

## **Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning: Complementing, Compensating and Countering Parental Practices**

### **Introduction**

In this paper we will illustrate how some school staff have interpreted and harnessed an educational intervention, the UK social and emotional learning scheme, SEAL, in their attribution of blame toward certain groups of parents. The article draws on a study that was intended to explore the interpretation of this programme in primary schools. We report on an aspect of the findings, concentrating on three schools' motivations for implementing the scheme. We focus on the interplay between staff members' perceptions of pupils' parents, their perceived ability/inability to develop their children's social, emotional and behavioural skills, and the role of educational and school policy in engaging with parenting practices. The paper presents the accounts of various primary school staff members who, as a consequence of their opinions of the pupils' parents, made use of SEAL to either re-affirm parenting practices deemed as positive, or to oppose practices deemed negative. We make the case that, in the main, parenting practices of the more affluent social groups were identified as worthy of school support, whilst some of the practices of minority-ethnic and working-class parents were resisted through schools' interpretation and utilisation of SEAL. The scheme was viewed as a tool that could facilitate the social, emotional and behavioural development of the children of these groups specifically, by compensating for and countering the practices of their parents.

In the article we contextualise the research findings by exploring ongoing educational debates relating to state intervention into family life. Secondly, we provide details of SEAL, the educational intervention upon which this study was based. Thirdly, we describe the research process, methodologies employed, and information relating to the case study schools and the staff members who participated. Then, we focus on the research findings, demonstrating how the scheme has been used to: i) complement perceptions of positive parenting, ii) compensate for perceptions of inadequate parenting, iii) counter perceptions of negative parenting. We conclude that the interpretation and use of educational policy by schools is influenced by their perceptions of parenting practices particularly in minority-ethnic and working-class families. In response, we contend that a more democratic approach between schools and parents is needed. Firstly, we discuss the notion of the Nanny State in relation to parenting.

### **Nanny state and state intervention**

A number of UK social policies, developed over recent years, illustrate an increasing rate of state intervention into children's lives. Policies aimed at children and their parents were at the heart of the New Labour project to refashion the welfare state and moved a concern with parenting from a 'political backwater' (Penn 2007) to centre stage, where they have remained under the Coalition government. Under New Labour, policies concerned with the family and the role of parents were often criticised, especially by those on the right, as a form of Nanny State, a term intended to symbolise an over regulative and centralised form of control. In particular the Nanny State was criticised for intrusion into the private world of parenting. Within New Labour, parents were identified as key figures in regenerating social morality, with those deemed as inadequate being blamed for a range of childhood problems including

truancy, anti-social behaviour, offending, and obesity (Ball 2008). By constructing specific types of parents as failing, and in creating a parental deficit, parenting was 'redefined as a public rather than a private issue' (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008, p. 6).

Education was one area where the state could legitimately intervene in family life, particularly in the early years of education. New Labour's flagship Sure Start programme became a context for drawing together a number of policies based on this government's conceptual shift to joined-up-services aimed at supporting children and their families. It included a focus on the provision of various kinds of support for parents intended to create a strong emphasis on children's well-being within their families. It was also intended to prevent later difficulties such as anti-social and offending behaviour (see Beecham and Sinclair 2007; Broadhurst, Mason and Grover 2007), an approach that has been characterised by Parton (2008) as a pre-emptive form of state intervention. However, whilst the national evaluation of Sure Start has claimed positive outcomes such as more stimulating home environments, less harsh discipline and greater life satisfaction, (DfE, 2010), its critics have characterised it as part of a 'neo-liberal agenda' which has 'increased regulation and surveillance of certain kinds of families,' (Broadhurst, Mason and Grover 2007, p. 454). Cuts to Sure Start, brought about by the coalition government, have changed it from a service intended to provide universal family support to one that targets 'problem families'. The rhetoric of targeting can be interpreted as a guise for the justification of cuts and narrowing of services. It also serves to situate social problems as coming from individual needy families rather than wider social inequalities.

