

Circles for Learning - Part 1

Alison Waterhouse an Educational Psychotherapist and SEN Consultant outlines the 'Circles for Learning' project to engage children in their learning and develop an inclusive classroom.

I am lucky enough to have had a varied career including being an Education officer for a field study centre, Class teacher, the founding head of a therapeutic special school, SEN Consultant and Educational Psychotherapist. Throughout all of these roles my fascination for children's beliefs and thinking about their learning has been a constant interest. What causes some children to engage and make progress? What causes others to freeze, stall or become stuck? What skills and characteristics make a good learner? All these experiences and interests culminated with the creation of the Circles for Learning Project.

The Circles for Learning project is a whole class inquiry-led learning journey that uses mother and baby observations to support learning and the enhancement of social skills, emotional literacy and wellbeing.

I was asked to pilot the project at Dudley Infants School in Hastings. Here I was able to introduce the baby and mother observation sessions on a monthly basis with a Year 2 class. The themes that the children raised, observed and highlighted were then supported with a range of activities between our visits.

The first session when the children met Baby Anna (6 weeks old) was quite magical. All the children sat in the circle and watched the interactions between mum and baby for a minute totally enthralled. They then took turns asking questions. What did baby Anna like to eat? What did she play with? What could she do and how had she changed since she was born? All the children were completely captivated by her and were left wanting to know more. Our learning journey together had begun.

One of the activities that these early observations led to was the exploration of learning. I gave the children a film strip with 2 blank frames and asked them to draw a picture of themselves learning how to do something. In the second



box I asked them to draw themselves achieving this goal. The children came up with a wide variety of things they had learnt from riding a bike, swimming to playing a game on their computer. Whilst we shared the pictures I was able to help them think about the many different emotions they had experienced from frustration to excitement from wanting to give up and then to what it finally felt like to succeed. We then explored what kept them going – their 'stickability.' These sessions allowed me to understand more about each of them and their attitudes and beliefs about both themselves and learning. This knowledge helped me stretch and support them in the classroom.

'Anna and her mum were already in class when the children came back from lunch. She was sitting on her mum's lap and watched them with interest as they quietly came in and sat in the circle. Anna was now 4 months old. Some of the children waved and said hello. Anna's mum talked gently to her verbalising what was happening. 'Look how pleased they are to see you Anna, they are waving and saying hello, one day you will wave back.' While the children observed and asked questions I drew

their attention to Anna's interactions and responses asking them what they thought they might be about. We explored how she might be feeling being in a strange place and what was helping her to manage. One of the children stated that Anna felt safe because she was being held on her mum's lap and her mum kept her safe.'

This visit by Anna and her mum led to us exploring how they felt when they experienced new situations. Did they feel excited or slightly anxious? Together we created a New Situation Toolkit full of strategies that they used to manage new and different situations. This proved a really useful resource during the year as it allowed me to support them in a range of situations.

As the Learning Guide I was able to model thinking about what I observed, making links about Anna's actions and how she might be feeling, encouraging the children to be curious, to explore what they were seeing and make links to what they already knew. At the end of the session we shared questions that the observation had raised for us and then over the next few days tried to find out the answers to them.

During another session Anna's mum

explained that she was now starting to try new foods. She described how Anna was exploring food in a different way to her older brother and sister. Anna's mum was able to describe how Anna instantly liked some foods and disliked others. She described her as enjoying new things. One of the children asked Anna's mum whether Anna was different to her older sister. Anna's mum told the children several little stories to show how different she was. This led to one of the children asking Anna's mum who she loved the best, Anna or one of her other two children. Our class mum very beautifully explained that all her children were special and different and that she loved them all the same. Over the next few days we explored how different we all were and what skills we had that other people admired. This was a lovely piece of work and one which the children enjoyed very much. It was fantastic to see their responses when other children in their class told them they admired a certain characteristic or skill. This piece of work led one of the children to make a comment on how some people found some areas of work easy but others struggled with them. They then stated 'This doesn't mean they are stupid it just means they need more help from those who can do it.'

This one observation led to a range of work on celebrating difference throughout the term and enabled the children to really start to experience an inclusive classroom where all are valued.

'As baby Anna sat on the rug she looked around the circle of children watching her. Her face was still. One of the children waved at her to get her to look at him. She caught the movement of his hand and turned her head. He smiled at her and said her name. She moved her hands as if to wave back and then turned to look at her mum reaching out her hand so that it rested on her mums

The Circles for Learning project is a whole class inquiry-led learning journey that uses mother and baby observations to support learning.



leg. Her mum verbalised what had just happened saying 'he's saying hello, he's pleased to see you.' I asked the children why they thought Anna didn't wave back? Several children put their hands up. 'I think she is a little wary, she's only just got here.' I wondered aloud about why she had looked at her mum. 'She wanted to know if it was alright to come and see me,' said Tom, the child who had waved at Anna. 'I think she's feeling a little worried, look she's put her hand on her mum's leg.'

This extract shows how observant and sensitive the children could be. They were able to make links between behaviour and how someone feels. This link was then easy to expand and use within the classroom, because of our shared experience: it enabled the children to think about their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

'When baby Anna came into class she snuggled into her mum turning her head away from the children. I asked the children what they thought her responses might be telling us? They suggested that she might be feeling cross and didn't want to be in class or that she was feeling shy. One child then suggested that she just wanted to be held by her mum because she didn't feel very well. Anna's mum nodded and explained Anna was teething and had not had a good night waking several times. She continued to explain because of this Anna was needing her to help her more and was not as brave as she often was.'

After this session as a class we explored how we cope with the world

when we are tired or worried. I read them the 'Big bag of Worries' after which we drew worry monsters and shared them with each other. We explored the strategies we all used to help us when we felt worried or anxious. This finally led to a class first aid box. This was great as it contained a range of things from cuddles to chocolate and computer games. I was gradually able to extend this work into the classroom and link it with how we feel when we are given work that looks too difficult for us. Not only were the children able to talk about difficult feelings but they were able to share ways of managing them. This work extended into the emotions we experienced with learning and we were able to explore how we felt when we got stuck, became frustrated or worried about a piece of work.

Since that first project other schools have joined in and other teachers have experienced the same excitement as I did. They have found that the Circles for Learning Journey has led both themselves and their class into amazing discoveries, but all feel that their class have grown together and are much more tolerant, supportive and able to discuss and talk about how they feel as well as accept that others feel differently. They have also seen an impact on the children's ability to talk about and manage their own learning. This has included tolerating and managing frustration as well as being more aware of resilience and the importance of working together.

See the May 2016 issue for Part 2 and 'What is learning?'