

# **The management of 'emotional labour' in the corporate re-imagining of primary education in England**

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The last twenty years have witnessed the spread of corporatism in education on a global scale. In England, this trend is characterised by new structural and cultural approaches to education found in the 'academies' programme and the adoption of private sector management styles. The corporate re-imagining of schools has also led to the introduction into the curriculum of particular forms of character education aimed at managing the 'emotional labour' of children. This paper argues that character education rests on a fallacy that the development of desirable character traits in children can be engineered by mimicking certain behaviours from the adult world. The weaknesses in the corporate approach to managing 'emotional labour' are illustrated with empirical data from two primary schools. An alternative paradigm is presented which locates the 'emotional labour' of children within a 'holding environment' that places children's well-being at its core.

**Keywords:** emotional labour; corporatisation; emotional capitalism; Nussbaum; well-being

## **Introduction**

Drawing on recent policy, social theory and empirical data, this paper explores how the ongoing corporatisation of English education may negatively impact on children's well-being by encouraging a narrow view of children as the 'future workforce'. 'Corporatisation' in this context refers to the growing relationship between the state represented by government and private enterprise, within a shared paradigm which favours market dynamics, economic imperatives and private sector management techniques.[1] As a result of corporatisation, issues relating to performativity, competition and economic returns have permeated the discourse on school reform of education policymakers and their political allies. For example,

according to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2012), English education 'should be open to the idea of leaders from outside education coming into our schools', because 'three quarters of heads in the best systems... do'. The CBI goes on to claim that:

If we could raise the levels of attainment in our schools to those of the very best in Europe, we could add 1% to GDP every year. This equates to £8trn over the lifetime of a child born today.

In this discourse the child is framed, de facto, as a unit in a cost-benefit analysis in which 'world-leading' education (DfE, 2016) is ultimately measured in terms of its contribution to England's global economic competitiveness. According to the CBI (2012), the achievement of economic goals is also bound up with successful school leavers who are not only equipped with 'rigorous academic qualifications', but who are also 'determined', 'optimistic' and 'emotionally intelligent'. Although character formation has been a long-standing educational concern (Arthur et al., 2015), more recent directions in education policy are distinguished by their overtly corporate nature (e.g. Morgan, 2014; DfE, 2016).

Similar corporate tendencies underpin intervention programmes aimed at improving character rolled out in the US under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) (Heckman and Kautz, 2013). In asserting that character is 'a skill - not a trait', Heckman and Kautz (2013, p.88) conceptualise character as both malleable and measurable and therefore enabling researchers to predict the outcomes of their educational interventions. The authors posit five 'character skills' as the most valued by the labour market: *Openness to Experience; Conscientiousness; Extraversion; Agreeableness* and *Emotional Stability*. These 'character skills' can be moulded through the 'technology for skill formation', which utilises 'incentives' to trigger 'effort', 'cognitive skills' and 'character skills' in order to increase the individual's 'task performance' (p.13). Apart from strong behaviourist resonances, this 'technology' of stimulus-response-performance is also

suggestive of an approach to teaching as the mimicry of corporate management techniques, aimed at incentivising employees to improve their performance. 'Efficient' intervention programmes are underpinned here by an economic calculation of 'payoffs' from early 'investments':

interventions during the preschool years or in kindergarten improve character in a lasting way, some with annual rates of return (per annum yields) that are comparable to those from investment in the stock market in normal times. (p.8)

The fusion of economic goals and psychological discourse in a corporatised education system is a manifestation of the now widespread culture of 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007). Eva Illouz defines 'emotional capitalism' as a value system in which emotion becomes fused with economic action, so that interpersonal relationships drive economic relations and, conversely, market values shape emotional, interpersonal relationships. According to Illouz, this intertwining of the language of psychology with market repertoires has been particularly pervasive in the American corporation, resulting in radically new ways of organising production and delivering services. The size, global spread and orientation towards service in modern, 'post-industrial' corporations require employee compliance and 'positive' communications as crucial to a 'perfect' customer experience. This in turn depends on managers' capacity to motivate employees and regulate their 'emotional labour'. As explained by Arlie Hochschild (1983, p.7), 'emotional labour' in the service industries consists of simulating or suppressing feeling in order to present oneself in ways that produce the 'proper state of mind in others'. Ensuring positive customer experience can be accomplished either by 'surface' or 'deep acting', the former based on feigning emotion and the latter on inducing a feeling 'as if' it were spontaneous and genuine. Based on her research on the expanding airline industry in the 1980s, Hochschild found that, in competing for customers, airline

advertisements promised a uniquely personal service, with the 'omnipresent smile' of the flight attendant suggestive of airline staff as 'friendly, helpful, and open to requests' (p.93). This increased the demand for deep acting, especially when the discrepancy between 'promise and facts' created through marketing, meant that airline workers had to regularly deal with customer disappointment. The corporate logic of the airline industry created a link between market expansion, competition, advertising, heightened passenger expectations and management demands for acting. In effect, company profit was bound up with the 'emotional labour' of the employees, expected to make their feelings instrumental to projecting 'positive' attitudes and 'professional' service.

