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Wood, P (2022) The interpretation and use of social and emotional learning in British primary schools. International Journal of Inclusive Education. pp. 1-17. ISSN 1360-3116

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International Journal of Inclusive Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tied20

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To cite this article: Peter Wood (2022): The interpretation and use of social and emotional learning in British primary schools, International Journal of Inclusive Education, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2022.2088870

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2088870

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2088870

The interpretation and use of social and emotional learning in British primary schools

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ABSTRACT

The promotion of social and emotional well-being and positive mental-health has become a key focus for governments across the world, with schools seen as prime locations to facilitate improvements in these areas for children. In response, schools have implemented a wide-ranging package of support designed to target well-being and mental health, including 'Social and Emotional Learning' (SEL). Although research points to complexities with the implementation of SEL, little is known about the influences behind how it is interpreted by schools and their staff. This paper, drawing on data from 24 individual interviews and ten focus groups with staff members working across primary schools located in North West England, offers insights into this research gap. The main finding of the study is that individual staff members framed, enacted and valued social, emotional and behavioural work in response to their own roles and working environment, and that schools utilised SEL in light of their own specific needs and priorities. Main conclusions for policy and practice are that 'emotions' should be prioritised as the basis of schooling to establish and maintain an ethos where SEL is valued and utilised effectively.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 February 2021
Accepted 6 June 2022

KEYWORDS
Social and emotional learning; primary schools; well-being; mental-health; whole-school approach

Introduction

In light of calls for greater clarity regarding the ways in which Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) schemes are understood and used in schools (see Durlak 2015), this article, drawing on case study data, identifies and explores a number of variables that influence the interpretation and enactment of these practices in primary schools in a town in the North West of England. Subsequently, it focusses on a range of findings, sub-grouped under three themes: staff, schools and leaders. Variables that impact upon each staff member's perception and use of SEL, such as their individual role and working environment are explored, before consideration is given to the influence of the schools' location, perceived needs and cultures. The role of management staff and school leaders and the importance of developing a 'whole school approach' are also

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acknowledged as central determinants in the interpretation and use of such support. To help situate these findings, in the next section, I make the case that schools are key spaces in the promotion of positive social, emotional and behavioural skills, show how in recent years there has been a conflation of social and emotional well-being and mental health, and maintain that interventions designed to bring about improvements in such areas are highly interpretable. After providing details of the empirical study, including the rationale for the work, the schools and staff member sample involved and the collection and analysis of data, I present the research findings, focussing mainly on the three themes identified above, before I offer a range of recommendations that may be of use to educational establishments in the future.

Promoting positive social and emotional well-being in British schools

The promotion of positive social and emotional well-being has become far more apparent in British schools over the past 20 or so years, and today, under the current Conservative government's plans to transform children and young people's mental health provision, educational establishments have once again been identified as the central platform to 'tackle many of the underlying issues which affect poor mental health' (DoH and DfE 2018, 6). Concerns surrounding such issues are by no means novel, but re-ignite a long-standing debate regarding the purpose of schooling more widely and its potential in influencing skills and attributes beyond those directly associated with academic aptitude (Levin 2013). As a consequence of their role and reach, schools have been identified as primary settings where initial concerns relating to emotional health and social well-being can be both identified and targeted (Greenberg 2010). A host of education-based initiatives that aim to facilitate the emotional and behavioural needs of school children, under the banner of 'social inclusion' (Burman 2009), have been developed and utilised in British schools. The 'National Healthy Schools Programme' (NHSP), a joint venture of the Departments of Health, and for Children, Schools and Families under the New Labour government of 1997–2010, sought, amongst other things, to promote positive emotional health and well-being amongst children in schools, through the teaching of strategies that aimed to improve skills associated with expressing feelings, building confidence and strengthening resilience.

Other central government-led strategies, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) initiative, and the Penn Resilience scheme, as well as local authority programmes, including the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PAThS) have embraced the notion of 'social inclusion' through the promotion of social and emotional well-being as a rationale for their roll-out (Burman 2009; Harwood and Allan 2014; Ecclestone and Rawdin 2016). Continuing this trend, and as a consequence of more recent government endorsements, there has been a renewed interest and take-up, by schools, in the use of 'Nurture groups' (Grantham and Primrose 2017), due in part to their potential to facilitate strong attachments, effective social skills and ability to maintain successful relationships, all of which emphasise the inclusive qualities of such support (Warin 2017). As such, British schools have been, and are now once again, key sites of social inclusion due to their adoption of a range of universal interventions that claim to enhance children's social and emotional well-being. The resurgence in SEL schemes, such as the SEAL initiative (Humphrey 2013) and nurture groups (Warin 2017), however, is not without criticism due, in part, to claims that such

interventions are merely components of a 'dangerous rise of therapeutic education' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2008). Furthermore, others (see Ecclestone and Rawdin 2016) argue that the types of interventions introduced above regularly fail to differentiate between social well-being, emotional well-being and mental health, and it is to discussions around such elisions that this article now turns.

