

Making secondary SEAL work

The secondary pilot of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme was closely observed by Ofsted. We summarise the useful learning that emerged

The SEAL pilot programme has demonstrated, in Ofsted's view, that schools can make a positive difference to the development of social, emotional and behavioural skills. In the schools where the programme was most successful, it had begun to influence attitudes to learning as well as aspects of behaviour.

During the five terms that Ofsted tracked the SEAL programme, the greatest impact they noted was on teachers' attitudes towards the idea of social, emotional and behaviour skills, and their understanding of how to develop these skills systematically within subject lessons.

As a consequence, there was discernible improvement in some teachers' skills in developing these competencies.

Barriers

Initially schools found it difficult to find suitable starting points for the SEAL programme. The report notes how they have welcomed the more recent materials from the National Strategy, including guidance on effective assessment and monitoring

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tools. Another barrier to SEAL implementation was resistance expressed by some teachers because they:

- anticipated an increase in workload
- had reservations about whether this kind of work should be part of their role
- thought a focus on social, emotional and behaviour skills would adversely affect academic results.

Such resistance was overcome by high-quality training that built on previous Inset around managing behaviour and improving attendance.

The report also suggests that the guidance and support materials provided did not sufficiently emphasise the links between:

- social and emotional skills
- pupils' increased confidence
- improved academic performance.

Resistance would be easier to overcome if data that illustrated 'how the programme could have a positive impact on academic achievement' were made available. Among the key recommendations made by

Using SEELS for SEAL

SEELS (School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey) is a valuable tool to help schools build a more emotionally literate ethos through SEAL.

The materials provided by the Secondary National Strategy recommend the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS) as a tool to:

- provide a baseline
- identify priority areas
- generate interventions and strategies
- enable monitoring and evaluation.

Finding out

SEELS is a research-validated, online questionnaire. Because the data collected is confidential, it enables staff and students to articulate freely what is going on for them in their experience of school. Adults and young people from Year 5 to 13 can fill in the survey. It takes between 15 and 30 minutes to respond to the 80 or so questions.

The responses are then amalgamated into a series of charts and graphs which the school can instantly access from the website to provide an account of what is really going on. These can be used to:

- explore the issues further with various groups of people
- think about what actions to take and strategies to put in place.

Cutting the data

SEELS is very flexible. The data can be cut in many different ways, enabling senior managers to see how school experience differs for boys and girls; different ethnic or year groups.

Similarly the staff data can be subdivided to examine the working experience of teachers and support staff; those who have been in the school many years and the more recently appointed; men and women; even different faculties.

Open conversations

The graphs and charts provide a baseline against which to measure change and furnish a good starting point for conversations about what would make school life even better.

Working with the SEELS information enables staff and students to talk in open and helpful ways about their experience of working and learning in the school.

When Antidote is involved in partnership with the school, the initial exploration is followed by a specially tailored follow-on survey that delves even deeper, getting beneath the surface of the first responses to uncover an even clearer picture of what is really going on in relationships, communication and school systems to support or inhibit learning and effective working. The follow-on survey leads on to focus groups with staff and students, which create proposals of strategies to make the school even better for everyone.

Overcoming barriers

As with any process of change, addressing the social and emotional environment for learning in a school is not easy. Staff and students are often anxious that:

- their scores and comments in the SEELS will be traced back to individuals and bring unwanted repercussions
- individuals or small groups will be scapegoated or blamed
- they will invest time and energy in a process that will not bring about any change.

the report was that the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should:

- provide examples of how programmes that develop pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills can have a positive impact on attainment and achievement
- ensure that guidance clearly links work on social, emotional and behaviour development to subject teaching and learning, and classroom practice
- develop guidance to support schools in evaluating the effectiveness of their work in this area
- clarify the required outcomes from the programme.

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Benefits

Among the most heartening outcomes of the SEAL programme were the benefits for pupils. Some of these benefits were indirect, resulting from changes in school systems brought about by the programme. This led to benefits such as:

- more consistent rewards and sanctions in the behaviour system
- improved lesson planning
- more helpful approaches to teaching and organisation of learning
- better relationships with school staff.

Other benefits were experienced by pupils as a direct result of the SEAL programme and its impact on classroom approaches, teaching and learning.

These led to:

- better team working
- better recognition and articulation of feelings
- greater respect for each others' differences and strengths
- greater willingness to take risks in their learning.

These benefits were found in both low-achieving schools and high-achieving schools. In one school, the deputy headteacher saw the programme as a way to raise achievement from what was already a successful baseline by:

- providing training
- asking staff to volunteer for further development work
- forming working groups to look at the programme within the curriculum
- improving tutor time
- increasing pupil participation.

'After five terms, the report says, 'staff were very aware of the importance of the programme and many were using effective approaches in their lessons. This had begun to have a positive effect on pupils' skills.'

Teaching methods

Although the initial focus in many schools was on behaviour management, the pilot was most effective where schools quickly made the links between:

- developing social, emotional and behaviour skills
- effective teaching and learning.

SEELS meets these challenges by focusing on the school as a whole, and showing how every element in the community is influenced by what is happening elsewhere. When used to identify starting points and priorities, this helps inspire staff and students to become actively involved in making a difference in their school.

One headteacher said that the SEELS process:

- informed the development of his vision for the school, enabling it to be encapsulated in three big ideas - achieve more, listen more, take care of each other
- stimulated conversations about what was going on
- helped people to realise the need to understand relationships before they could understand learning
- helped people to shift from focusing on behaviour to focusing on relationships.

