Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme in secondary schools: national evaluation

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SEAL is "a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools" (DCSF, 2007, p.4). National Strategies report that it is currently being implemented in around 90% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools. The aims of this national evaluation of secondary SEAL were to (a) assess the impact of secondary SEAL on a variety of outcomes for pupils, staff and schools, and (b) examine how schools implemented SEAL, with particular reference to the adoption of a whole-school approach.

Background

The SEAL programme is designed to promote the development and application to learning of social and emotional skills that have been classified under the five domains of Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence. These are self-awareness, self-regulation (managing feelings), motivation, empathy, and social skills. At the school level, SEAL is characterised by the following principles:

- SEAL implementation is underpinned by clear planning focused on improving standards, behaviour and attendance.
- Building a school ethos that provides a climate and conditions to promote social and emotional skills.
- All children are provided with planned opportunities to develop and enhance social and emotional skills.
- Adults are provided with opportunities to enhance their own social and emotional skills.
- Staff recognise the significance of social and emotional skills to effective learning and to the well-being of pupils.
- Pupils who would benefit from additional support have access to small group work.
- There is a strong commitment to involving pupils in all aspects of school life.
- There is a strong commitment to working positively with parents and carers.
- The school engages well with other schools, the local community, wider services and local agencies (National Strategies SEAL Priorities, 2009-2011).

SEAL is somewhat unique in relation to the broader literature on approaches to social and emotional learning in that it is envisaged as a loose enabling framework for school improvement (Weare, 2010) rather than a structured 'package' that is applied to schools. Schools are actively encouraged to explore different approaches to implementation that support identified school improvement priorities rather than following a single model, meaning that they can tailor it to their own circumstances and needs. In a sense, this means that SEAL is essentially what individual schools make of it rather than being a single, consistently definable entity. It was conceptualised in this manner to avoid the lack of ownership and sustainability that might be associated with the more 'top-down', prescribed approach that is taken in the USA.

Research Design

Our research combined quantitative and qualitative inquiry. The former was utilised mainly to provide data pertaining to the impact of secondary SEAL, and the latter was used primarily to provide insights into the implementation process.

For the quantitative component, 22 SEAL schools and a matched group of 19 comparison schools were recruited to take part in a quasi-experimental study. Pupils in Year 7 at the beginning of the academic year 2007/8 (N = 8, 630) were the target cohort. Key outcome data (e.g. pupils' social and emotional skills, mental health difficulties, pro-social behaviour and behaviour problems) was collected from the target cohort via self-report surveys on an annual basis: at the beginning of 2008 (Time 1 – baseline), at the beginning of 2009 (Time 2 – interim. NB: this wave of quantitative data collection was only used to inform our unpublished interim reporting) and finally at the beginning of 2010 (Time 3 – post-test).

For the qualitative component, nine of the 22 SEAL schools from the quantitative impact strand were recruited to participate in longitudinal qualitative case studies. These case study schools were visited five times (roughly once per term) during the course of our fieldwork. Data collection in the case study schools comprised of observations of lessons and other contexts, interviews and/or focus groups with members of the school community (e.g. pupils, teachers, SEAL leads, head teachers, and LA staff) and analysis of school documents (e.g. SEAL self-evaluation forms, policy documents).

After fieldwork had begun, the then DCSF requested that additional quantitative data be collected pertaining to pupil and staff perceptions of school climate, staff social and emotional skills, and pupil understanding, knowledge and involvement in SEAL. These additional quantitative measures were implemented in our nine longitudinal case study schools following the same timetable as described above for the quantitative impact strand.

Findings

In terms of implementation, our analysis of case study schools' approaches to, and progress in SEAL implementation revealed a very mixed picture. Schools such as CS5, CS6 and CS3 made comparatively good progress in implementation, and were able to provide clear evidence of engagement in the suggested school improvement cycle. However, schools like CS2, CS4 and CS10 made comparatively little progress over the same period of time. Our subjective impressions of these schools and analysis of other relevant data suggest that a whole range of issues were influential in determining these differences – including a somewhat superficial approach to implementation ('box ticking') and a failure to sustain initial activity levels in the latter schools. However, our analysis of impact data for each school revealed that this made little difference to outcomes for pupils, with very little variation evident between schools.

