

# Circles for Learning

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## Mother and baby observations within the classroom

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### Introduction

Circles for Learning is a unique, whole class, inquiry-led learning journey. For one hour each month, it brings a mother and baby into the classroom, for children to observe and interact with. This amazing journey, supported by a Learning Guide, allows children at Key Stages 1-3 to reflect on their experiences of how learning happens, to explore brain development and to develop their emotional literacy. They discover how early building blocks for learning are laid down, and have the time and space to observe and discuss the importance of relationships and attachment. The observation sessions are then supported with focus sessions. These sessions support the interests of the children or the themes that the class teacher identifies as of concern within the class.

### Research evidence

Throughout this article, I use a variety of academic research to highlight how the Circles for Learning project is effective in supporting both the development of learning dispositions, and the social and emotional development of children within school. To demonstrate how the academic research links directly to the Circles for Learning project, I will use a variety of examples gathered first hand from the pilot schools involved.

### Origins

As the founding Head of a therapeutic special school, and in my role as an SEN Consultant and Educational Psychotherapist, I have always been fascinated by children's beliefs and thinking about their learning. What causes them to engage and make progress, stall or become stuck?

A few years ago, a friend of my daughter had a baby. I watched my daughter become fascinated by the baby's development and the interactions she had with her mother. This curiosity and fascination reminded me of my own baby observation sessions whilst training as a psychotherapist, and the impact they had on my role as a parent, and on my thinking about relationships with the children I was working with.

At about the same time, I was working in a school in Hastings, supporting staff with work discussion groups and supervision. A group of newly appointed Individual Needs Assistants were all supporting children whom they described as 'not able to engage with learning as

other children do'. I introduced staff to elements of attachment theory and learning. We discussed emotional responses to learning and the importance of early relationships in developing our ability and attitudes to learning. The staff started to become fascinated by the concept of behaviour as a form of communication rather than just 'naughty' behaviour.

During this time, I also undertook some work with Bristol University on the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory or ELLI (Deakin, Crick et al, 2006). The work focused on learning power - how learners perceive themselves as learners - and identified seven dimensions of learning power in which a good learner is accomplished. The learning dimensions also took into account the thinking, doing and feelings entwined with learning.

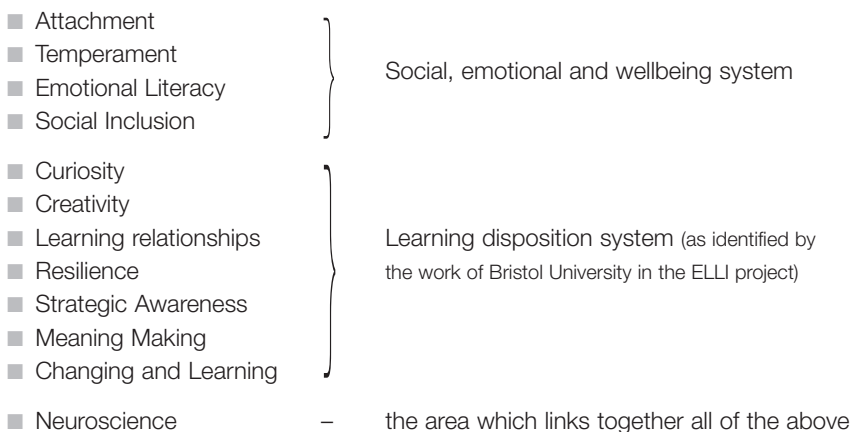
The culmination of these thoughts, experiences and observations resulted in my development of the Circles for Learning Project. Its purpose is to enable the development of a range of activities and experiences within the classroom that support the enhancement of learning and social and emotional wellbeing. Its practice is based on identified research from many different fields – education, psychoanalysis, psychology, neuroscience – and is concerned with support for both children and teaching professionals.

## The Framework

Circles for Learning has two main goals:

1. To support children in their awareness and development of learning dispositions and enhance their social skills, emotional literacy and wellbeing.
2. To support teachers' knowledge and understanding of learning and the complex intermingling of emotional and social factors involved.

These two goals link together to explore twelve areas of understanding relevant to learning and teaching:



The Circles for Learning Project supports the understanding of attachment and its implications for learning (Geddes, 2006). It encourages the understanding of emotions and their impact on both self esteem and academic success, demonstrates the importance of learning within a social context and supports teachers in understanding how to develop positive dispositions or skills for learning. Class teachers are trained and supported to act as the children's Learning Guide during the observation sessions. They encourage children to observe, ask questions, discuss and compare what they have experienced and what this means for them.