Parents were often positioned within New Labour discourse as blameworthy. Indeed this period of social policy saw the advent of punitive strategies for irresponsible parents such as parenting orders, and parental punishment for school truancy. Strategies that were presented through a rhetoric of support could also be seen as a form of social control that targeted those families from socially disadvantaged areas (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008), families who are regularly constructed as ‘malfunctioning’ or ‘failing’ (Tisdall 2006; Broadhurst 2009). When the UK coalition government came to power it presented the ‘Big Society’ as an ideal that represented a decrease of state regulation and a promotion of individual and local freedoms through the exercising of personal choice and responsibility. Within this discourse the ideal parent is one who makes careful and well informed choices about the schooling of their child, has high aspirations for their success, interpreted as employability, and raises them to be educable, law abiding, and healthy. In this policy climate, the finger of blame quickly alights on parents when young people misbehave, as they were seen to do in the summer riots of 2011. The UK coalition government has recently initiated a Troubled Families programme aimed at families where adults are unemployed, children are out of school and family members are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour. The policy emphasis continues to suggest that responsibility lies within the domestic private world of the family.

Whilst New Labour emphasised the need for state intervention in family life, and the Coalition stresses individuality and self responsibility, there is a clear continuity of blame for parents underlying both types of policy discourse. This approach ‘blames the victim’ and perpetuates a policy blindness to the root causes of disadvantage (Broadhurst, Mason and Grover 2007). However, as many of these strategies target certain populations, in the main those from minority-ethnic and low socio-economic backgrounds, they have been accused of

being schemes that re-moralise the family and mould images of ‘good’ parenting (Day-Sclater and Piper 2000; Gillies 2005b).

Although New Labour, in general, refrained from using a language of class, their strategy of re-socialisation was fundamentally ‘aimed at working-class parents, or at least a particular fraction of working-class parents’, in their terminology: ‘families in challenging circumstances’, families who are ‘socially excluded’, and families living in ‘areas of disadvantage’ (Gewirtz 2001, p. 366). Whilst the targeting of certain families can be interpreted as an inclusionary policy, it can also be understood as a strategy for promoting ‘the values and modes of engagement of a particular kind of middle-class parent’(Gewirtz 2001, p. 376). We follow the practices of sociologists such as Gewirtz in using the terms middle-class and working-class in this paper whilst acknowledging that these binaries are far from ideal and that there are significant theoretical and practical problems involved in defining social class (see Crozier 2000; Reay 1998; Vincent, Braun and Ball 2008). We use the terms as a recognisable form of shorthand to represent the nexus of intersecting social advantages, or disadvantages that characterise certain categories of parent. In this paper we will make the case that another New Labour initiative, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), has been interpreted and utilised by schools as a tool to target the parenting practices of the least advantaged groups.

### **Social and emotional aspects of learning**

This paper is based on a research study that aimed to investigate the interpretation and use of SEAL in primary schools. Initially introduced in June 2005 through the Department for

Education and Skills (DfES, 2005), SEAL was ‘designed to support schools in promoting the well-being and learning of children and young people’ (Banerjee, 2010, p. 8) and is delivered in schools using three waves of intervention, where pupils study seven themes: New Beginnings, Getting on and falling out, Say no to bullying, Going for goals!, Good to be me, Relationships, Changes. Wave one ‘centres on whole-school development work designed to create the ethos and climate within which social and emotional skills can be most effectively promoted, as well as direct teaching of these skills across the curriculum’ (Humphrey, Kalambouka, Bolton, Lendrum, Wigelsworth, Lennie and Farrell 2008, p. 10). Waves two and three take a more targeted approach, and aim to develop social and emotional skills amongst small groups and individual children ‘thought to be ‘at risk’ of developing social and emotional problems’ (Humphrey et al. 2008, p. 15).

Researchers’ appraisals of the scheme are by no means harmonious. Whilst SEAL has generally been warmly received in many of its evaluations (see Hallam, Rhamie and Shaw 2006; Weare 2007; Humphrey, Lendrum, Wigelsworth and Kalambouka 2009; Hallam 2009), others have offered disapproval and illustrated criticisms that apply to the scheme. Authors such as Craig (2007) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) contend that SEAL is a form of values education that endorses specific behaviours, and that in some cases, it aims only to socialise children in order to transform them to behave in specific ways. Additionally, the national evaluation of SEAL in secondary schools by Humphrey, Lendrum and Wigelsworth (2010), found that the scheme ‘failed to impact significantly upon pupils’ social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro-social behaviour or behaviour problems’ (p.2).

