

**EMPOWERING CHILDREN THROUGH CIRCLE TIME:
AN ILLUMINATION OF PRACTICE**

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In loving memory of my father, Maurice Collins (1916-2008)

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Abstract

The focus of the research is circle time, a widely used method in Irish primary schools. It involves children sitting in a circle with their teacher using method-specific techniques and strategies to promote self-esteem, develop skills and support positive classroom relationships. The theoretical and conceptual framework adopted has empowerment of children as its central focus, and is supported by theories of self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and voice and participation theory. Learning and counselling theories also inform the research.

The rise of circle time historically is documented against a backdrop of curricular and social changes in Ireland. These include a psychological turn in educational and societal discourse, a move towards inclusive and rights-based education, and an orientation towards personal development evident in recent reviews of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). The current research is prompted and informed by a review of research on circle time which suggests that there are multiple pathways for its exploration in the Irish school context. Awareness of challenges to circle time on privacy and psychological grounds also added impetus to the research presented here.

A qualitative (interpretive) study was chosen in order to get as close to the practice of teachers as possible, and investigate their beliefs and strategies. Observations were undertaken in five primary school classrooms. Interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and a leading author on circle time.

Research findings indicate that teachers aim to build children's confidence and self-esteem, develop personal and social skills, and to give children an equal voice. Children's voice generally does not extend beyond the confines of the classroom, thereby limiting their potential to influence and exercise agency. Classroom atmosphere and relationships are identified as benefitting from the method. Challenges include the difficulty of assessment, inappropriate or controversial contributions from children, and the potential exposure of both children and teachers. The role adopted by teachers in the circle is facilitative, and is designated as 'counselling-lite'. In responding to the challenges, the issues of confidentiality and participation are explored.

A vision of circle time is presented which foregrounds children's voice and participation for agency and action competence. Supports and strategies are identified to facilitate the introduction of this new empowering model of circle time which enables children to take their place as citizens in the evolving Ireland and world we inhabit in the twenty-first century.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Conceptualisations of children and their education have changed significantly in the last number of decades. This is reflected in both the content and processes of curricula recently introduced into Irish primary schools. The effects of such changes have yet to be investigated in many areas of the revised Primary School Curriculum (PSC, 1999). The research undertaken related to a method in use in the Irish primary school system called circle time. This involves children sitting in a circle with their teacher using method-specific techniques and strategies to promote self-esteem, develop skills and support positive classroom relationships. Self-esteem enhancement is supported in a wide range of literature, where it is portrayed as an inoculation against substance misuse (for example) and a determinant of individual happiness. Skills development such as assertiveness and personal safety skills have garnered widespread support on foot of research on the prevalence of bullying in primary schools (e.g. *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children in Ireland*, 2006) and reports on child sexual abuse (e.g. *Commission to Report into Child Abuse*, 2009; *Commission of Investigation into Catholic Diocese of Cloyne*, 2011) in Ireland. Children's right to a voice is upheld in the United Nations Charter of Children's Rights (UNCRC, 1989), while their right to equal participation in education (regardless of ability) is also enshrined in the same instrument. The potential and importance of circle time to deliver many of these aspirations is a key argument of this thesis, and justified the research focus.

Circle time was initially introduced into Ireland in the early 1990s by its main proponent in the UK, Ms Jenny Mosley (whose model is referred to hereafter as the Mosley Model). A review of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum (1999) at primary school level reported that 49 per cent of teachers

surveyed used circle time “frequently”, 32 per cent used it “sometimes”, 14 per cent used it “seldom”, with only five per cent indicating that they never used it (NCCA, 2008: 79). Its meteoric rise in Irish primary classrooms warranted investigation, particularly in view of its potential impact on captive and possibly vulnerable child participants in Irish primary classrooms. While it was known that Irish primary teachers were reporting its use, there was very little else known about it from a research point of view in the Irish context. This research also began at a time when challenges to the method were being articulated in some quarters (e.g. Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Hanafin, Shevlin, Flynn and O’Donoghue, 2009). In the same period, economic recession was a trigger for scrutiny of the education budget, while falling literacy and numeracy standards among the Irish student population led to a nation-wide debate on how this trend might be reversed and a subsequent report (DES, 2011). All of these challenges were seen as potentially damaging to the promise that circle time held out for inclusion, equality and empowerment of children in Irish primary school classrooms, and provided an impetus to engage in the research presented here.