## Information from Research and Links with Theory

A growing body of research is showing that schools need to support children not only in learning but also in their social and emotional development. Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), suggests that family lives are far more complicated than ever before and are no longer able to give a growing number of children a secure footing in life. He suggests that schools are left as the one place to support their social and emotional development as well as develop their learning (Goleman, 1996).

Shonkoff & Phillips (2000) state that Interventions that combine child focused educational activities with attention to interaction and relationships are the most effective ways of supporting children. US Public Health Services (2000) recognise that support for mental health within schools is critical for a child's learning and general health, and state that 'fostering good social and emotional health in children must be a national priority.'

Dudley Infants School in Hastings piloted the project. Here, I was able to introduce monthly mother and baby observation sessions to a Year 2 class. The children could watch and interact with the baby, seeing her grow and develop. Throughout the duration of the project, the class teacher and myself led further weekly sessions focusing on a range of themes and topics – either raised by the children or identified by the class teacher.

*The first session, when the children met 6 week old baby Anna, was magical. The children sat enthralled in a circle, watching the interactions between Mum and baby. They took turns asking questions: What did baby Anna like to eat? To play with? To do? What could she do now? How has she changed since she was born?*

Melanie Klein (1930) proposed that every child was born with a desire to find out about the world – 'The epistemophilic instinct.' She concluded that in the beginning, the child is focused on the mother. As the child grows, his interest and curiosity extend first to his family and then outwards towards the wider world. Within the observation sessions, we were able to watch that early interaction between mother and baby, alongside the class's unfolding curiosity about Anna.

Piaget (1969) described curiosity as the urge to explain the unexpected. Engel (2011) argues that curiosity is intrinsic to child development and unfolds during social interactions. Both highlight the fact that child development is driven by the child's efforts to understand and find out about the world and how it works.

## The practice

*'Is baby Anna coming into class today?' was the greeting I got from several children as they came into school. I nodded and said yes. Each time baby Anna and her Mum came into school, great excitement was felt by the whole class doing the Circles for Learning Project.*

*As the children sat in the circle, the feeling of expectation and excitement was high. We had been talking all morning about Anna, wondering what she had learnt to do and what stories her mum was going to tell us. When Anna and her mother came into the class, the children sat quietly until the two of them were settled. They watched as Anna looked around, some of them waving to her and saying hello. She responded with a smile and a wriggle as if she wanted to get off her mum's lap and approach the children. Anna was now 9 months old and very interested in the children. Her mum put her down on her rug, where she sat, slightly wobbly, and watched us. She then looked back to her mum for reassurance, before getting herself onto all fours so she could crawl. The children all had lots of questions which they were dying to ask. We went around the circle and they asked Mum what they wanted to know. Every once in a while, I would draw the children's attention to something Anna did or an interaction she had and ask what they felt she was doing and why. We explored how she might feel, what her action might be about and what she might want.*

## Role of the Learning Guide informed by theory

The teachers own behaviour has a powerful effect on promoting children's exploration and curiosity (Engel & Labella, 2011). Acting as the Learning Guide, the class teacher was able to model the asking of questions, making links between what they saw and how Anna or her mother might be feeling. This encouraged the children to be more curious, explore what they were seeing, ask questions, hypothesise and make links with what they already knew.

*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 mum's leg. Her mum verbalised for Anna what had just happened saying, 'He's saying hello., He's pleased to see you. Can you wave at him?' Anna turned back to the boy and watched him. One of the children asked, 'Why doesn't she wave back?' I asked what they thought. Several children put their hands up. 'I think*

*she is a little wary, she's only just got here.' 'I think she is thinking about who to go to as there as so many of us.' These were just two of the answers the children gave. I wondered aloud why she had looked at her mum. 'She wanted to know if it was all right to come and see me,' stated 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 showed how observant and sensitive the group of Year 2 children could be when supported by their Learning Guide. It also demonstrates the links they were able to make between behaviour and how someone feels. This link was then really easy to expand and use within the classroom as a way of supporting them to think about their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

Bion (1962) put forward a model of learning based on the intricate pattern of interaction between mother and baby in the earliest stages. He suggested that infants need considerable help from their mothers in thinking about and making sense of their experiences. If the infant consistently experiences a mother/carer who is able to 'contain' his primitive anxieties, he will be able to draw on this memory as he develops. Bion argued that being able to learn and think depends on the early experience of being thought about by the mother/carer.

John Bowlby (1969) was particularly interested in the early mother-infant relationship. He believed that it was fundamental to a growing child's ability to explore and learn. His research and experiences led to the concepts of an attachment figure and a secure base from which the developing infant could explore the world.

