

## Circle Time As An Inclusive Learning Space: Exploring Student Teachers' Prior School Experiences.

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### Abstract

Promoting inclusive practices has become a priority for many higher education institutions (Higher Education Authority (HEA) 2008). Inclusive learning is promoted across a number of teacher education courses as part of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. *Circle time* - a widely employed and popular learning method amongst primary and post-primary teachers – is conceptualised as one effective method for facilitating inclusive learning at third-level.<sup>[1]</sup> Drawing on research which investigated student teachers' prior experiences of and attitudes towards circle time in their primary and post-primary schools (Collins and Kavanagh 2013), this paper critically assesses the extent to which the practice of circle time reflects its inclusive theoretical underpinnings in light of research findings, and highlights some implications for teacher educators who wish to promote inclusion in their courses.

The methodology employed was mixed methods, with the use of a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 200 students and provision for focus group interviews with a small number of students. Two key research questions were identified: what was your prior experience of circle time at primary and post-primary school; and how will this impact on your future use of the method in your own teaching practice?

The research uncovered both positive and negative aspects of students' prior experiences of circle time and practices which support and undermine inclusion. Circle time's capacity to facilitate students' voices and peer discussion were cited as key benefits but some students did not feel that they were provided with opportunities to participate on an equal basis either with each other or with the facilitating teacher. These findings suggest a need to modify practices in order to promote inclusion, participation and equality of voice. This paper's findings and implications may resonate with other third level practitioners who seek to facilitate inclusive learning as part of their pedagogical approach.

**Keywords:** Inclusive learning; circle time; teacher educators; SPHE; mixed methods inquiry; students' prior experiences.

[1] In this paper, inclusive learning is conceptualised as organising learning to ensure that all students are provided with opportunities to actively and meaningfully participate in the learning process (Kershner 2009; Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007). In particular, it requires providing students with equal opportunities to exercise their voices, to have a say in decisions which affect them and to have what they say taken seriously and acted upon (Cook-Sather 2006; Holdsworth 2000).

URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/181>

## 1.1 Introduction

In the context of changing socio-cultural, legislative and demographic circumstances, promoting and institutionalising inclusive practices has become a priority for many Irish schools and higher education institutions (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2011; HEA 2008). While inclusive education has been embedded in teacher education courses for many years, since 2011 it has become a mandatory element of all Initial Teacher Education programmes (ITE) including the B.Ed. degree (Teaching Council 2011). As part of their B.Ed. programme, student teachers undertake modules in the curricular subjects taught in Irish primary schools. Inclusion is an important underpinning principle of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 1999).[1] SPHE is taught in all Irish primary schools and colleges of ITE. This paper focuses on a method called circle time, a teaching approach central to SPHE, which is widely regarded as promoting inclusive principles and practices (NCCA 1999; Mosley 1993, 1996, 1998, 2006). The 2012-2013 cohort of first year B.Ed student teachers are among the first to have experienced the SPHE curriculum (introduced in 1999), and the method of circle time, at both primary and post-primary level. They therefore have the capacity to provide valuable insights into circle time as practised and experienced in Irish schools. This paper is based on research which explored student teachers' prior experiences of and attitudes towards the method of circle time in primary and post-primary school. Drawing on data from the research, this paper critically explores the extent to which circle time realises the inclusionary principles it seeks to promote. As teacher educators, this research was prompted by anecdotal accounts from student teachers about their prior experiences of circle time and a desire to critique and inform our own teaching strategies and practices through an inclusive lens. The findings presented here emphasise the value of engaging students attending higher education institutions in research in order to critically analyse, problematise and inform educators' pedagogical practice.