The 'vague and slippery' focus of interventions

British SEL schemes, such as SEAL and its early years counterpart, Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD), have targeted children's social and emotional well-being by focusing largely on attempts to improve self-awareness, emotional control, empathy, motivation and social skills, aptitudes largely aligned with the concept of emotional intelligence, whilst nurture group type support invest in the importance of attachment and on-going relationships. Although it has been argued such interventions have wider benefits for inclusion, holistic well-being and positive mental health (see Humphrey 2013; Warin 2017), others suggest there is now a 'vague and slippery elision' of mental health, social well-being and emotional well-being within the support used in British schools (Ecclestone and Rawdin 2016, 377). Indeed, recent Department of Health (2014) guidance on 'Mental health and wellbeing provision in schools' re-affirm this conflation, despite the acknowledgement of well-being as a multi-dimensional construct in earlier guidance given to schools, such as those provided by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE 2009), and its emphasis on well-being consisting of interwoven but distinct aspects, including emotional well-being (happiness, confidence, not feeling depressed) and social well-being (ability to form and maintain healthy relationships). As such, it has been argued that schools now widely target competencies and attributes including reflection, self-esteem, self-awareness, emotional control, confidence, motivation, empathy and other components of emotional intelligence (Bywater and Sharples 2012) as a means of reducing mental health issues amongst their pupils. Whilst this is not surprising, bearing in mind claims that high levels of emotional intelligence have been equated to positive mental health (see Burman 2009), such research re-affirms how schools continue to be seen as 'key sites for fostering competences, attributes and dispositions associated with social and emotional learning, emotional well-being and mental health' (Ecclestone and Rawdin 2016, 378).

Centralised support for SEL schemes in British schools has waxed and waned over the years, with the recent Conservative governments, as well as their predecessor, the Conservative-led coalition of 2010–2015, distancing themselves from initiatives such as SEAL. More recently, there has been a rise in interest in 'character education', such as through the promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBV) (DfE 2014). Yet, even within this renewal of a commitment to character development in British primary and secondary schools more widely do we see a focus on individual traits (Spohrer and Bailey 2020) and a conflation of mental health and emotional well-being (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2017). So, whilst the rhetoric over the years and across British governments may have changed, the emphasis on emotional well-being and mental health has not. Still, this has not deterred calls for school-based reforms that prioritise universal mental health screening as a central component of their offer (Humphrey and Wigelsworth 2016). Indeed, as part of a drive to make 'health education a compulsory part of the

curriculum', from September 2020, schools are required to cover core content including lessons for children on: 'good decisions about their own health and well-being'; recognising 'issues in themselves and others'; and 'mental resilience and wellbeing' (DfE 2014, 33). With schools being firmly positioned as the spearhead of children's mental health provision reform, it would be wise to pay attention to recent advice from central government that 'substantial differences between schools … in terms of size and geography … would need to be considered in the implementation' of such provision (DfE 2014, 12). As an array of research testifies (see Durlak 2015; Humphrey and Wigelsworth 2016; Roffey 2017), the interpretation of schemes designed to improve social and emotional well-being is complex and nuanced and as schools working with interventions, like SEL, cannot be viewed as a homogenous group, it is necessary to acknowledge the variations in implementation across settings in order to understand how such support is enacted, (Banerjee 2010). I explore some of these variations next.

Research rationale: Exploring variation in interpretation, implementation and use

The focus of much research regarding the various tools and interventions designed to promote social and emotional well-being in schools as a way of improving social inclusion has been 'impact orientated', and in this respect, many have been able to demonstrate the benefits of SEL and wider forms of pastoral support (see Humphrey 2013; Grantham and Primrose 2017). Although work over the years has identified the strengths associated with 'whole school approaches' (Weare 2004, 2007) to such interventions, there remains a 'continued dearth of empirical research exploring how social and cultural' contexts 'inform the meaning', comprehension and use of 'school-based SEL interventions' (Evans 2017, 200). More recently, there has been an acknowledgement that school-based initiatives designed to promote social and emotional well-being, such as SEL, nurture group practices and wider pastoral support schemes, are 'multi-layered', and 'inter-connected' with the social and cultural realities of the individual schools (Rawdin 2019). The interpretation and enactment of policy, by schools, is situated by context, with a range of school-specific factors, constraints and pressures influencing the resulting practices (Braun et al. 2011). Yet, despite an array of evidence demonstrating disparity and difference in 'how schools do policy' (Ball et al. 2011), minimal research has sought to explore the localised nature of SEL interpretation, and how 'situated' context influences its enactment in schools.