Emotions have thus become a form of capital, invested to induce a sense of corporate identity and loyalty, improve performance, secure brand identity and market success (Fineman, 2008). The shared images, understandings and emotional attachments which form the *corporate imagination* (Illouz, 2007) are infused with a psychological-economic discourse which turns emotions into 'entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified and commodified' (p.109). Within this broader context of emotional capitalism, this paper is concerned with potentially harmful educational practices arising from the import into education of the *corporate imagination* and its demands for 'emotional labour'. It explains how the psycho-economic discourse and mass produced 'advice literature', coupled with an ongoing corporatisation of the English education system through the academies programme (DfE, 2016), promote limited conceptions of well-being.[2] Drawing on empirical data to illustrate 'emotional labour' in context, I also explore the weaknesses of the corporate approach to 'emotional labour' and argue for an alternative theory of emotions (Nussbaum 2001, 2003) which places children's well-being at its core.

### **Promoting 'emotional labour' in education and its corporate antecedents**

The calls to 'emotional labour' framed within the corporate culture of the 1980s as demands for surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) have subsequently been reframed by the 'new science' of Positive Psychology (Evans, 2012; Layard, 2011) and taken up by successive English governments to provide policies for 'emotional labour' in schools. Launched in 1988 by Martin Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, Positive Psychology (PP) has its origins in cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), which aims at removing negative symptoms of mental illness. PP utilises a combination of CBT techniques and questionnaire measures of what makes individuals happier, stronger and more resilient in order to promote the positive goals of well-being and flourishing (Evans, 2012). Examples of the international appeal of PP include its wholesale adoption in US army training and former president of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy's (2011) gift of *The World Book on Happiness* presented to 200 world leaders in the hope that they make Positive Psychology 'available to the man and woman in the street'. The most recent example of the global appeal of PP is the creation of a Happiness Ministry in United Arab Emirates (Sandhu, 2016).

The PP goals of optimism, positive emotion, engagement and achievement are also well aligned to the continuing education policy focus on raising standards, which led to UK Resilience Project (UKRP) in secondary schools in three local authorities (Chalen et al., 2011). Despite mixed evaluations of the UKRP pilot 2007-2010 (Watson et al., 2012), the current UK policy of austerity and welfare cuts creates conditions under which resilience and character training programmes may be deployed by policymakers to ameliorate the negative effects of 'social policy in cold climate' (Lupton and Thomson, 2015). As emphasised by the current Conservative Education Secretary Nicky Morgan (2014), schools are now expected to 'produce' well-rounded pupils possessed of character traits of 'resilience, self-control, humour, charity and a strong work ethic'. In an endorsement of emotional capitalism, Morgan's ambition to make England a 'global leader' in teaching 'character, resilience and

grit' is being promoted through financial incentives and rewards for schools that excel in character education (DfE, 2015; 2016).

Recent measures of child well-being place the UK in a low position in world rankings (Pople et al., 2015). For example, Innocenti Report Cards of 2007 and 2010 'caused a great stir in the UK' because of very low scores in international league tables due to inequalities in material well-being, education and (mental) health of UK children (Bradshaw, 2011, p.5). In response, an All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility organised a Character and Resilience Summit from which emerged the *Character and Resilience Manifesto 2014*. The Manifesto emphasises the importance of perseverance, commitment, self-control, ability to defer gratification, 'mental toughness' and 'grit'. It also endorses a view of behavioural-psychological factors as critical in the 'intergenerational transmission of inequality' (Paterson et al., 2014, p.15). This emphasis on individual factors which inhibit social mobility could be interpreted as an attempt to redefine inequality and child poverty: 'the true measure of child affluence and poverty is the quality of parenting' (Heckman as cited by Paterson et al., 2014, p.20). Critically, the psycho-economic aim of 'producing' a resilient workforce appears to be predicated on shifting the responsibility for child poverty and well-being from socio-economic policy onto individual families.

In parallel with these developments, primary and secondary curriculum initiatives have ranged from Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Literacy, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), Emotional Health and Wellbeing to Emotional Resilience. As pointed out by Watson et al. (2012), despite the wholesale adoption of these programmes across the country, few commentators critically examine the conception of well-being they foster or the evidence of their possible negative effects for individual pupils. Of key importance here is also a gradual shift in the focus of Personal and Social Education (PSE) of the 1980s from the development of reasoning skills, affective concern and independent critical judgement