## 1.2 Surveying the Literature: Circle Time as an Inclusive Learning Space

Circle time is a form of group facilitation where pupils sit in a circle to discuss, communicate and interact with one another.[2] It reflects a social constructivist theory of learning where children learn with and from one another in an inclusive and esteeming environment (Vygotsky 1962). "Rounds" are a particular feature of circle time, where a speaking object passes from pupil to pupil to regulate contributions, with a "pass" option if students do not want to speak. In order to make circle time a safe space, particular ground rules are included, such as listening, no "put-downs", and in some practice, a confidentiality clause. A typical circle time session might start with a game or opening activity, followed by a round, open forum discussion and closure. Its promotional literature presents it as an ideal forum for building self-esteem,

promoting positive relationships and discipline, and fostering social and personal skills (Mosley 1993, 1996, 1998, 2006). Circle time was initially introduced to Ireland in the early 1990s by its principal advocate in the UK, Jenny Mosley (whose model is referred to hereafter as the “Mosley Model”). Its mainstreaming was assisted by the introduction of SPHE in the revised Irish Primary Curriculum in 1999, within which circle time (or circle work) is promoted as an effective pedagogical approach.

A number of national and international research studies highlight the prevalence and popularity of the method of circle time amongst primary school teachers and pupils (NCCA 2008; Miller and Moran 2007; Clancy 2002). Research by the NCCA indicates that 81% of primary teachers employ the method circle time “sometimes” or “frequently” (2008, p.79). Despite its prominence and widespread use, there is remarkably little academic research on its theory and practice, particularly in the Irish context. The small number of Irish studies which exist focus exclusively on primary level, with no research evidence of its use at either post-primary or third level. Research (based mainly in the UK) is overwhelmingly positive about its effects on children’s self-esteem (Miller and Moran 2007), social skills (Canney and Byrne 2006), emotional literacy (Coppock 2007), and behaviour (Lee and Wright 2001). However, over-reliance on teacher perceptions of some of these gains weakens the findings, as teachers are not always deemed to be reliable evaluators in this regard (Miller and Moran 2005).

Collins’ (2011) research on circle time, which involved observing the practice of circle time in five Irish primary classrooms, provides the only identified data on the conduct of circle time in the Irish context. This research found that the public nature of circle time had the potential to erode children’s privacy, while inappropriate responses from pupils and an inability to react quickly to events in the circle can undermine the premise of the circle as a safe space. She also found ambivalence from some teachers to the “pass rule”, a key ground rule of effective circle time sessions. The imposition of a confidentiality rule in some classrooms in this research, while appearing to safeguard children’s contributions in the circle, also limited their potential for influence outside the circle (Lundy 2007), a concept which Collins argues is an important component of effective circle time sessions. Notwithstanding these challenges however, she found that teachers were positive about the method’s outcomes in relation to enjoyment, a sense of safety, and ease of communication in the classroom context.

An aspect of the Mosley Model of circle time that generates some controversy is the focus on individual problem-solving. If conceptualised as a problem-solving forum, it is possible that circle time can be used to discipline children or engage in a counselling session (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009). However, Collins (2011) argues that teachers in her research did not view their role as counsellors or therapists, and that engagement in circle time was best described as “counselling-lite” (p.168).