Additionally, within schools, there are a range of staff members negotiating SEL by acting as both 'receivers' and 'agents' of 'policy messages', who are likely to adapt their practices in response to the school's needs and according to their own individual and unique histories, experiences and motivations (Sin and Saunders 2015). Furthermore, staff within schools receive 'policy messages' from colleagues and, in turn, contextualise and adapt such messages before communicating these adapted ideas to others, and thus become a single step, comprising of many, on the 'policy implementation staircase' (Reynolds and Saunders 1987). What is central to these individual negotiations of policy and their enactment in practice are 'professional' contexts relating to the values, experiences and commitments of staff. As 'policy actors', staff are continuously positioned in relation to the activities they are involved in and 'understand them' as a consequence of 'where'

they are (Braun et al. 2011, 591). Yet, whilst such work demonstrates the complex and nuanced nature of policy interpretation and enactment by staff, one largely neglected area of research relates to the role of the teachers and other school staff members responsible for the delivery of interventions designed to enhance social and emotional well-being, and how their own beliefs, assumptions and values in relation to such schemes may influence their own participation in this work (Evans 2017).

Consequently, there is a need to gather such views, because despite calls for a remodelling of the teaching profession to one that prioritises reflection of social and emotional knowledge (White 2016) as part of a drive for improved 'emotional pedagogy' (Burman 2009), there remains a distinct lack of research that captures the voices of the range of staff members who engage in 'emotional labour' (Evans 2017; Page 2018). By filling this current void, this article aims to contribute to knowledge on a number of levels. Firstly, it will illustrate how a school's culture, location, and perceived needs impact upon not only their own interpretation and use of schemes designed to promote social and emotional well-being but also upon the staff members they employ. Secondly, it will demonstrate how the comprehension and enactment of such interventions varies between schools, and the influences that produce these disparities. Finally, it will identify and explore a number of variables that impact upon the utilisation of support amongst staff, both within, and between schools. Subsequently, by accessing the views of a wide sample of staff, including leaders, teachers and non-teaching staff members, this article will highlight how an individual's role influences the way they understand and make use of the interventions explored. Details of the research study upon which these contributions have been derived is provided next.

Research aims and questions

The overall aim of the research reported here was 'to explore the interpretation and use of SEL in primary schools'. To help achieve this aim, the following research questions were developed: What are the main motivations for using SEL in primary schools? How is SEL being interpreted in primary schools? What are the influences behind these interpretations?

The empirical study

This article draws on interview and focus group data, gathered from staff members working in case-study primary schools, which formed part of a larger multi-method study designed to explore the aims and questions stated above. Data was collected in 24 individual interviews and ten focus groups, each comprising of between four and six staff members. Focus groups consisted of 'naturally occurring groups' (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999) such as 'management staff', 'teaching staff' and 'non-teaching staff', as well as a group with members across the 'whole school'. One member of staff from each of the six staff groups – management, inclusion coordinators, teachers, teaching assistants, pastoral staff and welfare staff – in each case study school, was individually interviewed. The case study primary schools were sampled as they presented variation with regards to their size, number of pupils on roll, ethnicity, number of pupils eligible for free school meals and duration and type of SEL use. In the larger study, data was

gathered from four case study schools (Schools A–D), but in this article, I focus on data gathered from just two of these schools (Schools A and B):

> School A is a larger than average school with almost 450 pupils on roll, 95% of whom are of white British heritage. It is located in an urban area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage, with the number of pupils eligible for free school meals at over 20%. School A has been implementing SEL for five years, and this takes place via taught lessons designed to enhance emotional intelligence, weekly whole-school assemblies, regular small group work in each class, and one to one sessions with children who are deemed to benefit from such support.