Overview of this chapter

This chapter provides an overview of the historical rise of circle time, and then focuses on the curriculum reforms that facilitated its reported widespread use in Irish primary schools. The most well-known model (the Mosley Model) informing practice in Irish primary schools is outlined. Also included is a personal narrative or ontology which situates me in the education system, and outlines the role I have played in the circle time phenomenon in Ireland.

Historical Emergence of Circle Time

Mosley posed the question: “But where exactly did Circle Time originate?”, and suggested that “this is an impossible question to answer” (Mosley, 1996: 70). Some commentators (e.g. Lang, 1998) cited the example of the North American Indians who sat in circles with a feather or pipe to regulate contributions as a way of explaining its origins. Other writers also pointed to the USA as the home of circle time (e.g. Housego and Burns, 1994).

Lang (1998) outlined the development of various models of circle time in the USA, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Italy and the UK. He identified Froebel as a leading influence on the development of circle time in Northern Europe. Lang described an approach called “The Magic Circle” which was found in California in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ballard, based in the USA, wrote one of the first guides to circle time in which he described it as “a curriculum of affective growth and human relations skill development” (Ballard, 1975: 1). There are many similarities between the Ballard model and that promoted by Mosley in the UK, both in terms of frameworks and aims or goals. In both models, the circle time is structured to allow for listening and responding, reference is made to a “talking ticket” (Ballard) or “speaking object” (Mosley) which regulates some of the participation, and there are common basic ground rules such as “turn-taking” and “no put-downs”. Common aims of promotion of self-esteem and social interaction also indicate a high level of convergence. The Mosley Model envisages a whole class group for the class meeting, and a focus on individual problem-solving is demonstrated in a promotional DVD (*Quality Circle Time in Action*, 1999). In contrast, group size is smaller (six-12 students), and there is a clear message that circle time is not a problem-solving forum for Ballard (*Circle Book*, 1975: 12).

The model of circle time that emerged in the UK owed little to any particular tradition (Lang, 1998), and incorporated a wide range of practice that had not been researched with any rigour (Lown, 2002). The similarities between the Ballard and Mosley models as outlined in their promotional material suggested that the American tradition as espoused by Ballard might have informed the latter model, although there is no acknowledgement of this in the Mosley literature.

Curriculum Reform in the Irish Primary School

It is likely that teachers will experience only one major curriculum change in their teaching careers, given the slow pace of curriculum reform and the lifespan of curricula in Ireland to date (INTO, 1997). The main curriculum developments at primary level are outlined in order to provide a context for the practice of circle time which is the focus of the research.

Many teachers currently teaching will remember, and will have been trained to implement, the 1971 Primary School Curriculum (PSC) during their teacher education courses up to the late 1990s. More recently qualified teachers have received their teacher education for implementation of the revised PSC (1999). Of relevance to this study is the shift in curriculum aims, content and teaching methods from the 1971 PSC to those delineated in its later iteration, as it is contended that these shifts facilitated the rise of circle time in Ireland.

The 1971 Primary School Curriculum

The Introduction to the 1971 PSC reminded us that most pupils attending primary school at that time were the first of a generation that could expect to progress beyond primary education, facilitated by the introduction of free second-level education in 1967. The possibility of extended formal education meant that primary education could be seen as a foundation for further education rather than an end in itself. The 1971 PSC

outlined a broad education based on principles of learning drawn from the research of Dewey and Piaget, although these influential educationalists are not mentioned specifically in the documents.

The primary aim of the 1971 PSC was to “enable the child to live a full life as a child”, (PSC, Part 1: 12), or, to quote a phrase that is familiar to many in primary education, “to cater for the full and harmonious development of each child” (PSC, Part 1, 1971: 13). This development of the child as an individual was to be done, not in isolation, but with a clear focus on developing a citizen who could “go on and live a full and useful life as an adult in society” (PSC, Part 1, 1971: 12).

While much of what is in the 1971 PSC is echoed in later revisions, what is striking from a modern perspective is that even as variations in cultural background are acknowledged, there is an explicit commitment to God and salvation:

Each human being is created in God’s image. He [*sic*] has a life to lead and a soul to be saved. Education is, therefore, concerned not only with life but with the purpose of life. And, since all men are equal in the eyes of God, each is entitled to an equal chance of obtaining optimum personal fulfilment.

(Primary School Curriculum, 1971: 12)

Of most interest for the current discussion are the two curriculum areas from the 1971 PSC that have the closest links to the present SPHE Curriculum (1999), with which the practice of circle time is most associated.

