Primary social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) small group interventions: a qualitative study of factors affecting implementation and the role of Local Authority support

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The aims of the current study were to examine the factors affecting implementation of social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) small group interventions in primary schools and to explore the role of support from Local Authorities (LAs) in the implementation process. Telephone interviews were conducted with lead SEAL staff in 12 LAs across England as part of a larger national evaluation of this educational initiative. Data were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis. Subsequently, a tentative model was developed to document the relationship between the nature of support provided by LAs (e.g. training events, developing/providing additional materials), factors affecting implementation at school level (e.g. school readiness, the profile of SEAL) and perceived barriers to success (e.g. misconceptions about the purpose of small group interventions). These findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature on the implementation of social-emotional initiatives and interventions in education

Keywords: SEAL   primary school   small group intervention   Local educational authorities

Introduction

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

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than 60% of primary schools across England. SEAL is designed to promote five key social and emotional skills – empathy, social skills, self-awareness, managing feelings, and motivation. This is meant to be achieved through the use of a whole school approach to create a climate/ethos that promotes these skills, through direct teaching of said skills, through the use of learning and teaching approaches that support the development of skills (and, indeed, reflect the skills themselves), and via continuing professional development for school staff.

SEAL is delivered in three 'waves of intervention' (Figure 1). The first wave of SEAL delivery centres on whole-school development work designed to create the ethos and climate within which social and emotional skills can be most effectively promoted. Wave 2 of SEAL is the focus of this article. This element of the programme involves short, targeted small group interventions for children who are thought to require additional support to develop their social and emotional skills (DfES 2006). The purposes of these brief, early interventions include helping children by:

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

Children are selected to participate in SEAL small group work if school staff feel that they have not benefited from the work carried out at Wave 1. Our recent qualitative analysis of five primary SEAL schools (Humphrey et al. 2009) revealed that children selected for small group interventions experienced a range of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some of these were transient in nature (for example, a child who had moved into a class and was struggling to settle and make friends), whereas others were more enduring (for example, a child with conduct problems who was considered a future risk for exclusion). Importantly, each small group intervention also contained children considered to be role models for the social and emotional skills that were being taught. The interventions themselves cover seven themes (e.g. Getting on and Falling Out, Changes) that are each designed to promote a combination of the five skills outlined above. Our quantitative analysis of the impact of these interventions (Humphrey et al, in press; Humphrey et al, under review) revealed that broadly speaking

they had a positive effect on children, but that the amount of change seen was relatively small (perhaps to be expected, since the interventions themselves are very brief) and did not always generalise well beyond the school setting.

The final wave of the SEAL programme involves one-to-one intervention with children who have not benefitted from the whole school and small group provision in a given school. This may include children at risk of or experiencing mental health issues, and is currently being implemented as the Targeted Mental Health in Schools programme (TaMHS – Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008). No data is currently available on the impact of this Wave 3 work as the evaluation is ongoing.
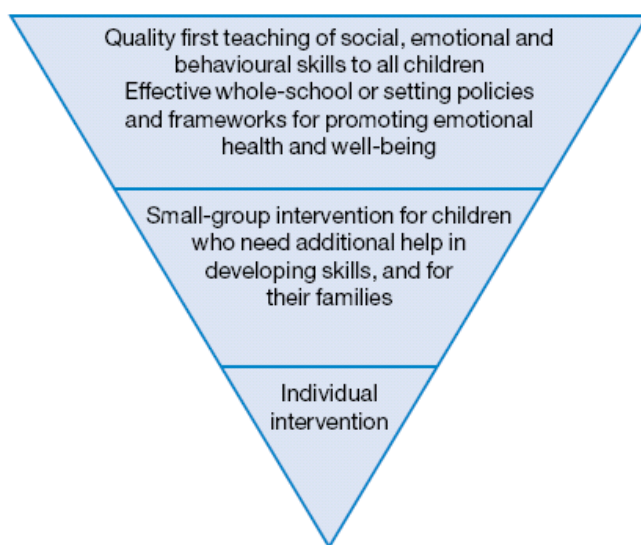

Quality first teaching of social, emotional and behavioural skills to all children
Effective whole-school or setting policies and frameworks for promoting emotional health and well-being

