



The potential dangers of a systematic, explicit approach to teaching social and emotional skills (SEAL)

An overview and summary of the arguments

Carol Craig
Centre for Confidence and Well-being
September, 2007

Author's introduction

This paper is a summary, or overview, of a much larger paper which the Centre for Confidence and Well-being has published called 'The potential dangers of a systematic, explicit approach to teaching social and emotional skills' (SEAL).

This overview paper summarises some of the main arguments of the large paper. It does so by telescoping the arguments and presenting them largely without the extensive supporting evidence contained in the main paper. Anyone interested in why we have reached these conclusions, and the evidence to support them, should refer to the main document which can be ordered from the Centre and Confidence and Well-being's website.

This is a controversial paper. SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) is now a major plank of the current government's education policy in England and Wales. We are taking steps to publish this critique because we believe that the approach being recommended to schools may not only waste of time and resources but also unwittingly undermine young people's well-being. As yet there is no work of this type being encouraged by the Scottish Executive. However, some local authorities and schools in Scotland are interested in piloting this approach.

We share the Department of Children, Schools and Families concern about young people's well-being but we think this concern is causing panic and pressure to take action and dangerous short-cuts which do not appear to be well thought through. Despite claims to the contrary, they are not strongly based on evidence.

Since SEAL is still only 'recommended' and not compulsory, teachers, schools and education authorities have the power to ignore or adopt. Our paper may be a useful counterpoint to the arguments they are being given on the benefits of SEAL. It will help them see the paucity of evidence for such a wholesale change in education and encourage them to evaluate the credibility of the case for SEAL and what the potential dangers might be.

Finally, I have been working with teachers and researching these types of themes for many years. I am not a psychologist but I am an enlightened layperson who is prepared to ask difficult questions and point out potential flaws. The Centre for Confidence and Well-being has nothing to gain from taking a critical approach. We could easily have jumped on the emotional literacy/skills bandwagon and created packs of material, particularly for the Scottish market. We are publishing this paper for the simple reason that our research leads us to conclude that SEAL may be well-meaning but formally teaching young people social and emotional skills could back-fire and ultimately make their well-being worse, not better.

Carol Craig
Chief Executive
Centre for Confidence and Well-being
Introduction

Introduction

The Centre for Confidence and Well-being is a small charitable organisation based in Glasgow. In the past two years much of the focus of our work has been on young people's confidence and well-being.

Like many organisations we are concerned about young people's well-being. The 2007 UNICEF paper on child well-being in rich countries put young people in the UK at the bottom of the league. The Centre's own research on young people's well-being on S2 pupils in Scottish schools suggests worryingly high levels of depression.

These mental health/well-being problems are occurring at a time when there is mounting concern over young people's behaviour and attitudes (eg use of alcohol and drugs, vandalism and gangs). There is also a growing belief that an increasing number of parents are either abdicating responsibility for bringing up their children or neglecting their children and not giving them enough care and attention to help them develop basic life skills.

Concern over young people's behaviour and development is also surfacing at a time when there is a growing interest in psychology and emotions. Some professionals argue that recent brain research suggests that pursuing an emotional curriculum in schools will lead to better academic results and improved well-being.

Given these trends we understand why young people's well-being is becoming a pressing issue and why some policy-makers see schools as providing an important arena for intervention and improvement.

However, following research and deliberation over the past two years we are increasingly concerned about the type of psychological interventions government in the UK, particularly in England and Wales, is now encouraging in schools to address the range of problems highlighted above.

SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) is the name of an initiative which has now been designed to put young people social and emotional skills in England and Wales at the heart of education. SEAL sounds innocuous but, if it taken up by schools, it will bring about a revolution in education and schooling as we know it.

What concerns the Centre is that policy makers, and some enthusiastic educators, are attempting to bring about this revolution on the basis of inadequate supporting evidence or credible intellectual rationale. Formally teaching children from 3-18 about their emotions or how to calm themselves, for example, has never been done before in the systematic way, year on year way SEAL suggests. We have no idea whether this will be beneficial or not. In fact, in the course of our paper we present cogent psychological reasons why calming techniques could easily encourage children to be more anxious, not more calm. We also argue that the focus on the self and feelings can easily encourage narcissism and self-obsession, thereby undermining young people's well-being, rather than improving it.

