Research Brief

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PRIMARY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF LEARNING (SEAL): EVALUATION OF SMALL GROUP WORK

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Background to the evaluation

SEAL is a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that are thought to underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, and emotional well-being (Department for Education and Skills, 2005)[1]. It was first implemented as part of the national Behaviour and Attendance Pilot in 2003 (Hallam, Rhamie and Shaw, 2006) and is currently used in more than 80% of primary schools across England.

SEAL is delivered in three 'waves of intervention'. The first wave of SEAL delivery centres on whole-school development work designed to create the ethos and climate within which social and emotional skills can be most effectively promoted.

Wave 2 of SEAL is the focus of this evaluation. This element of the programme involves small group interventions for children who are thought to require additional support to develop their social and emotional skills (DfES, 2006). The purposes of these brief, early interventions include helping children by:

- facilitating their personal development;
- exploring key issues with them in more depth;
- allowing them to practice new skills in an environment in which they feel safe, can take risks and learn more about themselves;
- developing their ways of relating to others;
- promoting reflection (DfES, 2006).

The final wave of the SEAL programme involves 1:1 intervention with children who have not benefitted from the whole school and small group provision in a given school. This may include children at risk of or experiencing mental health issues, and is about to the implemented as the Targeted Mental Health in Schools programme. This wave of SEAL will also be subject to evaluation (Wolpert, Fonagy, Belsky & Humphrey, *et al* ongoing).

[1] The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) became the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in July 2007. References to DfES and DCSF are used synonymously throughout this report.

department for children, schools and families

Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The main aim of the current study was to *assess the impact of small group work on children requiring more support in developing their social and emotional skills*. Our secondary aim was to *gather information on successful implementation of small group interventions*. Our aims were achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of small group work on improving children's social and emotional skills in Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2)?
2. What is the wider impact of the small group work element?
    a. In terms of behaviour, attendance, learning and well-being?
    b. At a school level?
    c. On parents/families?
3. Are these impacts sustained over time and how?
4. How is the small group work element implemented?
    a. How do Local Authorities (LAs) support schools to deliver small group work?
    b. How is it implemented within schools?
    c. How are pupils selected for it?
    d. How is it run and managed within schools?
    e. What is the evidence of best practice in implementing small group work?
5. How does the small group work element fit in with, and complement, the universal SEAL programme?

Research design

This research study was carried out in three distinct phases.

- The first phase comprised interviews with SEAL leads in 12 Local Authorities across England.
- The second phase involved a quantitative evaluation of the impact of SEAL small group work, involving 624 pupils in 37 primary schools. These 37 schools varied greatly in terms of geographical designation, size, attainment, ethnicity *et cetera* and can be considered representative.
- The third phase took place at the same time as the second phase and involved detailed case studies of six nominated lead practice schools in the north-west of England.

Main findings

Local Authority interviews

There was variation across LAs in terms of the nature and level of support offered to schools, but the following evidence statements can be made:

- Support for schools typically takes the form of training events, support mechanisms (e.g. inter-school networks) and the provision or joint development of additional materials and resources;
- LA staff suggested that successful implementation was influenced strongly by existing work (e.g. SEAL Wave 1 and/or other general approaches to social and emotional learning) within a given school;
- They also noted that skills, knowledge and experience of the small group facilitator were crucial;
- Auditing and evaluating progress in schools is typically done in an informal manner involving discussion amongst key members of staff. More 'formal' evaluations involving outcome measures are rare as yet;
- Key barriers to success in this area included the attitudes of staff, misconceptions about the nature and purpose of primary SEAL small group work, and 'initiative overload'.

Quantitative impact evaluation

In relation to our quantitative impact evaluation, a rather complicated picture emerged regarding the impact of the primary SEAL small group work interventions. However, the following evidence statements can be made:

- There is statistically significant evidence that primary SEAL small group work has a positive impact. Each of the four theme-based interventions showed improvements in at least one of the domains measured, although the average effect size was small:
    - **New Beginnings** – increases in pupil-rated overall emotional literacy;

- **Going for Goals** – increases in staff-rated self-regulation, decreases in staff-rated peer problems, and increases in pupil-rated empathy, self-regulation, social skills and overall emotional literacy;
- **Getting On and Falling Out** – increases in pupil-rated social skills;
- **Good to Be Me** – reductions in pupil-rated peer problems.

- In addition one of the interventions, Going for Goals, showed some non-significant trends that indicated positive impact (namely, increases in pupil-rated self-awareness and staff-rated overall emotional literacy, and decreases in staff-rated total difficulties);
- The measured impact of the interventions was sustained over a seven week period following the end of the intervention when a final 'follow-up' measure was taken;
- There was no statistically significant evidence of positive impact from parents in any of the four interventions examined as part of this evaluation (although there was some evidence of impact from the parental perspective in the case study strand);
- In Getting On and Falling Out and Good to Be Me there were some statistically significant unexpected/anomalous findings that were contrary to our predictions (e.g. a significant reduction in staff-rated empathy during the intervention phase of Getting On and Falling Out).

Case studies

The following evidence statements can be made:

- Staff and pupils alike suggested the small group work had a positive impact upon pupils' social and emotional skills (and, subsequently, broader impact upon areas such as pupil wellbeing), although there were provisos made by some participants;
- There was also evidence that this impact was sustained outside of the small group work environment. This was most evident where explicit strategies to ensure sustainability were employed;
- The success of SEAL small group work was influenced by a range of factors, such as the skills and experience of the facilitator and the availability of an appropriate physical space to conduct the sessions;
- The selection of pupils to be involved in the groups was made in a variety of ways. Factors that influenced selection of pupils included individual pupil needs, links with Wave 1 SEAL and the need to ensure an appropriate balance within the group. Pupils included in the groups had varied profiles of need and included those with emotional difficulties, conduct problems and those with poor social skills;
- Key aspects of effective delivery of small group interventions included setting achievable targets for children, providing acknowledgement and constant reinforcement of desirable behaviour, providing opportunities for pupils to verbalise their emotional experiences, and engendering a sense of fun;
- There was a high degree of fidelity in the case study schools, with most following the guidance (DfES, 2005) fairly closely. The exception was school CC, who used an adapted model.

Key recommendations

We have recommended a tentative model of good practice for primary SEAL small group work interventions based upon our data from the six case study schools. This comprises of an extended vignette of a fictional school that draws together what we perceive to be the key processes observed across our lead practice case study schools, including:

- Allocation of sufficient time and space for small group work
- A triangulated referral procedure for pupil selection
- Ensuring that the small group facilitator has a strong rapport with group members and is able to model social and emotional skills in an effective manner
- Securing an appropriate setting for the small group work
- Providing additional support back in the classroom
- Engendering a sense of fun and enjoyment in small group activities
- Making explicit links with SEAL Wave 1 work
- Delivering SEAL small group work with a high degree of fidelity to the national guidance

- Ensuring that SEAL small group work has an appropriate profile within the school

We hope that this will serve as a meaningful model for schools beginning to work in this area.

In addition, we have recommended that future iterations of the small group work may benefit from being longer and/or more intensive (e.g. 12-16 sessions and 2 sessions per week), with much more direct involvement with the families of pupils involved. Finally, we have also suggested that the training offered at LA level would benefit from being formalised (e.g. standardised training and support offered nationwide and accredited by a higher education institution) so that it can serve as a more visible and substantial element of the continuing professional development of staff who act as small group facilitators.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR064) are available by phoning the DCSF Publications Orderline on 0845 60 222 60. Reports are priced at £4.95.

This research brief and the full report can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Tammy Campbell, 4th Floor, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.