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THIRD EDITION

Developing Language and Communication Skills through Effective Small Group Work

SPIRALS: FROM 3–8

Spirals

A David Fulton Book

MARION NASH WITH JACKIE LOWE AND TRACEY PALMER

Developing Language and Communication Skills through Effective Small Group Work

Poor language and communication skills have been shown to have a profound effect on the life chances of children and young people. Research tells us this consistently over the years. The national review by John Bercow (2008) emphasised this.

Now in its third edition, *Developing Language and Communication Skills through Effective Small Group Work* provides essential information for practitioners working with linguistically vulnerable children. It is underpinned by an approach based on developmental psychology and brain based research. The book provides clarity and repetition of key concepts at a level that this particular cohort of children requires. The book now includes a section on using the power of puppets to support communication. Feedback from practitioners is that it is not only fun to run the SPIRALS groups but also highly effective in providing the support the children need. SPIRALS training has been mapped onto the SLCF (Speech, Language and Communication Framework).

The SPIRALS language book contains a wealth of effective ideas for activities to support good practice to develop children's speech, language and communication skills. The most powerful way to use SPIRALS is as set out in the sessions as an ongoing programme, although these activities can be used as stand-alone ideas to target a particular area of concern. The sessions have been carefully designed to build upon children's existing skills base. Small spirals of learning are introduced at a pace the children can access and retain. SPIRALS supports good practice in early years settings and schools up to Key Stage 2. The aim is to develop effective language and communication skills which will underpin a range of critical thinking, reasoning and social competency skills as well as increased ability to listen, maintain focus and learn effectively. Also it has been shown that improvements in levels of spoken language can have a positive impact on written literacy.

Included in this book are:

- concise explanations of the terms and concepts involved;
- clear guidelines for setting up and running small group sessions;
- 36 structured lesson plans for nursery and early primary years to Key Stage 2;
- photocopiable resources;
- lists of further reading and resources;
- revised early years and reception year material;
- references to the Bercow Report (2008);
- a section on using puppets effectively;
- additional 'bubble commentaries' offering useful tips and suggestions to teachers.

This fully updated edition will be particularly useful for teachers, teaching assistants in early years and in schools, speech and language therapists and assistants interested in the SPIRALS language development technique.

Marion Nash, an educational psychologist, is currently focusing her doctoral research on her professional interest in speech, language and communication needs. Marion provides training for early years settings, primary schools, speech and language therapy service teams and local authorities with I CAN, the national speech and language charity.

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SPIRALS: from 3–8

Third edition

Marion Nash
with Jackie Lowe and Tracey Palmer

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To Tom, with love

So much that I value has been added by
Tom's energy, enthusiasm and chuckles.

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Introduction: how Circle Time has been developed in schools over time

> Hearts, mind and hand interact with language and make learning possible.
> (Philip Taylor, 1985)

Circle Time group work is a key strategy which has been used successfully in schools for many years to give children opportunities to develop a range of vital social and academic skills. Circle work can be of great benefit to children who have assumed a passive or inattentive role in class rather than taking the personal risks involved in putting forward their ideas, perceptions and questions in the public arena. The feelings of support and safety created within the group can encourage the learner to take the first few steps towards contributing in class.

In order to develop both cooperative circle work and emotional awareness, Leslie Button used developmental group work as active tutorial work in secondary schools in the 1960s. Later it was realised that the safe and creative ethos in which the activities were set would be just as productive for the younger child. Through the work of educational practitioners the idea of sessions incorporating developmental group work was developed in the educational field as Circle Time. Jenny Mosley was one of the first practitioners to develop and apply a whole-school quality Circle Time model in British schools in the early 1980s and her work had a tremendous positive impact on schools, teachers and children. Jenny has always made a strong case for spending quality time on Circle Time because of the wide-ranging positive effects it has on pupils' listening and speaking skills and wider personal, social and academic achievement.

Jenny has continued to develop ideas based on this very positive model and has always included consideration of the needs of the adults who support the pupils, making Circle Time a very powerful and enjoyable and inclusive way to develop self-esteem and communication skills. Jenny's enthusiastic presentations have inspired many to adopt this approach in their schools, with many attendant benefits.

One of my early encounters with whole-school circle work was in 1989. I was researching for my master's degree based on a study of a middle school which used developmental group work throughout the school. I was impressed with the children's skills in communication and language. They were especially skilled in using language to resolve conflict and to work together

effectively, and my thesis reflected this. I came to Plymouth in 1990 to join the Educational Psychology team and I worked over a ten-year period to raise awareness of the special ethos and benefits of Circle Time with many head teachers, teaching staff, assistants, speech and language therapists and parents. Part of my work was to train professionals in the skills they would need to develop Circle Time in schools. As part of this development with schools I found Jenny's books, especially *Turn Your School Round* and *Circle Time for Mealtime Assistants*, particularly useful, as did the schools I recommended them to as a resource. I also had the opportunity to meet Jenny in 1991 when I attended one of her courses, which was held at the Seely Hotel in Bristol. Attendance on one of Jenny's courses was a joy! Apart from a strengthened belief in the powerful effect of a positive approach it reminded me that fun is an important part of the learning process.