In short, we fear SEAL is encouraging a large-scale psychological experiment on young people, which will not just waste time and resources but could actually back-fire and unwittingly undermine people's well-being in the longer-term.

Before outlining our case for saying that there is not enough evidence to support such a revolution, or why this new psychological education could back-fire, we want to make five preliminary points.

- I. We are not taking issue with, or criticising in any way, many classroom teachers who, in their attempt to do the best by young people, are trying to teach them skills that they may not be getting taught at home. Nor are we criticising other professionals such as social workers or educational psychologists who are attempting to improve the skills of young people who have an obvious need.
- II. We think that steps should be taken to help teachers with behavioural problems in the classroom.
- III. We are in favour of attention being paid to school ethos, supporting young people or building relationships with them. Indeed we think that this is of great importance.
- IV. This means that we do not take issue with all aspects of SEAL. Some of this initiative is about changing the atmosphere in schools, or empowering students and giving them a voice. Some aspects are related to eradicating bullying. We think some of this may be beneficial.
- V. We also believe that teachers can help young people acquire these skills by modelling them. So we accept that much can be done in teacher training to help teachers develop their own relationship skills or to help them become more skilled in handling their own or others' emotions.

What we are concerned about, and caution against, is government encouraging a systematic and programmatic approach to the development of social and emotional skills in all children. This is precisely what SEAL recommends. If schools follow the SEAL Guidance all children and young people will be:

- formally taught social and emotional skills in the classroom
- exposed to these lessons for thirteen years of their life – ie from three to eighteen
- evaluated against a checklist of 'learning outcomes' (for 3-11 year olds there are 42; for secondary students there are 50). This exercise may then lead to young people being given targets for improvement.

This leads on to one of the deceptive aspects of this agenda. Many people nowadays dislike the target-driven, management-by-objectives approach which dominates public sector organisations including schools. To many it seems far too impersonal and cold to turn people's lives into government data. So, after all the cold logic and strategies, is it not great to hear people talking about emotions and feelings? The warm and emotional feel to SEAL is further enhanced by the fact that advocates keep talking about the importance of a 'holistic' approach and appear to eschew targets by being child-centred.

But the Department of Children, Schools and Families (following in the footsteps of the DfES) is grafting this focus on emotions onto its standard practices. If this initiative succeeds as planned, and schools fully implement the recommendations, all young people's emotional lives (not just the few who have obvious difficulties) will become the focus of checklists of learning outcomes, assessments and evaluations.* The next step in this approach may well be targets.

Feelings, emotions and relationships are the core of our personal lives. They are an intimate part of us. The Centre believes that any initiative which suggests that government departments, schools and teachers should micromanage young people's feelings is Orwellian and a good enough reason on its own to say we have to drop this idea altogether.

Our argument

The large paper which the Centre has published outlines a number of different arguments against the taught approach to social and emotional skills for all children. In this overview paper we have grouped these arguments and summarised them under the following headings:

1. Evidence/intellectual rationale
2. The dangers of psychological interventions
3. Social control and conformity
4. The role of parents/teachers
5. The real issues to be addressed
6. Alternative courses of action

1. Evidence/Intellectual Rationale

We would not want drugs to go to market that are essentially untested and that have only their promoters' claims to back them up. Yet we routinely rely on such claims to buy educational and

organizational products and services. People's lives may be affected in much the same way as their lives can be affected by drugs ...

Professor Robert J. Sternberg, Yale University

In the course of our large report we put forward the following arguments about how weak the intellectual rationale and evidence base is for SEAL.

Intellectual background

In all the SEAL documents, and in the work of supporting academics like Professor Katherine Weare, Goleman's Emotional Intelligence is cited not just as the inspiration, but the intellectual and empirical rationale for this type of work. It is particularly used in these documents as the source of evidence on the importance of emotional intelligence and these types of social and emotional skills– Goleman claimed that it mattered much more for success in life than IQ.

However, Daniel Goleman was a journalist and his book has been seriously, and extensively, critiqued by a large number of psychologists. His claims for the importance of emotional intelligence have been discredited. Goleman now tacitly accepts some of these criticisms. What's more, the way that Goleman defines emotional intelligence has also been undermined. Critics claim that his notion of emotional intelligence is a ragbag which includes any positive human characteristic other than IQ. They also point out that many of the characteristics he cites are at odds with one another or largely emanate from personality. Yet Secondary SEAL has at its core Goleman's ideas as they base this whole programme on Goleman's 'five domains'.

