

# **“We are trying to make them good citizens”: The utilisation of SEAL to develop ‘appropriate’ social, emotional and behavioural skills amongst pupils attending disadvantaged primary schools**

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on primary school staff members’ interpretations of the UK social and emotional learning initiative: SEAL. The data, collected through group and individual interviews with a range of staff members working in schools located in deprived areas, illustrates how the scheme has been used to encourage various behaviours. This utilisation of SEAL was influenced by staff members’ perceptions of the pupils’ parents, and particularly their in/ability to develop ‘appropriate’ social, emotional and behavioural skills. Staff members identified a range of objectionable behaviours, exhibited by the pupils, which were perceived to have been encouraged in the home. In response, schools operationalised SEAL to endorse alternative behaviours deemed ‘appropriate’. Implications of the findings, in terms of marginalising the values and ‘othering’ the practices of specific sections of society, are discussed, and recommendations are made for a more democratic approach to schooling which prioritises a mutual exchange of knowledge between school and home.

**Keywords:** Social and emotional aspects of learning; social and emotional learning; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; parenting; home-school relations

## **Introduction**

This paper, based on the accounts of a range of primary school staff members, presents an analysis of the interpretation and utilisation of a UK social and emotional learning scheme (SEAL) in three case study primary schools located in areas of socio-economic deprivation. The staff members discuss how their employment of the scheme is often influenced by their perceptions of the pupils' parents, and specifically their in/ability to develop 'appropriate' social, emotional and behavioural skills amongst their children. School staff members identified a range of pupil behaviours as problematic and felt parents encouraged these 'inappropriate' modes of conduct. This led to staff, within the three schools, making use of SEAL to endorse alternative behaviours they deemed to be appropriate, as a way of responding to these perceptions of inadequate parenting practices. These perceptions, as well as a variety of issues raised by the employment of social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools, to contradict and oppose behaviours endorsed in the home, will be explored in this paper.

## **Contextual background**

The analysis and discussion is set within a context of on-going educational debates relating to state intervention into family life. Numerous researchers have recognised how previous governments have identified parents as significant figures in stimulating social morality, with those perceived as 'failing' in their role being held responsible for childhood problems like truancy, anti-social behaviour, offending, and obesity (Ball 2008). By creating a parental deficit, where specific groups of parents are constructed as 'failing', parenting is now a 'public rather than a private issue' (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008, p. 6).

Under Tony Blair's New Labour government of 1997-2010, schemes such as 'Family Intervention Projects' and 'Sure Start', which were seen to epitomise the 'Nanny State', were often criticised for intrusion into the private world of parenting. Commentators have argued how such strategies were part of a 'neo-liberal agenda' that targeted families from socially disadvantaged areas (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008; Broadhurst, Mason and Grover 2007). Between 2010-2015, and in keeping with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's notion of the 'Big Society', individual and local freedoms, as opposed to state regulation, were encouraged whilst more recently, under the current Conservative government (2015-present), there has been a renewed emphasis on 'the power of government' typified by Prime Minister, Theresa May's pledge to utilise state education as a vehicle to improve the mental health of the country's children.

Within these discourse, blame is often attached to parents when children and young people behave inappropriately, illustrating how responsibility still lies firmly within the family. Although New Labour and the current Conservative government advocate the role of the state in helping parents to bring up their children, whilst the Coalition championed the individual responsibility of parents, all types of policy discourse provided a means to attribute blame to individual parents. The supportive schemes, modes of state intervention, and discourses introduced have been identified as forms of social control that target those families from socially disadvantaged areas (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008), who are regularly constructed as 'malfunctioning' or 'failing' (Tisdall 2006; Broadhurst 2009). In this paper I contribute to these on-going debates by exploring how schools have utilised a recent educational initiative as a form of compensatory education, to target the

behaviours of children from low socio-economic areas. By perceiving the practices of these children's parents as inadequate, and then by employing the scheme to oppose behaviours endorsed in these homes, the concepts explored illustrate how schools have utilised SEL to intervene in family life.

### **The empirical study**

This paper is based on a research study that aimed to investigate the interpretation and use of the 'social and emotional aspects of learning' (SEAL) initiative in primary schools. This scheme, a curriculum based resource with the aim of 'developing all children's social, emotional and behavioural skills' (DfES 2005, p. 6), was introduced in June 2005. Utilising Goleman's (1995) notion of emotional intelligence as a theoretical structure, a variety of activities are offered through the scheme, via various platforms, including whole-school work, assemblies, classroom based lessons, small group work sessions and intervention with individual children. SEAL is delivered in schools using three waves of intervention: wave one centres on whole-school development work and the teaching of skills within lessons with the fundamental aim of creating an ethos where social and emotional learning is prioritised (Humphrey, Kalambouka, Bolton, Lendrum, Wigelsworth, Lennie and Farrell 2008); wave two targets children deemed to require the extra support to develop their social, emotional and behavioural skills via small group-work sessions for; wave three involves one one-to-one intervention with individual children who may not have benefitted from the input within the previous two waves.

