


best, but they need proper training and support to help them judge well.

- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Support Unit’, which offers high quality continuing training to senior and, perhaps more importantly, middle managers, on what constitutes best practice (especially around instruction and professional development).
- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Research Unit’ ideally not funded directly by the government (instead by research councils or charitable foundations), whose mandate is to stay close to the schools, establishing what works well and, crucially, what doesn’t work well. These units need to increase understanding on the ground of what changes might yield improvements.

Between us we have written a good deal that is hostile to school choice and sceptical about the likely success of voucher systems in the UK. Does our willingness to offer constructive advice on the design of a scheme that extends school choice represent some sort of volte face? We think not. We remain doubtful that this, or any school reform, will yield large improvements for the most disadvantaged children in the absence of more systematic measures designed to combat poverty. We continue to stress the limitations of an approach that seeks to improve educational standards at the bottom with little apparent concern for equality of opportunity per se, or recognition of the positional aspect of education.

Still, if the Conservatives do find the money to go ahead with their reforms, we want them to achieve their stated goals. We think that the leadership is sincerely committed to improving the achievement of disadvantaged children (consider their willingness to stand up to Tory grassroots opinion on grammar schools). But we’re not yet sure. Enough is known about how to design school-choice policies so that they are more likely to contribute to that goal for us to regard their willingness to do it properly as the real test of that sincerity.



‘Nor do we know whether SEAL’s unrelenting attention to feelings is creating a nation of narcissists.’

Ruth Cigman, Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy of Education, Institute of Education, London

Let's not get too social and emotional about learning

Politicians are strangely silent on the subject of SEAL, the government programme to promote pupils' well-being. Is this because they share **Ruth Cigman's** fears that it could undermine rather than spread happiness?

There's a philosophical joke about two behaviourists who meet on the street. 'You're fine,' says one to the other. 'How am I?'

Philosophical humour, said Wittgenstein, has a character of depth. I like this joke because it reminds us of things we may need to be reminded of from time to time. First, there's the absurdity of the idea – which psychologists like BF Skinner promoted – that the mind is reducible to the body. All that messy consciousness-stuff that you take so seriously is nothing but folklore. If things were so simple, we might indeed approach people in the street to find out how we were.

Crazy as this idea is, it reminds us of something we're liable to forget. It reminds us that we aren't always the best judges of 'how we are' or what we are

thinking or feeling. We can sometimes learn about ourselves – important things – from people who know us, watch us, listen to what we say.

Education policy in England and Wales has taken a turn in the past few years that neglects these important insights. It is based on a story that goes like this. Children are more miserable today than they have been for years. Because they are miserable, they are disruptive at school, cannot motivate themselves to learn, and are prey to destructive (including self-destructive) behaviour. Their futures look bleak unless we take steps to improve their emotional well-being now. We need to teach them how to overcome negative feelings, how to keep calm, how to value themselves and others. Instead of the piecemeal approach to children's feelings that teachers have always had, we need to roll-out national programmes scientifically designed to enhance their emotional well-being.

Though not compulsory (yet), the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme is intended to address these concerns. But how do we know that SEAL's premise (that today's children are

more miserable than ever) is correct? This belief is based, at least in part, on the error that the behaviourist joke seeks to expose: the assumption that self-report is necessarily authoritative. Of course, children can lie; anyone can deliberately misrepresent her thoughts or feelings. But this methodological consideration aside, happiness questionnaires, as they are often known, are widely trusted.

I do not trust them and I don't think it's obvious that the ice cap of children's well-being is melting by the month or year. But it's certainly useful to treat people as sources of unassailable authority about a substance like 'well-being' that seems to be in short supply. If we do this, we can turn our 'impressions' into 'facts': over a certain period, well-being levels rose/fell by x per cent.

Of course it's tempting to scientise children in this way at a time when news about their depressions and addictions greets us daily with our muesli. And we mustn't forget the electoral potential. Instead of doing nothing (effective) about depression and anti-social behaviour, you are in a position to take scientifically validated action to eliminate this.

What interests me about the forthcoming election is that, despite the alleged validity of SEAL, and despite an avalanche of polls showing that people value happiness more than anything (including wealth), happiness and well-being are not on the agenda. We haven't seen David Cameron on Andrew Marr's couch saying earnestly, 'Children's happiness levels fell by 15 per cent under New Labour. We aim to drive them up by at least 18 per cent.' We aren't even learning what the major parties intend to do about SEAL.

This is curious and worrying. Carol Craig, Director of Glasgow's Centre for Confidence and Well-Being, has described SEAL as a 'large-scale psychological experiment on young people, which will not just waste time and resources but could actually back-fire and unwittingly undermine people's well-being in the longer-term.' We don't know, says Craig, whether our efforts to calm children down make them calmer or more agitated. Nor do we know whether SEAL's unrelenting attention to feelings is creating a nation of narcis-

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sists who will find it harder, rather than easier, to form strong relationships. The American self-esteem movement's attempt to influence the nation's psychology in a comparable programme is widely believed to have fallen flat on its face. If anything (say many), it undermined well-being and achievement.

