

**Theme: SEN**

## **Primary Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL): Evaluation of Small Group Work**

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In England, as elsewhere in recent years, much attention in schools has been focused on promoting the social and emotional skills that are thought to underpin effective learning, positive behavior, regular attendance, and emotional wellbeing. SEAL is a comprehensive, whole-school approach to tackling these problems. The programme was first promoted in primary schools and has now transferred into the secondary sector. This study looked at the impact of small group work on children requiring more support in developing their social and emotional skills and gathered evidence about what made small group interventions work.

The research authors found modest but significant improvements in pupils' overall social skills and emotional literacy and identified elements of good practice across a range of case study schools.

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### **Which pupils took part and how did they benefit from the programme?**

The small group interventions were for children who were thought to require additional support to develop their social and emotional skills. The selection of pupils was based on a number of factors: individual pupil needs, links with previous support the learners had during whole-class work and the need to ensure an appropriate balance within the group. Pupils included in the groups had varied profiles of need and included those with emotional difficulties, conduct problems and those with poor social skills. A key part of the pupil selection process involved recruiting role models and extra support pupils in addition to the pupils who were felt to be in need of intervention.

The study found evidence of a number of beneficial impacts of primary SEAL small group work for pupils. These were noted across all the four interventions studied (shown in bold below) although the average impact was small:

- **New Beginnings** – increases in pupils’ overall emotional literacy;
- **Going for Goals** – increases in pupils’ use of self-regulation, decreases in peer problems, and increases in empathy, social skills and overall emotional literacy;
- **Getting On and Falling Out** – increases in pupils’ social skills; and
- **Good to Be Me** – reductions in peer problems.

The effects of the interventions were sustained over a seven week period following the end of the intervention as shown by a final ‘follow-up’ measure.

Further evidence from case studies complemented the teacher and pupil reports of improvements in pupils’ social and emotional skills. There was also evidence that these improvements extended beyond the small group work environment into other lessons and activities.

The study authors commented that success of SEAL small group work was influenced by a range of factors, such as the skills and experience of the facilitator and the availability of an appropriate physical space to conduct the sessions. Overall there was a high degree of fidelity to the SEAL programme in the case study schools.

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### What were the main ideas underpinning the programme?

The brief, early interventions which were the focus of the research included a number of key features:

- facilitating pupils’ personal development;
- exploring key issues with them in more depth;
- allowing pupils to practice new skills in an environment in which they feel safe, can take risks and learn more about themselves;
- developing their ways of relating to others; and
- promoting reflection.

SEAL was designed to promote the social and emotional skills that have been classified under five aspects of emotional intelligence. ‘I can do...’ statements are a key feature of SEAL lessons and are used to guide and motivate pupils as well as provide them with a means of evaluating what they have achieved. We have included some sample ‘I can do...’ statements from the Primary National Strategies guidance document *Excellence and Enjoyment: social and emotional aspects of learning: Guidance* (See Where can I find out more) to illustrate the skills from the pupils’ point of view:

- **Self-awareness e.g.** I know when and how I learn most effectively; I can take responsibility for my actions and learning; I can identify, recognise and express a range of feelings.
- **Self-regulation** (managing feelings) e.g. I can stop and think before acting; I understand that the way I express my feelings can change the way other people feel; I have a range of strategies for managing my worries and other uncomfortable feelings.

- **Motivation e.g.** I can set a challenge or goal, thinking ahead and considering the consequences for others and myself; I can bounce back after a disappointment or when I have made a mistake or been unsuccessful; I know how to evaluate my learning and use this to improve future performance.
- **Empathy e.g.** I can recognise the feelings of others, understand another person's point of view and understand how they might be feeling; I can be supportive to others and try to help them when they want it.
- **Social skills e.g.** I feel that I belong to and am valued in my class, school and community; I know how to be friendly – I can look and sound friendly, be a good listener, give and receive compliments and do kind things for other people; I recognise 'put-downs' and know how they affect people, so I try not to use them; I can work well in a group, cooperating with others to achieve a joint outcome. I can be assertive when appropriate; I can solve problems by thinking of all the options, identifying advantages and disadvantages, choosing a solution and evaluating it later on.