> School B is the largest in the town with just less than 600 pupils on roll, the vast majority of whom are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The school is located in an area of social disadvantage with one third of its pupils eligible for free school meals. The school has been using SEL for five years, although unlike School A, social and emotional learning here is not explored within whole school environments such as assemblies and taught lessons, but instead is used as a scheme of intervention for children identified by the school's pastoral team as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The data, after transcription, and organisation using ATLAS.ti software, was subjected to a conventional qualitative thematic analysis (see Cresswell 2005). Given the 'centrality of the research question to the research process' (Mason 2018, 9), this was guided by study's research aim on the interpretation and use of SEL, and its related questions and pertinent issues, including the motivations for use and its perceived purpose, process of implementation and influence on pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills more widely. Upon coding and categorising of the data, and with a recognition that themes do not 'emerge' but are 'identified' (Patton 2014), it was clear that an iterative stance would allow for an approach to analysis that could be both exploratory and confirmatory (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). As such, a range of themes were identified based on both the aims of the research questions, as well as experiences and opinions that were important to the staff member interviewees. Although many of the study's themes and findings have been reported elsewhere (see Wood 2020a, 2020b), in this paper, I report on one of these: how SEL interpretation and use is a product of the school, how it is led, and the staff members it employs, and it is to this analysis that this paper turns next. In keeping with the adherence to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2018) throughout all stages of the research, and in order to enhance confidentiality, allocated pseudonyms are used in this article, and will replace the names of the staff member interviewees.

Research findings: SEL interpretation and use

The motivations for using SEL, the way it is interpreted, and the influences behind these interpretations are complex and varied. The array of staff members working in the school comprehended and made use of SEL in a variety of ways, often in response to their own roles and working environment. Furthermore, each school's own unique culture and priorities influenced how such support was interpreted and then used, whilst the respective school leaders and management staff, in response to the perceived needs of their schools, also held individual and specific interpretations of this form of support which in turn influenced its enactment within their establishments. Consequently, in this section, I

clarify how SEL was interpreted and used by staff, schools and leadership and management.

Staff

Staff members understood, used and adapted the support that targeted social and emotional well-being in a variety of ways, often in response to their own role, working environment and identities, creating a degree of discrepancy regarding the interpretation and use of SEL, both within and between schools. Although a range of non-teaching school staff members, including teaching assistants, welfare assistants and pastoral staff, reflected on SEL in light or their specific roles and working environment, one consistent theme identified amongst this group was their reliance on their experiences as parents, and how they felt these 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) positioned them as competent social, emotional and behavioural facilitators.

Teaching assistants (TA) like Samantha, and welfare staff members such as Edith, viewed their main role in SEL as similar to their role as a parent with their own children, in terms of giving '*consistent care*' (Samantha: TA) and '*offering meaningful advice when things get tough*' (Edith: Welfare Staff), whilst Charlotte, a TA, felt her role was to provide guidance '*as a mum would*'. Drawing on their 'everyday' (Gee 2008), 'mother-wise' (Luttrell 1997) knowledge, in the extracts below, two non-teaching staff members illustrate how this knowledge framed the SEL and pastoral support they offered:

> **Amber (Welfare):** It's not just a job is it? It's more than a job, you're a nurse, you're a carer, you're a mum. You have to be.

> **Jess (TA):** I think as parents we're very much aware of anything that does arise and how it should be dealt with … and that helps with the social and emotional part of the job.

Non-teaching staff members interpreted SEL as a tool to achieve social harmony, a form of care, a means of communication and, as TAs like Lucy stated, to '*socially educate*' the children. As non-teaching staff members felt these acts ran adjacent to their role as '*mums*', a role that Molly felt is '*an everyday thing and what is always done*', they perceived such support as an approach that is second nature to them and, as such, it wasn't always valued, as she explains:

> **Molly (Welfare):** *Personally, in my job, I don't think (SEL) has made any difference to my job at all because I think I were doing exactly the same when I started here 28 years ago, it is what I'm doing now, it's what I've always done as a Mum.*

Although the views expressed so far offer weight to the view that non-teaching staff are at times seen as a 'mum's army' (Ainscow 2000), proficient in skills such as listening, talking to and caring for, children (Woolfson and Truswell 2005), they reveal an understanding of SEL not in keeping with all staff members. As will be discussed, SEL-related training across some of the case study schools, and particularly School B, was reserved for management and teachers only with non-teaching staff members often being overlooked. Consequently, the lack of training on offer to non-teaching staff influenced their interpretation and use of SEL to be framed through 'funds of knowledge' different to those accessed by teaching and management staff, who were given 'official' training.

