



## **Employing Student Voices to Enhance Inclusive Learning**

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## **Abstract**

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> The current research sought to investigate student teachers' experiences of and attitudes towards this inclusive learning method at the beginning of their teacher education degree course. As teacher educators, we wanted to critically engage with and inform our own conduct and practice of circle time in order to enhance students' experiences of the method and to maximise their possible future use of circle time in their own teaching.

The methodology employed was mixed methods, with the use of a self-administered questionnaire distributed to a large group of students and provision for focus group interviews with a small number of students.

The research uncovered both positive and negative aspects of students' prior experiences of circle time. Circle time's capacity to facilitate student voice, the sharing of stories and experiences and peer discussion along with positive interpersonal relations were cited as key benefits. However, 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. Students reported that teachers generally determined theme selection and that more confident students frequently dominated group discussions thereby marginalising and silencing less confident students. These findings suggest a need to modify practices in order to promote inclusion, participation and equality of voice. Notwithstanding some negativity however, the majority of student teachers indicated that they would be willing to use the method of circle time at some stage in the future, suggesting that they see a value in it.

The implications of these findings are examined in this paper from the perspectives of the authors as they introduce circle time to student teachers. The findings 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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. 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.

## **1. Introduction and Motivation**

Student teachers entering colleges of education in the last few years are recipients of the revised Irish primary school curriculum which was introduced in 1999. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a newly designated curriculum area in this revised curriculum. We 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. In working with the student teachers, we were struck by the negativity evident from a small number of students in relation to circle time. We wondered how prior experience of circle time impacted on student teachers' attitudes to the method, particularly towards their future use of the method. Could knowing those experiences help us to improve our pedagogy and make it more effective? How could we maximise potential for student teachers to create inclusive and esteeming environments in their subsequent teaching careers? The research described here was undertaken in the academic year 2012-13.

## **2. Surveying the Literature: Circle Time as an Inclusive Learning Space**

Circle time is a form of group facilitation where students sit in a circle to discuss, communicate and interact with one another.<sup>2</sup> 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 student to student 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

with a game or opening activity, followed by a round, open forum discussion and closure. Its promotional literature presents it as an ideal space for building self-esteem, promoting positive relationships and discipline, and fostering social and personal skills (Mosley, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2006).

Despite circle time's prevalence in Irish schools (NCCA, 2008) and an abundance of promotional literature extolling its benefits, 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 these gains weakens the findings, as teachers are not always deemed to be reliable evaluators in this regard (Miller and Moran, 2005).

Collins' (2011) small-scale doctoral research on circle time, which involved observing the practice of circle time in five primary classrooms, provides the only identified data on the conduct of circle time in the Irish context. This study found that the public nature of circle time had the potential to erode children's privacy, while inappropriate responses from pupils and teachers' inability to react quickly to events in the circle can undermine the premise of the circle as a safe space. A disquieting aspect of this research was ambivalence from some teachers in relation to the "pass rule" (Collins, 2011). 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 (Lundy, 2007). Notwithstanding these challenges however, Collins (2011) found that teachers were positive about the method's power to provide enjoyment, a sense of safety and ease of communication in the classroom context.

An aspect of the Mosley Model that generates some controversy is the focus on individual problem-solving during circle time. If conceptualised as a problem-solving forum, it is possible that circle time can be misappropriated or viewed as a

counselling session (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). However, Collins (2011) argued 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 conceptualised as an important method for inclusion in the classroom context and is recommended in the NCCA’s *Intercultural Education Guidelines* (2005). The NCCA promote 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 students (Canney et al., 2006), it can be conceptualised as an important democratic practice which challenges traditional student teacher power asymmetries (Kavanagh, 2013). Similarly, if students rather than teachers set agendas during circle time sessions, it enables students to exercise more power 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.

This study sought to explore student teachers’ perceptions and prior experiences of circle time at primary and post-primary level in order to inform our practice as third level practitioners, and to critically analyse the extent to which students’ experiences of circle time support the claims made in its promotional and research literature.

### **3. Research Methodology**

A mixed methods approach was adopted in order to facilitate breadth and depth in the study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). The two largest primary sector teacher education colleges were selected as the target research sites due to the access they provided to a large number of first year student teachers (800) and due to the researchers’ personal contacts in each college. First Year students were selected as they are among the first cohort of Irish students to

have experienced SPHE throughout all of primary and post-primary school and, as SPHE is not offered in first year college courses, attitudes towards circle time could not be influenced by their college experiences of circle time. The methodological framework adopted is presented here:



**Figure 1 - Methodological Framework**

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of St. Patrick's College Drumcondra and Mary Immaculate College Limerick. Once attained, the ethical protocols set down by both Colleges were carefully adhered to 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 an outline of the possible benefits and any risks associated with participation. Following a pilot study, the main research was undertaken in the academic year 2012-13.

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

SurveyMonkey was deemed the most appropriate method for gathering data. Its accessibility and efficiency in generating surveys, collecting web-based responses

and filtering results made it a pragmatic and effective research tool. SurveyMonkey facilitated the storing, management, organisation and analysis of the gathered data. It also enabled the researchers to access the gathered data independently of one another.