In short, Goleman cannot be used as the intellectual foundation, and justification of large-scale work of this type in school, but this is exactly what is happening in SEAL.

Goleman's work cannot credibly be used as the intellectual foundation for a huge shift in educational policy, such as SEAL.

Two psychologists – Mayer and Salovey – were the originators of the term 'emotional intelligence'. They are very critical of Goleman's work, including his outlandish claims. Their work is more academic but is still in infancy and could not be used either to underpin a wholesale change in the education system. A large academic tome on emotional intelligence recently stated: '... in spite of current theorizing about EI programs, we really do not know that much about how they work, for whom they work, under what conditions they work, or indeed, whether or not they work at all.' They also conclude that emotional intelligence is more 'myth than science'.

The empirical studies

The SEAL documents (and the report written by Weare and Gray which recommended the SEAL approach) cite as additional supporting evidence 17 international studies (15 of which are American). These studies, it is claimed, provide the evidence that what is required are whole-school, taught approaches. However, even Weare and Gray acknowledge that these studies report interventions which are hugely different in design, goals and methodology and that it is very difficult to ascertain their effectiveness. What's more, while these studies may have been effective on their own terms, none of these pilot studies are anything like what is proposed by SEAL – ie that children will be taught social and emotional skills on an annual basis from 3 to 18. Nothing like this has ever been done before and only a longitudinal study, with a control group, could allow us to assess what the impact might be of this type of intervention. Even if a large study of this kind had been done and proved effective, this would not provide evidence that rolling it out across a whole education system (where there would be fewer resources and well-trained staff) would be beneficial.

It is because there is no evidence that anything like SEAL has been shown to be beneficial for young people that we are claiming that SEAL is a large-scale psychological experiment.

The DfES pilots

Between 2003 and 2005, the DfES ran a multi-strand pilot. The results were then published as 'Evaluation of the Primary Behaviour and Attendance Strategy Pilot'. One of the strands piloted

was SEAL. This was a very poorly designed study which had no control group. Secondly, the report gives a positive impression as it mainly draws on the feedback of teachers who were hand-picked on the basis of largely unspecified criteria. In other words, their views cannot be presented as objective evidence. What's more the empirical data presented shows that SEAL had no impact on attendance and virtually no affect on academic performance. More worryingly, the empirical data presented on the impact on pupils shows that for most of the attitudes measured the results went down, not up, after the pilot, particularly for boys. The report authors write: "there were statistically significant gender differences in relation to almost all of the scales prior to and following the programme with the girls exhibiting more positive responses in all cases." What they should have said is that the girls displayed less negative responses overall when compared with the boys.

Another telling point about this pilot is that the pre-intervention results for self-esteem, social skills etc did not suggest there was a problem to be addressed in these children's social and emotional skills. (For example, the means for self-esteem across the various stages was over 90 per cent and for social skills and relationships over 80 per cent.) The lowest figure (61 per cent) was ironically 'anxiety about school work'.

This pilot did not show that SEAL was a success. Indeed it showed itself to be much less effective than using classroom coaches to help improve teachers' skills. Nonetheless the DfES argued that the pilot was successful and have used it as part of the rationale for rolling SEAL out nationally to primary schools.

A secondary pilot on SEAL was run between 2005 and 2007. It did not seek to measure or assess the impact of the intervention on students and was more concerned about the feasibility of implementing this approach in secondary schools.

Contradictory evidence

In essence, SEAL is a large-scale psychological intervention designed to change young people's perceptions of themselves and other aspects of their psychology and relationships. The only other similar attempt on a national scale to change young people's psychology can be seen in American schools (and homes) as a result of the influence of the self-esteem movement. They argued that raising self-esteem was a panacea which would cure all social ills. Subsequent evidence has not supported this and has shown that self-esteem is not important for academic achievement and that social problems (such as bullying, violence or anti-social behaviour) often occur as a result of people who have high, not low, self-esteem.

Despite the lack of robust supporting evidence, the self-esteem movement was successful in creating a bandwagon which led to distinct child-rearing and educational practices. One was to put a great deal of emphasis on helping to make the child feel good about him/herself. This led to unwarranted praise, restriction of competition and criticism and aspirational grading. It also led to an emphasis on 'all about me/I'm special activities' and a focus on feelings and emotions.