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## What kinds of activities do the pupils engage in?

Schools undertaking SEAL are provided with guidance handbooks and resources which contain ideas and examples of lessons. The SEAL model contains elements that resemble circle time and philosophy for children in that they seek to engage children socially and foster good communications. The facilitator can be a teacher or a teaching assistant. Lessons follow a common format built on a number of features, including:

- **Welcome and check-in** – this provides an opportunity for the pupils to say or show (for example, using a feelings fan) how they are feeling and to express any concerns;
- **Warm-up activities** – these could include circle games. They are designed to:
  - increase group cohesion;
  - practise skills such as listening and taking turns; and
  - mix up children to encourage them to work with each other;
- **Reminder of group aims for behaviour** – usually set-up in the first group-work session and kept on display;
- **Review of previous week** – this includes discussing any specific actions agreed at the previous meeting. It also provides an opportunity for pupils to review how they have applied learning from previous sessions and what has gone well or not. It is also when progress is celebrated;
- **Plan for today's session** – the group facilitators give an introduction to the session, including drawing pupils' attention to the specific 'I can' statement(s) that are the focus of the session;
- **Core activity** – this relates to the SEAL resource theme being addressed and to the 'I can' statement(s) for the individuals in the group. Here the focus is on structured group work;
- **Review and reflection** – pupils review what they have achieved in the session against the 'I can' statements and group aims, and plan how they might apply what they have learned over the week; and
- **Relaxation** – an opportunity for pupils to relax, through quiet time or guided exercises.

The effectiveness of small group interventions was linked to setting achievable targets for pupils, providing acknowledgement and constant reinforcement of desirable behaviour, providing opportunities for pupils to verbalise their emotional experiences, and maintaining a sense of fun.

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### What were the features of good practice observed in the case study schools?

The study drew together key features of good practice by facilitators they observed across the case study schools in a vignette. These included:

- recruiting pupil role models to provide balance to the group, and to ensure that the group work is not perceived by other pupils (or staff) simply as a withdrawal mechanism for 'naughty' or 'troubled' children;
- regular planning meetings between the facilitator – a teacher or a TA – and the class teacher of the pupils concerned;
- modelling appropriate social and emotional skills (including, for instance, demonstrating empathic behaviour when one of the children becomes upset);
- maintaining confidentiality – this was very important to pupils: *“And if you say anything there’s less people so you’re more confident to say things”*;
- engaging pupils in learning by:
  - prompting (such as providing additional information for children struggling to make a response);
  - probing (encouraging children to ‘flesh out’ their responses); and
  - questioning (to promote the active participation of children in the group) provided children with the support they need when developing their social and emotional skills.

Senior staff noted: *“Now you can set them a problem and they will sort the problem out and they will listen to both sides of the story. Before it was ‘well its my side’ and its all black and white, I think its given them elements of what they’ll need for life skills, that it isn’t black and white, there are shades of grey. I’ve noticed a change in behaviour and the attitudes to each other, they’re more tolerant of one another’s strengths and weaknesses, they are... more respectful of adults as a whole”*;

- encouraging pupils to become involved in progress evaluation. This happened on a session-by-session basis (e.g. in the review and reflect part of the session children are encouraged to talk about what they think they have learnt);
- class teachers reinforcing skills pupils have learnt in SEAL lessons back in the classroom; and
- senior leaders promoting small group work across the school.

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### What other factors contributed to the success of SEAL?

The research identified several features that supported the successful implementation of the SEAL approach. These were as follows:

- LA’s support, including:
  - organising training events;
  - creating support mechanisms (e.g. inter-school networks); and

- providing teachers with, or helping them develop, additional materials and resources;
- the experience of existing approaches to social and emotional learning within the school, including SEAL lessons presented in whole-class situations;
- skills, knowledge and experience of the small group facilitator, e.g. knowledge of SEAL principles; knowledge of child development, being able to establish good relationships with the children, being able to work with other professionals within the school, agencies and parents; and
- a dedicated learning environment that included:
  - a room or area specifically for small group work sessions to take place in; lessons held at the same time each week;
  - colourful wall displays about SEAL; one wall display acting as a visual prompt throughout the intervention to present: session objectives; examples of pupils' work; and rules for group behaviour;
  - oversized bean bags and cushions for pupils to sit on and materials and props such as puppets; and
  - a CD player to allow relaxing music to be played and the room's light has a dimmer switch.