Our nine case study schools were extremely variable and fragmented in the extent to which they adopted a whole-school approach to implementing SEAL. An issue here may be the necessarily limited time frame within which this evaluation study was conducted. Development of a truly whole-school nature inevitably takes time to become fully embedded. This may be particularly true of large, complex institutions such as secondary schools. The 'patchy' approach seen in most schools may simply be a reflection of this truism. However, there are also other issues which may have contributed to the lack of a consistent whole-school approach. Firstly, some schools interpreted the SEAL guidance in such a way that they purposively selected pockets of activity or development to focus upon, at the expense of the 'bigger picture'. This was often in tandem to a perception that SEAL did not offer them something new. Sustaining the effort and energy required to drive SEAL forward at various levels was also a problem for some, especially in the face of competing pressures. Alongside this, some staff held the perception that things would begin to change in the short-term and this led to a withdrawal of effort and interest when this did not happen.

Consistent with the findings of previous research (e.g. Greenberg et al, 2005; Durlak and DuPre, 2008), our analysis of qualitative case study school data revealed a range of barriers and facilitators relating to preplanning and foundations, implementation support systems, implementation environment, implementer factors, and programme characteristics. The factors identified clearly interacted in creating the conditions for effective (or ineffective) implementation of SEAL. Amongst these factors, we tentatively point to staff 'will and skill', in addition to time and resource allocation, as being the most crucial in driving implementation forward (or, indeed, holding it back).

Finally, in terms of impact, our analysis of pupil-level outcome data indicated that SEAL (as implemented by schools in our sample) failed to impact significantly upon pupils' social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro-social behaviour or behaviour problems. The school level variable of 'SEAL status' (e.g. whether a given school were implementing SEAL or not) was close to statistical significance in the analyses of social and emotional skills and general mental health difficulties (indicating the possibility of a 'SEAL effect'). However, the effect sizes associated with this variable were marginal – for instance, being at a SEAL school was associated with just a 0.298 reduction in SDQ total difficulties score at Time 3.

In relation to school-level outcome data, our analyses indicated that SEAL (as implemented by schools in our sample) failed to have a positive impact, although the results were less straightforward here. Analysis of school climate scores indicated significant reductions in pupils' trust and respect for teachers, liking for school, and feelings of classroom and school supportiveness during SEAL implementation. Additionally, qualitative data around perceptions of impact indicated a feeling that SEAL had not produced the expected changes across schools. However, school climate data also showed a significant increase in pupils' feelings of autonomy and influence, and this was supplemented by anecdotal examples of positive changes in general outcomes (e.g. reductions in exclusion), as well as more specific improvements in behaviour, interpersonal skills and relationships.

Taken as a whole, our data was not congruent with the broader literature on school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes, which suggest that they can lead to significant improvements in a range of outcomes (e.g. Durlak et al, in press). In developing ideas about the lack of clear impact in our study, we returned to the SEL evidence base, which suggests that successful programmes have certain latent characteristics that SEAL (in its current form) lacks. Firstly, successful SEL programmes have been shown to have a high level of structure and consistency in programme delivery. Secondly, such programmes are carefully monitored to ensure that they are delivered as intended by their developers. Thirdly, they are underpinned by a level of resources (e.g. human, financial) that may not have been available to schools in our study.

Recommendations

Based upon our findings, we recommend the following:

- Future school-based social and emotional learning initiatives should more accurately reflect the research literature about 'what works' in this area – namely, the provision of structure and consistency in programme delivery, and the adherence to SAFE (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit) principles; careful monitoring of fidelity in such programme delivery would be essential to ensuring more positive outcomes;
- For schools that want to engage fully in the implementation of programmes designed to promote social and emotional learning, we recommend that resources and time are made available to their staff to allow them to do this;
- Greater engagement with parents/carers should be an essential component of any future initiative in this area;
- A greater emphasis needs to be given to the rigorous collection and use of evidence to inform developments in policy and practice in this area; in particular, there should be proper trialling of initiatives like SEAL before they are rolled out on a national level;
- Guidance should be produced to enable schools to make informed choices about the adoption of social and emotional learning programmes beyond SEAL; this guidance should have a clear focus on the evidence base to support particular programmes and the contexts in which they are effective.

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