*In my role as Learning Guide, I pointed out behaviours and interactions and asked questions of the children. I encouraged them to consider how Baby Anna might feel being with so many children in a strange place, and what might be helping her to manage. How would we know if she was struggling to manage? The children quickly understood that Anna's Mum provided Anna with a feeling of safety - a 'Secure Base' - which she needed in order to be open to what was happening around her. From this understanding, they were able to create a list of what they needed in class if they were to be open to their learning. Later in the week, we explored how children in the class felt when they experienced new situations, and the strategies they used when they were anxious or worried. Together, we created a 'New Situation Toolkit', full of strategies for managing new and different situations. This proved a really useful resource for working together over the year and enabled us to create a positive classroom learning space for all children.*

Through the observations, the children and their class teacher were able to discuss and then identify the need for a physically as well as emotionally safe place for learning to happen. By watching Baby Anna, the children were able to make links with their own needs and abilities and then put these into words.

*'I like to stand and watch before I try things out.'*

*'I tend to have a go and see what happens.'*

These were just two of the comments made by two Year 2 children after the observations and 'What I need to learn' session. It led on to further conversations over the following weeks and months, when the teacher was able to ask children, 'What do you need, to be able to get your work done?'

This was also the beginning of an understanding about Social Inclusion; that every child is different and may need different things/environments to achieve.

## Attachment and Temperament

It has been suggested (Orford,1996; Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne,1983) that when children enter the world of formal education, the teacher and the school take over the 'containing' parental role and become the attachment figure for the child (Barrett & Trevitt,1991; Alexander, Entwistle & Thompson,1987). It is through this relationship with the teacher that children experience a secure base for exploring the world within the classroom. (Howes,1999; Pianta,1998).

*'Understanding the concept for a secure base and attachment has really helped me understand some of the behaviour I was experiencing within my class, especially the difficulties the children had when I was on my PPA time. Knowing about this helped me put a range of strategies in place that supported those children who really struggled when I was not there.'*

*'I was always told not to let the children become too dependent on me. Finding out about attachment and the need for a secure base has meant that I am able to understand that dependency for some children is the first stage to them becoming independent.'*

These were just some of the comments that the class teachers and teaching assistants verbalised after the training on attachment.

When discussing the type of environment that the children needed for learning, Daniel (Year 3) put into words how he felt when his class teacher was out of class. *'I like it better when you're here Miss, everyone is more settled and they don't muck about like they do for the supply teacher.'* This enabled the class teacher to spend time with the children talking about how they felt when she wasn't there and also how to make this more manageable for them.

Chess (1987) says that each child is born with a unique temperament that influences the interaction they receive, as well as the way they experience it. Initially, this is primarily from their mother. It then extends to their whole family. Right from the beginning, there is a

complicated fusion of internal temperament and external experiences, impacting on the way they feel and ultimately think about the world. It is this early experience of learning, between infant and mother and then infant and family that will determine the type of learner the child will be (Youell, 2006).

*'During one of the sessions with Baby Anna, her mum explained that she was now starting to try new foods. She described how Anna was exploring food in a different way from how her older brother and sister had. Mum was able to describe how Baby Anna instantly liked some foods and disliked others but some she was unsure of. She described her as enjoying new things*

*This discussion led us to explore the work around temperament and how we deal with new situations. Were we the type of person who liked to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in straight away? Did we prefer to stand back and watch what others did and then tentatively join in? Or did new things frighten us and make us want to hide? During the discussion, where we were able to explore how different children dealt with new things, one of the girls said she didn't like new things as they frightened her. A group of boys found this very interesting and tried to understand this different point of view. This then led us to discuss how to help children move to their new school – Dudley was an infant school and so the children were all due to leave later that year. As a class, we were able to talk about transition and what they needed to make it positive. This then fed back into the SLT (Senior Leadership Team) meetings and the Transition Plan for the year. It also meant that when the children got to that phase they all supported those who didn't find change quite so appealing. 'Come on I know you don't like it but I'll be there to help you and soon you'll get used to it,' was one of the comments from the boys to their more anxious friend.*

This illustration shows how one of the observations sessions led into a class discussion about how the children experience new things. This group focus allowed children to make links with their own experiences and hear about those of others. It supported greater class cohesion and also laid the foundations for further work on understanding the emotional aspects of learning, which the class teacher could then explore with individuals or the class.

Pullis (1985) found that increasing teachers' awareness of how children's temperaments impact on their response to academic tasks and social interactions can reduce negative pupil reactions and bring about more positive experiences for both the children and their teachers.