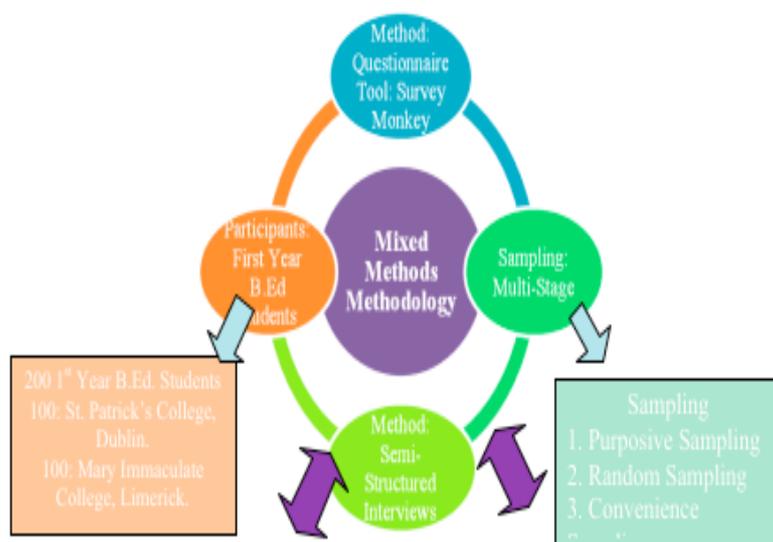
Circle time is presented in the promotional literature as an important inclusive method in the classroom context and is recommended in the NCCA's *Intercultural Education Guidelines* (2005). The NCCA (2005) promotes it as a safe space where pupils can engage in discussions about intercultural issues. Similarly, Holden (2003) contends that "circle time provides a good starting point for many of the social and moral issues which are linked to citizenship" (p.27). As the circle formation seeks to be non-hierarchical, with the teacher having to adhere to the same ground rules as the pupils (Canney and Byrne 2006), it can be conceptualised as an important democratic practice which challenges traditional pupil/teacher power asymmetries (Kavanagh 2013). Similarly, if pupils rather than teachers set agendas during circle time sessions, it enables pupils to exercise more autonomy than more traditional teaching methods and therefore has the capacity to be authentically democratic and inclusive (Kavanagh 2013). However, Collins' (2011) research indicates that circle time sessions at primary level are predominantly teacher-driven.

Drawing on the research data and informed by the literature, this paper examines student teachers' prior experiences of circle time and critically explores the idea of circle time as an inclusive method.

### **1.3 Research Methodology**

The research outlined in this paper was initially planned as a mixed methods approach. This research approach was selected in order to provide breadth and depth to the research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989). Two of the largest Irish primary sector teacher education colleges were selected as the target research sites because of the access they provided to a large number of first year student teachers (800) on the B. Ed programme and due to the researchers' personal contacts in each college (St. Patrick's College, Dublin and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick). First Year students were selected as they are among the first cohort of Irish students to have experienced SPHE throughout all of their primary and post-primary schooling. As SPHE is not offered in first year college courses, attitudes towards circle time could not be influenced by experiences of circle time in college curriculum courses. The methodological framework adopted is presented here:

Figure 1 Methodological Framework



Research Questions	
Question 1:	What is your experience of the method of circle time in your education to date?
Question 2:	What effect will that experience have on your own use of the method of circle time?

A random selection of student teachers (200) from the target group of first year student teachers was emailed a covering letter and a web link to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Question types included multiple choice and open-ended, with 16 questions focusing specifically on the key research questions.

### 1.3.1 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of St. Patrick's College, Dublin and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The ethical protocols of both Colleges were carefully adhered to and communicated during all stages of the research process. These included the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any stage, the steps taken to protect participants' privacy and anonymity, and the possible benefits and any risks associated with participation. Following a small pilot study, the main research was undertaken in the academic year 2012-13.

### **1.3.2 Research Methods, Data Gathering and Analysis**

SurveyMonkey was selected as the most appropriate method for gathering data. Its accessibility and efficiency in generating surveys and collecting web-based responses made it a pragmatic and effective research tool. It also facilitated the storing, management, and analysis of data, and enabled the researchers to access and work on the data independently of one another (SurveyMonkey.com).

Of the 200 students targeted (100 in each college), a response rate of fifty one per cent was achieved for the survey. Despite strenuous efforts to encourage students to partake in focus group interviews, a very poor response rate resulted in only one semi-structured interview being held involving two students. This is a source of regret to us, but was beyond our control. The quotations from student teachers used in this paper are drawn exclusively from the questionnaires.

Data analysis was conducted using SurveyMonkey tools. Data were read and reread and recurring language and themes identified. As these themes emerged, the data was coded line by line. This approach is similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach of "open coding" (as cited in Creswell 2007). The constant comparative method was used and the content of particular themes (outlined in the next section) was continuously reread and examined and data transferred between categories when necessary.

