

# **Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL): Panacea or Pandora's Box?**

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## **Introduction**

In 2007, at the design stage of a small scale research study to gather naturalistic data of children's emotional expression and regulation within English primary schools, I was searching the literature for a tool to assess young children's 'emotional competencies'. The objective of my study was to describe and delineate the types of emotional expression and regulation observed in Reception and Year 2 classrooms, with a view to understanding how emotional competence develops over this age range specifically within classroom contexts.

As a relatively new concept in education in the UK at that time there persisted, as indeed remains the case, much debate about what the term *emotional competence* entails, on top of the decades-old debates about what emotions are and what constitutes emotion-regulation. Some of the theoretical and semantic issues are outlined in the Department for Education and Schools (DfES) commissioned report '*What works in developing children's emotional and social competence and wellbeing?*' (Weare and Gray 2003). This document indicates that, however much debate there continues to be amongst those who study the many concepts, at the policy-making level in 2003 there was deemed to be enough consensus in the UK to define emotional competence and state its importance for lifelong achievement and for the development of emotional and social well-being and positive mental health. A teaching programme was then developed and, in 2005, a circular advised all schools with children aged 3 to 11 years that they should introduce into the taught curriculum a programme of social and emotional skills and competencies such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). This was followed in 2007 with similar guidance for secondary schools.

## **My research**

Ethnographic case study was the choice of paradigm for my research study, based on a desire to investigate what children were actually doing within schools, focusing on the observable changes in their behaviours and expressions of emotion revealed in real, naturally-arising situations, as indicators of emotion and emotion regulation. At the outset, an assessment tool was required to differentiate children in my sample into groups of varying emotional competencies, in order to identify types of strategy used by the different groups. I anticipated that finding an instrument would be relatively straightforward; hadn't the DfES

commissioned a report into just this area from The Health Services Research Unit, University of Oxford, following the publication of the Weare and Gray report and prior to the DfES issuing its Guidance on SEAL? A review had been carried out of emotional competence assessment frameworks for children aged 3-11 years (58 instruments in use internationally), along with a qualitative study to identify the concerns of teachers, practitioners and researchers with regard to such assessment. But my anticipation was misplaced; it seemed that no standard instruments were being recommended by the DfES for use by schools to assess children's emotional competence in tandem with the SEAL resource. Although the Primary SEAL Guidance makes it clear that children's ability and performance should be evaluated on the 42 outlined social, emotional and behavioural skills and within each theme overview it has provided explicit descriptors for each age group of what children will know, understand and be able to do following the completion of work on each theme, formal methods for assessing individual children's progress are not provided.

Hence the obvious question as I began my observational research, centred on whether and how schools were to fulfil a key recommendation of the DfES report in ensuring 'that work they organise to promote emotional and social competence and wellbeing is tailored to be appropriate to the age and emotional and social stage of the learner, and that they take positive steps to find out where pupils are starting from' (Weare and Gray, 2003: 55). The following reflections upon the SEAL programme, made during visits to primary schools to conduct naturalistic research are not part of a formal, systematic study; rather they are based on impressions gleaned from seeing 'snapshots' of various teachers and children involved in the implementation of the programme in various schools. The resultant issues, as I see them, stem from a perception that the programme is a 'blanket' solution to what has been framed by the government as a huge emotional and social 'problem' amongst the youngest members of our society, which it believes it needs to take on and solve.

## **My observations and reflections**

### ***Reflection 1***

In some cases, emotional concepts are too advanced for the developmental stage of the children for whom the lesson is prescribed. In a Reception class being taught the 'Say No To Bullying' module of the *Foundation Stage Guidance*, I observed that, when the teacher started by asking what bullying means, she was faced by a sea of blank faces and most of the children were unforthcoming when she tried to initiate discussion. Even if these 4 year olds were familiar with the term bullying, albeit conveyed in a familiar story-format, it is likely that their lack of understanding was to do with being exposed to concepts too advanced for them – such as 'having more power' (p.1). A basic analysis of the intended learning

outcomes reveals that they distil down to understanding that it *is* acceptable to experience any feeling, but it is *not* acceptable to behave in any way one likes; a complex idea that may not even be in the cognitive consciousness of mature adults. Moreover, several of the explicit learning outcomes are questionable with regard to the knowledge and understanding of 'typical' four year olds; *not* all children will have experienced 'name calling, leaving people out and intimidation'.

### **Reflection 2**

In the Guidance accompanying this section, teachers are explicitly directed to ask certain questions of the children following the story;

Ask: *'What was it that Sean did to make Kaltuun feel hurt?' and 'What do you think Miss Rashid could do to make Sean stop being unkind?' ... (Sean needs help to understand how to be kind. Make sure you use this opportunity to think about how helpful it was to Kaltuun to share her feelings **and tell the adult about it.**)* (my emphasis)

(*Say No to Bullying*, Foundation Stage p.4).