Small-group intervention for children who need additional help in developing skills, and for their families

Individual intervention

Figure 1. 3-wave model of SEAL delivery (taken from Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

In early 2007 the authors were commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to conduct a national evaluation of primary SEAL small group interventions. The main aim of the evaluation was to *assess the impact of small group interventions on children requiring more support in developing their social and emotional skills*. Our secondary aim was to *gather information on successful implementation of small group interventions*. The study was carried out in three distinct phases. The first phase – which is the focus of this article - comprised interviews with SEAL leads in 12 LAs across England. The second phase involved a quantitative evaluation of the impact of SEAL small group interventions, involving 624 pupils in 37 primary schools – and is reported in two forthcoming articles (Humphrey *et al*, in press; Humphrey et al, under review). The third phase took place at the same time as the second phase and involved case studies of five LA-nominated lead practice schools in

the north-west of England – reported in Humphrey et al. (2009) and Lendrum et al. (2009).

Implementation of social-emotional interventions in schools

To date, empirical research on targeted social-emotional interventions has focused primarily on quantifiable outcomes (see Shucksmith et al. 2007, for a recent review). Researchers have been primarily interested in whether *Intervention A* leads to (for example) reductions in problem behaviours and/or increases in social skills. This kind of research is very important in establishing the scientific credibility of a given intervention, but can also be useful in helping educators make decisions about which interventions are likely to lead to desirable outcomes (for example, the recently implemented Targeted Mental Health in Schools programme provides extensive guidance on different interventions drawn from several systematic reviews – DCSF 2008). However, such research rarely provides any kind of indication about what factors affect implementation processes in school. This is a particularly crucial consideration for primary SEAL small group interventions, which are implemented in real-life settings by school staff (as opposed to the 'efficacy' trials of interventions delivered by trained psychologists under ideal conditions so often reported in the literature – Shucksmith et al. 2007). Furthermore, the role of external agencies – such as LA staff – in supporting the implementation of interventions has not been clearly documented in the literature.

Although the literature on implementation of targeted social-emotional interventions is somewhat light, there may be much we can learn from work that has been done around universal approaches (e.g. school-wide initiatives that do not target children in need of additional support). Perhaps the most influential model in this area is that proposed by Greenberg and colleagues (2005), who proposed four different levels of factors affecting the quality of implementation - classroom, school, district (LA) and community. Greenberg et al. (2005) also identified potential barriers to successful implementation in the five areas of pre-planning, implementation support system, implementation environment, implementer factors and program characteristics.

This basic framework for examining the implementation of universal social-emotional programmes has received support from other researchers working in the field. Thus, we know that schools that are successful in 'scaling up' social-emotional programmes typically benefit from a supportive and committed leadership team and a high degree of implementation by teachers at classroom level (Kam, Greenberg and Walls 2003). This is reflected to a certain extent in UK-based studies (e.g. Kelly et al. 2004; Perry, Lennie and Humphrey 2008). Difficulties encountered in implementation

include the perpetuation of a narrow and decontextualised 'programmes and packages perspective', poor management of resources (e.g. time, staff), and insufficient attention to the qualities of the staff who carry out different aspects of implementation (Elias et al. 2003). Alongside these issues, reviews of the literature have enabled the identification of key 'quality indicators' for social-emotional programmes – relating to programme design (e.g. clarity of rationale, promotion of effective teaching strategies), programme co-ordination (e.g. school-wide co-ordination, partnerships with families and the wider community), educator preparation and support (e.g. formal training for staff), and programme evaluation (e.g. collection of evidence relating to implementation and impact) (Kam, Greenberg and Walls 2003). However, whilst the knowledge base of US literature is reasonably well established (see, for example, the Positive Behavoural Intervention Support website – www.pbis.org), there is very little literature from the UK.

Methodology

The current study provided an opportunity to empirically document the role of LA support and factors affecting implementation of targeted social-emotional interventions – both issues that have not been addressed in the literature. Beyond this, we saw a chance to examine the extent to which the key factors identified by Greenberg and colleagues (see above) in relation to universal approaches adequately covered issues raised about targeted interventions. In this vein, our research questions were:

1. How do LA staff support schools in implementing primary SEAL small group interventions?
2. What factors affect the implementation of these interventions at school level?
3. What are the perceived barriers to successful implementation?

