

Character and Resilience: a call for evidence

A response from the Special Educational Consortium

About SEC

The Special Educational Consortium (SEC) is a membership organisation that comes together to protect and promote the rights of disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN). Our membership includes the voluntary and community sector, education providers and professional associations. SEC believes that every child and young person is entitled to an education that allows them to fulfil their potential and achieve their aspirations.

SEC identifies areas of consensus across our membership and works with the Department for Education, Parliament, and other decision-makers when there are proposals for changes in policy, legislation, regulations and guidance that may affect disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Our membership includes nationally recognised experts on issues including assessment and curriculum, schools and high needs funding, the SEN legal framework, exclusions and alternative provision.

SEC welcomes the links between: this call for evidence on character and resilience; Departmental work arising from the Green Paper, Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision; the Personal Development strand in the revised Ofsted Inspection Framework; and schools' wider duties to promote wellbeing. SEC believes that all these duties and developments helpfully give weight to the arguments for a more balanced curriculum offer in schools and colleges; it is an argument that is particularly relevant for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEN and disabilities for whom the curriculum is more likely to be narrowed. The current call for evidence is significantly focused on the personal traits of individual children and young people. SEC believes there should be less of a focus on individual traits and more of a focus on:

- A whole school or whole college approach;
- An approach that is inclusive of all children and young people;
- A broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils, supporting their mental health and wellbeing as well as their academic progress;
- A wide range of activities and experiences within the school or college and as part of a local community.

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Exclusion from wider activities

This is where SEC's concerns start: the context for this call for evidence is one in which many children and young people have experience of discrimination: Many children and young people with SEN and disabilities are excluded from activities that give them opportunities to achieve and build self-esteem in areas of school life other than their academic work. There are too many examples of children being excluded from extended day activities and wider experiences such as school trips. Yet these are the very areas of life where they may be able to build some self-esteem. The importance of such activities, and the contribution they can make to pupils' experience of school, particularly to the experience of disabled pupils and pupils with SEN, has been highlighted in reports such as the evaluation of the Achievement for All pilot; and the narrowing of the curriculum is identified by Ofsted as a higher risk for disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils and those with SEN.

This is not just a school problem: members of SEC report difficulties for disabled children and young people in accessing community based provision such as sports clubs.

Poorer experiences of school

Disabled children and young people and those with SEN are more likely to have poorer experiences of school. They are more likely:

- to be absent from school;
- to be bullied;
- to be excluded.

Sadly, instead of addressing bullying, some schools encourage pupils to 'learn to live with it,' 'toughen up' or 'get used to it.'

It should be really clear that children and young people should not be subjected to such experiences in the first place; where they are, schools should be alert to and address the bullying. There should never be any encouragement to accept such experiences, nor should they be used as a springboard for developing resilience. In this context, we should draw a distinction between 'knocks that life inevitably brings' and those that can and should be prevented. A focus on character and resilience should never be at the expense of addressing bullying or discrimination.

A whole school approach

This brings us back to a consideration of individual and whole school issues:

- addressing bullying;
- respect for each other and an acceptance of difference;
- inclusion of all pupils in a wide curriculum that supports personal development;

- wellbeing and mental health of the whole school community.

SEC believes that all these issues should be addressed through a whole school approach. We believe this is the best way to support the development of character and resilience for individual pupils in a diverse society.

Character Advisory Group

We would urge the Character Advisory Group to have at the forefront of its mind that this is an opportunity to make recommendations to address disadvantage and discrimination; to make sure that any developments are inclusive; and to develop whole school and whole community approaches that can sustain and embed the development of character and resilience.

For further information:

If it would be helpful to provide further information or to clarify any aspect of this response, we would be pleased to help.

Philippa Stobbs
Policy vice-chair
Special Educational Consortium
pstobbs@ncb.org.uk
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