By being refused SEL training, many non-teaching staff members utilised their experiences as a parent as a basis for interpreting and utilising SEL, as is shown:

> **Abigail (Head teacher):** *Non-teaching staff haven't been trained in SEL and so they do, and understand it, off what they think is best for a child, as a mum.*

Seemingly unable to access the 'official' approach to SEL, non-teaching staff drew on their own personal 'everyday' knowledge (Gee 2008) as a parent, which inevitably varies. This, in turn, created scenarios where the individual non-teaching staff members viewed, interpreted, developed and valued pupils' social and emotional skills in very different and inconsistent ways. Relying less heavily on their experiences as parents, teachers like Joanna, who had access to training, felt SEL has specific objectives and takes place within formal learning environments, whilst members of the school leadership teams, who were also trained, pointed to its role in facilitating a range of social and emotional competencies:

> **Joanna (Teacher):** *SEL is developing children's emotional intelligence on a daily basis in a structured classroom setting.*

> **Bethany (Assistant Head):** SEL is about giving value and importance to social skills, … motivational skills, relationships with each other, managing feelings … (and) self-awareness.

Unlike Molly, and other non-teaching staff who were reluctant to place value on SEL, the teachers interviewed in this study, like Joanna, often felt that such support helped to remove the barriers to learning, which aided their main role of teaching the children and, as a result, viewed the scheme as central to '*successful pedagogy*'. Furthermore, the majority of leadership and management staff were also enthusiastic in their appraisal of SEL, with head teacher, Stanley, claiming such schemes are '*one of, if not the best initiatives that have come out in the time … in the job*'.

As the data explored above reveals, individual staff member groups, particularly management/teaching and non-teaching staff, drew from differing experiences relating to their roles and identities in order to comprehend and utilise SEL. These staff groups varied with regards to the quantity of training and thus 'ownership' of SEL they felt they possessed. Subsequently, the ways in which the staff groups were motivated to carry out their work, and the ways in which they interpreted, valued and employed SEL varied. Whilst the differing uses, understandings and appraisals of SEL reported here is distinct, it is important to acknowledge that there were also elements of uniformity regarding its perceived purpose and how it was enacted within schools, as a consequence of their specific needs, priorities and culture. It is to these between schools analyses that I now turn.

Schools

The interpretation and adaptation of SEL schemes in response to each school's individual needs and culture, previously asserted by the likes of Coyle (2008), were corroborated in the between schools' analysis of the data in the larger study. In this section, I focus on just two of these: School A and School B, both of whom interpreted and made use of SEL in response to children's social and emotional issues deemed to stem from the home and surrounding community.

School A adhered to principles pertinent to 'welfarist cultures' (Hargreaves 1995) due to their focus 'on individual student development within a nurturing environment', an 'educational philosophy that is child centred' and the development of a 'strong pastoral system' (27). Such cultural values were central in the positioning of SEL as '*fundamentally part of everything*' the school did, (Bethany: Assistant Head). What also influenced the school's enthusiasm for such support was a belief that their pupils' parents taught and advocated violent and aggressive resolutions to conflict in the home. In response to such concerns, staff members at School A felt there was a '*real need to fire fight*' (Stanley: Head teacher), with others alluding to the school as a '*battle ground of social and cultural integration*' (John: Assistant Head). Yet, in keeping with their welfarist approach, School A recognised the importance of parental involvement in the promotion of children's social, emotional and behavioural skills and consequently developed strategies with the aim of creating consistency in the approaches to SEL employed by the staff in school and parents at home. The school carried out a series of workshops and training events with the interested parties, and the value placed on this approach can be seen in the following two extracts:

> **Stanley (Head teacher):** *It is an important thing in getting the parents on board with it … We hold workshops for parents on SEL to show them what we do, and a lot will access it. The best way to get the best results is to involve the parents where possible.*

> **Bethany (Assistant Head):** I think the work we do with families is vital as it provides an alternative for them, a different way of doing things, and I think some of our more challenging parents over the years have picked up on the way we manage this.

A different stance was taken at School B, one that did not always recognise and include the children's parents and community as part of a 'whole school approach' (Weare 2004) to social, emotional and behavioural development. As was the case with School A, School B also problematised the role of parents and the wider community in endorsing specific behaviours. Abigail, the school's head teacher, and Samantha, a TA, share their views below:

> **Abigail (Head teacher):** *Their parenting skills are that they don't have any. They speak to their children inappropriately; they … don't teach their children manners or social etiquette … The list is endless.*

> **Samantha (TA):** SEL is to help the poorer children … of the Asian community … Their parents just don't do the things that English parents do, they don't play the games, they don't teach them the manners the same, or appropriate social skills

In their 'othering' of these parents, staff revealed a dual purpose in the potential products of SEL, where they both problematised the norms and values of specific groups, whilst at the same time helping to re-assert the dominant culture's way of life (Apple 2004; 2006). As can be seen, staff members within the school took issue with the social skills and etiquette endorsed by parents and within the surrounding community, largely focussing their attention on the '*issue of Asian children lowering their gaze*' (Bob: Learning Mentor). Staff members like Jane, a teacher, in response to scenarios where '*community members … (at) the mosque, … the Imam … .and especially the parents tell their children to 'lower your eyes, lower your gaze*', maintained that SEL, for her, focused mainly on the development of specific social skills, like assertiveness, of

which eye contact was central. Indeed, Jane regularly asked her pupils questions like '*why are you not looking at me when I'm talking to you*?', when she felt these social behaviours were not being adequately performed.