## Recognising feelings

Putting feelings into words and sharing them with other people are skills that are learned from past experiences and are supported by the encouragement and expectations of

others. For children who have not experienced this, a vital source of emotional regulation is unavailable. (Cozolino, 2013).

An illustration of this is shown in the extract below. The baby observation session led the class to explore feelings and emotions and put these into words.

*During another session, Baby Anna was tired and grizzly. Her mum talked about her teething and how her gums ached. This led the children into talking about when they were sad and how that felt for each of them. As a class, we drew pictures of a time when we had felt sad and then what had happened to help us. One child who had recently arrived in the class had moved from London to Hastings and was living with his Mum in a women's refuge. His behaviour since arriving at school had been quite challenging and he had found making new friends hard. He drew a picture of his old house in London. He then chose to share this with the other children at the end of the session and he was able to talk about missing his old house, friends and school. This helped the other children to understand a little more about him and why perhaps he behaved in the way he did. The class were able to tolerate the sadness this child shared and then support him more empathically to integrate into the group.*

The Circles for Learning session was the starting point for the class to explore sadness, how this made them feel, the behaviour it then caused and what strategies they had already developed to manage this. Through the observation and the work of the learning guide, enabling the children to see their baby experience this emotion, and then through the follow up discussion, the new child felt safe enough to share his feelings with the class. With the support of their class teacher, the children were able to contain and 'think' about his sadness and then support him in integrating into the class.

## Thinking about learning

*What is learning? What skills or attributes do you need to be a good learner? Where could we observe learning happening?" These three questions, which I asked a Year 6 Class, 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 Seven Dimensions of Learning (Deakin, Crick et al, 2006). 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.*

When teachers encourage children to talk, to discuss their learning and the processes involved, the children's attitude towards both learning and their achievements becomes more positive (Watkins, 2001). Moreover, when teachers learn more about learning and the processes and dispositions involved, children's academic achievements improve (Munro, 1999).

*'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. They also saw Michael's mum well up with pride. The children began to reflect on and explore together their own experiences of growing up and their many differences in 'readiness', ability and problem solving. Following a great deal of discussion on moving about as a baby from 'bottom shuffler', 'army crawl', rolling and pushing backwards, the class were able to conclude that the outcomes were the same - it was only the paths to achieve them that were different. The children understood that they could apply this realisation to all areas of learning.*

*This led to a wonderful learning vocabulary shared by the whole class. This was infectious as they talked so knowledgeably to other students, parents or visitors.'*

The term 'Learning Power' has been used within education over the past 10 years. It derived from literature analysis and interviews with educational researchers and practitioners. Its 7 dimensions enable learning, change and growth (Deakin Crick et al 2004).

By sharing this research and knowledge with class teachers, the Circles for Learning Project used the baby observation sessions to identify and watch the early learning foundation bricks being laid, played with and then developed by the infants. The Learning Guides were able to support children in seeing the different skills for learning being explored and then, in the follow up sessions, to expand each one through a range of academic tasks and activities. This led to a shared class language for learning and enabled children to make links with their own learning.

## Creativity

Howard Gardner (1993) suggests that by the age of 7 every child has developed a reservoir of creativity. He believes that this initial reservoir can be called upon and added to throughout our lives.

Edward De Bono (1985) suggests that the creativity we see in young children comes about because of their innocence. If you have not been taught how to do things then you

'play' and find your own way. In this way, the child comes up with novel ways of looking at and doing things.

*'When a class witnessed their visiting baby playing creatively with a toy, their teacher used the experience as a starting point to explore the importance of creativity in learning. She showed the class an animated film of an old lady who lived in a rubbish dump and collected rubbish to make into beautiful things for her home. Children were then given pieces of unwanted or broken items to make into useful or beautiful items for the old lady. Not only was the creativity amazing, the activity inspired a discussion about finding the positive in difficult situations. The concept of 'reframing' was introduced and explored. The following day, Terry, one of the more volatile boys, recounted to the teacher his experience of being pushed aside in the dinner line. 'I didn't get angry Miss, I just reframed what had happened and thought – he must be hungrier than me. I felt like a better person because I didn't push him or hit him, I didn't need to.'*

In this example we see the creativity shown by the baby observation enabled their class teacher to introduce a range of activities for the children in which to explore creativity. These experiences enabled children to make links with their own learning and to share their thoughts and experiences with each other. Annarella (1999) argues that fostering children's creativity in the classroom will support their problem solving in the future. For Terry and the class, the activity on making something beautiful out of rubbish led to a discussion about finding something positive in difficult situations. The class teacher then used this to support children in understanding that how we think about situations often impacts on how we behave. Terry was able to take this reframing concept and use it to manage his behaviour. The safe and secure space the teacher had created within the classroom enabled him to share this realisation with his class and they were able to support him with trying out this new way of seeing the world in the days and weeks that followed.