## **1.4 Findings and Discussion**

The research findings outlined here are drawn from the responses to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire unless stated otherwise. The main themes identified are presented and discussed in this section under the following headings:

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- Theme or focus selection in circle time
- (In)Equality of voice in circle time
- Positive and negative aspects of circle time
- Teacher effectiveness in circle time
- Future use of circle time

#### 1.4.1 *Theme or focus selection in circle time*

Circle time has the capacity to enhance inclusion and facilitate meaningful participation by providing students with opportunities to select themes and topics for discussion (Kavanagh 2013). Whether at primary or post-primary level, however, our research indicated that teachers dominated theme selection. At post-primary level, respondents were given significantly more opportunity to negotiate theme selection with teachers. Thirty-seven per cent of respondents indicated that theme selection was negotiated with teachers at post-primary level, in contrast to just under five per cent at primary level. It is possible that the disparities between respondents' involvement at primary and post-primary levels may be related to ideologies of childhood immaturity, with teachers viewing younger children as being too cognitively and emotionally immature to engage in curricular and thematic negotiation (Collins and Kavanagh 2013). Respondents' perceptions of teachers' dominance at primary level reflects Collins' (2011) contention that the focus of circle time sessions at primary level is predominantly teacher-driven. It is arguable that this dominance and control which teachers exercised in this supposedly pupil-centred democratic forum undermines inclusion as pupils are excluded from theme selection decisions. It was also an aspect of circle time that respondents did not enjoy. Reflecting this, one respondent stated, "*The teacher didn't want us to discuss other topics than the one she had chosen*"; while another stated that s/he did not enjoy, "*When the teacher was talking, i preferred listening to my classmates.*"

#### 1.4.2 *(In)Equality of voice*

Circle time is conceptualised as an inclusive forum which facilitates equal participation and pupil voice (NCCA 1999). However, a small number of respondents articulated the view that more confident pupils frequently dominated sessions, with less confident pupils feeling too intimidated to speak in the circle forum. One respondent stated, "*Sometimes the quieter students would be overpowered by the more outgoing/opinionated students in the circle.*" In this context, it could be argued that, counter to its aims, in addition to reproducing the hierarchical relationship which characterises pupil teacher relations, circle time can be a forum which marginalises less confident pupils, rather than giving them an equal voice. In fact, the data suggest that circle time can become a time of considerable anxiety for less confident pupils. For example, one student teacher stated, "*It was a bit scary sometimes having to speak out while everyone watched you*", while another asserted that circle time "*could be quite nerve-wrecking as your turn to speak approached!*" In this regard, the extent to which circle time facilitates equal student voice is questionable. While the use of a speaking object and the "pass" rule are two mechanisms employed in order to safeguard equality of voice, the data suggest that the issue is problematic for some pupils and that alternative strategies may need to be considered.

### 1.4.3 Positive and negative aspects of circle time

Respondents indicated that circle time's capacity to facilitate student voice was the aspect they enjoyed most about it. Student teachers' responses suggested that as a forum, circle time provided opportunities to "*voice my opinions/thoughts*," "*express myself*," and "*to clearly hear everyone's opinions*." Student teachers spoke of "*enjoying hearing other people's thoughts*." At post-primary level, other positive aspects included the sharing of ideas and stories. Interestingly, while at primary level, issues pertaining to fun and enjoyment were cited by 28% (n=19) of respondents who answered this question (second behind student voice), only 6% (n=4) of respondents mentioned these issues at post-primary level. While it is difficult to account for this significant disparity, it is possible that pupils' increased self-consciousness and discomfort with certain topics may account for some of it. Referring to these issues at post-primary level, one student teacher stated, "*I didn't feel comfortable sharing my thoughts most of the time*." In the same vein, another stated, "*As teenagers, I think we were all a little bit more embarrassed to give our opinions on controversial issues, which resulted in some of the sessions being quite awkward*." It is reasonable to expect that many of the issues raised in the data in this regard would hold equally true for third level students in terms of discomfort and self-consciousness about disclosing personal or controversial thoughts and opinions.