A qualitative design was adopted based on a constructivist paradigm – namely that there are multiple, socially constructed realities regarding the phenomenon in question (Guba and Lincoln 2000). We felt that the research questions for the study could not be fully explored within a quantitative paradigm – especially given the emphasis on implementation – which by definition refers to processes rather than outcomes. Qualitative methods are, by their nature, concerned with exploring the perspectives of participants and examining their experiences in the contexts in which they occur (Smith 2003). Within this paradigm, we adopted semi-structured telephone interviews as our method of data collection.

In the summer of 2007 we approached 12 LAs across England to request interviews regarding the support they were providing for implementation of primary SEAL small group interventions. Nine LAs were chosen based upon the knowledge and professional contacts of the research team, with the remaining three being recommended by the DCSF. All LAs were chosen because there was known to be a sufficiently high level of SEAL work going on in their primary schools.

The 12 LAs were spread across England, including the following regions – the North-West (5), Yorkshire and the Humber (3), Greater London (1), the South-West (1), the South East (1) and the North East (1). The LAs varied greatly in size, with the smallest serving just over 40 nursery and primary schools and the largest serving over 300. The job titles, roles and responsibilities of each interviewee varied greatly across LAs. For instance, in some LAs the 'SEAL lead' was an advisory teacher based in a Behaviour and Attendance team. In one LA our interviewee was an educational psychologist with particular expertise in emotional literacy. In yet another, the interviewee was a consultant working as part of a support team for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This kind of variation reflects the different organisational compositions of LAs across England, and also the way in which SEAL is construed as fitting within or around existing initiatives at LA level.

Semi-structured interviews are amongst the most widely used data collection methods in educational and psychological research (Banister 1994; Hopf 2004). Our interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was developed by the research team before being submitted to our project steering group at DCSF for feedback. Revisions were then made before the 12 interviews took place. All interviews were conducted by telephone for the convenience of participants and because of their geographical spread.

We adopted a pragmatic, content-analysis driven approach (Mayring 2004) to our analysis of interview data. Data was initially transcribed before being anonymised to protect the anonymity of participants. It was then uploaded into NVivo 7, a software package designed specifically for qualitative analysis. Initial categories were created to mirror our research questions. Once data from each interview had been transferred to relevant superordinate categories, a more refined analysis took place in which data within these categories was placed into progressively more discrete sub-ordinate themes.

In the interests of clarity, each theme discussed below begins with a brief breakdown of the number of *references* (e.g. how many 'excerpts' of data were coded in the theme), and *LAs* (e.g. how many of the 12 LAs these references came from) apply to each. This is not intended to provide a quantitative indicator of the relevance of a particular theme, but rather to increase the transparency of

our analytical procedure, and to increase the *credibility* and *validity* of our findings through demonstration of thorough triangulation.

Findings

The act of coding and analysing the 12 interview transcripts led to the development of a tentative model for describing factors affecting the implementation of primary SEAL small group interventions and the role of LA support. This can be seen in Figure 2:
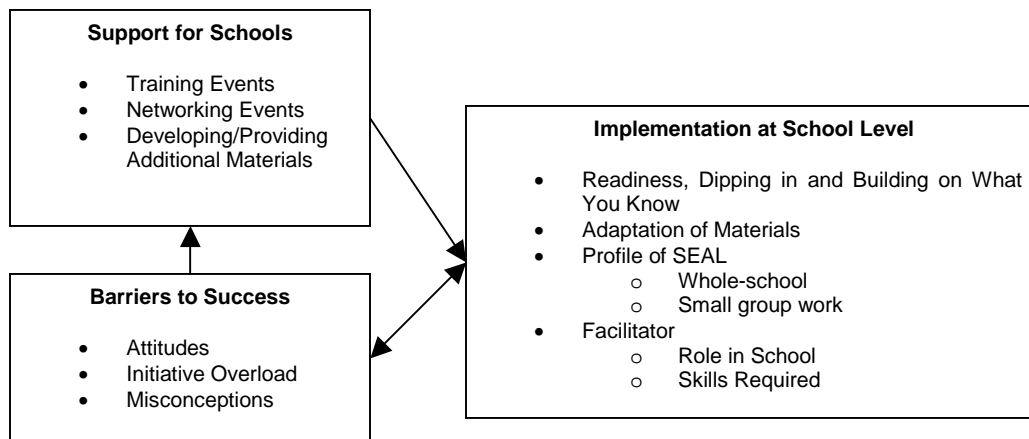