Craig's concerns are shared with many experts, who see SEAL as a controversial programme the validity of which has not been demonstrated. Its intellectual basis is Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, which sees a person's EQ (emotional quotient) as a more effective predictor of life success than IQ. However much of Goleman's work has been discredited and superseded, as he himself accepts. Evidence for the effectiveness of SEAL is widely challenged, and even the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which supported SEAL, accepts that there are 'gaps in the evidence'.

The empirical picture, in short, is contested, which is no doubt part of the reason why politicians aren't falling over each other to get electoral mileage out of well-being enhancement. But the reasons are deeper than this, and I believe they are deeper in the way that our philosophical joke has depth. An interesting film on Teachers TV – a SEAL resource for teachers – may help us to understand this.

Entitled *Emotions in Motion*, the film features KS2 children. Taking the lead are some children playing an ambiguous role between chat-show host and teacher. In sing-song voices, they say things like: 'With the help of my assistants here, I'll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situa-

tions that we all find ourselves in.’ Other children come to them with their problems and we are struck by the ways in which ‘teacher/host children’ and ‘pupil/guest children’ are vulnerable to, and articulate about, painful emotions. They share problems and suggest solutions. They acknowledge guilt, frustration, jealousy and anger, and praise each other for being brave and honest.

Zac confesses that he can’t deal with numbers. ‘When I look at a page,’ he says, ‘it’s as if there are just numbers everywhere, swimming up and down.’

The others help out.

‘Just try taking some deep breaths,’ says one.

‘Clear your head and forget about everything else,’ says another.

‘You know, Zac, you’re not stupid and you can do numeracy.’

This last remark struck me as odd. Zac can do numeracy: how do we know? There’s no time to think about this because Zac has gone and the next anxious child has arrived.

Let’s go back to the behaviourists, except that, in my version of the story, they aren’t behaviourists but friends.

‘Hi, how are you?’ says A.

‘I’m fine,’ says B.

‘Why don’t we stop for a coffee?’ says A.

What is happening in this story (you’ll have to take my word for this) is that B thinks she’s fine, but she isn’t. What she’s trying to do is persuade herself that she’s fine so that she can keep herself going. Her estimate of her ‘well-being level’ is flawed, and A, a sensitive friend, understands this and is able to respond helpfully. We needn’t intrude further into their conversation. The point is that, at the heart of this encounter, is a short and, I would say, crucial word.

It is the word ‘you’. Between friends, this word has a use and a meaning that it doesn’t have in the film *Emotions in Motion*. There, the word is corrupted in two ways. First, there is the media ‘you’, as in: I’ll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situations... The child who says this is talking into a camera; like Myleene Klass, she has no

idea who, if anyone, she is talking to.

Second, and implicit in much SEAL thinking, there is the social science ‘they’. Be assured that the suggestions ‘take deep breaths’ and ‘clear your head’ are based on scientific evidence about ‘what works’ for children (for ‘them’) in classrooms. There are two problems with this. One is that the empirical evidence relating to such interventions is contested, as we’ve seen. The second is that, even if the evidence about ‘what works’ is sound, it is at best evidence of ‘what works’ for the majority, ie over 50 per cent, of children. What works for Shilpa may not work for Mira. We can’t therefore extrapolate from ‘what works’ to ‘what will work for you personally’.

From this we get a glimpse of why emotional education may be disastrous for some children. In most cases, it may be true that children who say ‘I can’t benefit from the rejoinder ‘you can’. If a child hesitates before a vault and says ‘I can’t jump over it’, it may be a wise teacher who says, ‘Of course you can’. But this cannot be a general rule. First, the child may have a phobia that needs to be taken seriously. Second, there may be a ‘special need’ of some sort; going back to the film, Zac might be dyslexic. The swimming numbers that he reports might swim even more vigorously when the anxiety of being misunderstood compounds his dyslexia.

This issue of the word ‘you’ – the personal ‘you’ that appears in sensitive conversations between friends, and between teachers and their pupils – is neglected at our peril. As a concrete example of what can go wrong when third person perspectives are misdirected to the second person, consider how irritated we are by receptionists in GP surgeries whose clawing manner and frozen smiles betray the training courses they have taken (how to treat *them*, the patients...). Now consider teachers who talk to parents this way at parents’ evenings (how to talk to *them*, parents). Finally, consider teachers talking to children like this (how to talk to *them*, the children...).

The last scenario is scary, and my concern is that this is where we are heading. The well-being agenda should be a greeting to children, personalised in the classroom. *How are you? We really want to know.*