My work on the development of small-group Circle Time sessions for linguistically vulnerable children came about while working in a primary school in Plymouth with Jackie Lowe, senior speech and language therapist. We were both enthused by the idea of putting our joint expertise together to support several children who were linguistically vulnerable through lack of skill development or low confidence in using the skills they did have at their command. We worked closely with their class teacher and by 2001 had planned a series of carefully crafted sessions to develop language, thinking skills and communication. They were widely used in the school using the quality Circle Time ethos (which is entirely positive and seeks to affirm the participants). We then began a similar process in the nursery. By the autumn of 2001 we had a series of courses that I had written up in a way that would be supportive of the adults running it. Evaluations had begun to come in from other schools and nurseries who were trialling the sessions. They indicated pleasing gains made by the children in the groups. These gains had transferred to the classroom/large-group situation.

In looking at the rationale which underlies the principles of the Circle Time as a whole it is important to look at what traditional models of education say about the learning process and to make useful comparisons. I am not the first researcher by any means to arrive at the conclusion that if you use quality Circle Time as the heart of the educational process the resultant learning is many times more effective for the reasons explored below.

The benefits of using Circle Time ethos and practice in small groups to develop thinking and communication skills: an historical perspective

In the 1930s John Dewey promoted the centrality of action and reflection in the learning process. This challenged more traditional models of passive learning where the expectation was upon the student to receive knowledge and later to find ways to apply the knowledge in action (Stevens, 2001).

Dewey's emphasis still underpins current thinking by many that the ingredients of effective learning are confidence, activity and reflection, i.e. 'If I believe I can succeed I am willing to get involved in the task. I work at it, I think about it . . . and I realise that as a consequence I have learned a new skill or concept or discovered a new line of enquiry.'

The role of language in education

Paradoxically education has traditionally relied more on teacher talk than on active involvement to transmit knowledge and develop academic and cognitive skills (Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984). This puts a high demand on learners' ability to use language in order to accommodate information, develop their thinking skills and convey their thinking to others. The last requires a growing level of communication skills.

Some children have particularly low levels of effective language and communication skills at their disposal. They may also have difficulty in adapting their language to meet the demands of formal situations. Much of the instructional language and reflection in the classroom seems to present difficulties for them. The children with these difficulties find themselves unable to frame relevant questions to help their understanding. Their access to even the best curriculum is therefore limited, but where teacher talk is the main medium of transmission the child is effectively excluded from learning, to the frustration of both child and teacher.

Language, friendship and the vulnerable child

Another major area needs to be considered here. It is that low levels of language and communication skills will affect the child's ability to make good relationships with peers and to work collaboratively with them when the need arises.

Not surprisingly, confident, well liked children appear to communicate more effectively than less popular children. A recent study at the University of Texas indicated that popular children were more likely to be those who had good language skills. For example, they tended to communicate clearly by saying the other child's name, establishing eye contact and using appropriate touch to gain attention (Kemple, 1992). They replied appropriately to children who spoke to them rather than ignoring the speaker, changing the subject or saying something irrelevant which a less linguistically confident child may well do. They were more likely to accompany refusals with explanations or alternatives, e.g. 'Let's pretend we're hiding from the dragon', 'No, we played that yesterday' or 'No, let's be explorers instead' – rather than just saying no.

Kemple points to an increased likelihood of aggression or conflict due to a lack of verbal reasoning and conflict resolution skills for children who cannot

establish a positive place for themselves in the peer culture. All this can detract from the listening classroom and hinders the flow of learning for all.

Overcoming barriers to learning: taking individual learning styles and talents into account

Where language becomes the main method of transmission of academic and social knowledge to the child in education, it is crucial to ensure that the child has the necessary skills and confidence to work with that medium.

Merely introducing activity in group tasks will not be sufficient to ensure that effective learning will take place. There must be consideration of each pupil's differing learning styles and strengths. A learning style is the unique way each person tends to learn most effectively. Some learn best through listening or observing or using visual materials related to the information under study. Some have a greater need to talk through and question. There is also a marked difference in learners along a continuum of activity. Some want to be highly active and hands on, whereas others approach tasks more reflectively.