(Hargreaves et al., 1988) to techniques for the regulation and utilisation of emotion. These techniques are underpinned by a view of children as the 'future workforce' that shows little or no consideration for the nature of childhood, children's well-being and developmental needs. One of the most telling examples of seeing children as the 'future workforce' or 'adults in children's bodies' with the resulting *adulteration of childhood*, has been the wholesale adoption of Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence (EI) in primary and secondary schools (DfES, 2005; DCSF, 2007). Embedded within the SEAL curriculum as part of Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), the EI programme was aimed at both children and adults as:

a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the *emotional health and wellbeing of all who learn and work in schools*. (DCSF, 2007, p.4) [my emphasis]

Goleman's (1998, p.5) EI model was derived from research 'done by dozens of different experts in close to five hundred corporations' which found that emotional intelligence was more important in determining 'outstanding job performance' than intelligence (IQ). Based on his model, the SEAL curriculum identified the following developmental goals: *Self-awareness; Self-regulation* (managing feelings); *Motivation; Empathy* and *Social skills* (DCSF, 2007). Typifying the transactional tendencies of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007), SEAL materials reflect Goleman's overtly instrumentalist approach to EI. Each of the five EI dimensions is rationalised in terms of its 'usefulness' or 'effectiveness' in 'making relationships' and '*using* [my emphasis] our interactions with others as an important way of improving our learning experience'. For example, 'empathy' is defined as 'understanding others' thoughts and feelings and valuing and supporting others' and instrumentalised as follows:

When we can understand, respect, and value other people's beliefs, values, and feelings, we can be more effective in making relationships, working with, and learning from, people from diverse backgrounds. (DfES, 2007, pp.5-6)

This is an example of what Illouz (2007, pp.21-22) refers to as a 'strategic' justification of empathy: 'in developing skills of empathy and listening, one would further one's self interest' and 'secure one's goals'. Illouz draws here on the Habermasian distinction between 'strategic' and 'communicative action'. 'Strategic action', as explained by Habermas (1984, p.94), is linked to communications and actions 'directed through egocentric calculations of utility and coordinated through interest positions'. By contrast, 'communicative action' is oriented towards reaching mutual understanding. The five dimensions to EI are thus 'strategically' deployed, similar to the 'incentives' of Heckman and Kautz's (2013) 'technology for skill formation' explained above. This aligns the overarching aim of 'going for goals' (DfES, 2005) and other themes of the primary and secondary PSHE with maximising 'task performance' rather than 'communicative action' oriented towards understanding.

The official psycho-economic discourse which shapes education policy and school curriculum conflates both with the new science of Positive Psychology and 'advice literature' to narrowly focus on techniques for the regulation and utilisation of emotion. By 'advice literature' Illouz (2007, pp. 9-10) refers to mass produced literature offering 'pop' versions of psychological research findings (e.g. Goleman, 1995; Faber and Mazlish, 2003). Illouz (2007, p.15) notes that the fusion of the psychological and economic discourse resulted in an emergence of communication models within the family based on economic models of bargaining and exchange, leading to a rationalisation of emotion. Reflecting this approach, the recent US bestseller 'The Conscious Parent' (Tsabary, 2010, p. xv), recommends treating the child 'like a business' and 'capitalizing' on the *emotional* and *spiritual* lessons inherent in



the parenting process' as a replacement for ostensibly less 'effective' traditional approaches to child-rearing based on parental authority and control. The technique of 'descriptive praise' based on conveying 'positive' descriptive feedback (Faber and Mazlish, 2003), found its way into the 'Going for goals' curriculum:

As a teacher, consider how you provide feedback about work and behaviour. Try to make sure it encourages effort rather than suggests that the child is not able or lazy. For example, you might say:

Let's see – you have put in a title, labelled the axis, and drawn the bars accurately. (...)  
You've done really well to get yourself to school every day for the last fortnight – that means you have 100% attendance, when it was only 80% before. (p. 10)

Use: The language of success

Signal confidence to the children in their ability to succeed with phrases such as 'I know you can ...' (DfES, 2005, p.23)

As a call to 'emotional labour', the use of the 'language of success' is problematic in that it may be received by the children as not genuine because of its 'strategic' intent. As explained by Habermas (1984, pp. 307-8), conveying a 'communicative intent of the speaker' requires that 'he express truthfully his beliefs, intentions, feelings, desires, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to what is said'. The predominantly instrumentalist model of EI may thus inhibit (self) understanding because it prioritises the 'measurable' benefits of being 'emotionally intelligent'. Even authors who identify the potential for manipulation engendered in the process of managing 'emotional labour' seem to confuse the distinction between deep acting, genuine emotion and ethical implications of striving to 'appear' authentic - in order to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, Held and McKimm (2012, p.60) emphasise that in the emotionally charged educational context, leaders who draw on:

deep acting or spontaneous and genuine emotions, may well be considered most effective and gain the respect of followers. Such leaders must weave together EI competencies, and understanding of their context and networks and a willingness to perform emotional labour. This requires congruence between the leader's personality, behaviours and understanding that *appears* consistently authentic. [my emphasis]

Similarly, private consultancies offering corporate leadership training to schools propagate emotional capitalism by encouraging investment in 'good character' for the payoff of 'positive' change:

good leaders lead with good character... They must also master the art of having meaningful conversation – the kind of conversations that move people and situations forward leading to positive action and change. (McMillan, 2014, p.5)

'Meaningful conversations' are increasingly framed as person-centred techniques of 'coaching', 'counselling', 'mentoring' and 'active listening', deployed to improve the performance of pupils and staff. In the context of the current policy of converting all English state schools to sponsored academies by 2022 (DfE, 2016), these calls to 'emotional labour' in character education may become a taken-for-granted, dominant, paradigm for the socialisation of children and young people. The following section explores an alternative paradigm, based on developmental needs of children rather than economic or corporate ambitions.

