

Circles for Learning : Primary Research project to support the development of mental health and wellbeing.

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Introduction



Children's emotional wellbeing influences their cognitive development, learning, social skills and emotional skills. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnick, Taylor & Schellinger, (2014); Public Health England (2014).

Evidence shows that work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing has a wide range of educational and social benefits, including greater educational and work success, improved behaviour, increased Inclusion, improved learning, greater social cohesion, increased social capital, and

improvements to mental health. (Weare and Gray, 2003).

Identifying ways to support and develop wellbeing in school are therefore important if we wish the children & young people of today to grow into healthy well balanced and successful adults of the future. How to weave this into the curriculum in a way that supports both the teacher's knowledge and development and enriches the experience of young people, was the focus of the Circles for Learning project developed and undertaken by Alison Waterhouse in 5 Primary Schools in East Sussex.

Research Questions

Does the use of parent infant observation within the classroom once a month for a year have an impact on:

- * Developing stronger adult child relationships which then impact on behavioural management,
- * Developing a classroom culture supportive of mental health and wellbeing,
- * Developing social and emotional competencies, including empathy,
- * Developing a sense of self including resilience,
- * A stronger learning culture where children can engage with and discuss their learning,
- * Support staff knowledge and understanding of emotional barriers to learning and the importance of the learning relationship.



What we did

5 primary schools signed up to the research project. The children were from across the year groups including a year 2 class, a year 3 class a year 4, 5 and 6 class and two year 6 classes. The mother and baby were found from within the school community and included non professional parents as well as a professional speech and language therapist, and educational psychologist . All the class teachers were trained and supervised by Alison Waterhouse, an Educational Psychotherapist. Teachers were supported

within their own schools to set up the parent infant observations and then met together every 6 weeks as a group to share and discuss what they had done, the response from their children and the impact this was having on both themselves as teachers and their classroom.

After each session Alison shared research or academic papers that supported the learning and observations that the class teachers were experiencing or were discussed in the sessions.

Alison met with each teacher on a weekly basis to discuss the

next steps they might take and to share resources that they might like to use with the children as follow up activities exploring a range of areas linked to developing positive strategies for Mental Health and Wellbeing.



The impact on Teaching and Learning - Children

Observation	Follow up Activity	Outcome	Long Term Impact
Mum supporting baby to come into class	Temperament and how we manage new situations	Transition Policy written with the children to support their transition to Junior School.	Children were more able to support each other and think about how people were feeling in class.
Baby struggling to put shapes in a shape sorter	Introduction of the word perseverance and discussion about resilience and the strategies you could use when you were struggling.	Class created a list of strategies to try when the going gets tough.	Greater resilience and ability to keep going on work. More supportive of each other and more able to problem solve.
The enjoyment of Mum and baby when they looked at each other.	Class teacher posed the question 'Does love grow brains?'	Research looking for evidence to support different views to enable a debate.	Emotional literacy and an understanding of different points of view. Greater understanding of neuroscience
Mum sharing with children her visit to the hospital and their class baby's sensitivity to milk	Research questions posed by the children	Individual research projects exploring a range of different areas. An exhibition for families.	Research skills, presentation skills, collaboration, Celebration that we are all different.
Watching their class baby look for Mum when she got upset or overwhelmed.	What strategies do we use to self regulate ourselves?	A word thermometer to show the many words that describe angry & sad from strongest to weakest.	Developing emotional literacy Strategies to use to self regulate
A baby trying different ways to put rings on a stick	What skills do you use when you are trying to learn something new? A debate on which skills are best.	Discussion and shared language for how we learn Introduction to the ELLI project.	A language for learning. Understanding about the skills needed and the emotions involved.
A baby learning to crawl.	Learning & the brain. Enquiry—the best ways to learn our spellings	Deeper conversations about learning. We all learn in different ways.	Learning conversations and skills for learning. Greater support for each other.

The impact on Teaching and Learning - Practitioners

Stimulus	Outcome
Understanding Attachment and its impact on learning within the classroom.	This led to working with the children on how to manage PPA time and the creation of a class folder. This supported the relationship between class teacher and children and enabled a discussion to be had about how hard it was for the children when she wasn't there.
How our thoughts impact on our behaviour	This led to one teacher sharing the thoughts, actions, feelings triangle with the children which then supported behaviour management strategies.
Emotional barriers to learning	The parent baby observations created a shared time to talk and think about what the children felt and believed which created better relationships with each other. It enabled discussions about how the children managed frustration, asking for help, accepting help and making mistakes.
Strengthening attunement between teacher and children. Emotional Competencies.	Due to difficulties with focus, concentration and observations the class teacher focused on teaching strategies to manage self regulation and became more attuned to her children's needs. This in turn led to stronger relationships and ability to manage their behaviour within the classroom.
Strengthening observations & supporting reflection questioning and finding out information.	The baby observations highlighted the groups poorly developed questioning, this allowed the class teacher to teach and develop this as a way of finding information and supported children making links with what they were learning.
Observing learning	This led one teacher to use the dimensions for learning to support discussions about what & how the children were learning & to make links with other areas.

The feedback from the research schools was very positive, with all the teachers feeling that the work of the Circles for Learning project had really had an impact on their relationships with the children which, linked with the discussions on managing behaviour, had resulted in better understanding of how to manage the behaviour. Teachers felt that the observations supported their teaching of social skills and managing emotions which they

felt had an impact on how children responded to each other both in and out of the class. All teachers felt that the work had improved both a language for learning and also emotional literacy within their classroom and had made for a better classroom ethos of support, acceptance, empathy and learning.

What Next?

- Develop a training programme to support teachers run the project within their schools.
- Develop resources for teachers to use as follow up activities after the observations.
- Measure the impact on emotional and social competencies, learning and self development.
- Explore further the impact of training teachers in how to develop social and emotional competencies and the impact on classroom culture.



References

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- Brooks, F. (2014) *The Link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment: A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in educational settings.* Public Health England.
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