

Circle of friends

Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties can be helped to think and feel in a different way through a 'circle of friends'. Bob Burden and Gill Taylor report on some illuminating research

A mistake that is sometimes made when thinking about thinking is to assume that it is separate in some way from the affective or emotional side of our lives, when in fact the two are, or should be, complementary. The caricatures with which we are often presented set in opposition the emotionally immature, isolated "boffin" at one end of the continuum against the warm-hearted, loveable "scatterbrain" at the other. Extensive research by the American psychologist Lewis Terman has put paid conclusively to this myth. In his long-term follow up study of the life histories of those who had been identified as intellectually gifted children, Terman found them to be far better emotionally adjusted as adults, as well as being more successful in their careers, than the population at large.

One of the most positive outcomes of Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences has been the growing recognition that intelligence is not only manifested by scores on IQ tests. Gardner reminds us also that intelligence is not some form of static entity with which we are endowed at birth in differing degrees that are fixed for life, but rather the ways in which we function more or less effectively in various culturally significant forms of endeavour such as music, art, technological and interpersonal skills. Seen from this perspective, it follows naturally that anyone can learn to act intelligently in different contexts, thereby becoming more

intelligent, if they are given the right kind of help to do so. This is a key underlying premise of the current emphasis on teaching thinking skills and one that can and should be applied to all worthwhile forms of human endeavour.

The identification by Daniel Goleman of the need to develop emotional intelligence takes us one step further in this direction. Linking this in with Gardner's notions of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences helps us to recognise that these are areas the broader school curriculum ignores at its peril. There are many teachers and parents who believe, with some justification, that the first manifestation of our National Curriculum in schools placed far too great an emphasis upon skills training in a narrow range of specific subject areas and not enough emphasis upon the overall development of the whole child. The introduction of citizenship as a new National Curriculum subject may go some way towards providing a counterbalance to this trend, but in secondary schools in particular, the emotional needs of students and the pastoral duties of teachers are in increasing danger of becoming something of an afterthought.

One effective method of meeting the social and emotional needs of individual pupils in both primary and secondary schools, by drawing upon and developing the interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence of other pupils in the same class, is *Circle of Friends*. This is an approach that originated in Canada and the USA to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools as well as supporting adults with disabilities within the community. It has subsequently come to be increasingly recognised in the UK as a particularly useful approach to meeting the needs of children with emotional and social difficulties in mainstream schools.

In supporting children with emotional and social needs, a *Circle of Friends* aims to enable such children to develop their understanding of their own behaviour and provide them with

more choices about how to behave when faced with personal problems by creating a support network of friends from within the peer group. The approach attempts to achieve these aims by means of a carefully co-ordinated set of procedures which are implemented in stages, beginning with the identification of a child who would benefit from a circle of support, the commitment of that child's school and class/form teacher to making the necessary organisational arrangements, the agreement and support of the child's parent(s) or carer(s) and the informed consent of the focus child him/herself.

to eight children who will meet weekly together with the focus child and the teacher to discuss their thoughts and feelings about how things are developing and to agree action for the coming week.

The first meeting of the *Circle of Friends* occurs immediately after this class discussion to ensure that the focus child is fully informed and involved. The external facilitator leads this and encourages all the children in the group to tell the focus child directly why she or he wants to be part of their *Circle of Friends*. The group then decide on a name for themselves.



At this point a discussion with the child's class can occur, usually co-ordinated by an external facilitator. And the preparation stage begins. During this discussion (where the focus child is not usually involved) ground rules are set, the context of the problem is explored, empathic understanding is developed and the class's help is sought in looking for a positive solution. Positive elements in the problem situation are identified before focusing on difficulties and then followed by an exploration of how the focus child might be feeling: ideas are then generated for supporting the focus child and changing the situation. Next, volunteers are requested to make up a special support peer group of six

It is important at this stage for there to be honest, open, supportive discussion of the nature of the perceived problems leading to constructive, shared action plans and a commitment from all concerned to carry out these during the following weeks. Meetings typically run for 30-40 minutes and the formal life of the *Circle* ends when there is a general feeling within the group, usually after about half a term, that there have been significant improvements in the situation, that 'natural' good friendships have developed and the focus child can imagine functioning well without the weekly meeting. The key issue then becomes ensuring that the *Circle* is ended properly, as this is

just as important as the process of starting it.

The evaluation of whether or not such a process has been successful is obviously extremely hard to judge. Traditional experimental-control group designs are clearly not appropriate for ethical as well as pragmatic reasons. Trying to identify appropriate outcome measures poses further difficulties. What, after all, should we reasonably expect in the

- empowerment
- a sense of belonging

On a wider level, we might also look for the strengthening of a positive classroom climate and even, eventually, a strong positive school ethos.

We have begun to collect data from a number of such case studies, which are providing evidence for the effectiveness of this technique. In the



way of positive change as a result of such limited, short-term intervention? A sensible response to these dilemmas would seem to be to build up a dossier of case studies describing in detail the ongoing processes of a series of *Circles of Friends* together with the reactions of all those involved – the students, the teachers, the focus child and his/her family.

It is also possible to identify some of the key changes that we would hope to see occurring during and as a result of a *Circle of Friends*:

- the development of empathy
- greater self-awareness
- honesty and clarity of communication

case of Emma, an isolated five-year-old, for example, her *Circle of Friends*, the 'Friendly Fish Group', not only enabled her to make friends and become socially included, but also led to more co-operative general play and work in the classroom and increasing awareness by Emma and several other children of the effects on others of their own behaviour.

Sylvester, on the other hand, was a disruptive, aggressive nine-year-old, whose inadequate social skills led him to be shunned by the other children in his class. Sylvester, his mother, his teacher and members of his *Circle of Friends* all reported positive outcomes as the result of the establishment of a

Circle of Friends, which included Sylvester gradually taking control of his temper, friends coming for the first time to Sylvester's birthday party, an increased awareness by Sylvester of his own responsibility for his behaviour and the whole class becoming much calmer and supporting each other.

Sheridan was a 13-year-old girl who was unable to accept criticism in any shape or form, dramatising situations until they escalated, often into violence. The results of establishing a *Circle of Friends* for her were an increased ability to 'step back' from disputes and control her temper, less escalation of problems, an increased thoughtfulness and an increased confidence in giving and receiving constructive criticism to and from others.

Friendship issues are vitally important to children of all ages. However, sociometric studies have shown that children vary enormously in their ability to make and keep friends i.e. in their interpersonal intelligence and in their ability to understand their own role in contributing to this situation. This is something which can be learnt or helped to develop, but which is rarely taught in schools. The *Circle of Friends* technique makes it possible to take a holistic approach to child development in which thinking and feeling are encouraged in an integrated manner.

Bob Burden is Professor of Applied Educational Psychology and Head of the School of Education at Exeter University.

Gill Taylor is strategic manager for social inclusion at Birmingham LEA. She can be contacted via email: gill_taylor@birmingham.gov.uk

The research described here has been supported by a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. A copy of the full research report is available on application from Professor Bob Burden at the School of Education, Exeter University, Exeter EX1 2LU, or from Gill Taylor, c/o Education Department, Birmingham LEA.