The most commonly cited negative aspects of circle time were broadly similar at primary and post-primary level. One quarter of respondents who answered this question indicated that participating in circle exacerbated feelings of self-consciousness (n=18). This was followed by feeling undue pressure to speak (n=16). Illustrative of this, one student teacher stated, "*sometimes you were put on the spot and some students felt too shy to say what they really felt in front of their peers*." Another stated, "*The whole class was paying explicit attention to you*." With regards to feeling under pressure to speak, one student teacher described feeling "... *pressure to say something at times when your name was called*." Similarly, another reported disliking that fact that: "*We had to have an opinion on everything because we couldn't move along unless we said something*." Respondents also indicated that they "... *felt under pressure to volunteer personal information*." Supporting this, another asserted: "... *didn't like it, too personal, was forced to talk*", while another stated, "*It sometimes got very personal*." However, it is important to note that practice in this regard is not supported in Mosley's Model of circle time. Issues mentioned by respondents regarding feeling under pressure to share personal stories support Hanafin, O'Donoghue, Flynn and Shevlin's (2009) contention that practices such as circle time can lead to excessive intrusion into pupils' private and family lives, thereby undermining pupils' privacy rights. It appears there is a thin line between promotion of pupils' participation rights and infringement of their privacy rights, an aspect of inclusive learning that teachers at all levels may need to consider.

The literature indicates that circle time's capacity to facilitate the enhancement of pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence is one of its most important benefits (DES 2009; NCCA 2008; Mosley 1993, 1996). Interestingly, no respondents mentioned self-esteem when completing the questionnaires and confidence was only mentioned twice, once in a positive context and once in a negative context. In the negative context, the student teacher stated,

*I don't really like to talk in front of large groups of people, therefore i didn't enjoy circle time. I probably would have enjoyed it more if the discussion had begun in smaller groups and then moved onto larger groups, therefore my confidence in speaking in front of large groups of people would have eventually grown.*

The negativity found in the current research points to an inconsistency between claims in the promotional and research literature on circle time and pupils' own perceptions. Reflecting this, Collins' (2011) argued that using self-esteem as a rationale for circle time rests on "shaky foundations" (p.222).

Respondents also reported more overtly negative experiences than positive in their prior experience of circle time, specifically around the issue of confidentiality and exposure to ridicule. One student teacher stated, "*Although one of the ground rules was that we were not to mock people about what they said, it still happened after the class in question.*" Notwithstanding these shortcomings, congruent with existing literature, there was evidence in this research to suggest that circle time improves interpersonal relationships and classroom culture and promotes personal and social skill development (Canney and Byrne 2006; Doveston 2007; Lee and Wright 2001; Tew 1998). A number of respondents' comments support this contention. Examples of comments included: "*Got to know classmates better*"; "*Circle time also helped to form closer bonds or a more community spirit in the classroom*"; "*Bonding with others in my class*", and "*I enjoyed the connection it helped me to gain with my classmates and teacher.*"

These findings on positive and negative aspects of the method suggest that at third level, there is a need to facilitate student voice in a way that allows equal opportunities for all to speak without allowing anyone to dominate, or without undue pressure being brought to bear on students to contribute. One might also question how esteeming it is to be part of a learning space where the vocal may be valued more than the silent, and where personal issues may be aired in a way that makes the space feel unsafe - at least for some of its participants.

#### **1.4.4 Future use of circle time**

Notwithstanding some of the shortcomings reported by student teachers, over 70 per cent indicated that they would use circle time in their future teaching careers, with only a tiny minority stating that they would not use it at all. While this might not translate into actual use, it appears that in spite of some negative experiences, student teachers see a value in the method. A key support identified as necessary for implementing circle time in the research was the skill to build a relationship with pupils characterised by trust, care and understanding. Other supports identified include clarity around rules and structures, and appropriate resources. These elements need to be built into future work with student teachers in the promotion of circle time to maximise its effectiveness and model good practice.