### **Emotions and the well-being of the child**

An alternative perspective on emotions which lies counter to the instrumentalism inherent in the psycho-economic approaches and takes account of the nature of childhood has been developed by Martha Nussbaum (2001, 2003). Nussbaum (2001, p.22) turns to complex understandings of emotional development in infancy and childhood (e.g. Donald Winnicott's)

to argue that emotions are 'forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing'. This is a different understanding of emotions arising from an assumption of our inherently social (rather than individualistic) nature and, consequently, our 'lack of self-sufficiency'. In contrast to Goleman's (1995) premise that emotional intelligence means 'self-regulation' (managing one's feelings), Nussbaum emphasises that emotions remind us that we are vulnerable to events that we do not control. Also unlike Goleman's 'strategic' calculation of the value of others in relation to one's success, Nussbaum suggests that a complete human life unfolds in mutual relations in which the others are respected, befriended or loved for their own sake. The vulnerability inherent in understanding oneself as being capable of flourishing only within and through social relations is at odds with the independence and autonomy promoted within the culture of emotional capitalism.

Nussbaum traces our essential 'neediness' and 'lack of self-sufficiency' back to infancy, when feeling fear, anxiety and anger or joy, love and hope is linked to the satisfaction of the need of 'holding'. 'Holding' encompasses an infant's needs to be physically held, nourished and sensitively cared for within an environment in which their helplessness is acknowledged. It encompasses needs experienced 'here and now', in their embodied immediacy. Growing up inevitably involves moments of frustration or discomfort and consequently a 'holding' which is 'good enough' (rather than 'perfect') provides conditions for the development of the child's trust and sense that 'human neediness is all right'. A 'holding environment' also encompasses the physical surroundings and 'transitional objects' such as a favourite soft toy or blanket that provide the child with reassurance in the absence of a parent. Within 'holding' that is 'good enough', a range of feelings develops such as gratitude and love of the primary carers, but also jealousy, guilt and shame. All of these are helpful in providing the child with a 'map of the world' (p.206), teaching her the importance of boundaries and rudimentary moral ideas

(p.215). Of particular importance to moral development are the emotions of guilt and shame. Shame is linked to a realisation that 'one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate' (p.196), whilst guilt to an awareness of having been 'bad'. Guilt enables 'reparation', a sense that one can pay back and therefore accept one's limits. In contrast, shame shuts down the possibility of forgiveness, both in relation to self and others and, if habitually experienced throughout childhood, may lead to excessive control or narcissism in later life. The development of a controlling, narcissistic character may thus be traced back to early experiences of the 'demand not to be a child', 'to be without need' (p.219), to be self-sufficient and independent. Instead of developing resilience or 'mental toughness', the culture of treating children like 'adults in children's bodies' may, therefore, make children feel ashamed when they experience need, with the negative consequence of forming young people who shut down morally and cannot access their reparative capacity (p.222).

Because particular 'emotion-thoughts' are formed early in life and are therefore deeply habitual and self-defining, it is impossible to change emotions through simplistic behavioural therapies or EI techniques. Of more importance, therefore, is to understand the complexity of emotions and their origins in the 'deep structure of human life, in our ambivalent relation to our lack of control over objects and the helplessness of our own bodies' (p.234). As Nussbaum emphasises, this view:

urges us to reject as both too simple and too cruel any picture of character that tells us to bring every emotion into line with reason's dictates, or the dictates of the person's ideal... this is simply not a sensible goal to prescribe; and prescribing an unachievable norm of perfection is the very thing that can wreak emotional havoc. (p.234)

The above insights warrant a different engagement in 'emotional labour', 'not because it is more advantageous in self-interested terms to make a deal with others, but because [we]

can't imagine being whole in an existence without shared ends and a shared life' (Nussbaum, 2003, p.450). This alternative approach is oriented towards 'the common good' rather than a 'strategically negotiated modus vivendi' (Habermas, 2003, p.4). On Nussbaum's account, children's well-being is nurtured when the school becomes a 'holding' environment, in which children are supported in expressing and exploring a full range of emotions. Within this paradigm, resilience and other 'desirable' character traits develop under conditions of emotional safety of being allowed to be a child rather than as goals set within a system of incentives and rewards in a mimicry of corporate management approaches. On the contrary, it is the childhood history of emotions and 'holding' that shape adult emotions. Beyond infancy, 'holding' is extended into a 'facilitating environment' oriented towards the common good, in the interest of shared rather than individualistic ends. The consequences of pursuing corporate ambitions such as 'world-leading' performance are now considered in the light of the empirical data collected in two primary schools.