Social and Environmental Studies (SES)

This curriculum area was sub-divided into History, Civics, Geography and Elementary Science in the 1971 PSC. Overall, SES was to contribute to the development of an “appreciation of Nature as the work of God”, provide “valuable leisure-time activities”, and “motivation for expressive and creative work” in other curricula, as well as “many opportunities for planning and working together and ...

valuable training for citizenship” (PSC, Part 2, 1971: 112). Significantly, while an understanding of “one’s physical self” as an “essential form of approach to the “science of life” was mooted (PSC, Part 2, 1971: 112), this did not extend to any type of sexuality education which was to make its stormy debut in the mid-nineties, more of which later.

While it could be argued that aspects of History and Geography might contribute to a child’s sense of identity and commitment to the wider world (both of which are catered for in SPHE), it is the sub-area of civics that ties in most closely with the SPHE Curriculum (1999). Within this area, pupils were to become “better member[s] of society and to appreciate his rights and his obligations towards it” (PSC, 1971: 115). Also highlighted was the development of “acceptable social and moral attitudes” which owed much to “what has been said and done in his home” (PSC, 1971: 115). As echoed in a strand in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), the wider world was seen as an important educator of the child, along with school and home.

Civics was a subject that needed a degree of maturity, as evidenced by its introduction only in the senior classes of primary school. Before this, the child’s citizenship potential was to be fostered incidentally through, among other things, the “social training which is the inevitable side-effect of a classroom situation” (PSC, 1971: 118). Civic virtues were to be cultivated when opportunities arose, “ - perhaps by approbation when some child has exercised this virtue, or by censure when a number of children fail to behave as well as might reasonably be expected” (PSC, 1971: 118). This idea of ‘on the spot’ or situated education was to become a feature of the SPHE Curriculum (1999).

At senior class levels, the family, “as the basic unit of society”, was to be accorded due attention, at which time inspiration could be drawn from “the love of Christ for His

mother, His life as a member of the Holy Family and other aspects of the Divine example” (PSC, 1971: 118). This was to lay the foundation for study of the school, local and national community, where, in the latter case, projects could include support for the Irish language, national flag and anthem, the importance of national and individual savings, and the “Blood Bank as an essential service” (PSC, 1971: 125).

Physical Education

In the 1971 PSC, Physical Education (PE) was to contribute to the child’s development, including his “organic well-being” and “desirable social attitudes” (PSC, 1971: 289). Wholesome activities were to “give joy and satisfaction” leading to a mastery of his environment. PE consisted mainly of key areas such as movement, games, athletics, and other activities such as camping, hill-walking or orienteering, the latter of which might promote “qualities of leadership, courage and self-reliance” (PSC, 1971: 293). While combat sports were to be embraced enthusiastically by boys, teachers were exhorted to take care that such activities would not lead to “physical or psychological damage” (PSC, 1971: 293). It is not clear how teachers were to avoid this potential pitfall, nor what girls might be doing while boys were engaging in such activity.

The area of most relevance in PE to the SPHE Curriculum (1999) is that of health education, to which just over four pages were devoted in the 1971 PSC. Through health education, teachers were to provide opportunities for the “promotion of personal and general cleanliness and the fostering of habits that are socially acceptable” (PSC, 1971: 322). At senior class level, specific lessons were provided on infection and the nutritional value of food. These lessons could be undertaken on a day when it was not possible to do other aspects of PE for weather-related reasons (PSC, 1971: 324), giving some indication of the priority of these topics.

Overall, while there was a commitment to personal development implicit in the curriculum areas outlined from the 1971 PSC, it is fair to say that the concern was on the externals of appearance and physical health rather than the psychological turn that was to come in later curriculum revisions.

Teaching Strategies

Given that it is a particular teaching method which is the focus of the research, teaching strategies in the 1971 PSC were particularly relevant for exploration.

Content and process were equally important: “[h]ow a child learns is just as important as what he learns; nowadays, emphasis has moved from class instruction to child activity and personal involvement” (PSC, 1971: 289). It is difficult to find clear indications of what was envisaged in teaching methods, beyond an instruction that “[i]ndividual and group work should predominate: class ensemble work should be confined to such activities as story-telling, games, drama and music” (PSC, 1971: 15). Training colleges (as they were then designated), among others, were praised for their efforts in promoting knowledge “in the new ideas”, as were school authorities for “the courage and enterprise to adopt the new methods” (PSC, 1971: 16). Beyond the exhortation to provide opportunities for “activity, exploration and discovery” (PSC, 1971: 12), there is little to guide teachers in relation to teaching methods.

