

‘KEY GROUP TIME’ IS A TIME FOR INTIMACY: ‘CIRCLE TIME’ IS A TIME FOR GROUP THINKING WHY THEY MUST BE DIFFERENT

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I have been reflecting on the work of Elinor Goldschmied and its impact on those of us who have an influence on policy and practice in the early years.

Elinor Goldschmied - who died recently age 98 - has left a huge legacy of wisdom for all those who work to develop quality standards in daycare. Her writing and thinking drawn from theoretical concepts such as Bowlby’s seminal work on attachment and loss to the practical applications of her work in ‘*organising for intimacy*’ in a *Key Person* approach has influenced the kinds of experiences children are entitled to in day care. Her guidance is as relevant now as it ever was. Elinor was old enough to have worked with pioneers of early education such as Susan Isaacs and young enough to have had a strong impact on the contemporary Early Years Foundation Stage guidance. Her inspiration and practical ideas will reverberate for all of us who had the privilege to be in her training sessions or share in her conversations. She was an advocate for people under three but she also had the gift of empathy for mothers and grandmothers in families, and practitioners and managers in professional day care settings as they engage with the pleasures as well as the anxieties of day-to-day child care. Little children may be more likely to have affectionate and stable relationships with someone special to them – essential for their well being, mental health and learning as a result of Elinor’s life’s work.

In my own action research projects talking with managers of EYFS settings about the key persons approach we have been thinking about her concept of ‘*islands of intimacy*’ and how sometimes this concept has been muddled with *circle times* with – in my view – unintended difficult consequences for children as well as practitioners.

Elinor Goldschmied and Sonya Jackson (1994, updated 2004). <i>People Under Three</i> . London: Routledge pp.40-42 <u><i>Key Group Time – Organising for Intimacy</i></u>

'The idea behind the creation of the 'island of intimacy' stems from the need to build firmly into the day's programme a period when the key person for each small group of children gives her individual attention to them ... what then does the adult do to maintain interest and calm in her group? ... Essentially this is a listening time when children can explore a collection of shells or purses – for example – that will be the focus for conversation. The collection can be any kind that the practitioner has created herself that may provide interest and amusement for her group of children ... This kind of arrangement allows warm attachments to develop in a group setting. This is a time and place for intimate personal relationships that are understood as being important for children's development and happiness.'

Jenny Mosley - www.circle-time.co.uk (accessed 2nd April, 2009)

'Quality Circle Time (QCT) is a democratic and creative approach used to support teachers and other professionals in managing a range of issues that affect the whole learning community. Teaching staff, children, support staff, parents and governors can be actively involved. QCT has proved successful in promoting better relationships and positive behaviour, two of the most effective improvements to both learning and the smooth and harmonious running of a school. The QCT model involves a commitment from schools to set up an ongoing process of Circle Meetings for adults and children, at which the key interpersonal and organisational issues that affect school development can be addressed. ... QCT meetings for children involve carrying out activities, games and the practice of speaking and listening skills, often in a round.

There are several key elements in the model, namely: Improving the morale and self-esteem of staff, Listening systems for children and adults, The Golden Rules: a system of behavioural rules for children, Incentives: a weekly celebration to congratulate the children for keeping the Golden Rules, Sanctions: the partial withdrawal of the Golden Time incentive, Lunchtime Policy.'

The two kinds of groups have been developed for very different purposes. The key group time is when a group of a few children with their Key Person can share informal spontaneous conversational exchanges. Circle time is for a whole group/class to work together to manage issues that affect the whole EYFS/school community. Key group time is a safe place with a familiar and trusted adult for personal, intimate expression of ideas and feelings- a place where children can be listened to and their behavior can be seen to be an outward expression of each child's inner world. For young children their behaviour often reflects their internal feelings and their reactions and responses to their special adult will be understood differently by someone who knows them well and has shared previous experiences and encounters with them. Circle time is a place where the adult can guide children so that *'interpersonal and organisational issues that affect school development can be addressed'*. This is a place for *'Golden Rules'* to be made and adhered to and a way for teachers to promote the positive behaviour that is desired by them for the cohesion of the group.

Key group time is a 'private' family type space where exchanges may be confidential and idiosyncratic expressions can be understood – where as circle time is a 'public' space where children can rehearse being and belonging in a group where decisions are made that effect everyone. Children can learn the difference between intimacy with a few who are in a special relationship with them and their family and the other gathering in the round is a rehearsal for being in a community with shared responsibility for making decisions and contributing as well as benefiting from such meetings.

For this reason I think it is inappropriate for children at circle time to be encouraged to express difficult or personal feelings in the public space.

Where expressions may emerge in a child's self-initiated play or in the free flow conversational intimacy of key group time, then it is important to listen to each child's anxiety, hurt or pleasures. Our EYFS groups and classrooms must be places to be where children may express a range of emotions from rage and omnipotence, to the tragedy of abandonment, or exploits of valour where good triumphs over evil. (I have just witnessed a 4-year-old knight in a silver lamé helmet brandishing an off-cut wooden sword who expressed all of these in his mighty drama!)

Furthermore, early years practitioners must give children the opportunity to rehearse communicating their deepest thoughts and practitioners must be able to observe and contain such powerful expressions in the intimate spaces and relationships of the nursery/school. However we are not trained therapists and must always be mindful that all our work as the Key Person for a small group can only be developed when regular support and supervision is established where staff who have taken on the role of Key Person to a small group of children and their families have a place to discuss the demands and boundaries of that relationship.

The mentors – professional senior staff or supporting specialists – need to ensure there is a place to talk about these professionally intimate relationships, where the challenge of containing what is revealed and the boundaries needed around these relationships is thought about.

Elinor Goldschmied was always very clear about the boundaries between therapy and key person work in her training and writing and the importance of knowing when to ‘hand on’ to other professionals trained for therapy – sometimes needed for the child but also for a practitioner with unresolved issues that are a barrier to loving, trusting day-to-day relationships with a child and their family during the EYFS.

There must be spaces in the day for natural relationships between adults and children to flourish – key times for the intimacy of shared encounters, spontaneous shared humour, time for listening and comforting too, *key groups* for living and loving together.

There will also be circles of turn-taking debates – lessons planned for by teachers to introduce the ethics of living and learning together, for example: countering racist attitudes, caring for the environment, or taking care of the elderly or vulnerable people in our communities (wider issues for everyone of right and wrong and hope for our futures). These issues may well emerge from the intimacy of key group times but at *circle time* the emphasis must always be on the issue and its implication for everyone, not focused on the confidential and personal disclosures that may have been shared with a child in the key person relationship.

Key group times are for someone. Circle time for is for everyone. Key person relationships need to be in safe personal spaces. Circle times in public places.

Do you agree with Dorothy Selleck's interpretation of key group times and circle time?

Are you a key person for a small group of children and their families?

How does this work for you?

Have you used circle time and in what ways?

As ever, please contact TACTYC with your responses (j.moyles@ntlworld.com)