### **'Emotional labour' in context**

This section draws on empirical data collected in two state funded primary schools in outer London, 'School 1' (S1) and 'School 2' (S2). The schools' performance was typical of average to 'good' state schools. At the time of data collection, School 1 had an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspection grade of 'good' and School 2 was graded as 'satisfactory'. The socio-economic background of children presented a mix of middle class and working class families, with approximately 18% and 23% children free school meals (because of low income) in School 1 and School 2 respectively. Primary children are taught in 'Infant' classes (children aged 5-7, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) and 'Junior' classes (children 8-11, Years 3-6). The national tests in literacy and numeracy published in school 'league tables' are taken by Year 6 children, aged 11.

The research was designed as a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) and the data collected through semi-structured interviews (n=27), observation of lessons, school assemblies and other everyday events, as well as documentary review of children's books, school policies and wall displays. Interviews were conducted with the Headteachers (HT) and Deputy Heads (DH) of both schools, members of Senior Management Teams (SMT), Infant teachers (IT), Junior teachers (JT) and support staff (S). The observation schedule was negotiated with the Deputy Head (S1) and Headteacher (S2) and used to triangulate interview and documentary data. In consideration of Nussbaum's (2001) concept of a 'holding environment', the physical environment and particularly texts and images displayed on the walls provided an important data source. The key focus of the case study on the enactment of education policies precluded the collection of depth data from the children attending the two schools.

In analysing these data, I took into account how the enactment of education policy in everyday practice is enmeshed with 'pop' psychology (Illouz, 2007) to the detriment of theoretical approaches that transcend the dominant psycho-economic 'positive' orientations. The data reported in this paper were coded in NVivo 9.2 and analysed for: content, 'emotional labour' done *by* the children and *to* the children, as well as conceptualisations of environment facilitating children's well-being.

*'Emotional labour' done by the children: acting grown-up*

At the time of data collection, both schools followed the non-statutory government recommendation of an hour a week for Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE). In this context, 'emotional labour' done *by* the children centred on SEAL (DfES, 2005) materials discussed above, which were also used in whole school assemblies and displayed around both schools (Figure 1). Most interview participants spoke positively about SEAL, for example,

according to Sophie (DH, S1) the SEAL curriculum was ‘the best thing to come out of the National Strategies.’[3] The key SEAL message that ‘feelings matter’ seemed to be embraced in both schools and, accordingly, SEAL materials were displayed around both schools. For example, in S2 a large display with ‘feeling words’ such as: 'happy', 'excited', 'sorrowful', 'unhappy', 'angry', 'furious' was placed in the main corridor and to encourage the children to articulate their feelings, SEAL stories were used at least once a week in assemblies. The children also had an opportunity to post their problems anonymously in the ‘issues box’, placed in the main corridor with a notice saying: 'Are you worried about something? Let us know...!' (S1).

Much of the SEAL teaching was, however, approached through behaviour management techniques. These were taught to children in order to ‘manage anger’ and other ‘negative’ emotions. The techniques included instructions to: ‘Breathe deeply’; ‘Relax and tense your muscles’; ‘Walk away’; ‘Tell yourself to stop’; ‘Count to ten’; ‘Tell someone else how you feel’ and were routinely rehearsed in both schools with children who displayed ‘behaviour problems’. None of the interview participants considered a possibility that such techniques for ‘dealing with feelings’ may encourage children to suppress their feelings in order to comply with school rules or please adults rather than to help them to better understand themselves. As emphasised by Nussbaum (2001, p.323), understanding the deep meaning of emotions rests on consideration and judgement which is ‘not just parroted but comprehended’. Despite being taught a range of 'feeling words', children's *emotional stability* (Heckman and Kautz, 2013) seemed to be inculcated here through CBT techniques. As illustrated by Figure 1, ‘emotional labour’ expected of the children was also based on an adult-like rationalisation.