The SEAL scheme has been positively appraised positively by researchers (see Hallam, Rhamie and Shaw, 2006; Hallam, 2009; Humphrey et al. 2008; Lendrum, Humphrey, Wigelsworth and Kalambouka 2009;), who relate the initiative to improvements in children's social and communication skills, relationships, confidence, pro-social behaviour, attitudes towards schools and well-being. Although approval has been levied at the scheme, others believe SEAL to be a values based form of education (see Hartley 2003) that endorses and marginalises specific behaviours (Craig, 2007), by not only coaching, but coercing children into experiencing specific constructions of social and emotional well-being, (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008).

Recent research has illustrated how the SEAL programme has been interpreted by schools and staff as a means of promoting specific cultural and political values in schools. Wood and Warin (2014) claim that schools interpreted and made use of SEAL in response to perceptions of their pupils' parents, and specifically their ability to develop 'appropriate' social, emotional and behavioural skills. They maintained that where parents were positively appraised, the scheme was used to complement what was perceived to occur in the home; whilst in schools where parents were negatively appraised, SEAL was used to counter their endeavours. In this article I offer support for such findings and illustrate how primary school staff members, in response to negative perceptions of parenting practices, found certain pupil behaviours inappropriate, and then made use of SEAL to advocate and encourage alternative behaviours.

### ***Methodological approach of the main study***

The data utilised in this article emerged from a large study that explored how primary school staff members understood and made use of SEAL. A mixed methods empirical investigation, which employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies, was developed to help understand this research aim. Participants within the main study included a range of primary school staff members such as head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff, other support staff, etc. Three phases of study, each employing a separate methodological approach were administered over 12 months and the ethical procedures outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2011) were adhered to throughout. A 29-item questionnaire was completed by 402 staff members across 38 primary schools in the first phase of the study; in phase two, data was gathered using 10 focus group interviews with a total of 44 staff members, whilst in phase three, semi-structured interviews with 24 staff members were utilised.

The first phase questionnaire composed of three main sections (whole-school approach to the scheme, reasons for employing SEAL, and its perceived purpose), and was employed to access the views of a broad range of staff members, in relation to their interpretation and use of SEAL, across the host of primary schools. Phases two and three were carried out in case study primary schools sampled to achieve maximum variation. Consequently, four schools that varied with regards to culture, social class (categorised by pupil eligibility for free school meals), size, number of pupils on roll, ethnicity, religious character, and duration of SEAL use, were selected as cases. The individual and group interviews (phases two and three) focused on staff perceptions of SEAL, its function in school and impact. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and Atlas.ti software

was utilised to help organise the data. An inductive approach to analysis, as advocated by Denzin (1970) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), allowed each qualitative phase to add depth to the findings made during the previous phase/s and facilitated the emergence of themes at each stage. Furthermore, as the analysis was also iterative in nature, these themes were continuously re-visited and developed throughout all three empirical phases.

Although the research as a whole produced numerous themes which spanned the three phases, the data utilised in this paper was drawn from a specific analysis which focussed on the motivations for utilising SEAL across school. The quotations used to illuminate the finding presented in this paper are drawn from phase three, the individual interviews with the various staff members, and are representative of just one of the emerging analytical themes that provides the focus for this article. Whilst the findings from the larger study, including the analysis and reporting of data within schools and between staff, have been reported elsewhere, in this paper I focus on the use of the scheme in the three case study schools outlined next.

### ***The case study primary schools***

As mentioned, in the main study, focus group and interview data was retrieved from staff members from four case study primary schools, in a town in Northern England. One of the schools, St Martins C of E, is a small school drawing pupils from a prosperous area of the town with less than 3% of the pupils eligible for free school meals and, as such, data from this school is not reported here. Instead, I focus on the data taken from the other three schools, all of which drew pupils from areas of social disadvantage. A brief description of these three case study schools is offered below.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity the school names are allocated pseudonyms, as are those of the staff members used during the reporting of the findings.

*The Grove*                      This ‘larger than average school’, located in area of social disadvantage, has 427 pupils on roll of which over 20% are eligible for free school meals. Predominantly, the pupils at The Grove are of British white heritage.

*Oakwood*                      With less than 200 children on roll, this is a small school which draws pupils from a mixed catchment area. The proportion of children eligible for free school meals is above average, and all the pupils are from a British white heritage.