This overview of aspects of the 1971 PSC as the precursor to later curriculum developments allows for comparison with the 1999 PSC. It highlights some areas where progress has been made, particularly in relation to presentation of a more inclusive, less gendered view of curriculum. While the beginnings of a focus on the individual was evident in the 1971 PSC, it is difficult to envisage how this might have led to a new curriculum such as SPHE in the 1999 revisions. We must look outside the curriculum documents to answer that question.

Significant Milestones in Curriculum Development

Mulcahy (in Sugrue, 2004: xvi) was of the opinion that attention to the “underlying yet crucial moral, social and political determinants of curriculum decision-making” is important if we are to understand the “archaeology of reform”. Sugrue (2004) traced significant developments in the move to a revised curriculum which included reports such as the Primary Curriculum Review Body Report (1990), and OECD (1991). Another milestone was the advent of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) established in 1987¹. This agency was to take responsibility for curriculum development at primary and post-primary levels. A major difference between the drafting of the 1971 and 1999 curricula was the diminished role of the inspectorate (Sugrue, 2004). He highlighted the success of players such as the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) in positioning their members in key positions in the NCCA subject committees. This allowed practising teachers to exercise “a powerful voice in shaping field relations and the agenda of reform” (Sugrue, 2004: 190).

Outside the formal curriculum innovations, significant developments were shaping what was being taught. Teachers at primary level (and perhaps beyond) have an abiding interest in programmes that package curriculum content into manageable teaching units. Three programmes in particular were pivotal in terms of their later contribution to the SPHE Curriculum (1999), as well as their use of circle time as a teaching strategy. They covered areas left out of the 1971 PSC and were a response to emerging societal concerns.

Gleeson (in Sugrue, 2004: 111) suggested that individual Ministers adopt “pet projects” that have relevance to curriculum. Of note were the introduction of the

¹ This organisation grew out of the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) which was established in 1984.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Programme (1998) under Niamh Breathnach's stewardship, Mary O'Rourke's championing of the *Stay Safe Programme* (1998) and Micheál Martin's promotion of the *Walk Tall Programme* (1999)². Not all were welcomed, as evidenced by the protests that occurred at parent information meetings in relation to the *RSE Programme*, and to a lesser extent, the *Stay Safe Programme*. Their significance in terms of curriculum development lay in the fact that these programmes were in need of a curricular 'home' (DES, 2009) that was subsequently provided in the 1999 PSC.

The structure of the 1999 PSC differed significantly from that of its predecessor. While seven areas are mentioned as in the 1971 PSC, this hid "the reality that there are now more subjects than ever before" (Sugrue, 2004: 197). The level of detail provided in the teacher handbooks is markedly increased, resulting in two books being replaced by 23 separate curriculum documents, a development that suggested a significant reform as opposed to the tinkering that a 'revision' might imply (Sugrue, 2004).

Waldron (in Sugrue, 2004: 211) suggested that an "analysis of curriculum documents can reveal much about the ideological project of education at any given historical moment." However, she castigated the 1999 PSC for having "ideological weakness and a failure to explicate its philosophical underpinnings beyond the superficial" (Sugrue, 2004: 229). Notwithstanding this criticism, the 1999 PSC aimed to bring teaching and learning into the twenty-first century and provides a vision that is significantly different to its predecessor. Gone are the references to God and the Holy Family, which were replaced by a generic spirituality more in tune with the pluralist, outward-looking Ireland of today. The principle of child-centredness is maintained, with more focus on the pupil realising "his or her potential as a unique individual", and

² The *Stay Safe Programme* was initially introduced in 1988 by the then Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke. It was later revised in 1998.

developing the child as a “social being” so that they can contribute to the good of society. Education is to be a lifelong quest as children “learn how to learn” in order to instil a “love of learning” that will last (*PSC: Introduction*, 1999: 7).

Including the “full and harmonious development” of the child, there are five principles which underpinned this revision, including allowance for individual difference, the importance of activity and discovery methods, integration, and environment-based learning. While these were based on the 1971 PSC, they were expounded in much more detail in the 1999 PSC.