The data captured here not only presents instances of both structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1969, 1990), but also the imposition of cultural hegemony, by staff identifying and promoting the behaviours and values of the dominant culture as the societal norm. Furthermore, it demonstrates how specific obligations of a 'whole-school approach' where 'parents, the wider community and outside agencies should be actively involved in decision making' and that the school should 'focus on the totality of the school as an organisation in its community including all aspects of social life' (Weare 2004, 55) were not readily observed at School B. In the final part of this section, I delve deeper into the concept of 'whole school approaches' by examining the influence of leadership and management on the schools' interpretation and use of SEL.

Leadership and management

Schools A and B, whilst similar in their interpretation of SEL as an intervention that could target behaviours deemed a product of the home and community, were also different in the ways in which they interacted with these stakeholders. Furthermore, Stanley and Abigail, the heads at School A and B respectively, positioned and enacted SEL differently, often in response to their specific school's needs and priorities. In this final section, I examine the role of leadership and management at Schools A and B in terms of their impact on practices associated with social and emotional development, the values attached to it, and how the schools' existing whole school ethos influenced, and was influenced by, SEL.

At School A, the leadership and management team aimed for an ethos where SEL '*underpinned everything the school is about*' so that is became '*embedded … (as) the absolute key priority of the whole school curriculum*' (Bethany: Assistant Head). Members of the management and leadership team were honest in some of the challenges they were experiencing in establishing such a stance, including '*inconsistencies with training all staff in the comprehension of SEL*' (John: Assistant Head) and '*non-teaching staff seeing this as unimportant, common sense and not part of their role*' (Bethany: Assistant Head). Yet, what was clear from the data, was a willingness on their part to work towards a '*whole school ethos that cherishes SEL*' (Bethany: Assistant Head). Consequently, regular inset meetings and training events were offered to staff members within the school, as John states below:

> **John (Assistant Head):** *Each fortnight we have an all staff meeting on Tuesday night dedicated to SEL and the theme that will take our focus for the term. This is then re-iterated within the smaller teaching, teaching assistant, pastoral and welfare team meetings that are less formal and we do that so we get the same input, but then so that there can be those local discussions around SEL.*

This enthusiastic promotion of SEL by the leadership and management at School A, was in contrast to the approach taken at School B. Although there was some evidence from the data collected from both teaching and non-teaching staff there that SEL was '*valuable*' (Jane: Teacher) and '*worthwhile*' (Bob: Learning mentor) within the school,

most staff members were unaware of the scheme, as the following excerpt taken from the focus group with staff members across the 'whole school' demonstrates:

Researcher: *How would you explain to me what SEL is?*

Brenda (Welfare): Well I couldn't because I haven't been told about it, so to be perfectly honest I don't know anything about it.

Eve (Attendance): *Neither do I.*

Caitlin (TA): No, I'm sorry, this is the first time I've heard the term 'social and emotional learning'. We've just never been informed about it.

The lack of any explicit acknowledgement or recognition of SEL as a focus of activities within the school was also evident when speaking with members of the leadership team who largely felt it was an '*add-on*' that they only '*paid lip service to*' (Rose: Assistant Head). Although the quote below, in the main, illustrates how there was little evidence to suggest that 'relations between principal and staff were held to be democratic' (Hargreaves 1995, 27) at School B, it demonstrates further the apathy shown to SEL here:

Abigail (Head teacher): *I feel that in a school with a head teacher who supports all the theories, who's into things like SEL, and there are many head teachers, it's fine and it's a really, really good strategy. But in a school like this, with a head teacher like me, who doesn't give as much value to things like that, as it doesn't fit into my ethos and philosophy, it doesn't work as well … I'm not really supporting it … it's just that it doesn't fit in with my approach to schooling in general and my vision of how I want my school to run.*

This positioning of SEL as an approach that doesn't align with the head's vision for School B demonstrates how the interpretation, enactment and value attached to such support can be influenced by how the school is led and managed. Furthermore, the interpretations and uses of SEL, such as those observed at School B, counter what has been previously contended, in that schools ought to maintain 'fidelity' to SEL by utilising its whole school structure, classroom based sessions and individual one-to-one support as the 'backbone' for the whole programme (Humphrey 2013). In contrast to School B, Stanley, the head teacher at School A, sheds light on his vision for SEL, one that stays loyal to its centrality to the school's day to day operation:

Stanley (Head teacher) You've got your whole school approach, where all staff are working towards seeing SEL as our driving ethos, which is crucial for us all to see it happening as one. Then you've got your classroom based work; you've then also got your small group work, and then, if you can do it, you then really target the individuals, through one on one support.

