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### Article

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**‘It’s something I do as a parent, it’s common sense to me’ – Non-teaching staff members’ perceptions of SEAL and their role in the development of children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills.**

**Abstract**

The ‘Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning’ (SEAL) initiative is a curriculum-based resource aimed at developing all children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills across England and Wales. Devised as a tool to improve such skills by enhancing levels of emotional intelligence, SEAL is a scheme that utilises whole-school work such as classroom based lessons, assemblies, small group sessions and intervention with individual children. Although subsequent studies of the initiative have identified favourable outcomes, few have captured how the scheme is being interpreted or used by schools and their staff members. Drawing on empirical data gathered during a three-year study that investigated the interpretation and use of SEAL in primary schools, I present the accounts of a range of non-teaching primary school staff members, including teaching assistants, welfare assistants, and pastoral staff, who utilise the scheme in their individual roles, within their respective schools. The views offered by these staff members illustrate how their interpretation and use of SEAL is influenced by the behaviours and skills they have gained as parents, and how these ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2005) have positioned them as competent social, emotional and behavioural facilitators. With reference to Hochschild’s (1983) concept of ‘emotional labour’, Osgood’s (2005) work on ‘educare’, and their links to Gee’s (2008) notion of ‘everyday knowledge’, this paper will consider the role of non-teaching, primary school staff in the development of children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills and ask if such work is, indeed, ‘common sense’.

## **Introduction**

Whilst interest in social and emotional issues is ‘clearly nothing new’ (Weare 2007, p. 239), public debate and opinion pertaining to the development of children’s social, emotional and behavioural (SEB) skills has intensified since the Children’s Act (2004) and the ‘Every Child Matters: Change for Children’ (2004) document, which focussed on improving the well-being of children in a range of institutions, including schools. In response, a number of educational initiatives, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) scheme were introduced as a means of improving children’s social and emotional behaviours, (DfES, 2005). This curriculum-based resource, that utilises whole-school work such as classroom based lessons, assemblies, small group work sessions and intervention with individual children, was primarily aimed at developing all children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills across England and Wales by enhancing levels of emotional intelligence, (Goleman, 1995).

With ‘far more attention being paid to social and emotional matters, in education’ (Weare 2007, p. 239), the roles and skills expected of school staff members shifted from one of educator to educarer, (Osgood, 2005). In this paper, I present some of my own research that explored the experiences of primary school staff members in making sense of their own roles in the development of children’s SEB skills and delivery of SEAL. Whilst the main study set out to explore how primary school staff members, in general, operationalised SEAL, an unanticipated finding related to the sample of non-teaching staff who consistently claimed competence as social, emotional and behavioural facilitators. This group often associated their position in the delivery of

the scheme with their role as a parent, which in turn influenced a belief that SEB development in schools is ‘common sense’. These findings serve as the focus for the remainder of the article.

### **The research study**

The data presented in this paper is taken from a large study that explored the interpretation and use SEAL in primary schools. In this study, a mixed methodological approach, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies was utilised as a means of collecting data from a range of primary school staff members, such as head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff, other support staff, etc. Three phases of study - questionnaires, focus groups, and individual interviews - were administered over a 12-month period and during these stages of the research process, all the ethical procedures outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2011) were adhered to. In this paper, I focus on the responses of the non-teaching staff members, accessed during the individual interview phase of the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the names used in the following sections are allocated pseudonyms.

### **Non-teaching staff as competent social, emotional and behavioural facilitators**

When discussing their role in the development of children’s SEB skills, non-teaching staff consistently implied competence. Often drawing on their experiences as parents, they felt they were well positioned to facilitate the social, emotional and behavioural problems experienced by the children in their schools. Furthermore, and again consistent in their views, these members of staff frequently underemphasised this aspect of their role, dismissing such work and, indeed, the SEAL initiative as ‘common sense’. These findings provide the catalyst for the discussion that ensues.

### *SEB skill development and parenting*

When asked about their perceived competence in developing children's social, emotional and behavioural skills, the non-teaching staff member sample identified their parenting experiences as crucial 'funds of knowledge', (Gonzales, Moll and Amanti, 2005). Jess, a teaching assistant, maintained that the skills and knowledge acquired as a parent means she is "fully capable of identifying any social, emotional and behavioural issues that arise and how it should be dealt with." The underlying assumption that competence in SEB skill development stems from their practice as parents was a widely held belief amongst the sample of non-teaching staff, as can be seen in the extracts below:

Lilian (TA): I feel, with having children of my own, I know how to react with children. I know how to have that side of authority but also to remember that they're only children, and you have to understand their views on things. I think that is why I'm good at this social and emotional stuff, because I'm a good mum.



Charlotte (TA): We know how to treat kids. If there's a problem, we know how a child responds, if it's positive or negative. If you've got a problem with a child you know how to speak to them because you have a child of your own. You know the signs; you know how to read kids.