Figure 2. Model of LA support and factors affecting implementation of primary SEAL small group work

A. Support for Schools

LA interviewees spoke in broad terms about the support they provided for schools who were implementing (or about to implement) primary SEAL small group interventions. The nature and intensity of support provided varied, but typically consisted of one or more of the following:

"Training Events" (23 references in 11 LAs)

Described variously as 'workshops', 'training sessions', et cetera, these events typically lasted half a day to a day and involved providing school staff with an introduction to the small group interventions, including such issues as selecting appropriate children, adapting materials, and assessment. In some LAs this training would be provided as a 'one off' event, but in others more regular support was provided:

LA3: We put a series of half days on… centred on looking at teaching assistants and mentors and classroom teachers, to show them how it would fit alongside the ordinary rolling out programme of SEAL in the classroom.

Most of the interviewee responses about training referred to the content (e.g. how to select groups) and audience (e.g. who attended the training sessions). However, one interviewee in particular was keen to stress that the *process* was just as crucial a part of the training:

LA4: I would try to replicate the kind of experience that you are wanting the children to have…. so I try to involve them in a thoroughly enriching social and emotional experience.

In most LAs the training was delivered centrally. However, some LAs the training model extended to LA staff visiting schools and modelling work with groups of children for school staff to observe:

LA11: The mentors on my team have been developing the small group work resources in schools, so they are delivering small group work alongside school based staff. They are giving within school training… so they [school staff] are observing they are part of the group or we will do the planning with the school based member and we might do one session, they will do the next one, and we will come back in and help with the third one.

This 'coaching' work was reported rather less frequently than more standard approaches to training though – presumably because the latter is easier and more cost-efficient to organise.

"Network Events" (15 references in 10 LAs)

In addition to the training events provided by LAs, most interviewees spoke of additional support mechanisms – usually in the form of inter-school networks (or 'clusters') organised and facilitated by the LA. The networks would meet periodically to share ideas, experiences and practice, and appeared to serve the function not only of being a way for schools to learn from one another, but also to implicitly support one another in their attempts to successfully implement the small group interventions:

LA3: We run network meetings twice a year we work on a double district basis so we do three in the autumn term and then three in the summer or late spring term.

Our impression was that most of these networks were actually set up as part of the LA support for schools when they originally began to implement SEAL (at Wave 1 – see Figure 1), but that some

had evolved to incorporate discussion of small group interventions when schools within a given network were at that stage of implementation. As such, the membership in each network also evolved with time (e.g. teaching assistants and learning mentors were much more likely to attend at this stage, whereas at Wave 1 implementation a member of senior management from a given school may have been more likely to attend).

A smaller number of LAs also provided additional support in terms of financial aid (e.g. extra money that could be used to buy resources or staff time for use in the small group interventions) or further opportunities for more intensive training and consultation with LA staff:

> LA1: What happens is schools make a bid for a six week block of support for a child, so we have made schools aware that the team are trained and this could be delivered as part of a child's intervention. They work at a level that what we call 'primary preventative', which is where the child doesn't have identified behavioural special needs.

"Developing/Providing Additional Materials" (six references in six LAs)

Although the bulk of the support provided for schools took the form of training events and inter-school networks, some LAs had also begun to experiment with the development (or purchasing) of additional materials to provide schools with a greater range of options in their implementation of SEAL small group interventions.

> LA11: We are in the process of getting quite a lot of stuff ready for our SEAL website

> LA 4 We have lesson plans that we have written and differentiated and we have got lots and lots of additional materials to complement the SEAL materials… we have got in our office and they get an invitation to come and borrow the materials. They can keep them up to half a term and we also offer them training showing how they can use it. We can give them examples of how to use the materials.