Whilst the concepts that underpin SEAL, such as well-being and strength of relationships, have been endorsed in the contemporary recommendations for primary education (see Rose 2009; Alexander et al. 2009; Allen 2011), the scheme itself has somewhat lost its high profile status under the current Conservative-led coalition government. As of August 2010, responsibility for SEAL within the DfE fell under the anti-bullying strategy meaning it receives less attention in government policy, and whilst the online resources for the scheme are still available, they are now part of the National Strategies 'legacy' website.

In contrast to the evaluations presented above, the purpose of this study was to explore how school staff were making use of the initiative, how they interpreted its function, and the values and status they attributed to it. A specific focus on staff perceptions of parenting practices and values within the school's community was developed through analysis of the data, as we shall now explain.

### **Research methodology**

A mixed methods empirical study, employing three separate methodological approaches, utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies, was developed to create an insight into the way primary school staff members understood and made use of SEAL. Data was 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, during three phases of study. A 29-item questionnaire was completed by 402 staff members across 38 primary schools in the first phase of the study. In phase two, data was gathered using 10 focus group interviews with a

total of 44 staff members, whilst in phase three, semi-structured interviews with 24 staff members were utilised. In this paper we report the findings taken from the focus group and individual interview phases of the study. Personal details pertaining to each staff member, such as their age and ethnicity, were not sought in order to achieve a degree of anonymity. However, to contextualise the findings discussed later, some brief details of the sample whose data is reported in this paper are now included. We have utilised the testimonies of 17 members of staff, including three head teachers, two senior managers, two teachers, two learning mentors, four teaching assistants, and four welfare staff members. Two of the 17 are male.

The individual and group interviews, both of which followed the ethical procedures outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2011), focused on staff perceptions of SEAL, and particularly their beliefs in relation to the motivation for its implementation, how it functioned in school, and its impact. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity the names of the schools and staff members utilised during the reporting of the findings are allocated pseudonyms. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and Atlas.ti software was utilised to help organise the qualitative data. Employing an inductive approach to analysis (see Denzin 1970; Brannen 1992; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), each qualitative phase aimed to add depth to the findings made during the previous phase/s. This approach allowed for the identification of emerging themes at each stage and, as an iterative attitude toward data analysis was also adopted, these themes were continuously re-visited and developed throughout all three empirical phases. The quotations used in this article have been extracted from the focus group and individual interviews with the various staff members, and are representative of one of the emerging analytical themes. Whilst the research as a whole



produced numerous themes which spanned the case study schools, the data utilised in this paper was drawn from a specific analysis which focussed on the variability of SEAL use and interpretation between schools.

### **Contextual details – The case study primary schools**

The focus group and individual interviews were carried out with staff members from three case study primary schools, in a town in Northern England. In order to obtain a maximum variation of case study schools, purposive sampling was performed (Henry 1990). The aim of this strategy was to sample a number of case study schools that varied with regards to size, number of pupils on roll, social class (categorised by pupil eligibility for free school meals), ethnicity, religious character, and duration of SEAL use. A brief description of the three case study schools is offered below.

*St Martin's C of E* This is a small school (120 pupils on roll) drawing pupils from a prosperous area of the town; less than 5% of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Ofsted, in 2008, rated the school as 'outstanding' with regards to the personal development and well-being of its pupils. This school has been implementing SEAL since 2007.

*Red Road* This school is the largest in the town (570 pupils on roll) and is located in an urban area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Almost one third of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Implementing SEAL since 2007, the latest Ofsted report in 2008, rated the pupils' well-being as 'good'.

*The Grove* This larger than average school (427 pupils on roll) is located in an area of social disadvantage, with the number of pupils eligible for free school meals at over 20%. The Grove has been implementing SEAL since its introduction in 2005 and Ofsted, in 2007, rated the school's effectiveness and pupil well-being as 'good'.

The findings reported in this paper have been extracted from a substantial analysis of the disparities in SEAL use and interpretation between schools, and as such the data will be presented according to individual school use.

### **The utilisation of SEAL between schools**

The study, from which the data for this article was drawn, explored a range of issues, highlighting degrees of variability between staff members in their use of the scheme, and illustrating a range of differing appraisals of parents. However, the analysis also uncovered consistencies in the way staff members within individual schools engaged with SEAL in response to their perceptions of the pupils' parents. Consequently, we will now examine each case study school and demonstrate how staff adapted SEAL to complement, compensate for, or counter the parenting practices and values that they perceived to exist in pupils' families.