By associating the role of SEB skill development to that of a parent, non-teaching staff consistently viewed this aspect of their work as "automatic" due to the belief that as mothers they "naturally

know how to help pupils with their problems”, (Samantha – TA). Vera, a receptionist, re-affirmed this view by claiming that the strategies endorsed through SEAL are “just an automatic, common sense reaction to a child with a problem.” The views presented above are a working demonstration of ‘sex-role spill-over’ (Guttek and Cohen 1987) - a propensity for carryover of traditional notions of gender-based roles from the home into the work setting - supporting the concept that female non-teaching staff members are expected to fulfil the role of a carer in school (Giddens 2001). This, I argue, has influenced how the non-teaching sample appraised their role and the SEAL scheme, creating a view that the development of children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills is a ‘common sense’ act.

#### *Common sense?*

Understanding SEAL in light of acts that “come natural to them as a mum” (Vera - Receptionist) produced a relatively consistent appraisal amongst non-teaching staff of the scheme being little more than a ‘common sense’ approach to social, emotional and behavioural development. By drawing on their ‘mother-wise knowledge’ – skills associated with ‘women’s work, family life, child rearing, and other care giving tasks’ (Luttrell, 1997, p. 30), - and by utilising their ‘everyday identity’ (Gee 2008) as mothers, the professed competence in SEB skill development for non-teaching staff was attributed not to the SEAL scheme but to the skills they had established as parents. Molly, a welfare assistant, for example, claimed that “if you see a child upset you try and help them the best you can...I don’t need SEAL to do that; it’s my mothering side coming out. It’s something I do as a parent, it’s common sense to me.” Other members of the non-teaching school work force, such as Shirley and Vera, re-affirmed this view:

Shirley (Pastoral support): It is common sense to take a child to one side, to ask what the problem is and if there is anything you could do to help, but to me you'd do that at home, as a mum, wouldn't you? It's just common sense to do that, there's nothing new happening here.



Vera (Receptionist): I think SEAL is just basic common sense. Is it not just common sense to help children with their social and emotional behaviours? It's what I do with my own kids, as a parent, so you don't need a fancy scheme to help the children.

The role fulfilled by non-teaching staff members reinforced their function to the school, that of 'educarer' (Osgood 2005). Teaching assistants who work on the yard at playtime such as Samantha, and welfare staff members such as Edith, considered their main duty was to "safeguard the children" and "to be their protector", viewing their role as a form of maternal care. Similarly, non-teaching staff members, such as Charlotte, who work on the yard and spoke of children "falling over, bumping heads and hurting knees" felt obliged to offer care "as a mum would". These assertions are typical of a view that position non-teaching staff as a 'mum's army' (Ainscow 2000) whose tasks, in the main, are assumed to be limited to listening and talking to children, and tending to minor injuries, (Woolfson and Truswell 2005). Such constructions of non-teaching staff as parents, as Ainscow (2000) testifies, makes it difficult for this group to shrug off the 'mum's army' tag, restricts them from attaining a professional status (Osgood 2009) and adds to the perception that they are primarily mothers, employed by schools, (Edwards and Duncan 1996; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Duncan 2005). Consequently, as the 'naturalness' (Osgood 2005, p. 285) of the work they perform is largely used for further family investment in children (Nowotny

1981), non-teaching staff members, as can be seen the extracts presented above, do not place emphasis or importance on the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) central to their role, instead viewing such practices as ‘automatic’ and ‘common sense’.

The findings presented are typical of the ‘classed nature of childcare’ (Osgood 2005), which maintains that an overwhelming majority of childcare professionals and school support staff members are working-class women (see Burn and Holland 2000; Colley 2003), and which positions the knowledge and experiences held by non-teaching support staff members as insignificant. Non-teaching, support staff have become ‘historically invisible’ elements within schools, as for many years they have remained unseen and unregarded (Watkinson 2003). Accordingly, and as they are perceived to have ‘failed to make enough effort or lack the requisite talent’ (Osgood 2005, p. 294), educarers often assume lowly positions within a school’s occupational hierarchy (Hutchings 2002), reinforcing further the view that their emotional labour is unimportant and trivial. Regardless of their skills, level of education and commitment to their career, educarers have little value in the labour market (Skeggs 2003) and what emerges is a ‘situation wherein educare becomes a symbolically valuable vocation rather than a normatively respected career’ (Osgood 2005, p. 297).

## **Conclusion**

The non-teaching staff members in this study indicated competence in the development of children’s SEB skills. Drawing mainly on their ‘mother-wise knowledge’ (Luttrell, 1997) and ‘everyday identity’ (Gee 2008) as parents, the sample maintained that schemes that aim to develop these skills, such as SEAL, are little more than a ‘common sense’ approach to schooling. These

views not only shed light on the ‘classed nature of childcare’ (Osgood, 2005), but illustrate, also, how social, emotional and behavioural development is being viewed by some staff as a trivial aspect of education, indicating a need for schools to review their approach to children’s holistic development.

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