The special nature of this environment, along with the content of the sessions is an important factor in motivating the pupils to view SEAL as a special privilege.

The research also noted some barriers to success including the attitudes of staff, misconceptions about the nature and purpose of primary SEAL small group work, and 'initiative overload'.

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### How was the study carried out?

This research study involved a number of methods of data collection, including:

- interviews with SEAL leaders in 12 LAs across England;
- a quantitative evaluation of the impact of SEAL small group work, involving 624 pupils in 37 primary schools. The schools varied in geographical location, size, attainment, ethnicity *etc* and overall were considered representative of mainstream primary schools in England; and
- detailed case studies of six lead practice schools in the north-west of England.

The quantitative evaluation involved a number of pre- and post- ratings measures provided by teachers and pupils. The case studies were based on interviews with head teachers/senior managers, classroom teachers, group work facilitators (e.g. teaching assistants), and pupils and parents. They also involved observations of small group work sessions, normal lessons and other contexts (e.g. lunchtime), and analysis of school documentation (e.g. behaviour policies, development plans) and teaching and learning materials (e.g. small group work planning notes).

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### What are the implications?

In completing this digest the author began to ask the following questions about the implications for teachers and school leaders:

#### Teachers

- the SEAL programme aimed to improve pupils' communication skills, help them learn to regulate their own behaviour and learn to work with others. This demanded a range of skills on the part of the facilitator. In addressing these problems would it help you to get together with colleagues – both teachers and TAs – to identify the particular needs of pupils in your school and devise, with the help of other professionals, a training programme that targets their needs?
- LAs provided training and support for teachers on the SEAL programme. Can you identify areas for your own development that you would like to pursue with LA behaviour specialists, perhaps through a training programme that is accredited by a higher education institution and leads to an academic award?
- the study identified the importance of probing pupils' feelings and thinking using questions and structured support. To what extent do you use these skills effectively in your everyday practice in the classroom? Would you find it helpful to work with a colleague who has experience in working on these skills with more challenging pupils and perhaps to observe and feed back to each other?

School leaders may find the following implications helpful in acting on the messages in the studies:

- the provision of an appropriate 'special' location for this small group work was an important factor. Is there a location in your school where you could create a special environment for small group SEAL work – or a way of using furniture such as bean-bags and special lighting for changing the 'mood' of other areas?
- the study highlighted support on a whole-school basis as a desirable feature supporting the effective consolidation of small group work, yet effective small group working skills are often patchy across a school staff. Would your staff – teachers and TAs – benefit from professional development in this area? Are there individual staff with good skills in small group working who could act as a peer support for other colleagues? Are there LA or HEI specialists who could put on some professional development sessions for particular groups of staff?

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### Where can I find out more?

Behaviour digest: *Supporting students through behaviour improvement programmes*, accessible at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/behaviour/Supportingstudents/>

GTC Research of the Month summary *Multi-agency working and pupil behaviour*, accessible at:

<http://www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/behaviour0207/>

GTC Research of the Month summary, *Carl Rogers and classroom climate*, accessible at:

<http://www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/rogers1008/>

Primary National Strategies: *Excellence and Enjoyment: social and emotional aspects of learning Guidance*, accessible at:

[http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/65859?uc=force\\_uj](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/65859?uc=force_uj)

SEAL resources, accessible at:

[www.bandapilot.org.uk](http://www.bandapilot.org.uk)

Wegerif, R., Littleton, K., Dawes, L., Mercer, N. and Rowe, D. (2004) Widening access to educational opportunities through teaching children how to reason together, *Westminster Studies in Education*, Vol. 27, No. 2. Digest accessible at:

[http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/speakandlisten/wegerif\\_access/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/speakandlisten/wegerif_access/)