*St Martin's C of E: Complementing perceptions of 'positive' parenting*

On the whole, staff members at St Martin's believed their pupils' parents to be appropriate role models, who provided a safe and secure environment in which their children were able to develop and acquire the necessary social and emotional skills. Being located in an affluent part of the town, there was an assumption amongst staff that the school didn't have "many behavioural problems" (Jess – TA). As a result, there was the belief that the children's parents and home-life were stable and that the school's main role was to maintain this notion of stability, as two members of staff illustrate in the following extracts:

**Amber (Welfare):** *Our children are not from deprived areas so they all know right from wrong really. We expect the children to behave in school as they would do at home, and we carry that on.*

**Lucy (TA):** *You're an extension of the home,....you are continuing what the parents are already doing.*

SEAL, in this school, was largely aimed at the adult population and was utilised to maintain the approach of the parents. The scheme was employed as a tool which encouraged all adults to be appropriate role models and, as Lucy maintains, to extend what was occurring in the home to school. In order to continue the work that staff perceived the parents to be doing already, SEAL was utilised as a scheme to create a consistent approach to social and

emotional learning amongst staff. This next extract illustrates how the scheme was interpreted at St Martin's:

**Amber (Welfare):** *You follow other members of staff...You watch how they react and then you copy; so all the staff are role models to yourself, not just role models for the children but role models for the staff as well.*

Regular meetings and an implicit understanding that all adults should consistently and appropriately role model behaviour, in order to continue and complement the positive work of the parents, was fundamental in the way SEAL was interpreted and used in this school. The programme's concern with children's social and emotional lives appeared to give legitimacy to interventions in their home experiences, especially the quality of parenting. Where parents were held in high regard by staff there was no conflict between SEAL's aims and values and the culture of the home. Some of the more middle class parents were identified as worthy of support by staff, and sometimes imitation. In these cases, SEAL was mainly seen as a vehicle to help create a consistent approach to social and emotional learning amongst staff and a *continuity* with parenting. Relating to the assumption that 'if only everyone could be middle-class then everything in Britain would be all right' (Evans 2006, p. 11), staff members idealised the parenting practices of this social group and utilised SEAL to not only re-affirm but to continue these practices within the school environment.

*Red Road and The Grove: Compensating for perceptions of 'inadequate' parenting*

The perceptions of parents, held by staff members at St Martin's, were unlike those held by staff at Red Road and The Grove. At these two schools, both of which are located in areas of social disadvantage, staff members felt that many parents were negative influences and did not adequately care for their children. This belief was justified by the consistent view, held by staff at these two schools, that some parents neglected their children not only physically but also socially and emotionally. Below are two quotations which demonstrate this view:

**Abigail (Head teacher):** *Their parenting skills are that they don't have any. They speak to their children inappropriately; they don't feed them appropriately; the houses are not appropriate for children to be in; they are drug abusers, alcohol abusers, prostitutes; they have strangers in their home at all hours of the day and night; parties raging all day and night; don't teach their children manners or social etiquette or how to dress properly, how to eat properly, how to speak to people properly. The list is endless.*

**Bob (Learning mentor):** *It's their parents' social background,...unemployed, drugs, alcohol, abuse, everything...This school is in a deprived area and we see it every day. I mean if there weren't any issues we wouldn't have things like SEAL, would we?*

Consequently, SEAL at both Red Road and The Grove was utilised as one type of social and emotional guidance, and was viewed by staff as a form of care. In order to compensate for notions of parenting at both these schools, the scheme was perceived as a means of providing children with the attention deemed to have been neglected by their parents. Two members of staff had the following to say with regards to this point:

**Lilian (TA):** *SEAL is, for instance, if there was somebody crying or they didn't feel so well because they hadn't had any breakfast,.....as a teaching assistant I'd be the one who goes out to make them some toast and a drink of orange.*

**Edith (Welfare):** *I suppose in that way you are acting like a parent, putting your arm around them and reassuring them that everything is going to be ok.*

The needs of both schools were largely influenced by the perceived inadequacies that were assumed to exist amongst the parents' practices. SEAL, at Red Road and The Grove, compensated for notions of parenting as it helped to develop skills that were assumed to be neglected by the parents.