Twenty years on celebrated psychologists like Professors Carol Dweck and Martin Seligman are extremely critical of what has happened in American classrooms in the name of building self-esteem. Dweck argues that the obsession with unwarranted praise has undermined achievement and resilience. Seligman argues that the emphasis on how the child feels has led to a fixation with the self which paradoxically increases the likelihood of depression and anxiety. This approach also means that teachers and parents begin to pay too much attention to negative feelings and do not encourage young people to persist in the face of frustration. This then undermines learning and skill development. Recent research by Dr Jean Twenge shows that since the 1960s young people in America have increased their level of self-esteem, but that narcissism, blame and feelings of powerlessness have also risen.

Since the ideas from the self-esteem movement gained currency in American education, their standards have dropped. A crisis in their education system has occurred as a result of massive grade inflation and falling standards. No doubt there are many factors involved here but it is not too difficult to see why self-esteem building would have led to grade inflation and ultimately undermined, not increased, achievement. Twenge and others also reports that American employers are distinctly unimpressed by the skills and attitudes of young employees.

Conclusions on evidence

The Department of Children, Schools and Families with its recommendation for a whole-school and taught approach to social and emotional skills is attempting to bring about a revolutionary change in the way that young people are educated. But our research indicates that this revolution is being wrought with no credible intellectual rationale or robust empirical evidence to support it. If we factor in evidence from America about what has happened to their education system, and to the well-being of young people, in the past few years, then there is even more cause for concern. None of this is reflected in the SEAL documents. 'All about me' is a theme in one of the seven themes in Primary SEAL which children will be exposed to annually.

2. The Dangers of Psychology

There is no robust, independent evidence that making children and young people express their feelings in formal rituals at school will develop lifelong emotional literacy and well-being. Inserting a vocabulary of emotional vulnerability into education is likely to encourage the very feeling of depression and hopelessness it is supposed to deal with.

Professor Kathryn Ecclestone, Oxford Brookes University

In our report a second major strand concerns the dangers of psychological interventions. Human psychology is extremely complex. It is difficult enough to target interventions at individuals, let alone design an annual psychological intervention targeted at millions of children at the same time. Here we simply list our types of concerns.

Indirect/unconscious messages

We have to be careful about the messages we give out when tackling problems through psychological interventions, as these messages may be counterproductive and can make the

problem worse. For example, praise seems positive but Professor Carol Dweck's research shows that it can undermine young people's motivation and their desire to stretch themselves and achieve. Restricting criticism and the opportunities to fail can also undermine learning and resilience.

We believe certain unhelpful messages will be given out to young people and parents as a result of SEAL. For example:

- The architects of SEAL think it is beneficial that they are now eradicating the idea of a 'deficit' by giving all young people teaching in social and emotional skills. But in effect they are extending the deficit to all children. Do we want to give young people the message that we all need to learn about feelings and relationships from experts in a professional setting? Will this not encourage help-seeking behaviour and a view of emotions and relationships which will fuel mental health problems (and overload state services) in the long run? This is precisely the critique advanced cogently by Professor Frank Furedi in *Therapy Culture*.
- Do we want young people to believe that hurting others feelings are such a terrible thing that we need to be evaluated on it by teachers? This is what SEAL does. Indeed one of the learning outcomes for primary and secondary students is 'I can make, sustain and break friendships without hurting others'. This is disingenuous. Feelings are likely to be hurt. The message we need to give young people is not to put too much emphasis on hurt feelings. "Sticks and stones ..." is arguably a better philosophy for fostering resilience than encouraging young people to think that hurt feelings must be avoided at all costs. This message is more likely to lead to inertia and conformity as well as fragility. We must always remember that human beings are naturally resilient. This can be seen in asylum seekers. Many have suffered terrible atrocities and yet they manage to overcome what has happened to them and are often more resilient and entrepreneurial than many of the people in the communities in which they settle.
- Self-awareness, and emotional awareness are at the heart of both Primary and Secondary SEAL. But do we want to encourage people to be overly concerned with how they feel? Psychologists now talk about a 'negativity bias' which means that it is very easy for people to become depressed if they become too introspective or ruminative. What's more in an age like ours where we are very focused on ourselves is this approach not likely to encourage even more individualism, narcissism and an obsession with how one feels in the moment? SEAL assumes that expressing feelings is inevitably good, but this is contested by research. For example, counselling or debriefing people after negative incidents can make them more, not less likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. So how can we know that a focus on feelings and emotions for thirteen years of young people's lives in the classroom will actually benefit, as opposed to undermine, their long term mental health?