Sugrue (2004: 200-1) identified two significant shifts of thinking in the 1999 PSC as the importance of assessment and a “greater emphasis on skill development generally” which he suggested was an acknowledgement of the need to prepare people “to compete for market share in the global economy”. This contention should be placed alongside the introduction of a curriculum (SPHE) that defies assessment in many of its stated objectives, but which arguably has the potential to develop marketable social and personal skills, among other things. The other notable shift is the attention paid to psychological well-being, clearly manifested in SPHE. The emergence of circle time as a widely-used method in Irish primary schools in particular might be seen as addressing both the social and personal skills requirements of an open market economy such as Ireland, and the psychological health of children.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

Presenters at the *Principals' Consultative Conference* (INTO, 1997) admitted that the NCCA did not plan for SPHE from the outset, but that, rather like Topsy, it just grew out of the overlap between health (formerly in PE), and social and personal education which had formed part of SES. A commitment given by Niamh Breathnach (the then Minister for Education) for space in the timetable to implement the *RSE Programme* (1998) was also mentioned as adding impetus³. Timetable space confers status and legitimises programmes in a way that mere provision does not. Feedback from delegates at the conference confirmed that many felt the introduction of SPHE was only catching up with practice, when they said: “we are doing 90% already in other subjects” (INTO, 1997: 80).

The *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999) outlined that the curriculum “provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development and well-being of the child and to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 2). These opportunities were to be exploited through a spiral curriculum incorporating child-centred, activity-based learning in a variety of contexts. School and classroom climate and ethos were recognised as important contributors to SPHE curriculum implementation. This does not allow for easy evaluation of outcomes (NCCA, 2008; DES, 2009).

Of significance to the current research is the stated commitment to the intra- and interpersonal development of children. Readers of Gardner will be familiar with his delineation of intelligences which are implicit in the structure of the 1999 PSC. These

³ The *RSE Programme* (1998), along with the *Stay Safe* (1998) and *Walk Tall* (1999) Programmes are the basis of much of the content of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). The first two programmes generated controversy at the time of their introduction, and recent reviews of the SPHE Curriculum (NCCA, 2008; DES 2009) suggest that their implementation is lower than other aspects of the curriculum.

are discussed in more detail in a later chapter. For now, it is sufficient to note the foregrounding of ‘self’ in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), with concepts such as self-worth, self-confidence, self-awareness and self-efficacy all listed. The fact that these are not explained or discussed suggested that teachers were expected to know what these concepts were. The lack of definition may also confirm Furedi’s argument that these concepts have gained widespread currency and underpin a movement “towards emotionalism [which] represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary western culture” (Furedi, 2004: 4). While the three strands of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) appear to counter this argument, providing content around *Myself and others* and *Myself and the wider world*, as is seen later, it is the strand *Myself* that teachers implement most in their classrooms (NCCA, 2008; DES, 2009).

The Structure of the SPHE Curriculum

Examination of the structure and overview of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) confirmed the contention that it owed much of its content to the PE and SES curricula of the 1971 PSC, as well as the programmes that were introduced in the interim. Content is divided into three main strands. These are further sub-divided into strand units. An example of some of the content clearly illustrates links with previous developments. Under the strand *Myself*, one strand unit deals with *Growing and changing*, within which aspects of sexuality education are placed. Food and nutrition are also in this strand, along with *Safety and protection*, which include the content of the *Stay Safe Programme*. The strand *Myself and others* houses content on families, but contrasts with the 1971 PSC focus on the Holy Family. Since 1999, teachers are expected to deal with the reality of family life, including “the fact that family units and structures may not all be the same” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 14). It is in *Myself and the wider world* that we find the strand unit *Developing citizenship*. The promotion of a democratic classroom is a key aspect of this strand unit. However, there

is also a focus on wider national and international communities within the strand, as well as attention to media education.

Waldron suggested that the SPHE Curriculum (1999) had a strong “justice and equality perspective” and that SPHE could be described as a “model education for citizenship curriculum” (Waldron, in Sugrue, 2004: 224). The focus on justice and equality in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) facilitated the use of strategies such as circle time which espoused similar principles and underline its empowering potential.

Teaching Strategies

There is an explicit commitment to how children learn in the documentation for teachers in the PSC (1999). Equal importance is given to “what the child learns and to the process by which he or she learns it” (*PSC: Introduction*, 1999: 10). In addition, the acknowledgement that “individual children learn in different ways” points to a need for more attention to teaching strategies, both in terms of variety and individual difference. Key principles of learning further underline the child-centred nature of learning in the contemporary primary school classroom. These include tapping into the child’s natural “sense of wonder and awe”, promoting agency in learning, using prior knowledge and experience as “the starting point for acquiring new understanding”, learning through language, environment and arts, and the importance of guided activity and discovery (*PSC: Introduction*, 1999: 14-5). It is likely that these principles have been influenced by key writers in child development (e.g. Piaget) and theories of learning (e.g. Vygotsky), however there is no explicit reference to the theoretical bases for the curriculum.

