related policies are announced by the Department for Education (DfE) or any other agency
- no schools are forced to become academies
- no Ofsted inspections take place apart from re-inspections of those schools which have been judged inadequate, and inspections of new Free Schools and academies, and
- no organisations publish any new policy proposals for schools

During the year, school communities should be encouraged to exploit a period of relative stability to ask questions about their deeper goals.

2. The DfE should set up a small expert working party to develop clearer guidelines for pupils’ SMSC development in all state-funded schools in England, including academies and Free Schools.

3. Ofsted should develop a more consistent and rigorous approach to the inspection of schools’ SMSC provision and outcomes.

4. The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) should ensure that SMSC is more overtly built into any revisions made to the teachers’ standards.

5. The NCTL and other providers of leadership programmes should develop methods for use with aspiring school leaders that develop their understanding of SMSC.

6. School governing bodies should take full ownership of a school’s SMSC policy as a driver to consider and, where necessary, reshape a school’s overall purpose and ethos.

7. School leaders should use the design principles to rethink their approach to SMSC, and consider:

- building SMSC development into reporting systems for parents and students
- building SMSC into teachers’ performance management systems (but not lesson plans)
- using pupil premium funding to support the development of SMSC outcomes, linked to strategies for closing attainment gaps

8. External providers of education opportunities, including businesses and cultural organisations should attempt to identify, as specifically as possible, how their offer might support a school’s SMSC provision and outcomes, in addition to any subject-based curriculum links.

9. Foundations and other funders should also consider supporting tough-minded, well-researched practical projects which seek to understand the impact of specific SMSC interventions on SMSC outcomes and attainment.

SMSC’s continued existence provides an opportunity for schools to carry out deeper thinking about the way they educate and what kind of development they want to promote, and, in the process, to begin to wrest control and reclaim territory from the centralising tendencies of too many governments and their agencies.

The mantra for the last twenty years of education in England, said too often but not done often enough, has been ‘standards not structures’. It may be time to reintroduce a third ‘s’, the soul of schools, into this mix. Then we may begin to see more clearly the young people behind the standards and think more clearly about whether their long-term needs are being met. We believe that now is the time to put back the soul and spirit into our schools.

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To find out more about the RSA’s education programme, and opportunities for partnerships on future investigations, contact education@rsa.org.uk, or call Joe Hallgarten on 020 7451 6917.