However, despite these interesting examples, the majority of LAs did not appear to be providing support of this nature:

> LA9: At the LA we haven't done anything else

B. Implementation at School Level

"Readiness, 'Dipping In' and Building on What You Know" (16 references in eight LAs)

When discussing the process of small group interventions implementation at both LA (in terms of preparation of training and resources) and school (in terms of actually setting up and running small group interventions) levels, interviewees spoke about common factors that they had observed. In particular, there was a clear notion of schools needing to be 'ready' to begin implementation:

LA1: Some are ready and see it as the next step… some of those schools that even two or three years into that [SEAL] are still not ready.

LA8: We are still early days I think with the majority of our primary schools I would say.

Some other schools, rather than having everything ready and set up, adapted what they were already doing in terms approaches to social and emotional learning and went back to the relevant SEAL resources in order to 'dip in' and use it appropriately:

LA9: To be honest we haven't got a lot of them using the materials at the moment … where they have had a go at them they dipped their toes in and they have identified a group of pupils and a TAs has then worked with them through the materials, so it has been at that sort of very straightforward level.

Similarly, there was also the notion of small group interventions as a natural evolution of existing work in schools:

LA2: Because of the work of the primary behaviour support service so many of our schools felt they were pretty close to the principles anyway and they tacked it onto to where the gaps were … It depends on the starting point - some schools would say 'well we were doing this anyway' - they put a name on it and it has given us one or two more ideas but really we were pretty good at this sort of stuff anyway.

It appears that this 'synthesis' of the small group model with existing work is an explicit implementation tactic being encouraged by at least some LAs:

LA8: We always encourage all the schools to have a look at what they [are] already doing and how that can be included and to be honest some schools will say 'well, we are doing all this.

"Adaptation of Materials" (25 references in 9 LAs)

The interviews with the LAs provided evidence that the national materials were being adapted by both LAs and by schools themselves. Different levels of adaptation were identified: a) materials are

adapted at LA level and b) materials adapted at school level. At the LA level, some interviewees acknowledged that they had stayed close to the SEAL guidance materials rather than adapting or generating anything new. Other LAs engaged in more extensive adaptation of materials, with some providing additional, unique resources:

LA11: We made additional resources and developed the ideas basically.

LA12: Yes we just put together anything we think is useful.

This adaptation may be an ongoing rather than a one-off process:

LA11: Probably like any other training materials that we get sent you have to do it a few times before you beginning to sort of adapt it a little bit more, do it yourself and, you know, having to workout timings and things and which bits that you feel comfortable with and you don't feel comfortable with etcetera.

As far as the use of materials by the schools themselves is concerned, several LA interviewees indicated that schools were generally 'faithful' to the DCSF guidance:

LA4: They are following this structure very well and using the materials very well.

LA12: I would say the schools that are implementing it well think of it [guidance] as bit of a bible really.

However, one LA interviewee explained that adapting the small group materials in order to meet a given school's needs was strongly encouraged:

LA7: They are almost like 'too bound' by the guidance and we say 'hang on you don't have to do it like that'. So we try to think about what you know and what you think will be best … just not stick so ridgely to the script really.

"Profile of SEAL – Whole School (two references in two LAs) and Small Group Interventions" (three references in three LAs)

Only two LAs reported on the profile that SEAL has at whole school level. Between the two, there was evidence that the whole school SEAL profile depends on both the LA and the individual school itself. In LA 12, the interviewee described the role of the LA in raising the SEAL profile in

schools. The interviewee explained how, initially, the push for SEAL at LA level was perceived by the schools as threatening. The LA worked hard to remove this misconception, subsequently helping to raise the profile of SEAL within some schools. LA 11 on the other hand, presented the profile of SEAL in different schools as following a developmental pattern from year to year:

LA11: Again its very, very different, its very different I would say at the moment most of our schools this year have been going thorough having a go, you know, they have been having a go they have been looking at it as staff team. A lot of schools are focusing much more towards next year in September that they will be doing it they will be going through the themes

The interviewee stressed that this however varied from school to school and it is very much influenced by whether the head-teacher has been convinced and sees it as a priority, whether this has 'won the heart and mind of the Headteacher', since this is the person 'who is driving it' (LA 11).