**Figure 1 HERE.** Adapted from ‘Going for goals’ wall display in Year 2 classroom (S1)

Illouz's (2002, pp.31-35) analysis of the rationalisation of emotion includes four components which resonate with the approach used in 'Going for goals' theme of SEAL:

- the calculated use of means: 'I can think of lots of different ideas or solutions to problems'
- the use of more effective means: 'I can break a goal down into small steps'
- choosing on a rational basis: 'I can choose a realistic goal'
- making general value principles guide one's life: 'I can tell you why things have been successful'

Such a rationalisation of emotions contradicts the key message of SEAL that 'feelings matter'. This rationalisation was also reinforced through 'golden rules' which in both schools included prescriptions to: *Be kind and helpful; Be gentle; Be honest; Listen; Look after property; Work hard*. The rules were displayed in all classrooms, discussed during assemblies and incidents of rule breaking. The Year 6 children who took me on a tour of their school (S1) were able to recite the 'golden rules' to me and talk about the rules they considered to be most important. Although these examples of 'work on feelings' do not reflect the demand for surface or deep acting, the rudimentary elements of 'emotional labour' done by the adults in Hochschild's (1983) research were implicit in the expectation of the children to display compliance with rules and suppress 'negative' feelings. In School 1 in particular, children were offered a range of attractive extra-curricular activities, but were expected in return to be 'responsible', 'hard working', 'proud of their school' and focused on realising the school's vision to be 'the best they can be'. 13 out of 16 interview participants at S1 talked about a 'culture of high expectations', referring 55 times in total to shared values such as 'expectation', 'ambition', 'rigour', 'drive' and 'push'. As stated by Alice (DH, S1):



we do work them hard and we expect a lot from them, but they do rise to that and they're proud of their school, they really are... So we give our children a lot of responsibility, but we expect a lot from our children, we do. And our children are very confident, they are very confident to take part in things... The amount they can put on their CVs is massive.

In parallel to the service industries where 'professional' service and corporate profits depend on employees' positive attitudes (Hochschild, 1983), government ambition for 'world-leading' education has been combined with 'pop' psychological appeals to an idealised future as the basis for confidence-building. The wall display in the main corridor in S1 was a gallery of 'motivational posters' with positive messages such as:

Success: It is not the position you stand, but the direction in which you look

Challenge: Always set the trail, never follow the path

Aspire...

Your possibilities are endless

Read as 'incentives' to 'trigger effort' and increase 'task performance' (Heckman and Kautz, 2013, p.13) these messages created an environment which was an expression of adult rather than child aspiration in that it lacked the immediacy and the concreteness of a 'holding' environment, where children's needs 'here and now' are recognised.

Despite the predominant focus on an idealised, abstract future, the everyday life in both schools also consisted of activities and routines which gave the children opportunities to develop emotional capabilities that enhance well-being. Special importance was attached in both schools to play areas for younger children (Infants), where toys and free activities enabled them to engage in 'narrative play'. For example, on joining School 1 as a new

Headteacher, Pete spent a lot of time talking to Infant staff and making a list of new play equipment for the Infant playground. Integral to each school day, ‘narrative play’, stories, rhymes and songs provide the children with a ‘potential space’ in which to explore life’s possibilities:

Through symbolic activity, the child cultivates her ability to imagine what others experience, and she explores the possibilities of human life in a safe and pleasing manner. (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 238)

As the children move up the school, however, the ‘emotional labour’ expected of them seems to increasingly involve *acting grown-up*, rehearsing school rules and becoming more responsible for managing their feelings. In both schools, practitioners talked about the PSHE, SEAL and playtime being squeezed out by the focus on academic achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy. This focus was maintained, both among teachers and children, through the use of motivational techniques utilising a range of extrinsic incentives, which are discussed next.

#### *Emotional labour done to the children: stickers, stars and competitions*

The overarching aim of ‘emotional labour’ done *to* the children was to develop ‘positive’ behaviours and attitudes to learning. It consisted of a mixture of managing ‘negative’ emotions discussed above and using incentives to mobilise children, mainly in the form of extrinsic rewards such as stickers, certificates, points and ‘stars’ for collection and exchange for other rewards. Contrary to corporate motivational techniques such as ‘envisioning’ success and incentives for top performance, the culture of performativity seemed to be a source of anxiety for children in Years 5 and 6.

Both schools built complex systems of incentives. Apart from being rewarded with stickers, 'smiley faces' and written praise for work 'well done' (see Box 1), children's achievement was recorded in 'star charts' and displayed in classrooms and corridors.

**Box 1 HERE.** Extract from Amy's (aged 6) reading record completed between October and March (S1)

The example of lavish praise in Amy's reading record goes against SEAL advice to use 'descriptive praise' (Faber and Mazlish, 2003) to factually describe action rather than label children as 'good', 'excellent', 'superstar'. It also reflects a tendency noted in children's books in both schools to use praise as the main motivational technique.

Notable in school assemblies in S2 was a high occurrence of individual and team competitions, for example: competition to design the school's nature reserve, best local community project award, attendance competition, fund-raising to improve play spaces in the school, Easter bonnet competition and regular team points contest. The winners of the competitions received certificates, applause in assembly and generous verbal praise, such as: 'We are proud of you' (Stephen, HT, S2). These reward systems replicate the instrumentalist approach to 'emotional labour' characteristic of some research on the impact of SEAL. For example, Hallam's (2009, p.321) study focused on such measurable outcomes of SEAL as: 'positive behaviour', 'effective learning', 'well-being' and a desire 'to be good' - in order to get a reward:

Most children developed an understanding of their own emotions and strategies to deal with them. They were reported as wanting to be good, 'because there is something at the end of it and they get a reward.'