That children are explicitly encouraged to see a teacher as the source of power to solve this conflict is questionable; the emotion-regulation strategy being promoted is not self-reliance but dependence. As with all *real* learning, emotional and social 'lessons' have to be personally experienced to be properly learned. Children need to make mistakes and learn from them; where better to learn this than in the 'safe' environment of their classroom with their friends? The real-life emotional-regulation strategies required in adulthood encompass abilities to assess emotionally-challenging situations and decide whether to join in, avoid them or modify them. Should we not be encouraging even young children to acquire and practise such strategies for independent appraisal of situations and for coping with others' behaviour?

### **Reflection 3**

A lesson on Relationships, which I observed in a class of Year 2 girls whose teacher was introducing a session on jealousy, has led me to reflect about the SEAL 'one-size-fits-all approach' compelling children to participate in emotional self-disclosure under the guise of emotional expression. When the teacher asked "What does jealousy look like?" prior to showing them some photocards with pictures of emotional faces on them, the girls looked anxious and awkward – a reaction which I inferred as being due to an unwillingness or unreadiness to discuss the concepts of this negative emotion. Emotional expression varies enormously according to individual personality traits as well as the cultural norms of a

'society' – and this is certainly mentioned in the Guidance. However, the dominant methods within the SEAL resource rely upon a capacity and willingness on the part of the children not just to recognise and manage feelings, but to talk about them as well. For many personalities, however, a repeated focus on introspection and self-evaluation may be at best uncomfortable and at worst even distressing. Moreover, due simply to immaturity, young children may not have the skills of articulation required by this approach. Is it appropriate then to carry out such work with young children who have no real choice about whether they are involved? Of course the SEAL Guidance states that young people should not be forced to take part, but is opting out, saying they "do not want to talk about it" a *real* choice for a four year old? Even more concerning is that, as a child gets older, repeated opting-out could lead to being labelled as demonstrating a lack of emotional or social skill – or even being assessed as incompetent.

#### **Reflection 4**

What has been the basis for deciding whether an emotion is 'negative', at what point it needs managing and the 'acceptable' ways of doing so within SEAL? Is there any room for children – or teachers, or parents - to disagree with its value system? Who decided these values are 'right' *for everyone*? And who 'styled' the ideal persona which will emerge out of school at the end of 15 years of the cyclical programme? The manifestations of such decisions are seen in everyday practice in the classroom. SEAL has linked specific outcomes to 'managing feelings' for example, (e.g. 'I know some ways to calm myself down when I feel scared or upset) which highlights the issue about who decides on a practical level what level of self-expression is appropriate for an individual child when 'scared or upset' or when an individual's feelings reach a pitch necessitating 'calming down'? In reality, despite the stated objective of teaching children to regulate emotion, does it not come down to *teachers* being required to determine the 'acceptable' levels of emotion management and expression, in their capacities as managers and evaluators of the SEAL 'competencies'? Even the most well-intentioned teachers are typically inexpert in this field, so are probably simply relying on their own personal experience. The standards are therefore subjective and may well vary from individual teacher to the next, leading to issues of inconsistency for children. Moreover, 'being good' and 'doing the right thing' is worded vaguely and, again, left to individual teacher interpretation; could it even be accused of endorsing a potentially unhealthy emphasis on social conformity (for reasons of 'class management' at the extreme)? From a very early age are 'good behaviour' and co-operation being confused with appropriate self-assertion and moral values?

Catch children 'being good'. Give specific praise, using the child's name, to children

who you see doing the right thing. It is important to let the child know exactly what you liked about what they did – for example, ‘Jordan, I really like the way you picked up the bricks from the floor and put them away in the right place’.

(New Beginnings, Foundation Stage 2007: 14)

## **Discussion**

Underpinning the SEAL Primary programme appears to lurk the assumption that in every Reception and Year 1 and 2 class in the country, young children have emotional and social problems which they need help to solve. The preliminary results of my empirical study of young children’s naturalistic emotion expression and regulation in primary classes have revealed evidence to the contrary. Through observing actual behaviours, it is clear that even young children are able to perform some of the basic skills and strategies of emotion expression and regulation and, importantly, it seems the majority have learned to do so naturally, holistically and without formal school teaching. The pessimistic ‘deficit model’ (Craig 2007) underpinning SEAL is not only overly-controlling, but could potentially be counter-productive. Regardless of how well a child learns the required repertoire of skills in any one school year, they will have to address their emotional and social ‘problems’ again the following; is it not likely that being told year after year that this is how one should think, feel and regulate could completely alienate a child to all things emotional? Even worse, might it not undermine any confidence they might have built in their own competencies? Are they not being conditioned to ‘helplessness’, being led to think they are still ‘not getting it right’ emotionally and that they must continue to depend on adults to learn how to feel, control themselves and relate to other people?

**What has been YOUR experience? Have you used SEAL and how do you feel about it? How competent are your children in their emotional development? Do you agree that children’s development of emotion is being ‘regulated’ in the ways Sue Bingham suggests?**

*As usual, your responses to [j.moyles@ntlworld.com](mailto:j.moyles@ntlworld.com)*

## **References**

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