As far as the SEAL small group interventions were concerned, similarly to LA 11 (see above), the interviewee in LA 7 suggested that this varied from school to school and depended very much on the individual head-teacher:

LA7: In some schools it is given a very high profile, [in] other schools it is mixed I think … I think the Head is the key driver if the Head sees it as something that he/she wants to prioritise it has got very high status.

In LA5 there was evidence of a push for the profile of SEAL small group interventions comparable to that of literacy or numeracy small group work:

LA5: A high profile, as we have said, when people have said, you know, 'how are we going to fit this in', well we have said 'well do you have groups with kids who are struggling or with kids who can't read', 'yes?', 'no problem'. Trying to make sure it is seen at that level.

Intervention Facilitator: Role in School (eight references in seven LAs) and Skills Required (13 references in 10 LAs)

The role in school of the small group facilitator was almost exclusively a teaching assistant or learning mentor:

LA5: Tends to be a learning mentor where there is one sometimes it is a teaching colleague very often a teaching assistant or a higher level teaching assistant directly involved hands on.

LA8: Often the people who are running small group work are TAs it is very rarely a class teacher or anyone in senior management.

However, one LA interviewee felt very strongly that the 'teaching assistant as facilitator' model was actually rather inappropriate, as it was based upon a misconception of the purpose of SEAL small group interventions:

LA4: I felt this is me as the trainer I felt that they didn't send the right people… that was my feeling that some of the people they sent hadn't any knowledge of SEAL - they were the TA working in the classroom who didn't understand the planning and processing of what we were actually doing. So if you are not a teacher it doesn't come through the ether what you are supposed to be doing… so that's the problem I felt… not in every case, but in many cases they sent a TA believing that the small group work would have to be a special needs group.

Overall however, there was a general consensus that most nominated teaching assistants possessed the requisite skills to be effective facilitators. Five general areas of personal and inter-personal skills and knowledge were identified as being key: a) knowledge of SEAL principles, b) knowledge of child development, c) have or being able to establish good relationships with the children, d) being emotionally literate, and e) being able to work with other professionals within the school, agencies and parents.

(a) Knowledge and understanding of SEAL principles

LA11: They are they have got to have a good understanding of what SEAL is about.

LA12: They have got to have a very good understanding of the whole school elements of SEAL, and to understand how SEAL is being embedded within that school and that it needs to come on the back of that rather than to be down at the same time as the initial implementation.

b) Basic knowledge of child development

LA1: Somebody that understands something about child development and certainly social and emotional development.

LA3: But they have got to have a good understanding on why children behave in the way they do.

c) Having or being able to establish good relationships with the children

LA5: I think the first thing they need is a good relationship with those kids they need to know who they are.

LA7: Some successful experience of interaction with children who have difficulty in these areas really.

d) Being emotionally literate

LA4: They have got to be skilled, good listeners and they have got to be responsive to the different things that children say in a kind of controlled and positive way rather than you know to be phased by what children say.

LA2: Being empathetic, being non-judgmental with families.

e) Being able to work effectively with other stakeholders

LA11: They have got to have a good connection with the class teacher so they know what is going on in the class so they know what they can build on for the children who are coming out. I think for us that is the really important key for the small group work is that communication between the class teacher and the person running the group.

LA2: Being prepared to work in a multi-agency way with different types of school staff and with families and with children.

LA7: Somebody who perhaps has got the ability to talk to parents. Somebody from the work they are doing with these children to then be able to feed back to the teaching staff about what is happening so its not isolation.

C. Barriers to Success

Discussions about barriers to success relating to primary SEAL small group interventions focused around three issues: a) attitudes to SEAL, b) initiative overload and c) misconceptions about the nature and purpose of small group interventions

"Attitudes to SEAL" (10 references in seven LAs)

Several LA interviewees suggested that cynicism about SEAL and a subsequent reluctance to engage in small group interventions was a critical factor across many schools:

LA4: I don't think there are enough people who understand the value of teaching in small groups with the kind of work that you do with social and emotional content - they have not got the angle on it. They don't realise how valuable it is.

LA10: I think what has happened is you as with all other schools you got some people really behind it and those who are a bit more cynical for whatever reason.