There are three principal problems with these motivational approaches. First, the proliferation of external incentives may stunt the development of intrinsic motivation. Since young children's will to learn is rooted in 'awe and wonder' of the world and a desire to understand it (Nussbaum, 2001; Illeris, 2006), extrinsic rewards run counter this intrinsic desire. Second, these extrinsic approaches may plant the seeds of emotional capitalism by encouraging the economy of point scoring and attaching emotions to winning or losing. Third, they categorise children and, as illustrated by Figure 2, may also trigger the feeling of shame, for example when publicly 'named and shamed' by being consistently unfavourably compared to others.

**Figure 2 HERE.** Adapted from Class 5 wall display tallying poor behaviour of individual children (S1)

'Emotional labour' done *to* the children in the two schools seemed to marginalise considerations of complex emotional needs of young children and negative consequences of the unswerving ambition to achieve top performance in academic subjects. For many children, the expectation to 'succeed' (S2) and be the 'best they can be' (S1) was a source of anxiety. As emphasised by Eve (S, S1):

They are doing a lot of extra curricular stuff here, there are lots of wonderful sports clubs and that kind of thing. But the pressure is still on the academic side. I know that that's what the children come here for, they come here to learn, but perhaps they could learn in slightly different ways. It seems very harsh for six or seven year olds to be pushed into that sort of environment.

Eve is referring here to the school's culture of academic excellence, with a six-week cycle of assessment and testing, which caused considerable anxiety to some children. A loss of self-esteem was reported in Year 6 children who achieved low scores in tests and, as a result, did not get into 'good' secondary schools. For example, Liz (JT, S1) pointed to children's detailed knowledge of their performance in tests as a source of anxiety:

I feel as if they've almost been exposed to it too much, where they know every little detail down to the date and time [of the exams], and what they need to get, and what they've been getting on average. They know every little detail and their anxiety levels rise.

These concerns, as well as a wish for children to be 'happy' (Jeanne, S, S2; Eve, S, S1) or simply 'letting them be children' (Fiona, IT, S1), were articulated mainly by support staff, more experienced teachers and the teachers of Infants. The following statement from the numeracy policy in School 1 captures the complexity and ambiguity linked to adults' focus on 'doing the best for the children' (Miriam, SMT, S2):

To ensure vulnerable groups and 'coasting' children are picked up quickly, end of term assessments are carried out.

The phrase 'vulnerable groups' refers here to children who do not make the expected progress in mathematics in the cognitive sense. Because assessment in both schools consisted of regular, six-weekly tests, the very process of testing and identifying 'vulnerable children' could have exacerbated the anxiety experienced by some children in the test situation. In creating top and bottom scorers, the systems for accumulating test results, points and certificates may lead some children to an inflated concept of themselves and others to feeling ashamed of their inadequacy. 'Emotional labour' done *to* the children may also be neglecting

the importance of a 'holding' environment, which provides the focus for the conclusion to this paper.

### **Conclusion: the future of the school as a 'holding' environment**

In the light of Nussbaum's (2001) insights into the complex nature of emotions, what seems to be missing in the calls to 'emotional labour' in education policy and curriculum is a recognition of the nature and importance of 'holding'. 'Holding' during the school years includes an environment in which children's needs and vulnerability are recognised. No corporate incentive, psycho-economic intervention or measure of well-being can, therefore, replace a sensitive, caring adult response to children and 'letting them be children' (Fiona, IT, S1).

The current interest in child well-being and happiness, however, seems to be based on an assumption that developing resilient, emotionally intelligent children relies on mimicking adults possessed of these desirable traits and deploying corporate approaches to 'emotional labour' in schools. The most recent developments in English schools competing for the DfE Character Education Awards seem to be setting future directions for the R's of character education, *resilience*, *respect* and *responsibility*, developed through engaging children in projects such as: talks by motivational speakers; keeping personal portfolios; personal development plans; passports to develop character; records of personal excellence and behaviour rewards to 'help children reach their "ideal selves"' (DfE, 2015). This approach could be considered as an *adulteration of childhood* in the sense that it provides an intrusion of the adult mindset into the children's world, which may, in effect, corrupt the 'holding' environment. Apart from encouraging children to *act grown-up*, this approach is likely to be developed in the future into assessment practices which may also be damaging to children's well-being.