*Red Road*                      This school is located in an urban area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage; almost one third of the 570 pupils on roll are eligible for free school meals. The vast majority of pupils attending Red Road are from minority-ethnic backgrounds.

### ***The staff member sample***

The testimonies of 17 members of staff will be utilised in this paper. Included in the sample are two head teachers, one senior manager, five teachers, three learning mentors, three teaching assistants, and three welfare staff members. Due to the focus of the main study, the ideas and concepts that will be discussed in this paper represent what the staff members consider to be the priorities in their SEL work, and how they *interpret* SEAL. At times staff members spoke about ‘using’ SEAL but for some individuals this actually represents their assumptions of what social



and emotional learning is attempting to achieve. Consequently, the reader should be aware that in some cases, although staff assert they were ‘using’ SEAL they were, in fact, speaking about their interpretations and understandings of social and emotional learning in general. It is important to add that these interpretations do not always corroborate with the ‘official’ development of social, emotional and behavioural skills as endorsed by the SEAL resources. As such, the views expressed by the staff, and *their* interpretation of the scheme, should not be confused with the way SEAL should officially be delivered in accordance with the various resources.

### **Using SEAL to target and develop specific skills**

All three schools drew pupils from socially disadvantaged areas, identified specific pupil behaviour as problematic and responded by making use of SEAL to target these behaviours. By stressing the importance of, and encouraging specific modes of behaviour, primary school staff members within these schools opposed and countered parenting practices perceived to be taking place at home, and in doing so adapted SEAL to combat behaviours encouraged by parents, and within the children’s social lives away from the school setting. This utilisation of SEAL at Oakwood, Red Road and The Grove illustrates how schools have adapted the scheme in response to issues perceived to have been created by parents in the home. In this section I will illustrate how primary school staff members found certain pupil behaviours objectionable and inappropriate, and then made use of SEAL to advocate and encourage alternative behaviours.

## *Independence*

One of the concerns, held by the primary school staff members, was that parents were “*smothering and mollycoddling*” (Fred - Teacher) their children, which in turn impacted upon their ability to be independent, as is pointed out:

Ella (Teacher): *Our children, when they're upset or angry, we do tend to find they go straight to the parents who then intervene for them. This means the children don't know how to react in different situations, hence they would just come straight to the adult because the adult who they know at home, as a parent, sorts everything out immediately.*

In response, the scheme was utilised as a tool to help compensate for this perceived inadequacy amongst parents, and was used to develop independence, individuality and responsibility amongst the pupils. To compensate for the assumption that parents “*mollycoddled*” their children, SEAL was interpreted and utilised as a scheme that could help to encourage pupils to develop their own strategies for dealing with emotional problems without their parents' input, as the following two quotes illustrate:

Alice (Head teacher): *SEAL, in the main, is getting the children to try and sort problems out for themselves.*

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Ella (Teacher): *First of all, SEAL is to help children to learn to solve their own problems rather than rely on adults all the time...We want them to develop their own strategies really, so that they aren't relying on adult strategies all the time.*

Schools made use of SEAL as a consequence of their perceptions of parents. The application of the scheme was influenced by the belief that parents “*smothered*” and “*sort everything*” for their children. Subsequently, SEAL was utilised to develop specific skills, deemed to have been neglected by parents, so that pupils could become more independent and less reliant on adult intervention during difficult times.

### ***Communication***

Many staff member participants felt that notions of poor parenting today were epitomised by a lack of interaction between the adult and child, which was attributed to a belief that parents were now “*lazy and couldn't be bothered*” (Samantha - TA). Edith, a welfare assistant at Red Road, expressed her concern in relation to this point by affirming that:

Edith (Welfare): *A lot of parents can't be bothered. They probably think when all the kids come home, and they have them sat down and given them their*

*tea that they can't be bothered with much else, like talking to them, which is unfair to the kids, isn't it? It only takes five minutes.*

Whilst some staff members accused parents of “*choosing not to interact*” (Lilian - TA) with their children, others maintained that, due to numerous constraints, many parents were unable to give sufficient time to develop their children’s communication skills. Some parents were assumed to work long hours, and consequently staff members felt they had little time for dialogue with their children, as Alice states:

Alice (Head teacher):       *Parents are working, they spend a lot of time out of the home and when they get back they're exhausted; they haven't got time to sit down and listen to their kids.*

Fred, a teacher at Oakwood, believed that parents “*now have to work long hours*” which means that “*when they get home, and make tea, and wash up, and do their jobs, then they don't have the time...to talk, and to discuss with children what is right and wrong.*” In response, SEAL was utilised as a tool to target this aspect of family life and to develop the skills perceived to have been neglected by parents. The scheme was operationalised to enhance communication between adult and child by developing the pupils’ emotional vocabulary, as Fred reveals later in during his interview:

Fred (Teacher):

*Many children don't have anybody to talk to at home, whereas SEAL at school is brilliant, because then the child has got someone to talk to. SEAL is more about the thought processes that we do with the children, getting the children to think about how they can do things differently, getting the children to think about how they speak to other people, even going as far as the vocabulary used to describe their feelings. SEAL helps with all of that, it really does, it helps them to express themselves. It's getting them to talk to each other and not at each other; to listen more; to take people's opinions and value them; to listen to what they've got to say not just in class but obviously outside as well; to take on board what they've said and if they don't agree then say why, but to do it in a nice way; talking without using violence, without shouting, without talking at somebody.*

Staff members across the three case study schools felt that one of the main motivations for implementing SEAL was to impact upon the pupils' communication skills. The schools' needs, dictated by the perceived inadequacies taking place in the home and amongst the pupils' parents, influenced these views. Consequently, the scheme was adapted so that it provided children with a means to interact with others, where they were encouraged to communicate with peers and adults in positive ways.

## *Social Skills*

Within the three case study schools there was a view, held by many staff members, that in order for children to be assertive and to possess ‘appropriate’ social skills, pupils should make eye contact with the individuals with whom they are communicating. This belief may have been gleaned from the SEAL resources where the importance placed on such ‘appropriate’ social skills is apparent. One example of the advocacy of ‘appropriate’ assertiveness skills can be found within the ‘Green set resource’ for the ‘Good to be me!’ theme (DfES 2005). Within this resource, school teachers are encouraged to clarify to the children that behaviours including: assured body language, eye contact, a confident tone of voice and the use of words are needed in order to demonstrate assertiveness.

Consequently, many staff members felt that children who failed to make regular eye contact when communicating with others did not display appropriate social skills. This belief was certainly prominent when staff members addressed the ‘issue’ of “*Asian children lowering their gaze*” (Bob – Learning Mentor) when speaking with adults. Some Asian children were deemed to display inappropriate social skills due to the fact that they did not feel it was apposite to make eye contact with adults. As this specific behaviour was uncommon amongst some Asian pupils, staff members believed that such children lacked assertiveness skills, which often resulted in staff members asking this group: “*why are you not looking at me when I’m talking to you?*” (Jane - Teacher). Subsequently, some felt it was appropriate to make use of SEAL to teach Asian children this ‘skill’

so that they behave in the line with “*the rules*” (Lilian - TA) “*in this country*” (Alice – Head teacher), as is demonstrated below:

Charlotte (TA):                    *An Asian girl can’t come into a school like this and put their head down; it’s the rules, you’ve got to behave by them.*

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Alice (Head teacher):           *Those Asian children are going to have to learn that in this country, if you want something, you have to look somebody in the eye, because it’s expected.*

•

Samantha (TA):                    *(SEAL) is to help the poorer children or of a lower class, we shouldn’t call them that, but of the Asian community....(Asian parents) don’t teach the children, they don’t play games with them like we did. I mean obviously they do but in their own language and in their own way. They just don’t do the things that English parents do....they don’t teach them the manners the same.*

A belief, held by some staff members, that in order to be assertive, and thus to display appropriate social skills, pupils should make eye contact with others influenced the way SEAL was used in schools. Some parents and communities, most prominently those from minority-ethnic

backgrounds, were accused of not only neglecting, but discouraging this behaviour. In response, schools made use of the scheme to advocate eye contact, based on the belief that this behaviour exemplified typical assertiveness and social skills.

### ***Emotional control***

There was an assumption, held by some staff, that parents from low socio-economic areas advocate the use of physical aggression to resolve conflict in order to “*toughen up*” (Rebeka – Learning mentor) their children. Staff members consistently argued that in situations of conflict, parents from low socio-economic areas expected their children to act in aggressive ways, gave value to violent acts, and offered advice such as “*if you get hit, hit them back*” (Stanley – Head teacher; Bethany – Senior management; Charlotte - TA). Alice, the head teacher at Oakwood, shares her experiences of this matter:

Alice (Head teacher):        *We have had situations where particularly fathers would like their sons to be aggressive...In a conflict situation they would expect their sons to kick or hit or be violent, and I've had them come in my office and say so.*

Staff maintained that the encouragement of such behaviours, by parents, “*was clearly reflected in the number of behavioural incidents that were being logged across the school on a regular basis*” (Stanley – Head teacher). As a consequence of these perceived endorsements made by parents,



schools utilised SEAL to develop alternative forms of conflict resolution amongst pupils, by aiming to improve their ability to control emotions in more ‘appropriate’ ways. SEAL, across the three case study schools, was used as a vehicle to encourage children to utilise peaceful conflict resolution strategies such as ‘walking away’ and/or ‘counting to ten’, as the following staff members clarify:

Olivia (Welfare): *SEAL is there if we see there’s a problem, like you see somebody starting arguing or there is a fight. Instead of going in and trying to get them apart, you just try to talk to them both, you say ‘come on, calm down, walk away’. I usually bring them inside and they come and sit down until they’ve calmed down. Then when they’ve calmed down we talk about what’s happened.*

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Molly (Welfare): *When they get angry I’ll say, ‘just think and count to ten’. I’ve had children many a time, when they’ve got angry, go ‘1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, oh I feel better now’.*

SEAL was used in schools to endorse peaceful conflict resolution strategies as a means of targeting violent and aggressive responses to conflict, that some parents in low socio-economic areas were deemed to encourage. By applying the scheme in this way, and by countering the approaches to conflict perceived to be taking place at home, the case study schools hoped to promote more

‘appropriate’ means for children to resolve disputes so that they had effective control over their emotions.

**A duty of care: Appropriately socialising children in response to perceptions of ‘inadequate’ parenting practices**

As one of the vehicles for social, emotional and behavioural development, SEAL, for the three schools, was perceived as a tool that could impact upon, and help to change the children’s lives. With members of staff such as Molly (Welfare) arguing SEAL can help change the children “*for later life*” and Stanley (Head teacher) viewing the initiative as “*life changing for some of these kids*”, expectations relating to the scheme’s potential were high. Consistently within the case study schools staff members spoke about their duty of care in relation to the social, emotional and behavioural development of pupils and felt that, as parents were perceived to encourage objectionable and unsuitable behaviours, it was the schools’ responsibility to advocate alternative and ‘appropriate’ ways to behave. SEAL was identified as a means to achieve this, as the following extracts demonstrate:

Fred (Teacher):

*I believe that, through SEAL, we as a school...have the right to show children that fighting is not the way, I think it’s really, really important; I think we must be a good role model. Obviously, if dad says ‘fight’ and the child takes that through life, they’re going to get*

*into bother. Society doesn't like that; we are trying to make them good citizens.*

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Joanna (Teacher): *I think we're using SEAL because the children are coming in with such low social and emotional skills....and we need them to be able to socialise and develop....I think SEAL is very much preparing children for all the situations they'll have to come across in life.*

As Lilian (TA), Charlotte (TA), Alice (Head teacher) and Samantha (TA) maintained in their views captured above, the use of SEAL to endorse specific behaviours was perceived by some as beneficial as it encouraged children to behave in 'appropriate' ways. Emotional control techniques perceived to be linked to SEAL, such as 'walking away' and 'counting to ten', were viewed, by a proportion of staff, as being far more beneficial in comparison to the strategy of 'hitting back' supposedly advocated by some parents living in low socio-economic areas. Such non-violent strategies, it was argued, enhanced how pupils dealt with conflict and thus improved the way in which the school functioned as a whole.

When appraising the notion that SEAL endorsed certain behaviours, some staff felt that this strategy was worthwhile as it provided children with alternative forms of behaviour and improved their self-awareness in differing contexts and environments. Believing the scheme helped to identify the “*different paths that children can go down*” (Ella - Teacher), some maintained that

SEAL was useful in helping children to contextualise and adapt their behaviours, as the following staff members state:

Stanley (Head teacher):        *(SEAL) is trying to develop the individual to the point where he or she can make the right choices and the right decisions in the right moment, at the right situation.*

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Sophie (Teacher):                *A child might find themselves in different situations and in different roles in their life when they go out into the big world and at least they've got an understanding, through SEAL, of what's going on in different societies and in different communities, and they might be able to respond differently and know what's socially acceptable.*

Whilst many staff members applauded the scheme for its perceived ability to appropriately socialise children, by providing a means to develop alternative behavioural strategies, this utilisation of the scheme was deemed, by others, as problematic. In the next section I will introduce this view and share the thoughts of a sample of staff who felt that as SEAL was seen to encourage and endorse specific, 'appropriate' behaviours so it was also perceived to oppose the norms and values of the marginal, less powerful groups within society.

## **Marginalising the norms, values and behaviours of the less powerful groups**

Regardless of its purpose, SEAL was perceived by staff as a scheme that, in some cases, countered specific norms and behaviours encouraged in the home. Pupils, according to the staff, often found the strategies provided by school contradictory to the teachings at home, with some expressing concerns that “*being told one thing by one person and something by the somebody else*” could “*screw the kids up*” (Edith - Welfare). As the norms and behaviours endorsed through SEAL sometimes differed to those at home, many children found these contrasting approaches confusing as they were unsure of what they were “*expected to do*” (Rebeka – Learning mentor) in the differing environments.