How the schools balanced the promotion of social and emotional skills amongst the children with external performative demands associated with increased workload and successful outcomes in key stage assessments revealed further dissimilarities in practice. In this regard, Stanley and Abigail, head teachers at School A and B, respectively, positioned SEL within each school's every day in very different ways. On the one hand, Stanley, in his prioritisation of SEL viewed this package of support as a tool that was central to learning, the by-product of which may lead to performative success, whilst Abigail saw SEL as an unnecessary distraction from getting the children to meet learning targets that created additional pressures to teachers, in terms of their workload, as is shown:

> **Stanley (Head teacher):** The reason SEL has had an impact on the kids is because now, in a working day, the teachers teach, the children learn; whereas previously in a working day the teachers managed negative behaviour, dealt with all those issues around emotional and social problems, and had far less time to teach. The children are far more ready to learn than they were … ,in time I think this will bear fruit in terms of end of year tests and assessment.

> **Abigail (Head teacher):** *The main thing to remember in all of this is how hard my teachers work already. I don't think it's fair asking them to take something else on, they work their fingers to the bone from when they first walk in until leaving, and then they're at it all night too. We just think the teachers are fine focussing on what is important, teaching the kids.*

Albeit in very different ways, management and leadership staff at both School A and B have, in Deal and Peterson's (1999) terms, acted as 'visionaries' as they have approached and operationalised SEL as a means of reinforcing and re-emphasising their school's ethos, in doing so explicitly communicating this stance to its stakeholders. This should not be surprising bearing in mind that head teachers, leaders and members of management have a substantial influence on the ideas that are formed and the values that are held within schools (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008), yet the comparison of School A and B captured within the latter part of this section reveals not only how a school's ethos frames SEL, but also how SEL affects the whole school ethos. This is discussed in greater detail next.

Discussion

The findings made in this study illuminate some of the complexities regarding the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place across the 'whole school' and, as such, have implications for the applicability of specific components of a 'whole-school approach' to SEL. It was clear that some schools were able to achieve and display numerous facets of a 'whole-school approach' (Weare 2007), including coherence and co-ordination, yet SEL, in School B for instance, was perceived as an unnecessary '*add-on*' (Rose: Assistant Head) and not recognised as important. Conversely, School A enthused over the scheme, utilised it fully and, believing it to be '*life changing*' (Stanley: Head), considered the initiative to have had a very real and significant impact. Yet, as the testimonies that display disparity in use and the value attached to SEL, such as those offered by non-teaching and teaching staff at this school illustrate, School A also struggled to achieve a 'whole-school approach' in its purest sense and certainly regarding 'congruence between the various parts, so that one part of the picture is not undermining work that is being carried out somewhere else' (Weare 2007, 246). It is advised, therefore, that homogeneity and uniformity should not necessarily be considered as pre-requisites of 'successful' whole-school implementation of SEL, in order to allow for the more local and nuanced experiences and enactments of practice, such as has been shown here.

The involvement of 'parents, the wider community and outside agencies … in decision making', so that schools focus 'on the totality of the school as an organisation in its community including all aspects of social life' (Weare 2004, 55), was rather more complex, with some schools embracing and others dismissing such advice. Weare's (2007) emphasis on a 'joined-up' effort, was apparent in the approach taken by School A, as they took a more holistic stance, one that recognised the school as part of the community, whose role wasn't merely one that targets the social and emotional behaviours of individual pupils,

but one that acknowledges and celebrates how those behaviours are located within, and indeed stem from wider community held values and beliefs. Conversely, School B, in keeping with their apathetic approach to SEL, decided against close collaboration and communication with parents in their enactment of this support. Their utilisation of the scheme to problematise and 'other' some of the behaviours of children that were valued in the wider community, demonstrated a monist approach (Skinner and McCollum 2000) to social and emotional learning; one that privileged specific displays of social behaviours above others. In order to work towards 'whole school approaches' to SEL, that includes parents and the wider community, schools are advised to adopt strategies couched in value pluralism, where there is an inherent understanding that multiple values exist, and that they often contrast and conflict with each other, (Weber 1946).

