

A Short Critique of SEAL and a Response to Suzy Horton

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[I should disclaimer the paper by stating that as I attempted to research SEAL and what it was about, there was great difficulty in trying to maneuver around the website which hosts information about SEAL. Thus my understanding of SEAL is generally basic and if I have misrepresented SEAL in any way, I apologize. JN]

The aim of the SEAL program is to foster the development of ‘the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools’.¹ It encourages students (and teachers!) to become more aware of the different responses they have available to them in dealing with situations by understanding social, emotional and psychological aspects of themselves and those around them better in order to build a positive and effective learning environment within schools. On the outset, the SEAL program seems to be a positive program, and one could hardly fault any program which aims to develop individuals socially and emotionally. However, being careful to not fall under the spell of its persuasive language, there are a few issues those who either created the program or those who implement it may want to consider.

For some teachers, SEAL seems to be a formulization of what they as teachers already do: assist students to relate to themselves, their education and to others in a meaningful and productive way. Such formulization can allow for broader access of such emotional and social ‘skills’, that is, to students who may not seek out support from teachers and other school staff, or those students who end up ‘under the radar’. On the other hand, the risk in doing so is that emotional and social aspects (of learning) can become prescriptive and concepts such as self awareness and empathy can become rarefied, losing their richer and fuller value and being contextualized purely within relation to schooling and its curriculum. Furthermore, the complexity of interaction with one’s self and with others is in danger of becoming overly simplified, and these relations can seem as though they are a one-to-one relation as the ability to categorize behaviour, emotions, attitudes etc. is made to be crucial in being able to review, assess and thus manage such emotional and social ‘skills’.

Secondly, within SEAL, students learn ‘skills’ such as emotional sensitivity and empathy, and to gain the ‘ability to manage their own behaviour’² in that they:

manage strong and uncomfortable emotions (anger and frustration), and become more resilient, which helps them rise to the challenges of the learning process and stick at it if things get tough ... [and] learn to feel good about themselves, which reduces the likelihood of disruptive behaviour and increases capacity for independent learning.³

Underlying the questions of how good does one need to feel to be considered they are feeling good about themselves, how is one to be deemed as self aware or knowledgeable versus one who is not; how much resilience counts towards being considered 'resilient' etc.; is the idea that there is indeed an *appropriate* level of behaviour, attitude and skill etc. to strive towards? In learning to manage their behaviour or to relate to themselves and understand their motivations or to empathize with others, SEAL implies (as well as states explicitly) there are appropriate ways and levels to manifest such behaviours and attitudes.⁴ SEAL then works within certain assumed value systems and social norms. However, what counts as appropriate and who decides this are left unsaid. The implication to this is that a 'hidden agenda' to integrate those who are deemed on the fringe into the dominating specific norms of a specific culture and society can end up seeping into the teachings, becoming a power play between different social and cultural values and norms.

To be clear, I am aware of the difference between something which is genuinely controversial versus actions, behaviour and attitudes which is clearly ruled out within the state one lives and works within.⁵ It is also important to note that I am not saying that the above will for certain take place. Concepts such as, for example, empathy and self knowledge will not necessarily become rarefied and oversimplified, nor will students definitely feel alienated from the behavioural and attitudinal adjustments they are encouraged to make. My purpose is to highlight that while SEAL has the potential to be a productive and meaningful tool within education one still needs to guard themselves against certain shortcomings which the program can fall into. One needs to be diligent and vigilant in such an undertaking to ensure that students gain the benefits which SEAL sets out in a meaningful, enriching and holistic way.

NOTES

- 1 <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/banda/secondary/pages/introduction.html>
- 2 http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/66360?uc=force_uj
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 See <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/66430> as a brief example.
- 5 Thanks to Michael Bonnet for pointing out this detail.

REFERENCES

- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2006) *Secondary SEAL: Introduction*. Available at <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/banda/secondary/pages/introduction.html> (accessed November 25, 2009).
- Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2006) *Secondary SEAL: Why are social and emotional skills central to school improvement?* Available at http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/66360?uc=force_uj (accessed November 25, 2009).