*Red Road and The Grove: Countering perceptions of 'negative' parenting*

SEAL, at both schools, was also employed to counter certain parental values. Those parents of minority-ethnic origin were deemed by some staff to discourage certain behaviours, such as eye contact and independence, which are valued in schools. This culture clash is well represented in the following staff comment:

**Jane (Teacher):**

*You'll find that with Asian children, when they go to the mosque if they look at the Imam, that's disrespectful, he'll say straight away 'lower your eyes, lower your gaze.'...Even with parents, if children get told off and you look at your parent that's disrespectful, you're supposed to lower your gaze....It's what they've been taught at home and in the mosque,...they aren't encouraged to be independent or forthcoming with their ideas.*

Staff, at these schools, interpreted SEAL as a scheme that could be used to promote values that were discouraged in the homes of some minority-ethnic parents. Indeed it could be said that elements of 'cultural violence' (Galtung, 1990) were apparent in some teachers' comments where they legitimated certain cultural norms of parenting and outlawed others. Some of the minority-ethnic parents fell under further scrutiny as they were deemed, by some, as neglectful of certain aspects of parenthood. There was the belief that children from minority-ethnic backgrounds were a burden to the schools as they were seen to be draining resources. For example Samantha, a teaching assistant, explained how staff "put in a lot of

effort” to compensate for the school’s “big problem” with English as a second language, by “teaching them our manners and everything like that”.

Some minority-ethnic parents, as we have illustrated, were deemed as failing to prepare their children for school and the ‘English’ way of life, something that Michelle (Welfare) felt was caused by minimal parental “input from being young”. In response, many staff members were forthcoming in arguing that the scheme could help to combat such forms of parenting, as the following extract illustrates:

**Researcher:** *What do you feel the purpose of SEAL is?...What’s it trying to achieve do you think?*

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

Samantha elides the category of poor families and those within the Asian community ‘othering’ their parenting practices as non English. Her view of Asian parents is in keeping here with a policy discourse that characterises such parents as deficient. Although ‘ethnic differences in parenting styles...are neither well documented nor understood’ (Stier and Tienda 2007, p. 109), the views of certain members of the sample within the study, as well as



evidence from the literature, illustrate how those from minority-ethnic backgrounds are constructed as lacking when it comes to parenting. As numerous authors contend, it is often these parents who are considered to inhabit the fringes of school, whose views are marginalised, and who are socially excluded (Crozier and Davies 2007; Warin 2009) that become labelled as 'hard to reach'. Although this term was not used explicitly by the staff members in this study, many felt that parents from minority-ethnic backgrounds were lacking as there was an absence of dialogue between home and school, leading to assumptions that these parents didn't "teach the children...like English parents do" (Samantha). This observation is in keeping with a discourse of derision (Ball 1990) concerning minority-ethnic parents where there is a 'prevailing disparaging view amongst many teachers, of (minority-ethnic) parents as failing in their duty' (Crozier and Davies 2007, p. 307). Consequently, and as previous findings have demonstrated (see Crozier 2005; Crozier and Davies 2007; Crozier and Davies 2008; Pyo-Hong and Lise-Halvorsen 2009), minority-ethnic parents were set apart and 'othered' (Paechter 1998) as inadequate, failing and lacking.

Staff members also contested that the scheme could specifically help to combat the parenting practices of those from low socio-economic areas, who, it was felt, often taught and advocated violent and aggressive resolutions to conflict. Two members of staff share their views regarding this point:

**Molly (Welfare):**

*I think all children need to learn how to go about things, because some of our children are never shown how to sort a problem because they have a parent, where if something goes*

*wrong... they go in shouting and jump in with both feet instead of saying 'right now let's sit down and listen.'*

**Stanley (Head teacher):** *A perfect example of poor parenting here is 'dad says I've got to thump him back.'*

These forms of conflict resolution, according to staff, created a population of children who struggled to control their emotions in a non-violent way. In response, SEAL was interpreted as a scheme that could help to undermine and oppose these strategies by promoting alternative ways to deal with conflict and the emotion of anger, as is shown:

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

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

The recent pathological construction of working-class families (Goldson and Jamieson 2002; Jones 2011), according to some, has its roots in government discourse, as a number of researchers, in relation to past and current government policy, have argued that it is often those from low socio-economic areas who are constructed as requiring intervention, support and guidance with regards to the ‘proper’ conduct of their children (Gewirtz 2001; Gillies 2005b; Lister 2006; Walters and Woodward 2007; Jensen 2010). Such judgemental attitudes towards underprivileged parents and children were prominent amongst the views offered by the sample of staff in this study.