- SEAL is supported by checklists of learning outcomes and evaluation is promoted in Primary SEAL. The main architect of the SEAL approach, Professor Katherine Weare favourably reports in one of her books a primary school which gives children and A to a D for their social and emotional skills which gives us an idea of how this initiative could drift. Some children will inevitably do worse than others in these evaluations. They will soon pick up on the fact that in the social and emotional game of life they have been evaluated and found wanting. Some children, who currently do not do well academically, will also lack the social and emotional skills they are now expected to have. This is unlikely to have a positive influence on them. Remember children are very astute at picking up indirect messages.

Ironic effects

Another difficulty with psychological interventions is not just the unconscious messages can backfire but also there the possibility of 'ironic effects'. Research by Wegner et al shows that when individuals deliberately try to do something like fall asleep or relax their intention often produces the opposite effect. This means that telling people to be tense can have a more relaxing effect than encouraging them to relax. In other words, SEAL's emphasis on calming techniques could induce anxiety in some young people.

Dosage issues

In psychology, as in physical health, we cannot assume that more is better. One vitamin pill might be good for you but taking the whole bottle is not more beneficial. However, 'more is better' is exactly the assumption which underlies SEAL. This can be seen in the rationale which says that because 17 international studies showed some benefit to young people in a limited time period then more of this type of approach will be better. But they have no reason to assume this. In short, the year on year, taught, whole school approach is an intensive prescription based on faulty reasoning.

A related problem is that every child, irrespective of personality and skills will be treated to SEAL. This means that children who are already expressing their feelings a lot may unwittingly be encouraged to do more of this. This could be damaging for them. Professor Weare acknowledges this potential problem in some of her writings. For example, in her recent book she states: 'An overload of emotional awareness can lead to paralysing introspection, self-centredness and or/dwelling or getting stuck in a difficult mood rather than trying to deal with it.' She thinks this will be avoided by the competences balancing each other – an incredibly sophisticated approach for any professional working with one individual. Remember that this is an intervention targeted at millions of children at the same time.

Sophistication

Another problem with SEAL is that it is far too sophisticated. If you read through the learning outcomes for SEAL you will see that what is proposed would be an extremely complex and conceptual set of learning outcomes for adults let alone 3-11 year olds. Indeed both the primary and secondary lists of learning outcomes would not be out of place in a post-graduate course for counselling skills. Here are five learning outcomes by way of illustration.

1. I know that it is OK to have any feeling, but not OK to behave in any way I feel like. (Primary/pre-school)
2. I understand that changing the way I think about people and events changes the way I feel about them. (Primary/pre-school)
3. I can change the way I feel by reflecting on my experiences and reviewing the way I think about them. (Primary/pre-school)
4. I can make sense of what has happened to me in my life and understand that things that come from my own history can make me feel prone to being upset or angry for reasons that others may find it difficult to understand. (Secondary)
5. I can see the world from other people's point of view, can feel the same emotion as they are feeling and take account of their intentions, preferences and beliefs. (Secondary)

Reading this list it is easy to see why education professor Katherine Ecclestone argues that approaches like these are more about therapy than learning.

Some psychologists admit that this type of understanding/skills defies most adults, even after years of therapy. What's more we have to bear in mind that these sophisticated ideas will be taught by teachers who, through no fault of their own, are bound to be inadequately trained to deal with the complexities of the issues covered by the material.

3. Social control, conformity and resistance

SEAL is based on a checklist learning outcomes. In essence this is a list of desirable characteristics/behaviours against which all children and young people are to be judged. Even if they are not formally evaluated, this checklist outlines the type of person they should become. This is in effect a form of social control/compliance. The type of person being aimed at in SEAL is largely of a 'nice girl' who expresses her feelings 'appropriately', gives compliments, is empathetic and doesn't hurt anyone's feelings. This is even openly accepted in the SEAL Primary Guidance as it includes the following statement:

Boys and girls are likely to respond differently to some of the activities, and may find different areas more or less difficult. Teachers/ practitioners will need to be sensitive to these potential differences, and to the fact that the expression of emotion, talking about feelings and being seen to be empathetic and caring tend to be seen as feminine traits, with the consequence that boys may actively reject them rather than risk potential ridicule from peers and criticism at home.

