



# Pastoral Care in Education

An International Journal of Personal, Social and Emotional Development

ISSN: 0264-3944 (Print) 1468-0122 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rped20>

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To cite this article: Peter Wood (2018) Social and emotional learning schemes as tools of cultural imperialism: a manifestation of the national and international child well-being agenda?, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 36:3, 253-265, DOI: [10.1080/02643944.2018.1479350](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2018.1479350)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2018.1479350>



Published online: 02 Jun 2018.



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ARTICLE



# Social and emotional learning schemes as tools of cultural imperialism: a manifestation of the national and international child well-being agenda?

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## ABSTRACT

The need for improved well-being of children in Britain has been highlighted in a raft of reports both nationally and internationally. In this paper, I aim to explore some of the practicalities experienced by schools that, in response, have implemented social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions as a means to improve child well-being. I make the case that the discourses of emotions inherent within such schemes, and the various supranational publications, are susceptible to exploitation and manifestation. The study employed a mixed methodological approach, utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies with primary school staff members including head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff, other support staff, etc. Three phases of study – questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews – were administered as a means of creating an insight into the interpretation and use of SEL in these settings. The findings demonstrate a propensity for staff to conflate social and emotional aspects of self with more moralistic constructs of identity, revealing how SEL schemes have the potential to act as tools of cultural imperialism by marginalising and/or endorsing certain values, norms and behaviours. After maintaining that such realisations of these schemes may impede rather than improve the lived experiences of children, that are fundamental to their social and emotional well-being and mental health, I make the case for alternative approaches to SEL in schools.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 April 2018

Accepted 14 May 2018

## KEYWORDS

Social and emotional learning; well-being; mental health; development; primary school

## Introduction

This paper contributes to our understanding of the practicalities faced by schools and their staff when utilising social and emotional learning (SEL) as a vehicle to enhance children's social and emotional well-being needs. More specifically, it illustrates that through such educational activities, staff may conflate social and emotional aspects of self with more moralistic constructs of identity. Consequently, it aims to demonstrate how SEL has the potential to

both celebrate and problematise social, emotional and behavioural skills common to specific groups of pupils in British schools, and that in some instances such schemes may operate as tools of cultural imperialism that can impede rather than improve the lived experiences of children. The main catalyst for the arguments presented here is empirical data derived from an 18-month long study that examined the views of a range of primary school staff members, who discussed their comprehension of SEL, and their role in its delivery, across four case studies. In order to contextualise this data, in the following section I provide a brief overview of literature and discourse that recognises a failure on the part of British schools to meet children's social and emotional well-being needs. After outlining how SEL has been positioned as an intervention to improve these needs, and upon examining literature offered by its proponents and critics, I provide details of the empirical study, including: the methods of data collection employed; the staff members who formed the sample; and how the data gathered was analysed. Next, I present the research findings, in the form of qualitative data gleaned from group and individual interviews with staff, to illustrate how SEL has the capacity to endorse and marginalise norms, behaviours and experiences deemed important to some groups of children. After pondering on the legitimacy of a propensity for a monist operationalisation of SEL and a move towards character and values education in policy, I propose an alternative vision of SEL that embraces a more pluralist approach to social, emotional and behavioural development in schools.

### **Children's mental health and well-being in Britain: a national and international concern**

Children's mental health has been the focus of much debate and discussion in Britain recently, with demands for improvement in this area gathering momentum since the turn of the millennium, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) (1999) called for schools to create environments where social and emotional development should be prioritised so that well-being can be enhanced. The need for improved social and emotional well-being of children in Britain was further highlighted in a report commissioned by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2007) where comparatively, across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, British children were least satisfied with life, disliked school most and had the lowest levels of emotional health. One aspect of the UNICEF (2007) report identified specific weaknesses relating to the education system, where Britain fell into the bottom six countries with regard to how children rated their enjoyment of school life and their judgements of satisfaction with the education they received. Although improvements have been reported (see Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007; Palmer, 2006), concerns regarding the

unhappiness and emotional ill-health of children in Britain persist (see Layard & Dunn, 2009; UNICEF, 2013).

