Changing behaviour and debating social values? What's the role of education in the 'big society'?

Posted on Friday 15th July 2011

The much-touted phrase ‘from nanny to nudge’ symbolises the Coalition Government’s aspirations to find new ways to shape the habits and attitudes of good citizenship and to spread them more widely. Policy makers hope to change our expectations of what local and national government should provide, our ideas about who might provide them, and our commitment to changing our own and others’ behaviours in all areas of our lives.

It goes without saying that these attempts don’t depend on the political hue of governments: history shows that the state project of behaviour change dates back to the 1830s. It also goes without saying that schools, colleges and adult and community providers have always played a key role.

Yet, the scope of this role has been quietly expanding. From physical and emotional health, personal and social relationships, to good parenting, being a lifelong learner, flexible worker, volunteer and an engaged citizen, schools, guidance and welfare agencies and psychology services now have a powerful role in behaviour change. One effect has been to move responsibility for this from parents, religious organisations and the wider community.

Public spending on a wide array of interventions increased under the previous government. And while it not yet clear how the Coalition Government regards the role of education in behaviour change, nor what interventions it considers appropriate, the setting up of the Behavioural Insight Unit in 2011 continues political attempts to generate a convincing evidence base for effective strategies.

The Policy Commission on the ‘future of public services’ concluded that too many interventions vie for attention, are characterised by ad hoc, short-term implementation, and a ‘doomed to succeed’ approach where enthusiastic claims for anticipated effects go hand in hand with over-positive evaluations of their impact.

There has been very little public debate about these developments. Yet the views of young people about the respective roles of family, religious organisations and education to intervene in behaviour raise moral and political questions. Who should decide what, and whose, behaviour needs to change? What interventions are appropriate and effective? What is the role of behavioural science in all this? And how are participants involved in considering these questions?

In the debate about the future of public services, early years’ providers, schools, colleges and adult education providers must decide how to balance demands for them to intervene in behaviour with their civic role in involving parents, children, young people and adults in debate about the wider social values involved.

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She is also a Commissioner for the University Policy Commission on the future of public services, launched this week. She is chairing a debate about the role of public services in changing behaviour at this year’s **Battle of Ideas (http://www.battleofideas.org.uk/index.php/2011/overview/C12/)** .

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