LA3: I know in meetings you mention SEAL and you can feel people rolling their eyes.

The various comments reflect attitudes of either staff or management in schools, or both. However, it appears that some of these attitudes and perceptions are in the process of changing:

LA8: I think some of them have been very surprised and they are on a journey of changing their beliefs.

"Initiative Overload" (five references in four LAs)

Several LAs voiced concerns about the 'initiative overload' that faces primary schools. The sheer number of strategies, initiatives, programmes and agendas introduced in recent years has meant that it has been difficult to find space and time to take on small group interventions:

LA10: Time is so pressured from all the other agendas from DfES.

LA5: People have said, you know, 'how are we going to fit this in.

LA6: One or two staff have voiced concerns about fitting it in and we have got a curriculum that is very full already - how do we fit that in?

"Misconceptions About Small Group Interventions" (eight references in five LAs)

A final key barrier to successful implementation of primary SEAL small group interventions related to 'misconceptions' about the nature and purpose of the intervention model. A common strand here was the notion of which children the group work was intended to help – with many schools believing that it was simply a withdrawal group for 'naughty' children, with no perceived benefit for others:

LA4: When they realise that it is not just a Special Educational Needs group, which is what they are thinking it would be, because I take that as being you know you are never going to help children skill up if you don't give children with skills the opportunity to work alongside.

LA8: One of the biggest things we have found to over come with schools is how can you justify taking so-called, excuse me, "normal children" out of lessons to be part of that and letting them [know] actually all children benefit, and you know it can be for all.

LA9: I think they identified the wrong children.

Discussion

This exploratory study yielded a number of findings. Firstly, in terms of support for small group work implementation, our interviews indicated that LA staff typically provide a combination of one-off events (e.g. training) alongside ongoing assistance (e.g. network events, additional materials). The descriptions provided by our interviewees suggested that this support is relatively 'light touch' in nature. In terms of factors affecting implementation at school level, common themes that emerged included the importance of existing foundations for social-emotional learning and the profile of SEAL (a finding that resonates with case study work at the school level – Humphrey et al. 2009, and other literature – Mosley and Niwano 2007), the need to adapt intervention materials to fit school context, and the key skills required for effective facilitation of small group work (which are given further consideration, with hypothetical examples, in Lendrum et al. 2009). Finally, barriers to effective implementation included negative or ambivalent attitudes to SEAL and/or social-emotional learning more generally, feeling overwhelmed by educational initiatives, and misconceptions about the purpose of small group interventions.

The nature and level of support provided for schools by LAs makes for interesting reading in light of Greenberg et al.'s (2005) influential work on implementation. One key recommendation from the Greenberg review is that: "implementers must receive adequate training so that they are knowledgeable and confident in their skills" (p.3). As indicated above, the support and training described by our respondents appeared to be somewhat light and variable between different LAs. Our case-study research with schools in this project vindicated these inferences, with teachers talking about having been "left to your own devices" (Humphrey *et al*. 2008, p.74) following brief training events. A key recommendation for the future development of primary SEAL is therefore the formalisation of training procedures for SEAL small group work and an increase in the level of support LAs are able to offer schools. If this happens, one might feasibly expect better outcomes for pupils involved in the

interventions. This formalisation could include a standardised training and support programme offered nationwide – as is the case with several US-based programmes (such as Second Step – Committee for Children 2009). Nominated small group facilitators from schools could follow a training programme that is accredited by a higher education institution and leads to an academic award (such as an undergraduate or postgraduate certificate). Such an approach may serve to raise the profile of primary SEAL small group work even further in schools. This kind of development would also be in line with recent governmental efforts to develop higher professional standards amongst school staff in England through increasing opportunities for continuing professional development in specialist areas (for example, the National Personal, Social and Health Education programme funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families).