With doubts firmly cast over the quality of schooling as a means to improve pupils' social and emotional well-being needs (see Pope, Rees, Main, & Bradshaw, 2015) and with a recognition that Britain 'is not doing well on children's mental health' (Warin, 2017, p. 188), there have been international demands for greater state intervention in education, with the OECD (2009, p. 163) calling for 'Governments (to) continuously experiment with policies and programmes for children ... to enhance well-being'. Such supranational pleas have been echoed in political rhetoric nationally, with previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, identifying improvements in mental health and the social and emotional well-being of citizens in Britain as a 'priority' of government. His view that 'happiness' should be the new gross domestic product, and that government has the 'power' to improve well-being (Cameron, 2010), was re-emphasised in January 2017, by current Prime Minister, Theresa May, who called for:

The power of government as a force for good to transform the way we deal with mental health problems right across society ... at every stage of a person's life: not only in our hospitals, but in our classrooms, at work and in our communities... This starts with ensuring that children and young people get the help and support they need and deserve.

This 'well-being agenda', as it has become known, is now deemed a 'serious business' of government that is about improving society's sense of well-being (May, 2017). Acting on the international concerns voiced in the many publications introduced above, and on the renewed emphasis at national level to facilitate mental health issues across society, subsequent British governments have made use of various education-based schemes as vehicles to target the social and emotional well-being needs of its children. Such strategies include, but are not limited to, the 'Healthy Schools' programme, designed to promote a whole school/whole child approach to emotional health, a renewal in the practice of 'Nurture groups' that invest in the importance of attachment and ongoing relationships (Warin, 2017), and the 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning' (SEAL) initiative, 'designed to support schools in promoting the well-being and learning of children and young people' (Banerjee, 2010, p. 8).

In this paper, I focus on just one of these strategies by exploring some of the practicalities experienced by schools when implementing SEL schemes that focus on child social and emotional well-being. I make the case that the 'discourses of emotions' (Burman, 2009), inherent within the various supranational publications on well-being and in the national calls to improve mental health through schooling, are susceptible to exploitation by policymakers and practitioners alike. While an aim of the international comparisons of child well-being, outlined above, is to illustrate how 'performance in protecting children compares with the record of

other nations at a similar level of development' (UNICEF, 2013, p. 4), through the examination of the data captured, I make the case that instead of facilitating social and emotional development, SEL may be being used to problematise norms and behaviours fundamental to children's positive mental health and well-being.

## Overview of the research study

### *SEL as a research focus*

Whilst SEL schemes internationally have been given an array of labels such as *Social Responsibility* in Canada, *Life Skills* in Israel, *Kids Matter* in Australia and *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning* (SEAL) in Britain, all, at some level, aim to improve children's personal relationships, capacity to understand their own emotions and awareness of appropriate response to the emotions of others (Weare, 2007). Indeed, at their core is a commitment to cater for children's well-being needs through the development of their social, emotional and behavioural skills (Kroeger, Schultz, & Newsom, 2007). Across the globe, the potential benefits of these schemes have been identified, with claims of improvements in children's anger management strategies, social skills, emotional control (see Gadre, 2004), emotional well-being (Hallam, 2009) and academic attainment (Banerjee, 2010). That said, there has been research that doubt the legitimacy of such opinion (see Humphrey et al., 2008), while others offer more fervent opposition, due to claims that SEL is well positioned to coerce children into experiencing specific constructions of social and emotional well-being, (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009).

### *The aims of the main study*

Drawing on Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence, Hargreaves's (1995) typology of school culture, notions of a 'whole-school approach' (Banerjee, 2010; Weare, 2007), and concepts within the interpretive paradigm, the main study aimed to determine how staff members working in the primary school sector in Britain understood and made use of SEL in their establishments. As a means of achieving this aim, the issues captured in the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the main motivations for using SEL in primary schools?
2. How is SEL being interpreted in primary schools?
3. What are the influences behind these interpretations?

### *Methodology*

A mixed-methods empirical study, employing three separate methodological approaches, utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies,

was developed to explore the research questions outlined above. The three phase study was carried out in primary schools in a town in Northern England. Data were gathered from a range of staff members, including head teachers, assistant head teachers, senior management staff, teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff, other support staff, administration staff and maintenance staff.