In the SPHE Curriculum (1999), teachers are encouraged to use these principles to inform their implementation in three contexts: “in the discrete time, in the context of other subject areas...and...in the context of the classroom or school climate and

atmosphere” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 41). Exemplars are provided for teachers which illustrate both good planning within strand units and some of the methods that should be employed. Two of the planning exemplars (Exemplars 2 and 4) list circle work as a way of exploring friendship and aspects of community. Exemplar 19 (in the *Approaches and Methodologies* section) describes circle work as a strategy for working with children and endorses it as a useful strategy for promoting good communication, reflective principles such as “sharing, equality and inclusiveness and a sense of caring for each other” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 83). Teachers are encouraged to use it in all strands of SPHE and at all class levels.

The fact that circle work (as opposed to circle time) is used in the curriculum documentation warrants comment. In the Irish context, the term ‘circle work’ was coined by trainers working with the Walk Tall support service in the mid- to late-nineties to create a distance between the Mosley Model of circle time (seen as a commercial venture) and the in-career inputs they were providing in schools. At that time, the trainers were mainly focusing on the class meeting aspect of the circle time model, which differed only in small detail from the Mosley Model. As the national coordinator of the *Walk Tall Programme* (1999) at that time, I was instrumental in the change of name from ‘circle time’ to ‘circle work’ and am in a key position to comment on this⁴. That this term was taken up and incorporated into curriculum documents may say something about the influence of the Walk Tall trainers. Alternatively, it is possible that the curriculum developers were also anxious to distance themselves from the Mosley Model. This delineation does not appear to be one that teachers are overly careful about, and in spite of circle work being used in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), it is rarely ever heard in the field. Mosley mentioned that she had used the term ‘circle

⁴ The *Walk Tall Programme* (1999) is a substance misuse prevention programme which spans the eight levels in Irish primary schools. Circle work is a feature of the classroom materials at all levels.

work' when she started working with teachers because she felt "it would have a stronger rigor to it if we said circle work" (Mosley, wrap up interview). This further underlines the interchangeable nature of the terms.

The Teacher Counsellor Pilot Project

While the Teacher Counsellor Pilot Project (TCPP) does not fall into either the curriculum reform or programme category, it was significant in promoting circle time in a small number of schools. The TCPP ran for three years in thirty schools in the Tallaght area of Dublin in the mid-1990s. Teacher counsellors were appointed in each school. Their brief was to work with teachers to answer needs of children that were not being met in the school. These mainly fell within the social and emotional skills range. Principal M was a teacher counsellor and was interviewed as part of the research for this study. She described how, as part of her role, she was trained in the Mosley Model. A considerable part of her time was spent training teachers in circle time:

And as part of my brief as a teacher counsellor I introduced circle time to my school, and went in and mentored each class teacher for six weeks and trained them up for six weeks, and went in and did the circle time with them, and then left them off, and was available for consultation.

(Principal M, interview)

While this work was replicated in a small number of schools, it can be presumed that there was a ripple effect when teachers who had received this type of training subsequently left these schools to work elsewhere. The pilot project was not mainstreamed after the three years, and the personnel were re-designated as learning support teachers in their schools with a different brief thereafter. Support teachers continue to use circle time as an intervention in their work in primary school classrooms (see Chapter Five: Findings).

We now turn to circle time itself to explore the principles and processes of the method.

Circle Time

It is an indisputable fact that many Irish primary teachers say they are using the method of circle time in their classrooms (NCCA, 2008). What is less clear is how they are conducting circle time, to what ends, and whether the method delivers any measurable gains for the pupils involved over and above any other methods or interventions. In order to illuminate current practice, I chose to examine the Mosley Model of circle time. The reasons for this were as follows:

- a. Jenny Mosley has had a long association with Irish teachers through the education centre network stretching back to the early 1990s and up to the present. She has been involved in on-going in-career education on her model in many parts of Ireland and continues to validate Irish trainers to promote it,
- b. She has authored a number of books outlining her model of circle time which are widely used in primary schools in Ireland,
- c. Jenny Mosley is based in the UK where the education influences and thinking are not too dissimilar to those in Ireland, which suggested that her resources and materials could be applied in the Irish education system, which may be one reason for their popularity in Ireland,
- d. I have promoted the Mosley Model of circle time (also known as circle work) over a number of years in my role as teacher educator which makes it more likely that this is the model informing practice for some teachers in Ireland.

This is not to suggest that the work of others writing in this field is not available to Irish primary teachers. Gilmore and Diamond have materials which can be accessed through the website www.circletime.co.uk. These have a specific link to developing active citizenship and have been used in junior classes in Irish primary schools. Roffey has also developed a limited amount of classroom materials for circle time (e.g. *Circle Time For Emotional Literacy*, Roffey, 2006). The latter materials are similar to the Mosley Model of class meetings in principles and strategies and are not considered to constitute a different model for that reason.