Learning styles can be harnessed to aid the development of the multiple intelligences or talents which we all have but with varying degrees of skill in each. Broadly seven areas of intelligence have been identified by Howard Gardner, cognitive developmental psychologist and educator. They are:

- linguistic
- logical–mathematical
- visual
- bodily kinaesthetic
- musical–auditory
- intrapersonal
- interpersonal.

Howard Gardner has developed this powerful idea of multiple intelligences as a way to widen thinking about improving school-based learning. There is strong evidence to suggest that the most effective learning takes place when the teaching situation provides opportunities for pupils to develop their areas of strength in these key areas and others and they become excited by learning. The following quote from the Cheshire (Barnes & Todd) website makes some important points:

> If we wish to improve learning and human achievement we need to ensure the teaching and learning strategies and experiences are not dominated by instructional models and take account of the whole person, their motivation and their preferred learning modes.

The next task for the pupil is to learn to develop strengths in other areas and use new and different learning strategies. A full description of these intelligences is available in Howard Gardner's book *Frames of Mind*. Articles on the theory of multiple intelligences with self-assessment questionnaires for pupils and teachers are available on the website of Cheshire County Council.

Emotional intelligence and the importance of emotional literacy

Howard Gardner also emphasises the importance of developing our emotional awareness and skills.

People with highly developed emotional intelligence can identify and manage their own emotional responses and have some understanding of the moods, motivation and actions of others. They use their good problem-solving skills to help others and this can result in effective conflict resolution. It is vital to identify a place in the curriculum for such important life skills.

Emotional literacy, to me, means the ability to put words to the many nuances of feeling we experience. It is clear that where pupils do not develop in this area difficulties lie ahead for them. The majority of older pupils I now see for anger management have very few words to describe their emotional states: typically 'chilled out', 'angry' and 'mad'. Bearing in mind that more than 1,500 words related to feelings can be identified, this is a limited and limiting emotional vocabulary and often reflects a lack of awareness of the effects emotion has on the physical being. It limits to the range of responses available to the person.

I work with these students to identify the feelings they have and also the physical signals accompanying them. We then work together to put a wider ranging graded sequence of words to this: for example, chilled out, OK irritated, bothered, disturbed, annoyed, hurt, upset, disbelief, angry, very angry, furious, raging. Once people have in their mind an awareness of a range of emotional descriptors they have more awareness of where a feeling may be leading. They have in addition the words to tell people about how they are feeling. This can ease the emotional pressure. They can then choose more fruitful ways to express their feelings. Angry feelings can become assertive words rather than aggressive action. Thinking has greater clarity when the mind is clear.

There are strong indications that this process of putting words to feelings needs to begin as early as possible, certainly in early primary. A significant thread of our small-group work with young children is the development of both emotional awareness and the language which supports it and allows its expression.

It is promising now, seven years on, to compare the findings from brain based research that confirm we are on the right lines with the SPIRALS programme. We expand on this in the training sessions.

How we put this into practice in the development of our small-group sessions

With the small-group Circle Time we have endeavoured to build sessions which involve the children in ways that allow them to contribute and develop individually according to their preferred learning styles. We have also helped them to develop their least preferred styles so that they begin to be more skilled overall. We value the importance of the positive ethos of Circle Time in providing a safe, relaxed atmosphere. Again to quote Cheshire County Council:

> The brain functions and develops most effectively when meeting challenge in a relaxed, safe environment where recognition, praise and reward outweigh criticism and when it is enabled to process many sensory inputs at once and at many different levels of consciousness.

Our Circle Time groups certainly include movement for a purpose, talking and questioning, music, rhyming, logical critical reasoning and thinking skills, social skills and emotional awareness, and are highly visual. The content involves aspects of all seven areas of intelligence outlined above.

The children initially did not have highly developed listening and concentration skills. But they developed them markedly through the course. For us this signalled that the children had become more motivated and effective learners overall. This was borne out in the classroom later where there was a clear transfer of skills.

Why small-group work?

Many children have benefited from whole-class Circle Time. Having been involved in training I have seen this positive effect. But there are children who seem to freeze in a large group. These vulnerable children often do not appear able to take advantage of the benefits available within the whole-class circle. I had often felt that for some children a preparation for whole-class Circle Time was needed.

Teachers face the challenge of providing effective support for all the children. Whole-class Circle Time has been shown to be effective in helping the majority of pupils but for linguistically vulnerable children barriers need first to be overcome. The main barrier can be a lack of self-belief. Mind and hand may appear to be engaged but the heart may not be if children do not believe that they can do what they are being asked. If children succeed they can see this success as a 'lucky break' or at worst a big pressure because they will be expected to do it again and they are not at all sure that they can repeat it. The child may see in a large group a threat to an already fragile self-esteem and will respond in a self-protective way by trying to disrupt the group activity.