As has been shown, in order to be deemed assertive and in possession of ‘appropriate’ social skills, pupils were expected to make eye contact with others, even though this opposed the cultural norms within some minority-ethnic communities. Additionally, SEAL was also seen to promote non-violent conflict resolution, although many working-class parents reinforced the view that “*if you get hit, hit them back*” (Fred - Teacher). The sense of what was deemed appropriate as advocated by SEAL and by home did not always align. In response, staff members such as Molly (Welfare) argued that pupils “*are living on two levels*”, where the norms endorsed in school through SEAL are not always applicable in the home. Consequently, Joanna (Teacher) “*didn’t think it was right*” to teach the children things that they “*weren’t used to*”, whilst Bethany (Senior management) felt that schools should “*respect individual...and cultural differences*”. Diverging from this approach and using SEAL to advocate specific norms and behaviours could, as Molly argued, “*cause a lot of problems (and) friction*” in the home.

Jane, a teacher at Red Road, clarified that although ‘eye contact’ was endorsed in school, when some Asian children “*go to the mosque, if they look at the Imam, that’s disrespectful*” and they are told to “*lower their eyes*”. Similarly, if these children are being “*told off*” and they look at their parents, “*that’s disrespectful*”; “*they’re supposed to lower their gaze*” as “*it’s what they’ve been taught at home and in the mosque*” (Jane - Teacher). Bob (Learning mentor) maintained that “*Asians are all taught to drop their gaze if they’re in trouble, as...it’s just a sign of respect*”, and believed that “*schools need to....understand all the different ethics*” involved within children’s lives.

Furthermore, within some lower socio-economic and working-class cultures, parents, as has been illustrated, were perceived by staff to endorse violent and aggressive forms of conflict resolution. To resolve conflict, children attending the three case study schools often responded in violent ways as their “*parents say they have to hit them*” (Joanna - Teacher). Those not conforming to these culturally embedded behaviours were often “*labelled as soft*” (Charlotte - TA) by family members and peers. As SEAL was seen to oppose aggressive conflict resolution strategies, so it also countered the norms advocated by some members of these low socio-economic areas, which in turn created potential problems for the children at home and within their peer groups. Lilian and Rebeka share their thoughts regarding some of the points discussed above. Their use of the term “*around here*” refers to the area surrounding the school in which they work: an area of social and economic disadvantage.

Lilian (TA): *I was brought up that if somebody punches me in the face I would not walk away from that, and I don't think any child would around here. Around here, if you're kicked you wouldn't take it and say 'thank-you for doing that', you'd hit them back, you'd be expected to.*

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Rebeka (Learning mentor): *SEAL is a lovely, lovely idea but when children have been brought up around here,...the big bad world is not necessarily as kind as SEAL. SEAL is a lovely way of saying, 'right I'm angry now, so we'll talk about it and I'll apologise', but the world doesn't act like that....especially not around here. In the area where we are, they would just get smacked. If they hit a child, often the other child would just hit them back; it's built inside them, it's like their mechanism.*

SEAL, it seems, was perceived as a tool that encouraged specific norms and behaviours amongst the pupils. By endorsing certain normative social and emotional behaviours, some staff believed that the scheme was being used to oppose behaviours encouraged in the home and that, in turn, children may have felt obliged to act in ways which oppose the values of their own cultures. Some believed this application of the scheme was an idealistic, “*narrow minded*” (Erica – Learning mentor) approach that did not recognise the values held by members of working-class and low socio-economic cultures; whilst Rebeka maintained that “*teaching the children to be tough*” was

a strategy valued by members of this group, as it was seen to prepare the children for their parents' perception of adulthood, one where dealing with violence was 'normal'. In essence, by encouraging aggressive behaviours some working-class parents felt they were developing specific 'skills' and 'appropriate' strategies that would help their children to deal with the violence they may experience in later life; 'skills' deemed inappropriate by advocates of SEAL. Regarding these points, Rebeka states:

Rebeka (Learning mentor): *A lot of the children...have parents who love them in a way that toughens them up...If they're angry a lot of the parents will say 'right, go and hit him back.' Whereas SEAL is more of a softer approach to it.*

Research has commented on the effects of parenting under economic hardship. In support of Rebeka's view that parents advocate aggressive behaviours as a survival technique, authors largely agree that parenting in such areas is influenced by the demands of the environment (see Hanson, McLanahan and Thomson 1997; McLoyd 1998), and that in impoverished neighbourhoods parents often advocate any required behaviours in order to protect their children (see Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman and Mason 1996; Jarret 2000). However, the 'required behaviours' encouraged by parents from low socio-economic areas were opposed and marginalised by some schools' use of SEAL. Whilst staff members, such as Samantha and Olivia, argued that the "*parents' teachings should be respected above the schools*", such advice, within the case study schools at least, was not observed. As a result, the use of SEAL in schools marginalised the values, norms and modes



of behaviour encouraged amongst some lower socio-economic and working-class cultures and, in this sense, the scheme could be seen as an attempt to influence such children to hold alternative values.