In total, 402 staff members in 38 schools took part in Phase one of the empirical study. Composed of four main sections (whole-school approach, reasons for employing SEL, behaviour management and purpose of SEL), the 29-item questionnaire utilised during this phase was produced in response to the study's main research questions. This approach, according to Peterson (2000), is widespread in questionnaire research and by corresponding the four sub-sections to the overall research questions, an inventory that was 'content valid' was produced. Each sub section of the questionnaire – that had been piloted by staff members in a SEL implementing primary school located in a separate town to the one sampled in the research – contained between three and ten items, and utilised either Likert-scale or open-ended forms of response. Items using a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree nor agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree) asked participants to indicate the response that best suited them. An example of one such question was: *I value the use of SEL in school*. Open-ended questions were utilised as an exploratory tool (Oppenheim, 1992) to help generate concepts and to obtain general information with regard to the four main sub-sections. An example of one of these questions was: *What, do you feel, is the main purpose of SEL?*

By outlining this phase of the study here, I do not intend to imply a positivist approach to the research questions but include such information due to its role in initiating the research process, and as a tool that provided a broad, extensive survey of how schools and their staff members interpret and use SEL. Results from the quantitative phase also provided a means of triangulating the findings made during the qualitative Phases two and three (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Additionally, Phase one was also a valuable resource in identifying the four case study schools and was utilised extensively in the sampling strategy for Phases two and three.

Phases two and three, which focused on staff members' perceptions of SEL, their beliefs in relation to the motivations for its use, its function in school in general, their own use of the scheme and its impact, were carried out in case study primary schools sampled to achieve maximum variation. Consequently, four schools that varied with regard to culture, social class (categorised by pupil eligibility for free school meals), size, number of pupils on roll, ethnicity, religious character and duration of SEL use were selected as cases. Phase two involved semi-structured focus group interviews with groups of management/teaching staff, non-teaching staff and, in two cases, a range of staff selected from the 'whole school'. These samples were selected from 'naturally occurring

groups', which are advocated widely in the literature (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). There were ten focus group interviews comprising of a total of 44 staff members across the four case study schools. Phase three was composed of 24 semi-structured interviews (six staff members in each case study school). Employing a stratified purposeful sampling scheme (see Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007), I divided the various staff members within each school according to the following six roles: management, inclusion co-ordinator, teacher, teaching assistant (TA), pastoral staff and welfare staff, and sampled an individual from each group for interview.

### ***Data analysis***

To help organise the qualitative data, all interviews during Phases two and three were recorded and transcribed, and Atlas.ti software was utilised as a tool of analysis. Using a mixture of 'top-down deductive and bottom-up inductive processes' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010, p. 17), the iterative approach adopted during the research allowed the data analysis process to be both exploratory and confirmatory. The findings and inferences reported here have all been subjected to a rigorous form of content analysis (Cresswell, 2005), where data collected from all phases of the research was utilised to illustrate the phenomena being reported. To achieve a certain degree of 'descriptive validity' (Maxwell, 1992), and to make my interpretations of the participants' views as 'valid' as possible, confirmation of these interpretations were sought at all phases. With methodological and data triangulation achieved, the findings reported in this paper have been cross checked and validated with evidence from each phase of the research. As is to be expected, the larger research project produced numerous themes which have been reported elsewhere (e.g. Wood & Brownhill, 2018). In this article, I focus on just one thematic finding, by making use of the qualitative data outlined above. In keeping with the ethical procedures outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2011), all of which were adhered to throughout the study, the names used in the remainder of the paper are pseudonyms.

### **Findings: staff members' interpretations of SEL**

The analysis of data uncovered consistencies in the way staff members across schools interpreted and utilised SEL in their daily practice, particularly in terms of perceived motivations for its use and how it was operationalised in response. Consequently, I will now elaborate on these findings by relating more specifically to the paper's focus, to illustrate how SEL became a vehicle that targeted the behaviours and experiences deemed of value to specific groups of children.

### *Perceived motivations for SEL in schools*

The findings indicate that holistic notions of children's social and emotional development were viewed as a main function of SEL, with staff members pointing to the facilitation of 'social abilities, ... motivation, relationships, managing feelings ... (and) self-awareness' (Bethany – Assistant head) – skills traditionally associated with emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) – being emphasised. That said, there was a distinct tendency for staff to prioritise two specific aspects of emotional intelligence: emotional control and social skills, as central tenets of SEL. In doing so, there was also a propensity to attribute 'issues' with these aspects of EI to certain groups of school children, with staff members such as Samantha, a teaching assistant, believing SEL to be specifically for 'the poorer children of a lower class (and those) of the Asian community'. As such, SEL became reified as a tool to tackle the issues 'presented by Asian children' (Lucy – TA) and 'the many deprived kids' (Shirley – Welfare staff). When asked why SEL was introduced in schools, Leroy, a Key stage two teacher maintained:

**Leroy (Teacher):** I think it's possibly because of the kids we get in our schools, schools situated in council estates or in Asian communities. I think there are a lot of issues with social skills and behaviours at home in those places, which are then brought into school, not only by the children but by the parents as well.

