

Pupil well-being falls foul of testing 'obsession'

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Government pressure on schools to abandon programmes which promote wellbeing will have 'disastrous' effects on vulnerable pupils, according to University of Manchester research.

Neil Humphrey, a professor of psychology of education, says the evidence shows social and [emotional learning](#) (SEL) in primary schools can have powerful effects on attainment, discipline and mental health.

SEL is implemented in schools in a variety of ways: it can be taught in formal lessons using scenarios and role plays, though extra curricular work such as school councils, mentoring and anti-bullying campaigns are all in the mix.

SEL is especially useful for children from challenging backgrounds, he says, as they are more likely to be under stress and need help.

Data from educational systems around the world, assessed by Professor Humphrey, reveal dramatic improvements on attainment, discipline and mental health.

A recent review of research on the impact of social and emotional learning from the United States demonstrated that it can improve children's academic scores by up to 11%.

However, many schools are now under pressure to abandon SEL because they are forced to devote more time to delivering the government's

testing agenda.

Professor Humphrey's research, which is the most comprehensive assessment of research on SEL yet, is published by Sage this month in a book called *Social and Emotional Learning: A Critical Appraisal*.

He said: "School is a place that should provide a secure and safe environment for all children, especially those with [mental health issues](#) or difficult social backgrounds.

"If social and emotional learning is properly implemented, especially at primary school level, then the effects can be profound because children are in a better position to learn.

"Most evidence suggests that teaching social and emotional skills in childhood can prevent problems further down the line, particularly for pupils whose family and community backgrounds may place them at-risk."

He added: "Up to 2010, there had been steady progress on SEL in terms of Government policy.

"But because of the Coalition's obsession with academic scores and testing, we've now gone backwards. It's a disaster for those vulnerable pupils politicians claim they aim to support.

"Many schools still continue with SEL- but because there's apparently no appetite for this at Government level, many will see it as a risk and are likely to abandon or ignore it."

However, not all SEL programmes are effective says Professor Humphrey. A flagship initiative, called Social and emotional aspects of learning programme, or SEAL, was introduced by the previous

Government for secondary school pupils across England.

His 2010 evaluation of SEAL found the scheme to have no impact on [pupils'](#) social and emotional skills, mental health or behaviour.

A primary school scheme developed in the United States called Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is currently being evaluated by Professor Humphrey, in a major study involving more than 5,000 children across Manchester.

Professor Humphrey said: "Not all children may need it, but a universal model is the most cost effective way to implement SEL. It's a bit like immunisation- not everyone has the same degree of risk- but it makes sense to cover all bases just in case.

"But the failure of SEAL does not mean that the promotion of social and emotional skills is valueless.

"Education is not just about testing: it's about producing people who are not only well qualified, but are able to meet the many challenges life will present to them. I urge the Government to think again."

Provided by University of Manchester

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