Leaving aside the point about gender, the learning outcomes of these social and emotional skills are heavily based on personality. Some types of people are naturally more likely to display these behaviour and skills than others. So, for example, some people by nature are keen to express their feelings, and talk about themselves and others are not.

We must remember that young people at school are a captive audience. They will be given little choice in whether they participate. If they refuse their behaviour is likely to be judged as testimony to the fact that they do not have the correct social and emotional skills.

The SEAL emphasis on empathy and not hurting peoples' feelings could also backfire and undermine other current Government aspirations for encouraging enterprise. Research shows that being empathetic is not a characteristic exhibited by many 'creative' people who often are driven to express themselves, irrespective of the impact on others. Entrepreneurial types also need to act independently and not be overly concerned with the emotional norm (the focus of much of emotional intelligence work).

Even these few points show how this is very complex territory and it is dangerous to deliberately try to engineer children's personalities according to a precise template: a template which reflects the biases and personality of the people drawing it up. Even asking the question 'who says what is 'appropriate' when it comes to emotional expression?' illustrates how potentially biased, and dangerous, the whole exercise will be.

Another problem is that the intense, formal teaching of social and emotional skills is so direct that it is likely to engender resistance. Young people, especially in today's world, do not like being told what to do by adults. We believe there is a strong danger that many children will become more rebellious and object to being evaluated and pressurised in this way. If so are they not more likely to act negatively in an attempt to assert their personality and to resist conforming? Rebelliousness was indeed reported as an unwanted side effect for some young people in the SEAL primary pilot. This is likely to be a particular problem for boys since even the SEAL Primary Guidance document admits that they are encouraging a way of behaving which boys are more likely to reject.

4. Impact on parents and teachers

We believe that SEAL could also have a hugely damaging effect on both parents and teachers. Since there is increasing concern that some parents are abdicating responsibility for their children's behaviour is it not unwise to encourage parents to believe that schools are responsible for the development of young people's social and emotional skills? Is this not one of the main indirect messages which SEAL will send out? Will this not exacerbate the problem? Young people under the age of 16 only spend 15 per cent of their time at school. Schools can never take the place of parents in helping young people to develop good social and emotional skills.

The aspirations for SEAL are enormous. If the Guidance were to be implemented it would lead to massive changes in schools and what is taught in the classroom. There is now an enormous industry dedicated to creating materials for SEAL – every age and stage, subject and setting now have their own extensive set of resources. At the Centre we do not have to teach children on the basis of this material, but we feel daunted every time we look at the lists of what is available, ostensibly to support teachers. We are not surprised therefore that a number of teachers who were interviewed for the primary pilot talked about how stressed they felt by being presented with the box of materials. The pilot also showed that SEAL, far from lowering teachers' stress, contributed to it. The report's authors tell us that some staff 'found implementing the programme stressful particularly when they had no training in taking circle time or in facilitating consideration of pupils' emotions.'

Of the teachers interviewed, almost 80 per cent 'disagreed' or 'disagreed strongly' with the proposition that it reduced teacher workload. The same number disagreed with the proposition that it had reduced the time they had to spend on discipline matters for pupils.

5. The real issues to be addressed

Psychology may be in vogue, but it is not helpful to put too much emphasis on psychology or fixing individuals. For example, recently the police have claimed that teen violence is often fuelled by drink. Some commentators argue that the issue here is the cost and availability of alcohol. It may be far better to deal with the availability issue than attempt to effect a change in young people's psychology. Strong evidence has now been published showing that additives in foods commonly consumed by children can lead to attention deficit disorder and behavioural problems. Of course, psychology matters but it is often affected by culture and structures and changing these may be less risky than targeting individuals' psychology.

What's more the idea a systematic, taught approach to these social and emotional skills in school is essentially a short cut, or a band-aid, when what is required is a range of much deeper-seated changes. The UNICEF report indicates that the main barrier in the UK to child well-being is family breakdown. Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, from York University, one of the report's authors, put the UK's poor ratings down to long term under-investment and a 'dog-eat-dog' society. 'In a society which is very unequal, with high levels of poverty, it leads on to what children think about themselves and their lives. That's really what's at the heart of this,' Bradshaw argues. So the SEAL approach could easily be a time-consuming, and costly, distraction from the real issues. As we've argued above, it might even make the problem worse.