The Mosley Model

In the Mosley literature, a comprehensive model for enhancing self-esteem, promoting positive behaviour and self-discipline, and establishing and maintaining good relationships in schools is described, which includes class meetings, a behaviour management system with rules (Golden Rules), rewards and sanctions, and ways of working in a circular way with school staff and parents. This collectively is designated as ‘The Whole School Quality Circle Time Model’ (Mosley, 1998). The focus in this research is the class meeting which is a significant aspect of the Mosley Model, and is, in my experience, the main component implemented from it in Irish primary schools. The term class meeting and circle time are used interchangeably hereafter.

The Class Meeting

Mosley described the class meeting as “a democratic and creative approach used to consider a wide range of issues affecting the whole school community”, with self-esteem building described as “a central aim” (Mosley, 1993: 9). She suggested that it was “an ideal group listening system for enhancing children’s self-esteem, promoting moral values, building a sense of team and developing social skills” (Mosley, 1996: 33). Mosley asked: “[c]an circle time contribute to emotional intelligence” and the answer

was: “[c]ircle time provides the ideal opportunity for all our intelligences to be stretched and challenged” (Mosley, 1998: 8-9). Elaborating further, she stated that emotional education, self-esteem and academic achievement were “not only interlinked; they are indivisible” (Mosley, 1998: 10). The link with academic achievement was not clearly spelled out (perhaps because of its claimed indivisibility) but schools could be in no doubt about the importance of circle time:

Only when schools and agencies work together on a programme of timetabled Circle Time meetings regulated by firm imperatives for respect for each other can they say that they have the child’s emotional needs at the heart of all they are doing.

(Mosley, 1998: 10)

There is little evidence in the Mosley literature to substantiate claims made in relation to the contribution of circle time to self-esteem or emotional intelligence enhancement, nor indeed to the impact of either on academic achievement. This is understandable, given the fact that the literature is in the form of teacher manuals and has a practical implementation orientation. These claims are dealt with comprehensively in later chapters.

The framework for circle time class meetings in the Mosley Model is as follows:

- Introductory Phase
- Middle Phase or Open Forum
- Closing Phase.

(Mosley, 1996: 99 – 102)

In the introductory phase, the emphasis is on setting the scene, creating a sense of safety and acceptance, and a relaxing or fun element through the use of games and icebreakers. The middle phase places particular emphasis on hearing children’s voices. A technique used is the round, where a speaking object is passed from child to child

around the circle and they are invited to make a contribution. Children are given permission to pass if they do not wish to say something.

Another element of this phase is the open forum. Here, a theme may be explored by children through discussion, or the teacher may present a problem which children then try to solve. This could involve highlighting a group or individual problem. Practices in this phase have attracted criticism, where a child is encouraged to state a personal problem s/he has and others are invited to give that child advice (see *Quality Circle Time in Action*, Mosley, 1999). Ballard did not include problem-solving in his circle time model. For Robinson and Maines (1998: 5), “the specific behaviour of one or more children, discussed in a way which shames or stigmatises, is not the business of Circle Time.” There is no evidence in Mosley’s materials that this is ever an intention. Devine (2003: 308) expressed concern that where children were typified as deviant or deficient (a claim that could be made in relation to Mosley’s personal problem-solving focus), there might be a dominant use of power, “with adults drawing on the full range of their authoritative resources to socialize children in line with adult-defined goals and expectations.” However, Devine included circle time in a list of “more democratic forms of schooling” (Devine, 2003: 318).

In the closing phase there is an emphasis on restoring a calm and peaceful atmosphere, an opportunity to affirm individuals or groups, and to celebrate if there have been particular successes since the previous meeting (for example in behaviour of individuals or groups).

Ground rules for Circle Time Meetings

The following rules are taken from *Quality Circle Time*:

- To signal if they wish to speak
- Not to use any put-downs towards each other
- Not to interrupt when someone else is talking
- That a child has the right to say 'Pass' in a round if she does not wish to speak
- Children who pass in the initial round will, at the end of the round, be allowed to signal if they'd like a second chance
- Not to name anyone in the circle in a negative way. Instead, they must say, for example, 'Someone hit me' or 'Some people are ganging up on me.'

(Mosley, 1996: 35)

Other practitioners using the Mosley Model have elaborated on these. To the previous ones, Tew added:

- All views are taken seriously.
- Members of the class team suggest ways of solving problems and
- Individuals can accept the help or politely refuse it.