Undoubtedly, the implementation of SEL within schools is a complex issue with consideration required regarding its fidelity, dosage, quality, responsiveness and differentiation (Durlak 2015) running alongside the need for a 'whole school approach'. Recent guidance from Public Health England (2021) in the form of 'eight principles to promoting a whole school approach to emotional health and wellbeing', one of which focuses on advice for schools to develop 'an ethos and environment that promotes respect and values diversity' (8), may be useful for schools wishing to strike 'the balance … between fidelity and adaptation' (Lendrum and Humphrey 2012, 635) in their implementation of SEL. In stressing the centrality of values diversity to emotional health and well-being, over uniformity, schools may feel better placed in reframing their approaches along more 'agonistic' (Mouffe 2005) lines, where instead of wishing to endorse commonality in the ways children consume and respond to SEL, they instead embrace experiences of disagreement, contestation and conflict as the basis of the social, emotional and behavioural work they undertake.

One of the ways in which 'agonism' may be embraced is through the promotion of 'cultural intelligence' or the ability to recognise and adapt to differing cultural beliefs and practices, in schools, via SEL. The utilisation of Earley and Mosakowski's (2004) 'six steps to cultivating cultural intelligence' is one framework that outlines how the aptitude can be developed, and if incorporated within SEL, may provide a platform for schools to enhance this ability amongst children. It is hoped such work, in turn, would not only guard against the instances of 'othering' witnessed in School B but would also allow schools to contextualise and make sense of SEL in response to their own needs and those of the communities they serve. Such an approach would not happen by chance. The school, its leaders, staff, parents and stakeholders would all need to be adaptable in grounding their position in one that embraces openness and a willing to learn, and whilst whole school training may provide a means of moving towards the establishment of this approach, a renewed emphasis on 'emotions' at the heart of the practices of schools, its leaders and staff would also be needed.

Although the current UK government's commitment to encouraging the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing, explicit in recent publications (see DoH 2015; DoH and DfE 2018), positions schools as primary locations in this quest, the demands of the national curriculum coupled with the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball 2003), reduces the scope for teachers to engage in any meaningful work explicitly dedicated to SEL. A move towards a 'social and emotional curriculum' (Roffey 2017) that both facilitates knowledge and skills that helps to bring about positive well-being and mental health,

and is embedded within the learning environment, would be best achieved where schools prioritise concepts and skills such as emotionality, love, and care as fundamental to their ethos, culture and practices. Although Page (2018) maintains there has been a persistent devaluation of 'emotions' in education 'policy circles' (123), love, care, and intimacy continue to be the hallmarks of 'best practice' (124) in schools. With this in mind, head teachers and other management staff should ground their vision for their schools, and approaches to SEL, in these concepts. Such brave and transformational leadership will in turn help staff to normalise their social, emotional and behavioural work with children, and in doing so begin to position 'emotionality' as the crux of the school's ethos.

Conclusion

The interpretation and use of SEL in schools is both complex and nuanced. The findings reported here focused on variables sub-grouped under three themes: staff, schools and leaders, and in response to calls for further research in this area (see Evans 2017; Rawdin 2019), advances our understanding of the practice of SEL interpretation and use. Specifically, the paper's main contribution lies in developing our understanding of how staff interpret, enact and give value to social, emotional and behavioural work in light of their own roles and working environment; how schools utilise such support in response to their specific needs, priorities and as a consequence of their culture; and how leadership and management staff, such as head teachers, influence and shape the 'whole school approach' to SEL. Although it was found that a school's specific needs and priorities have an impact on the way SEL is viewed and used, and whilst leaders, management and individual staff members interpret such support in light of issues relevant to them individually, categorising specifically how schools and their staff interpret and make use of SEL is a daunting task. Whilst all of the variables discussed in this paper undoubtedly influence the way in which the schemes are understood, ultimately the interpretation and use of SEL is a product of the individual school and staff member, in response to their own specific circumstances. As such, and bearing in mind calls for reform in schools so that social and emotional well-being and mental health becomes a key foci of education (see Humphrey and Wigelsworth 2016), this paper is a timely reminder of the complexities involved in SEL implementation, interpretation and use. Although encouraging that avenues for social and emotional nourishment not only exist in schools but are now being actively promoted by government, their impact on children's health and well-being remains to be seen. One, obviously, hopes for positive results in this regard, but as a means of facilitating the likelihood of this outcome, schools would do well to recognise, value and position 'emotions' as the starting point of their day-to-day practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council: [Grant Number ES/I902945/1].

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