Government needs to be more realistic about what it can change and influence and what it cannot. This will lessen the chances that it will launch interventions which could be pointless or dangerous. Problems with young people's well-being are the result of an enormous number of social and cultural changes. We could list these as –

- Family breakdown
- Community breakdown
- Rise in drug and alcohol abuse
- The impact of the mass media
- Advertising/marketing/higher expectations
- Pressure to achieve (exams etc)
- Materialism
- Increasing inequalities
- Decline in religion
- Lack of exercise
- Poor diet/eating habits/additives
- Pessimism of the age (eg ecological disasters).

In short we should not be surprised that the well-being of young people in the UK is poor when our values are not child-centred and when we do not encourage them, or equip them with the skills needed to live good lives. This is not about teaching children and young people

about emotions; this is about the values of society at large. Of central concern too is the behaviour and skills of adults.

6. Alternative courses of action

In critiquing SEAL the Centre is not arguing that we have the answers to the problems presented by young people's well-being and behaviour. There are no simple answers.

In Scotland the Scottish Executive have adopted a new Curriculum for Excellence and creating confident individuals is now one of the four purposes of education. (The other three are: responsible citizens, successful learners and effective contributors). One of the attractions of this formulation is the balance it tries to strike. However, the Centre is aware that the confident individuals part of this agenda is fraught with the type of dangers outlined already in this paper (namely self-esteem, ironic effects, the distortions and negative impact of profiling or targeting). This is why we have published a book recently called *Creating Confidence: a handbook for professionals working with young people*.

As a centre we are interested in Positive Psychology and we have been particularly influenced by the work of Professor Martin Seligman. However, we would still not support a systematic, SEAL type of approach to some elements of Positive Psychology (eg a centralised programme of happiness lessons) as we think this too could back-fire. Instead we think that teachers may benefit from some of the insights from Positive Psychology and could incorporate some of its thinking into aspects of their classroom practice.

We fully recognise that schools have a part to play in improving young people's well-being but only a part, and not the main one. Parents are much more important than schools. However, schools could play their part by

- adopting a supporting ethos (many already do this)
- having well trained, motivated teachers who can relate well to young people
- modelling the type of behaviour we would like more young people to adopt
- teaching young people important basic skills
- giving young people opportunities for development
- having clear rules and boundaries
- tackling, with the support of other authorities, anti-social behaviour.

There are specific non-psychological activities which we believe could help in the drive to improve young people's well-being and are at least worthy of piloting/further investigation:

- more opportunities for PE/sports/outdoor education/martial arts
- nutritional support
- more opportunities for volunteering/community activities
- more exposure to third world countries/more exchanges.

Where schools want to undertake interventions which address psychology we believe these should be more about thinking styles, beliefs and cognitions than emotions or emotional

expression. So, for example, Professor Dweck's work on mindsets could be helpful as this is about views of intelligence and achievement. Optimism and explanatory style may be useful as this is about how people see adversities and successes. Teaching young people about flow (engagement in activities), and its rewards, could also help in encouraging young people to seek fulfilment through activities. Our preference would be to do this work with older, secondary school students rather than younger children.

We also believe that in any work on this agenda undertaken in schools we must eschew individual profiling and targets and avoid checklists of learning outcomes/desirable characteristics for measurement and evaluation.

We are also very committed to the idea of a major shift in resources to what is being called 'early engagement or enrichment' – devoting real resources to ensuring that all children get the care and attention they really need in life through proper support for parents and child care. We would also like to see a major investment in youth clubs and opportunities for young people in the communities in which they live. This would encourage them to channel their energy into more productive activities and, by exposing them to other role models, help them to improve their life skills.

Conclusion

Instead of the language of feelings, introspection, fragility and vulnerability the work we particularly encourage in education is about self-efficacy, taking action and doing things in the world. We believe that when the type of confidence this fosters is allied to a sense of purpose, or the attempt to make a difference in the world through connections with other people, then this creates the conditions for both flourishing and well-being.

We are aware that this may be the destination the Department of Children, Schools and Families and its various advisers also want to reach. We think, however, that its recommendations to schools that they should formally teach all young people social and emotional skills is leading them to take not just a difficult, but a dangerous, route.