Concerns regarding the eating habits of working-class families, particularly children that do not use a dinner table (Argent 2007), were expressed by Joanna (Teacher) who stated that parenting by parents from low socio-economic areas was epitomised by “the usual eating the tea in front of the television and no routine”. Such prejudicial views, according to O’Neill (2005), are a modern day example of contempt for the working-classes as they imply a parenting deficit of those who fail to conform to more middle-class cultural norms. Furthering this point, families from low socio-economic backgrounds were widely accused of not giving their children a “fair start” due to their “poor upbringings” (Lilian – TA). By deeming the upbringing of people with more affluence as the norm, and something to which parents with low socio-economic status should aspire, staff members such as Lilian (TA) and Bethany (Senior management) held unfavourable judgements of parents based entirely on their economic situation and lack of wealth.

Additionally, Stanley (Head teacher) and Bethany (Senior management) maintained that parents from deprived areas were often lacking as they had learned their own parenting skills

from their own inadequate parents; in Bethany's words, they "parent as they were parented". This 'cycle of deprivation' approach (Broadhurst 2009, p. 114) was framed in line with governmental discourse that explains inter-generational transmission of disadvantage in terms of parental deficit, located in the alleged faulty behaviours of the individuals and their families, and which overlooks the societal and structural inequalities that produce and maintain this cycle.

### *Family SEAL and school ethos*

In order to extend the schools' approach to social and emotional learning to the home, with the aim that staff members and parents consistently socialised children, Family SEAL (DfES 2006) was also utilised. There are two main parts to Family SEAL: an introductory workshop to which all parents and carers of children in a year group are invited and encouraged to attend; and a series of seven workshop sessions, which correspond with the seven themes of SEAL, where groups of parents share ideas and discuss the challenges of helping their child develop social, emotional and behavioural skills. This element of the scheme, according to the DfES (2006), was 'designed to make explicit links between the support parents and carers provide their children when they are developing social, emotional and behavioural skills and engaging in school-based work,' and 'is about collaboration and sharing ideas, with recognition and respect for the beliefs and values of the participants,' (p. 5). Two members of senior management, who had carried out the recommended workshops, praised the resources as a way of "getting the parents on board" (Stanley) and providing a strategy for dealing with "our more challenging parents" (Bethany).

In addition to SEAL, the notion of school ethos was also identified as integral in the development of children's social, emotional and behavioural skills. In recent years, policies aimed at SEL have been varied, incorporating emphases on school curriculum, school ethos and a concern with pre-school learning and school readiness. Other than the very obvious curriculum based lessons, such as SEAL and PSHE, staff members in this study identified ethos as essential to SEL. Summer (Assistant Head at St Martin's C of E) maintained that social emotional and behavioural development in her school is "covered through their Christian ethos", whilst Stanley (Head at The Grove) believed the ethos in his school created an environment where the staff were "living, sleeping and breathing" social and emotional learning. Additionally, schools like Red Road identified alternative SEL initiatives, such as Nurture Groups, as being more relevant to them, and contended that specific staff members were utilised to develop children's social emotional and behavioural skills. In relation to this point, Abigail, the school's Head, believed her "learning mentors and behaviour support workers pick up that work". Indeed, pastoral staff members, such as those named above, were identified as integral to children's social, emotional and behavioural development, with some staff members maintaining their work "makes a massive difference" to the pupils' lives (Lilian – TA at The Grove). However, staff members within and between schools placed great importance on SEAL, and identified the scheme as a vehicle to develop children's social, emotional and behavioural skills.

### **Implications and recommendations**

It was apparent that individual schools harnessed the purposes and resources of the SEAL programme to meet their own needs, which incorporated a focus on the parenting of their pupils. A key defining feature of the views expressed by the staff members within the study

was their willingness to emphasise the individual responsibility, and apparent failure, of minority-ethnic and working-class parents. In keeping with the views expressed by researchers interested in past and current governments' demonisation of these groups, many of the staff members failed to acknowledge 'the intergenerational and embedded problems of poverty, social exclusion and inequality which are characteristic' of some parents' lives (Jamieson 2005, p. 181).