As alluded to by Leroy, staff members across schools, in keeping with previous findings (see Broomhead, 2013), often attributed blame to parents for children's perceived lack of social, emotional and behavioural skills. By consistently highlighting presumed negative aspects of their nature, and in the act of labelling them 'drug abusers, alcohol abusers and prostitutes' (Abigail – Head teacher), 'neglectful' (Lilian – TA; Edith – Welfare staff), 'aggressive and violent' (Stanley – Head teacher), parents living in socio-economic hardship were often 'othered' (Paechter, 1998). Furthermore, there was a belief that 'social and emotional education is not important to the Asian community' (Carol – TA) due, in part, to the attribution of 'ignorance of families ... from an Asian background ... who aren't willing to change' (Lucy – TA).

Subsequently, some staff alluded to school as a 'battle ground of social and cultural integration' (John – Assistant head) while others, such as Head teacher, Stanley, maintained there was a 'real need to fire fight' the social, emotional and behavioural norms believed to being promoted within communities. The use of such metaphors illustrate how some school staff members perceive the role of schooling and the purpose of SEL within that, offering support to existing views that position 'schools and the curricula ... (as) prime areas of



attack' (Apple, 2006, p. 17) in cultural maintenance. When discussing their use of SEL, the trend to target the groups identified continued, as is shown next.

### ***The utilisation of SEL***

The view that SEL was most appropriate for specific groups of children was further reified in its practice. Across the schools, head teachers echoed the sentiments discussed above, by positioning SEL as a tool to target behaviours deemed a product of the 'children's hectic lives' (Hannah – Head teacher) and their 'socially and emotionally illiterate home environments' (Stanley – Head teacher). Such usages were emphasised again, by Alice:

**Alice (Head teacher):** Due to where they live, our kids get together in their little gangs and they make up their own social rules, but SEL counteracts all of that in a positive way, and that's why and how we use it.

The schools operationalised SEL via classroom-based lessons, using the SEAL resources (see DfES, 2005), and also in small group work and one-to-one interventions with individual children, led by Behaviour Support Workers and Learning Mentors. In accordance with the SEAL materials (see DfES, 2005), and across schools, peaceful conflict resolution was endorsed as a means of promoting positive emotional control, while assertiveness was prioritised as an 'appropriate' social skill. Such uses of the scheme were recognised as combatants for behaviours deemed common in areas of deprivation, where it was felt children are expected to 'act tough' (Charlotte – TA), 'be aggressive' (Amber – Welfare staff) and 'hit back, if hit by others' (Fred – Teacher), as well as in Asian communities where some children 'aren't encouraged to be independent or forthcoming with their ideas' (Jane – Teacher). Such uses of SEL to problematise behaviours endorsed in low socio-economic and Asian communities have been reported elsewhere (see Wood & Warin, 2014), but a further finding related to how staff often conflated social and emotional aspects of self with more moralistic constructions of identity.

Evidence of 'othering practices' (Griffith-Williams & Korn, 2016) were voiced by staff who identified SEL as a vehicle to teach children, from deprived and Asian communities, skills such as 'being polite, showing respect, being helpful' (Erica – TA), 'social etiquette, how to dress properly, how to eat properly, how to speak to people properly' (Abigail – Head teacher) and 'our manners and social skills' (Samantha – TA). Here, Samantha's use of 'our' reveals an 'us and them' dichotomy (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), hinted at throughout the qualitative phases and exemplified in the quotes shared in this paper. This was strengthened by a belief that schools, not home, deliver the 'right way' (Charlotte – TA) and the 'right behaviours' (Samantha – TA) in guiding children

on what is the 'right thing to do' (Lilian – TA) in difficult situations. Emphasising this point further, Barbara, a Key stage two teacher, stated:

**Barbara (Teacher):** I think a lot of our children see inappropriate ways to react to things when they're out of school. So the idea of SEL being in school is to teach them the right way to behave.