Schools operationalised SEAL as a product of their own specific needs, which in turn were influenced by their location, socio-economic environment and perceptions of parents. Consequently, SEAL was adapted by each school in response to the perceived values and norms of its surrounding area. This finding is in accordance with previous qualitative investigations of the scheme that have illustrated how schools ‘have implemented SEAL in very different ways’ (Banerjee 2010, p. 8), and in line with research findings that have identified the school’s location and socio-economic needs as having an influence on the implementation of SEL programmes (see Duffield, Riddell and Brown 1996; Beland 2007; Amatea and West-Olatunji 2008; Wood and Warin 2014). Such variability, between schools, in the implementation of SEAL is ‘welcomed and encouraged, in so far as the approaches to developing social and emotional skills are designed not to be rigid and over-prescriptive’ (Banerjee 2010, p. 23).

However, and as has been expressed above, by utilising the scheme to endorse specific modes of behaviour, some staff members were critical of the potential consequences of this application. The application of SEAL, specifically with regards to the endorsement of ‘appropriate’ social skills, must be questioned. The insistence of behaviours such as ‘eye contact’, encouraged in schools through SEAL, counters certain cultural norms of specific populations of pupils. The use of SEAL to advocate eye contact is problematic as appropriate social skills vary between culture and

context. As has been discussed, diverting one's gaze is a sign of respect and viewed as an appropriate social skill in some Asian cultures, so, what may be deemed as abnormal in school is viewed as appropriate within these specific cultures.

### **Compensatory education**

Whilst it has been argued that education cannot compensate for 'societal problems' (Bernstein 1970), it seems that schools have utilised SEAL in response to the perceived inadequacies taking place within the children's home-life. Those schools situated in deprived areas identified the pupils' social skills and behavioural issues as problematic and responded by making use of SEAL to encourage alternative behaviours. Over the years it has been shown that schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage regularly meet the needs of the community by targeting pupils' behavioural issues (see Ramey and Campbell 1979; Barnett 1992; Schneiders, Drukker, Van der Ende, Verhulst, Van Os, and Nicolson 2003), and the use of SEAL at Oakwood, Red Road, and The Grove, illustrates how schools have operationalised the scheme as a form of compensatory education in response to such issues; issues perceived to have been created in the home.

Schooling in response to the needs of children, and as a consequence of their socio-economic status, dates back to the eighteenth century and the introduction of charity schools (Barnett 1992). Today, schools located in areas of socio-economic hardship are required to take on a caring role in addition to their academic one (Thrupp 1999), and are also expected to provide 'intensive and professional intervention' (Bentham 2011, p. 43). However, whilst Weare (2007) contends that

‘effective SEL explores skills with pupils in order to help them to...work in the contexts they encounter’, our case study schools, by utilising SEAL to counter specific behaviours, are ignoring the advice that they should not impose a normative model of ‘the one right way to do things’ (p. 247). The insistence of children to ‘make eye contact’ in order to display appropriate social skills or to ‘walk away’ from conflict in order to display appropriate emotional control, illustrates how this educational initiative has been utilised as a form of compensatory education, in response to the behaviours deemed ‘normal’ within the schools’ surrounding area, to encourage a normative model of the ‘right way’ to behave.

The employment of SEAL as a form of compensatory education was evident within the case study schools in this study, as the scheme was used to combat behaviours deemed suitable at home but inappropriate in school. Such applications of compensatory education are open to a number of criticisms. Bernstein (1990), for example, believes schools, by employing compensatory education tools, maintain and reproduce social-class advantages in schooling and society; whilst Evans (2006) purports that as schools embody middle-class values they regularly target and marginalise the practices and behaviours of minority-ethnic and working-class people.

### **SEL as a form of cultural imperialism**

As schools operationalised SEAL to marginalise specific working-class and minority-ethnic norms, it was perceived to encourage behaviours located in more middle-class, Western, English values. Although some felt this was of benefit to society (see the views expressed by Lilian,

Charlotte, Alice and Samantha), many opposed this application of SEAL. Authors such as Hartley (2003) interpret SEL schemes like SEAL as forms of values and morals education which emphasise the emotions and behaviours that pupils 'should' experience. He maintains that such programmes 'produce' and help to 'construct an identity' for children and that at present, emotions, or what he terms as 'the expressive', are being 'managed for instrumental purposes' (p. 6). Additionally, Burman (2009) believes that the 'new discourses of emotions are...amenable to exploitation' (p. 137). SEAL, as a scheme that has been used by staff to encourage specific emotions and modes of behaviour, has seemingly succumbed to such exploitation. Schools are utilising the initiative to inform children of the emotions they should feel, which ones are 'appropriate', and how they should act and behave at all times; all of which are located in middle-class, Western, English values.