Solutions

Antidote's experience has been that once the school community is given permission to talk about the things that create barriers to positive relationships, communication and learning, they are more than willing to focus on solutions. We have experienced enthusiastic engagement from adults and children alike for developing strategies and approaches, which would make teaching and learning even better.

These include:

- reviewing staff policies, job descriptions, and appraisal
- developing approaches to building relationships among students in the classroom including circle time and philosophy for children (P4C)
- instigating approaches for building relationships among

students outside the classroom including student-led mediation and a more creative use of outside space

- creating more time for staff reflection and joint planning
- introducing more interactive and experiential teaching and learning strategies
- focusing on student-adult relationships that support learning - including coaching, facilitative approaches to learning and more positive use of the tutor's role.

Whole school

Sustaining the conversation about the SEELS findings helps to shift the unrealistic expectations some staff, and some students, have about how quickly change can be brought about.

The greatest impact comes when a whole-school community - staff and students - engage together with their different perceptions of how what is going on affects their capacity to teach and learn, and then work collaboratively on what can be done to make things better for everyone.

This process ensures that no section of the community is made into a scapegoat, and all parties have an equal chance to make their views heard. The strategies and interventions that emerge have a greater 'buy-in' from staff and students, and are therefore more likely to succeed.

SEELS is available from Antidote and costs £350 or £450, depending on the size of the school. You can download a PowerPoint presentation about the survey from www.antidote.org.uk/offer/seels.html. Call 020 7247 3355 or email emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk to find out more.

As a result, staff adjusted their teaching methods to take account of developing the social and emotional aspects of learning alongside the acquisition of subject knowledge and skills.

'Schools which carefully wove social, emotional and behavioural skills into lessons and curriculum planning at an early stage saw changes to the ways in which teachers helped pupils develop their skills, and to pupils' motivation, resilience and ability to work as part of a team.'

Some schools encouraged teachers to set a social emotional and behavioural skills objective for each lesson, such as developing the skills of working in a group, using positive language or being empathetic.

Some successful approaches included:

- the regular use of group work to build cooperation and teamwork
- weaving references to emotion into a lessons such as in the examination of texts in English
- using suspense and intrigue when enquiring into historical events to build resilience and motivation
- acknowledging the feelings of fear, anxiety, apprehension, confusion etc. in maths lessons with lower attaining pupils
- using techniques to develop independence and resilience in more passive pupils by suggesting ways in which they could help themselves rather than simply giving them the answers.

Grouping

Where schools systematically consider how pupils are grouped, Ofsted reported 'a significant positive effect of pupils' interactions with each other'. However, 'few schools,' the report says, 'gave sufficient consideration to how pupils were grouped for learning'. In one school, 'inflexible setting of pupils by ability militated against the positive effect of social, emotional and behavioural skills work until the school considered this aspect more carefully and made some appropriate changes'.

For schools to give weight to the importance of pupil grouping and the impact this can have on teaching and learning, staff needed more opportunities to:

- identify the social and emotional developmental needs of a teaching group
- analyse the priorities for developing the group's social, emotional and behavioural skills development
- agree and develop common strategies and approaches
- discuss approaches to teaching and learning, including the way in which pupils are grouped and how this affects their interactions and relationships.

Leadership

Leadership was seen as the main factor in ensuring success. The impact of leadership was seen in several ways. Firstly 'in schools whose ethos and values were strong and evident or where they were developed as part of the SEAL programme, social, emotional and behavioural skills improved pupils' views of themselves and others and led to better social interaction.'

In addition, schools where senior leaders understand the underlying philosophy of the

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programme, ensure the aims permeate all aspects of school life and do not see it as just another bolt on initiative have been most successful in applying it.

The impact of leadership is made evident when leaders:

- incorporate the programme into the school's other priorities
- link it to broader school improvement
- appoint a key member of the senior leadership team to lead the initiative
- make time for staff to discuss, and reflect on, their own social, emotional and behavioural skills
- gradually involve more staff in leading aspects of the programme.

The report notes that this kind of leadership meant that staff were more inclined to give SEAL precedence. Developing social and emotional skills became 'part of the way things were done' and, as a result, was built into strategic planning.

By contrast, in one school where changes were made to the pastoral system and the way pupils were grouped, other senior leaders did not fully understand the aims and intentions. Consequently, the work 'had limited impact on most of the staff's understanding of how to develop pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills.'

Actions

The Ofsted report notes that the interventions introduced by schools during the first year of the pilot included:

- training for all staff
- review of school behaviour policies with a greater focus on praise, rewards and pupil involvement
- introducing a student support centre
- introducing circle time
- outdoor activity trips to support pupils in interacting positively with each other
- auditing the curriculum
- teaching the skills that pupils would need to develop resilience, cooperation and empathy.

Conclusions

The Ofsted report provides recommendations for improving the implementation of social, emotional and behavioural skills development in schools. Alongside these lies an implicit message about the power and importance of this work in relation to learning and achievement.

The overarching message is that SEAL programmes can and do have a positive impact on the experience of pupils and staff in schools. However, it notes that 'social, emotional and behavioural skills development does not happen overnight. These programmes need to be continued for a significant period of time before there is a measurable impact on pupils' skills.' This is not a 'quick-fix' approach, but one that takes time, commitment, tenacity, vision and strategic leadership before the rewards are reaped.

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Developing Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills in Secondary Schools: A Five-Term Longitudinal Evaluation of the Secondary National Strategy Pilot (ref 070048) can be downloaded from www.ofsted.gov.uk