Although the assessment of children's progress is currently focused mainly on cognitive performance measures, given the importance attached by policymakers to character education, the rise of systems for assessing 'character skills' in the future can also be envisaged. For example, measuring and recording 'positive' emotions is already being promoted by *World Happiness Report 2015*. Authored by a group of 'independent experts', the Report offers a new form of cost-benefit analysis of social policy aimed at increasing well-being, with the economic efficiency of policy measured in 'units of happiness' (Helliwell et al., 2015, p.79). In recognition of the contribution of schools to well-being, Helliwell et al. also posit that schools should regularly measure the well-being of their children. The danger of adopting such cost-benefit models and measures of well-being is that they may lead to aligning the 'emotional labour' done *by* and *to* the children to the now widespread cognitive performance targets and testing regimes. These regimes have been reported to have narrowed the curriculum, turned schools into 'exam factories' and contributed to rising levels of anxiety in children (Alexander, 2012; Hutchings, 2015). Using performance targets for emotional intelligence and 'character skills' could lead to a new form of 'teaching to the test' – through promoting techniques for surface and deep acting or suppressing unhelpful feelings and thoughts - in effect stunting children's emotional development.

As an alternative to planning for and collecting evidence of 'positive' emotions and character traits identified as essential in developing an 'ideal self', Nussbaum (2001) emphasises the importance of *experiencing* a whole spectrum of emotions, 'positive' as well as 'negative'. As explained by Nussbaum (2003, p. 456), emotional capabilities necessary for the development of a psychologically mature, healthy personality are predicated on the ability to: 'have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence... to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger'. Feeling vulnerable in particular is essential for developing compassion for others and

avoiding the 'arrogant harshness' (p.315) which permeates the perfectionism of *corporate imagination*. 'Emotional labour', therefore, needs to be directed towards an understanding of emotions that goes beyond the instrumentalist EI and PP techniques for managing undesirable emotions. As suggested by the policy, social theory and empirical data discussed in this paper, the escalating focus on top performance in a school system re-imagined as an economic investment may deprive children of what Nussbaum (2003, p.456) considers an essential right to 'not having [their] emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety'. The narrow conception of well-being defined in terms of 'positive' emotions, desire to excel, 'mental toughness' and 'grit' may be the foundation for corporate success or competitive advantage in the global economy, but at a cost to more holistic human flourishing. The danger inherent in emotional capitalism and its calls to 'emotional labour' is in how it may be taken up by policymakers, practitioners, parents and researchers to provide perfectionist models of 'good' character that do not account for human weakness and vulnerability. As pointed out by Evans (2012, p.225), such models become particularly dangerous 'when over-hasty politicians' decide that they should be 'instantly transmitted to the masses, and installed in their personality via automated programmes and pre-written scripts'. The result is a passive education whereby 'the expert spoonfeeds the art of happiness and the masses kneel and swallow it' (p.226).

Although particular and unique, the 'emotional labour' done *by* the children and *to* the children in the two case study schools may bear resemblances with the approaches taken in similar contexts in primary schools in England and beyond, as policymakers seek to make the new science of happiness available to every boy and girl in the school. Tracing the origins of this new science in the corporate world calls into question its application in the world of children. The complex enmeshing within education policymaking and policy enactment of psycho-economic discourses, Positive Psychology and its 'pop' versions necessitates a deeper



theoretical engagement in the field of character education. This paper has sought to contribute a deeper understanding of children's development through examples from social theory and real-life contexts that highlight the complex, nuanced and often ambiguous nature of 'emotional labour'. In the context of the ongoing corporate re-imagining of education, fuelled by 'advice literature' and ambition to capture a 'unit of happiness', it is imperative that policymakers, teachers and parents bear in mind the complex nature of emotions and the importance of 'holding'. Given the proliferation and global spread of policy initiatives focused on well-being, 'emotional labour' going on in schools provides an important agenda for future research.

## Notes

- [1] Within a historical time frame, 'corporatisation' can be understood as a conflation of UK New Public Management (NPM) policies started in the 1980s (Mahony and Hextall, 2000) and the more recent phenomenon of 'corporate globalisation' (Saltman 2003). Both NPM and 'corporate globalisation' have been driven by the neoliberal faith in the power of free markets to solve all economic and social problems. In its extreme form observed in the US, 'corporatisation' has become a state-backed social, cultural and economic movement for 'corporate globalisation' which seeks to 'erode public democratic power' and 'enforce corporate power locally, nationally, and globally' (Saltman 2003, p.3).
- [2] Academies are state-funded schools sponsored by private sponsors and taken out of democratically elected local authority control to be directly responsible to the Secretary of State for Education. The 'academies programme' was started by New Labour (1997-2010), who continued the NPM policies and sought to establish quasi-markets in education, based on consumer choice as a lever for improving quality in the education system (Gunter 2012). The Coalition (2010-2015) and Conservative governments (post 2015) accelerated the academies programme and introduced 'free schools', borrowing the American charter and Swedish free school models. Despite the assumption that academy sponsors simply contribute extra resources and new ideas, many of these 'new' ideas are directly imported from the corporate culture where they are deployed to improve employee performance.
- [3] 'National Strategies' refer to the curriculum introduced by New Labour in 1998, 1999 and 2005, which focused mainly on literacy, numeracy and science.

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