### **1.5 Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper explores the extent to which the practice of circle time reflects its inclusive theoretical underpinnings and presents a model of practice which uses research with student teachers to critically engage with and inform practice at third level. It underscores the value of engaging students attending higher education institutions in research in order to critically analyse, problematise and inform educators' pedagogical practice. Findings indicate that in spite of the negativity evident in some of the student teachers' responses, most student teachers had positive experiences of circle time and will use it in future as part of their teaching, a key objective of teacher educators using circle time. However, the data also indicate that a number of steps can be taken to ensure that circle time promotes rather than undermines participants' sense of inclusion.

Putting pressure on pupils to speak is counterproductive in terms of confidence-building and promotion of an inclusive learning atmosphere. In this regard, it is imperative that the principle of choice enshrined in circle time should be upheld. Inclusive learning spaces such as circle time should not be used to shame, ridicule or extract personal information from pupils. These aspects of the practice of circle time caused most anxiety and negativity among the student teachers surveyed. As teacher educators we need to identify ways of respecting student teachers' participation preferences while promoting inclusion in our teaching.

As the findings suggest increasing involvement in theme selection in circle time as pupils move through the school system, this suggests that, at third level, students might expect a high degree of control and input during activities such as circle time. This presents some challenges for us as teacher educators, where themes are selected on the basis of perceived importance for student teachers in future implementation of the SPHE curriculum. Although we rely on

feedback from former student teachers when designing and refining our courses, this research suggests that authentic student participation and inclusion requires high levels of student involvement in choosing topics or themes within courses.

It would be helpful to present some of the data gathered to student teachers as a way of engaging them with issues, both positive and negative, that surfaced in our research. This might provide a much more powerful learning for our students than the teacher educator's voice alone. It would also be instructive to survey these student teachers again after they have completed their SPHE college course to identify what, if any, changes have occurred in attitude, understanding and disposition towards circle time. Having base line data in this regard is particularly helpful in evaluating the impact of our courses and informing future developments therein. It would also be instructive to conduct research with pupils in primary and post-primary schools who are currently participating in circle times to see if they confirm or challenge the findings presented here. This type of exploration has yet to be undertaken in the Irish school context in any meaningful way.

The failure to entice a greater number of respondents to partake in focus group interviews in spite of our best efforts was a disappointment and limits depth in terms of the study's findings. Moreover, there was a significant time lapse between student teachers' prior experiences of circle time and our investigation. Notwithstanding these limitations, there are aspects of this research that may be useful for all who teach at third level, and not only those whose focus is on inclusive learning. The research also prompts a number of questions: are there other examples of the impact of student teachers' prior school experiences that could be explored in a similar way? How do we ensure, as teacher educators, that we are modelling best practice on the courses we teach? For example, how can we model caring and trusting relationships (indicated as a key to effectiveness in our research) when dealing with large groups of students that we may only see weekly or less frequently? While higher level institutions, particularly those engaged in initial teacher education, have sought to adopt and develop more inclusive pedagogical approaches, it is imperative that these institutions and the practitioners within engage in on-going critical reflection and review in order to ensure that the rhetoric of inclusion translates into genuine inclusive practices which meet the needs of their students.

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[1] We, the authors, have responsibility for curriculum courses in SPHE in one of the main colleges of education in Ireland. In common with our counterparts in other teacher education colleges, we promote a method called circle time as part of the SPHE curriculum courses.

[2] It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe circle time in any great depth, or to provide an extensive review of the beneficial claims made in both the promotional and research literature. Readers who wish to find out more can consult Collins (2011) as well as numerous promotional manuals (for example, Mosley, 1993, 1996; 1998, 2006).