Consequently, in its conflation of social and emotional behaviours with moralistic aspects of character, SEL became a framework that operationalised as means to inform pupils of the 'right' behaviours to display, with teachers such as Fred believing 'that, through SEL, we as a school ... have the right to show children ... the way; we are trying to make them good citizens'. While work to develop children's behavioural skills are often incorporated within other discrete aspects of the curriculum, such as Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship (Weare, 2000), the data explored in this section reveals a propensity for schools and staff to operationalise SEL as a tool to not only target social and emotional experiences, but to also fuse expectations relating to these aspects of self with those of being a 'good citizen'. The potential consequences of this conflation are discussed next.

## Discussion

'Assimilation practices' (Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra, & Solomos, 2002), which place emphasis on students 'to mix ... to blend in and to stop being different' (Crozier & Davies, 2008, p. 299), were apparent in the operationalisation of SEL across the schools in this study, demonstrating its embodiment as a tool of cultural imperialism. In their use of SEL to target children from deprived and Asian communities, negative connotations of specific behavioural norms were manufactured by staff that 'othered' common practices within these areas. Furthermore, as the space of school and practice of SEL were seen to target these groups, aspects of structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990) were present. Curriculum, both formal and hidden, has long been viewed as a vehicle of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) that transmits 'appropriate' forms of cultural capital (Apple, 2004), privileges middle class values (Gewirtz, 2001) and normalises whiteness (Crozier & Davies, 2008). In uncovering a propensity for a monist approach to SEL, the findings of this study provide further support for these views. Such expectations of acculturation in schools often have negative consequences for children's identity formation (Wright, 2010), social and emotional development and well-being (Broomhead, 2014), signalling a need for an alternative approach to SEL, one that embraces difference and pluralism.

I call on educational establishments to recognise the multitude of values and behaviours that children experience and, as such, feel schools and staff

may benefit from exposure to the notion of ‘spheres of influence’ and ‘family values’ (Epstein, 2001), that assume an exchange of interests and knowledge between teachers and parents, that is based on common goals and mutual respect for the benefit of children’s learning and development. Similarly, in developing an ability to interpret, understand and accept the specific social and cultural practices of individuals, Earley and Mosakowski’s (2004) concept of ‘cultural intelligence’ may provide a useful framework to establish more pluralist realisations of SEL. Although many teachers fear the consequences of discussing contentious issues in the classroom (Keddie, 2014) and often feel under-prepared to engage critically with difference (Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014), by adopting a more agonistic (Mouffe, 2005) approach to teaching – one that utilises conflict and disagreement as a stimulus for learning – schools and staff may be better positioned to operationalise SEL as a means to develop *all* children’s social and emotional skills.

Under recent Conservative governments, support for the use of SEL in school has dwindled. Instead, there is now an explicit emphasis on educating values, epitomised in expectations for schools to promote ‘fundamental British values’ (DfE, 2014). As such, the advocacy of ‘democracy’, the ‘rule of law’, ‘individual liberty’ and ‘mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’ now forms part of all pupils’ schooling in Britain. With SEL schemes such a SEAL now languishing in government archives, and with a demand that British values are promoted in a ‘muscular way’ (Cameron, 2014), schools and their practitioners should be aware of the criticisms levied at this current approach to children’s spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, that label it assimilationist (Keddie, 2014), anti-Muslim (Lander, 2016) and an exercise to reinforce white privilege (Elton-Chalcraft, Lander, Revel, Warner, & Whitworth, 2017). Bearing in mind the utilisation of SEL in schools reported in this article, it would not be too fanciful to anticipate similar manifestations in the promotion of fundamental British values.

## Conclusion

The research reported in this article indicates a tendency for primary school staff members to target social and emotional behaviours valued by specific groups of children. Furthermore, by conflating these experiences with constructs of character governed by morals, SEL operationalised as an assimilationist tool in its promotion of behaviours and values deemed central to positive citizenship. Furthermore, the research revealed a degree of reticence towards pluralist models of social and emotional development which served to ‘other’ children from deprived and minority ethnic communities. In prioritising this monist stance, and in utilising SEL as a form of acculturation, there may be negative ramifications for children’s social and emotional well-being and mental health. Consequently, it is recommended that instead of pursuing

universality, school staff should recognise and celebrate the differences among the many pupils they teach, and make use of their variety of experiences as a means to facilitate all children's social and emotional skills.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [Granted Number: ES/1902945/1].

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