*Toby, who had a statement for dyslexia, had become very stuck in his learning and believed that he was stupid. Watching his class baby push up on his knees for the first time led to an amazing breakthrough. The class teacher followed up the moment of the baby learning something new for the first time with work on neurons firing and linking. After acting out the neurons firing and talking about different ways we all learn, Toby asked the class, 'Is that what's wrong with me – my neurons aren't firing?' His teacher explained that this wasn't the case and showed how some pathways needed lots of practice to become established. She followed this with work on Gardener's multiple intelligences, enabling Toby to understand that he was extremely good in other areas. He proudly told the class, 'I'm excellent at being nature smart and practice smart - I'm going to need these to work outside. I'd make a great gardener or farmer!' The transformation in Toby's work was astonishing. Before the project, he would avoid writing in every way. After the work on neurons and the multiple intelligences his class teacher was unable to stop him.'*

For Toby, the Circles for Learning project enabled him to explain to the teacher and the class his thinking about his own learning. This enabled them to help him to view his skills in a different way. The Circles for Learning had given them a common language and a forum to share and discuss ideas and thoughts in a safe way. His teacher utilised this to help him understand how he learnt and to adapt and use this knowledge to achieve within the class. When a child feels emotionally safe within his relationship with his teacher then he can use him/her as a secure base and a resource for exploring the learning opportunities within the classroom or the school environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997. Howes, 2000). Toby's new understanding enabled him to keep going with his learning when it became difficult. He was able to understand that he was 'smart' in a range of areas. It supported his self-belief and in so doing increased his resilience.

## Coping in the classroom and relationships

*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 that because of this Anna was needing her to help her more and was not as brave as she often was.'*

This session led me to explore with the children how we cope with the world when we are tired or worried. During our next session, I read them the Big Bag of Worries (2011) and we all drew worries that we had and then shared them with the class. We explored the strategies we all used to help us when we felt worried or anxious. I then gave the children a picture of a first aid box and asked them to create their own first aid box to deal with worries and anxiety. This was great, as they 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.

Gottman, Katz & Hooven (1997) discuss how children's ability to manage social aspects of the classroom increases through positive interactions with adults. Responding appropriately to emotional displays; labelling emotions in a considerate and supportive way; helping children with strategies to modulate and manage their emotions are all examples of how adult input can make a difference.

Children who have a positive relationship with their teacher are also more likely to create positive relationships with their peers (Howes, Matherson & Hamilton, 1994) and to make good use of the learning opportunities within the organisation (Howes & Smith, 1994) The experiences created by the Circles for Learning Project, enable class teachers to develop strong relationships with the children within their class and these relationships

enable teachers to support individual children in their emotional development, social skills and learning.

*Joseph, a child with Social Communication difficulties, held their class baby and after a few moments of looking at her she smiled up at him. His face lit up as he turned to his teacher to say, 'I think she really likes me'. This moment stayed with him for the days and weeks following the baby's visit.*

This was a really powerful experience and one that the class teacher was then able to utilise to support him in interacting with the other children in his class and with others. A reminder of how wonderful it felt when the baby looked at him and smiled became, for all the children, the start of many conversations and discussions about interactions and responses to others.

## Conclusion

Deakin, Crick et al (2010) identify four main areas that support and contribute to learning:

1. Learning Capabilities: including dispositions, awareness and skills.
2. Learning Identity: including beliefs, values, and attitudes about learning held by the learner.
3. Learning Story: the socio-cultural formation of learners over time
4. Learning Relationships: the quality and substance of learning relationships.

Circles for Learning allows children to observe and then explore how the skills and attitudes necessary for learning develop. With the support of their Learning Guide, they are able to think about, discuss and extend this knowledge, making links to their own learning through a range of activities within the classroom. This experience supports the development of emotional literacy and a deeper understanding of how emotions influence their learning, their social interactions and behaviour. For teachers, a range of theoretical research is shared and explored. Linked to the experience of running the Circles for Learning project, this theoretical understanding informs and develops practice within the classroom. The Circles for Learning project supports an understanding of the importance of social skills in learning. It gives teachers a forum to help children develop and explore their learning, their interactions with others, feelings and emotions and the influence these can have both now and in the future. It supports their ability to think, question, understand and problem solve, and in so doing promotes academic achievement and emotional wellbeing.

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