Most staff, although not explicitly acknowledging the ideals of new right politics, bought into its ideology by linking the disorderly behaviour of children with poor parenting and problem families. In keeping with this kind of parental deficit discourse, a majority also chose to focus on the perceived individual deficiencies of parents without acknowledging the many structural constraints, like poverty, that make family life and parenting difficult (Drakeford and McCarthy 2000; Goldson and Jamieson 2002; Hill and Wright 2003; Gillies 2005a). Whilst parenting should be 'understood in context; that is housing, neighbourhood, household composition and so forth' (Broadhurst 2009, p. 115), the views expressed by the staff members, at two of the case study schools in particular, show a lack of such contextual understanding. Instead their views illustrate how poor parents and problem families are stigmatised and blamed.

The marginalisation of minority-ethnic and working-class parenting practices, by staff and schools, resulted in the perception that SEAL endorsed certain behaviours and devalued others. In some cases the values, norms, and social and cultural practices advocated by these parents in the home were countered by the schools' use of SEAL. Consequently, the initiative was seen to help empower, authorise and recognise the school's stance whilst de-authorising

the knowledge, values and behaviours of these specific groups. In this sense, SEAL may be deemed as a scheme ‘defined by representatives of the dominant group...to exclude or de-authorise the knowledge and experience of the dominated groups’ (Connell 1994, p. 130). ‘Historically, white, middle-class identity has, in the UK, been an idealised one held up for its ‘others’, the working-classes to aspire to’ (Reay 2008, p. 87), with white ‘middle-classness’ being regarded as the standard of class normativity (Bourdieu 1984; Evans 2006; Reay 2008). Subsequently, education, which has the potential to broker the differences between class groups, is heavily biased in favour of the middle-classes, resulting in minority-ethnic and working-class ideals ‘being eclipsed and forced into the background of educated life’ (Evans 2006, p. 11). As SEAL has been seen to endorse middle-class behaviours it may be labelled as another tool to ‘other’ the practices of those people who are more socially disadvantaged and marginalised.

Researchers of home-school relationships contend that ‘schools communicate superior attitudes to parents which maintain the barriers between home and school’ (Crozier 1997 p. 327). In order to allow the more socially disadvantaged groups to have a voice in their children’s schooling it is necessary to approach curriculum making and pedagogy ‘from the point of view of the least advantaged, not from the standpoint of what is currently authorised’ (Connell 1994, p. 130).

Connell implies a radical rethink of educational policy on the interface between schools and the communities they serve. A solution is for schools to operationalise an ideal of ‘mutual reach’, characterised by Warin (2009, p. 140) as ‘a more democratic and cooperative exchange between parents and teachers’. Such an exchange would also prevent teachers from

stereotyping parents, a tendency that is clearly evident in the data we have presented. Constraints to the realisation of this more democratic form of exchange lie in the increasing emphasis of educational policy on a narrowly defined academic performance, which allows little time for such strategies. This educational emphasis also continues to position the educational professional as expert and consequently perpetuates a policy blindness to the idea that professional educators can learn from parents.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst the study described here set out to explore how primary school staff were making sense of SEAL, an unanticipated finding was the prevalence, and often the strength, of staff judgments about the quality of parenting practiced in the homes of their pupils. The interpretation and use of SEAL was influenced by staff perceptions about parental ability to develop the social, emotional and behavioural skills that staff deemed appropriate. In schools where parents' ability in this area was positively appraised, the scheme was used to complement home practices whilst in schools where parents were negatively appraised, SEAL was used to counter parents' endeavours. The scheme was also used to compensate for certain inadequacies that were judged to be taking place in the home.

Staff expertise on the children's family and community cultures, their knowledge about, and understanding of, the circumstances of children's daily home lives, were sadly lacking in the data. This was especially the case when children's lives were unfamiliar. Staff members at schools located in areas of social deprivation often seemed unable to recognise the social and economic hardship faced by these parents. Instead, staff chose to focus on the individual



parents, their responsibilities and perceived failures. Blame was fundamentally attributed to the parents whilst the socio-economic climate, and indeed the role of the government in creating the hardship in which parents bring up their children, were overlooked.

School staff interpreted and manipulated SEAL as a mechanism to position their own roles to compensate for, and/or counter the practices of parents, through a construction of parental deficiencies, particularly in those families that were part of the Asian community and families living with economic deprivation and other social disadvantages. In this respect staff discussion of SEAL acted as a catalyst for blaming some parents for poor parenting. This finding indicates a need for school staff to engage in more empathic relationships with parents in a spirit of mutual understanding, and for policy to recognise that parental practices are not just shaped through parents' individual choices but through the economic, social and cultural circumstances of their lives.

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