By utilising SEAL to re-affirm the hegemonic nature of such cultures, schools may be marginalising the values and norms of the less powerful groups within society. Such uses of education have been widely reported in the literature over the years and reflect an agenda which aims to demonise the role of parents within marginal groups. Numerous pieces of research, from authors including Broadhurst, Mason and Grover (2007); Parton (2009); Amatea and West-Olatunji (2008); Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier and Maczunga (2009); and Jensen (2010), illustrate how parents within such groups are often targeted, through schemes like 'Sure start', in an attempt to curb their 'poor parenting' practices so that they can imitate members of the more powerful groups. However, by utilising SEAL to endorse middle-class, Western and English values whilst marginalising the norms of working-class and minority-ethnic communities, schools may be 'othering' (Paechter 1998) the cultural behaviours of their members.

## **Mutual Reach**

In line with the findings reported in this paper, it has been maintained, by authors such as Crozier (1997), that ‘schools communicate superior attitudes to parents which maintain the barriers between home and school’ (p. 327). However, and so that the less powerful groups have a voice in their children’s education, it is necessary to approach schooling ‘from the point of view of the least advantaged, not from the standpoint of what is currently authorised’ (Connell 1994, p. 130). How far is it possible for parents, their children, and teachers to work together to shape schooling that is tailored to the school’s constituent communities?

A solution is for schools to operationalise an ideal of ‘more democratic and cooperative exchange between parents and teachers’ (Warin 2009, p. 140). This requires a radical rethink of educational policy on the interface between schools and the communities they serve. It requires school staff to engage in an exchange of knowledge with parents about what matters in the mutual enterprise of bringing up the next generation, from a position of openness and willingness to learn. This can only be accomplished by a mutual exchange of knowledge between school and home, a principle that overcomes the present policy blindness to the idea that professional educators can learn from parents. In a current policy discourse that characterises specific groups of parents as ‘hard to reach’, especially those emphasised in this paper, it appears that there are few arenas for creating a genuine partnership or exchange of information between parents and educationalists about children. We need to develop specific practices and strategies that can bring about ‘mutual reach’ (Warin, 2009).

We have much to learn from several examples of practice that enshrine this principle. An study by Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) engaged teacher/researchers to conduct in-depth interviews with parents to gain a deep understanding of the children's families, and access their 'funds of knowledge', destabilising the orthodoxy of teacher as expert. Secondly, Hughes and Greenhough (2006) describe the practices that were developed as part of their 'home-school knowledge exchange', using strategies such as video viewings, photographic displays of home and school environments and the innovative use of shoe boxes filled with artefacts from home. A third example comes from Whalley (2001) describing the regular knowledge exchange meetings between staff and parents within her pre-school setting. There are constraints to the realisation of this more democratic form of exchange, most obviously in the current emphasis of educational policy on a narrowly defined academic performance, which allows little time for such strategies and which also continues to position the educational professional as 'expert'. However, these examples suggest the potential for models of 'mutual reach'.

## **Conclusion**

In aiming to understand how primary school staff members were using and interpreting the SEAL programme, this study established how staff judgements of the pupils, their parents and home-life influenced the operationalisation of the scheme. Assumptions regarding the pupils' parents were especially influential in the way the scheme was employed, as it was adapted and utilised in response to the schools' value judgements concerning the quality of 'parenting' the students were assumed to receive. Staff members working at the three case study schools, all of which drew

pupils from areas of social deprivation, held negative appraisals of parents and attributed blame to this group for the pupils' 'inappropriate' social, emotional and behavioural skills. Specifically, the data illustrated a tendency for staff to blame certain groups of parents, particularly those from minority-ethnic and low socio-economic backgrounds, for their children's 'inappropriate' behaviours. In response, staff members made use of SEAL to endorse behaviours deemed suitable to them and, in doing so, countered the endeavours of these parents. Consequently, the scheme and the school became prime sites of intervention with both being exploited to encourage children to behave and act in specific ways. Yet, what was also clear was the reticence of staff to acknowledge the values of the children's families and communities when endorsing these behaviours, which led to situations where schools were encouraging behaviours that were discouraged in the home. This finding illustrates a need to improve communication between home and school in order to guard against the marginalisation of social behaviours and cultural norms valued within the multiple realities that exist within children's lives.

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