



Circles for Learning - Part 2

Following on from the March issue of SEND Magazine, **Alison Waterhouse** an Educational Psychotherapist and SEN Consultant continues to look at the Circles for Learning project.

WHAT is learning? What skills or attributes do you need to be a good learner? Where could we observe learning happening? These were the three questions I asked a Year 6 Class that started us on a wonderful learning journey. Just the first question led to 30 minutes of heated discussion before we were finally able to share our ideas and collectively come up with our definition: 'Learning is all about having a joyful frame of mind while discovering new things to expand your knowledge.'

The children then worked together to identify the skills and attributes they felt a good learner possessed. The ones they identified neatly fitted into the seven defined by Bristol University as the 7 Dimensions of Learning (Ruth Deakin Crick, Guy Claxton and Professor Broadfoot). Children were

understandably pleased to hear that they had reached the same conclusions as the academics!

My final question, "Where could we observe learning happening?" prompted a straightforward reply. 'We should watch a baby!' And so our journey began.'

This is just one way that a teacher introduced 'Circles for Learning' into their class. This unique, whole class, inquiry-led learning journey brings a mother and baby into the classroom for an hour each month, for children to observe and interact with. This amazing journey, supported by a Learning Guide, allows children to experience how learning happens, explore brain development and develop their emotional literacy. They discover how early blocks for learning are laid down and have the time and space

to observe and discuss the importance of relationships and attachment in learning.

'A Year 4, 5 & 6 class observed baby Michael lie on his tummy, press his hands to the floor and lift his head and shoulders for the very first time. With the help of their Learning Guide they began to reflect and explore together on their own experiences of growing and learning how to do things. After a great deal of discussion on how they had learnt to move about as a baby from 'bottom shuffler', 'army crawl', rolling and pushing backwards, the class were able to agree that the outcomes were the same - it was only the paths to achieve them that were different. This observation enabled the children to make links to their own learning in the classroom. As the work unfolded it led to discussions about not giving up and

problem solving and a range of activities to explore and promote resilience. During the following weeks the class teacher helped them watch Michael use and develop these skills in his play. For the class this led to a wonderful learning vocabulary being developed which they shared enthusiastically with other children, parents or visitors.

Baby Anna sat on the rug and held the orange material book in her hands. She turned it this way and that, completely focused on it before tugging at the corner and finally separating the pages. I asked the children why she worked so hard on opening the book. 'She wanted to know what was inside,' was the answer that one of the children gave.

This observation and comment became the starting point for a range of activities exploring curiosity. One of the activities involved the class teacher collecting questions that the children had thought of and wanted answered at the end of their observations sessions. Once these were collected, the class then chose the 3 best ones and set the challenge to find the answers and share with each other. During one session one of the children commented – 'You know it's funny miss, each time we find the answer to a question it makes us ask another question.'

The Circles for Learning project not only supported class teachers and their children explore skills that make good learners but also provided the space to explore a range of feelings and emotions and how they can influence our actions and our learning.

One teacher using the Circles for Learning project with her class was concerned about how they were managing playtimes. They were constantly falling out with each other and becoming very aggressive. She decided to tackle this through the mum and baby observation sessions and asked mum to come in and talk about the times Baby Rose became cross. The children listened to her stories completely enthralled. The children then worked with their teacher to explore anger as an emotion through a range of activities. Many of the children were able to talk about things which made them angry and how they managed this feeling. Children shared the 'strategies' they found useful. Although the playground difficulties didn't completely

disappear they certainly improved. More importantly, children started to support each other in managing challenging situations, to put words to the emotions they were feeling and to problem solve how to make things better for each other.

In another year 6 class there were a high number of children with Additional Needs. The class teacher experienced constant difficulties when the children had to work together and behaviour within the classroom was challenging. The class teacher used the baby and mother observation sessions to introduce and then support work on empathy and the ability to think about others. The sessions and the resources supported her in finding different ways to challenge the children's behaviour and talk about emotions and ways of managing these within the classroom.

'The Circles for Learning Project enabled me to see the children's emotional and social needs as well as their academic needs. It provided me with the opportunities to explore these with the children and then in the follow-up sessions we were able to undertake a range of activities that helped them make links to their own attitudes and behaviour.'

The Circles for Learning project creates a forum for children to think

about, explore and discuss how they feel about different situations with their class teacher and then to work together to think of possible ways to manage these. By watching their class baby they are able to watch learning unfold and then relate the skills they identify to themselves. Through doing this they are able to grow and expand their own learning skills. Interwoven into the work emotional literacy is extended and social skills developed. By experiencing the richness of the project children are able to understand that all of us are unique and have something special to offer.

'I have watched the children in my class visibly grow in their learning. They have become more engaged, they talk about learning more and are far more interested in how they all learn. They are more engaged in the activities we are doing, and have all taken more responsibility in their learning. For me, however, the most important thing is that they are much more supportive of each other now. They work together in a far more positive way and they all seem to be developing greater resilience when working. It really has been a great project and one I can't wait to undertake again next year.'

If you would like to know more about the Circles for Learning Project then visit www.circlesforlearning.co.uk