Our findings relating to factors affecting implementation at school-level found further support for Greenberg et al.'s (2005) model. Two issues are of primary interest here. Firstly, our respondents reported the need to adapt materials to fit school context. This finding was supported by small group facilitators in our case study schools, who reported that they interpreted the intervention materials flexibly (Humphrey *et al.* 2008). However, this raises concerns about the possible impact this kind of adaptation may have on intervention outcomes. Fidelity to intervention protocols is a key element of Greenberg et al.'s (ibid) recommended model of implementation, and indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated that lack of fidelity can lead to poorer outcomes for participants. For instance, in Kam, Greenberg and Walls' (2003) study of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Curriculum, intervention effects were only seen in schools where a high degree of teacher implementation was in evidence. Likewise, Biggs *et al.'s* (2008) study of the Creating a Positive School Learning Environment programme clearly demonstrated that a greater level of adherence to intervention guidance was linked to more positive outcomes. In light of such evidence, we recommend that further clarification is needed "to identify the specific elements of evidence-based programs that are essential to program success and those elements that may be modified while remaining true to the intended purpose or concept underlying the model" (Greenberg et al. 2005, p.2).

The second issue relating to school-level implementation factors that warrants discussion here is the skills and experience required to be an effective intervention facilitator. The range of attributes reported by our respondents corresponds directly with key recent literature in this area. For instance, Mosley and Niwano (2007) suggest that effective facilitators of 'circles of support' (an approach which is very similar to SEAL small group work) need to be enthusiastic, emotionally warm, empathic, and

work well with other key staff. Likewise, Westergaard (2009) suggests that one of the key skills to facilitate personal learning and development in group situations is empathy. Our recommendation, therefore, is that schools planning to implement SEAL small group work need to carefully profile possible facilitator candidates against the attributes described in this paper to ensure that the right person is chosen. The evidence we received from one LA (see 'Intervention Facilitator: Role in School') suggested that this kind of process was not always occurring – again, this has implications for the likelihood of positive outcomes for participants.

Our final finding – relating to barriers to effective implementation – again resonates with the broader social-emotional learning literature. In particular, cynicism among sections of staff is a widely reported challenge, although research suggests that this need not impinge upon positive outcomes. Indeed, in considering the role of staff motivation in anti-violence programmes, Mihalic *et al.* (2004) noted that, "many successful classes were taught by teachers who stated that they did not want to teach the curriculum" (p.5). Perhaps more noteworthy is the finding relating to misconceptions about small group interventions. Some of our respondents indicated that schools used the small group interventions simply as a withdrawal group for children with special educational needs, particularly in relation to challenging behaviour. Our case study research confirmed this, with some children included in small group work who were clearly in need of more intensive, 1:1 support (Humphrey *et al*. 2008). Even though it is a targeted approach, SEAL small group work has been designed from the outset to be a preventive rather than reactive approach – thus, appropriate participants are those children deemed to need a little extra support or who are showing signs of potential future difficulties, rather than those already identified as having emotional and behavioural problems. Selecting children whose needs are too complex for such a low-intensity intervention could set a dangerous precedent, with problematic outcomes. For instance, Dishion, McCord and Poulin (1999) reported that grouping children with behaviour problems during interventions created 'deviancy training' and actually increased problem behaviour.

As with any empirical study, our research suffered from a number of limitations that may have influenced our findings. Firstly, as outlined in the method section, our interviewees were a select group, chosen either because one of the authors had professional contact with them or because they were recommended by the DCSF. This process does, of course, bias our sample and it may well be the case that the responses given by interviewees were therefore not representative of all LAs (especially given that we were only in a position to interview 12 people). Furthermore, it may be that interviewees

responded in a particular way because they know that the study was funded by the DCSF (for instance, they may have been less disposed to criticise SEAL as it is a DCSF initiative). Finally, qualitative research is necessarily subjective and as a result our interpretations may be different from others.

However, it is also important to note that much of our findings discussed above resonate strongly with the issues and themes from the US literature on implementation.

In conclusion, this exploratory study uncovered a number of key themes relating to the role of LA support and factors affecting the implementation of a targeted social-emotional intervention programme (SEAL small group work). In the main these findings resonated strongly with the existing literature on the implementation of universal approaches – in particular, Greenberg et al. (2005). Whilst we were only able to draw upon a relatively small sample of respondents (N=12), our findings were given further validation by data from other sources, such as schools, reported elsewhere (see Humphrey et al. 2009).

We therefore feel confident that this data is generally representative of the current state of social-emotional education in England.

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