Of the 200 students targeted (100 in each college), a response rate of fifty-one per cent was achieved for the survey, with responses from females almost eight times that from male students. Despite strenuous efforts to encourage students to partake in focus group interviews, a poor response rate resulted in only one semi-structured interview being held. This is a source of regret to us, but was beyond our control. Data analysis was conducted using SurveyMonkey as it had been used to construct the survey and the “categories” structure was deemed particularly useful for storing, organising, managing and coding the gathered data. Data was 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 categories constantly reread and examined and data transferred between categories when necessary.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Due to space restrictions, a limited number of findings are presented here, which as third level practitioners we deem relevant and interesting for a third level teaching audience. A full account of the findings can be accessed at Collins and Kavanagh (2013, in press), from which much of this paper is drawn. The findings are presented under the following headings:

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

### ***Theme or focus selection***

Circle time has the capacity to enhance inclusion and participation by providing students with opportunities to select themes and topics for discussion (Kavanagh, 2013). Whether at primary or post-primary level, however, this study indicated that teachers dominated theme selection, although 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 4.8% 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, in press). 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. This dominance and perceived high levels of power and control which teachers' exercise in this supposedly pupil-centred democratic forum undermines inclusion as students 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, "*When the teacher was talking, i preferred listening to my classmates.*"

As the trend appears to be for more student involvement in theme selection as students move through the school system, this suggests that at third level, students should have a high degree of control and input over their learning. This presents some challenges for third level educators, where course syllabi are laid down and approved for accreditation in advance of meeting the students. Although many third level practitioners rely on feedback from former students when designing and refining courses, this study suggests that authentic student participation and authentic inclusion requires greater levels of student involvement in the areas of theme selection, pedagogy and assessment.

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

Circle time is conceptualised as an inclusive forum which facilitates equal participation and student voice (NCCA, 1999). A number of respondents articulated the view, however, that more confident students frequently dominated sessions, with less confident students 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 suggests that circle time can become a time of considerable anxiety for less confident students. For example, one student 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 suggested that the issue remains problematic for some students and other alternatives need to be considered.

### ***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. Students’ responses suggested that as a forum, circle time provided opportunities to *“voice my opinions/thoughts,” “express myself,”* and *“to clearly hear everyone’s opinions.”* Students 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 students’ increased self-consciousness and discomfort with certain *“awkward”* topics may account for some of it. Referring to these issues at post-primary level, one student stated, *“I didn’t feel comfortable*

*sharing my thoughts most of the time.*” In the same vein, another student 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 surmise 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.

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 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 described feeling: *“Pressure to say something at times when your name was called.”* Similarly, another reported disliking the 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, & Shevlin’s (2009) contention that practices such as circle time can lead to excessive intrusion into pupils’ private and family lives, thereby undermining pupils’ right to privacy. It appears there is a thin line between promotion of students’ 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 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 students' own perceptions. Reflecting this, Collins' (2011) argued that using self-esteem building as a rationale for circle time rests on "shaky foundations" (p.222).

Respondents also reported more overtly negative experiences than positive, specifically around the issue of confidentiality and exposure to ridicule. One student 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, there was evidence in this study (congruent with existing literature) to suggest that circle time improved interpersonal relationships and classroom culture and promoted personal and social skill development (Canney et al., 2006; Doveston, 2007; Lee et al., 2001; Tew, 1998). A number of respondents' comments supported this contention. Examples of respondents' 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."*

This data on positive and negative aspects of the method suggests 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.

Somewhat surprising is the finding that over seventy per cent of student teachers said 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 was the skill to build relationships with pupils characterised by trust, care and understanding. Other supports included clarity around rules and structures, and appropriate resources. These need to be built into future work with student teachers in the promotion of circle time.

## **5. Conclusions and Future Work**

This paper has presented some of the findings of a research project involving student teachers' prior experiences of one method of inclusive learning. In spite of the negativity evident in the students' responses, the data indicates that it is not a barrier to their future implementation of the method – a key objective of our teaching with them. If in spite of their negative prior experiences the majority of students are willing to use the method, what are the implications of the findings for our teaching and use of the method on our course?

In the first instance, it would be helpful to find out during our course how many students have experienced this form of inclusive learning and whether their experiences were positive or negative. This could inform not only their own adoption of the method but the way that we approach its introduction and facilitation. For example, the data suggests that putting pressure on students to speak is counterproductive in terms of confidence-building and promotion of an inclusive learning atmosphere. In this regard, 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 the students. These aspects of the practice of circle time caused most anxiety and negativity among the students

surveyed. As teacher educators we need to identify ways of respecting students' participation preferences while promoting inclusion in our teaching.

It would be helpful to present some of the data gathered to students 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 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.

There are aspects of this research that may be interesting for all who teach at third level, not only those whose focus is on inclusive learning. The research also prompts a number of questions: are there other cases of the impact of students' 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 (valued by students teachers in our research) when dealing with large groups of students that we may only see weekly or less frequently? We look forward to having a discussion about these issues with colleagues in similar or diverse third level spaces at the conference.

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