(Tew, 1998: 22)

Kelly added a further one: "complete confidentiality. This was considered to be the most important rule" (Kelly, 1999: 43). For some teachers, the idea of confidentiality in working with children is controversial. Mosley suggested that "realistic constraints" needed to be accepted, and that children should be encouraged to say as much as they feel is "safe" (Mosley, 1993: 116). Unfortunately, not all children have the capacity to make this judgement, and this aspect of practice in circle time contributes to some of the unease about the method which is explored later.

The Role of the Teacher in the Circle

The circle formation is symbolic of the equality promoted in circle time. There is no 'head' of a circle – all opinions are held in the same esteem. Mosley does not spell out in any great detail how the teacher should act in the circle, apart from stating that they must follow the rules the same as the children, and be calm and accepting of ideas “no matter how off-beat” (Mosley, 1996: 35). She suggested that children could eventually “learn to take it in turns to ‘run’ Circle-sessions!” (Mosley, 1993: 115). This is indicative of a facilitative role for the teacher, with a sharing of power in the circle.

Behaviour modification is seen as a legitimate area for the problem-solving phase of the class meeting in the Mosley Model. As such, it may fall into a broad definition of counselling, where the object is to change the behaviour of the individual⁵. This aspect of circle time is mentioned by teachers in in-career activities from time to time, both in terms of its potential to expose children (and possibly their families) and the blurring of the lines between facilitation and counselling in circle time. There is little in the literature on this dilemma. Tew acknowledged that “many teachers, both newly qualified and long-standing, have had little or no training in counselling skills”, but stated that circle time was “an emotionally ‘safe’, easy-to-learn teaching methodology which any PSE teacher or form tutor could master” (Tew, 1998: 21-22). This could be interpreted as suggesting that the counselling role was not envisaged in the conduct of circle time. In contrast, Biddulph (2007: 51) had reservations about the method which he believed “assumes a high level of skill in the area of classroom management on the part of teachers.” So while teachers might not necessarily need counselling skills to conduct effective circle times, they certainly need good behaviour and classroom management skills, as with any active learning method.

⁵ This is examined comprehensively in Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework.

Carr outlined the difficulties of educating teachers to deliver education in the affective domain, and suggested that “instrumental strategies are not enough” (Carr, 2000: 31). Mosley appeared to acknowledge this when she provided strategies for teachers to enhance their own self-esteem as a prerequisite for working with children in the circle. And there is recognition of the difficulties that teachers might encounter in the *Teachers Talk Back* chapter (Mosley, 1996: 88-95), where a number of problems raised by teachers in relation to circle time were answered.

A Personal Narrative

Research is always carried out by an individual with a life and a lifeworld...a personality, a social context, and various personal and practical challenges and conflicts, all of which affect the research...

(Bentz and Shapiro 1998, quoted in Anfara and Mertz, 2006: 4)

Many writers give personal accounts of aspects of their experiences to explain their current positions in their professional/research lives (Eisner, 2001; Selby (in O’Sullivan, Morrell and O’Connor 2002)). McIntosh (2008: 35) defined ontology as the “study of being, that is to say, what we are”, and provided details of his life journey to explain his current position. The following narrative gives some insight into my career journey. This is done not to “exorcise ... subjectivity” (Henstrand, in Anfara *et al.*, 2006: 16), but to let the reader know what they might expect in terms of dispositions and expertise, and to explain the motivation for undertaking research into circle time.

My initial training as a primary school teacher in the late 1970s exposed me to, among many other things, the writings of Dewey, Piaget and Freire who espoused theories of learning that were experiential, staged and empowering. In my subsequent professional life, I attempted to implement these theories in my everyday interactions and teaching with children, sometimes more successfully than others. Reinforcement of

these child-centred approaches was found in my subsequent study of Froebelian principles of education while doing a postgraduate diploma after teaching for a number of years. This was followed by a series of postgraduate courses which eventually led to a Master's Degree in School Leadership.

Significantly, during this time I became involved in the design and delivery of in-service courses for teachers and whole school staffs in primary schools with the education centre network. The emphasis when working with these groups of individuals and staffs was on facilitation rather than prescription - the role of the 'guide on the side'. Extensive work in in-service education convinced me that if you can create a supportive and cooperative learning environment, while at the same time challenging people to examine their practice in order to improve it, they can generally be trusted to do just that.

Around this time (circa 1990), a new method of working in the classroom with children, called circle time, was being introduced into Ireland. This fitted in with my interest in empowering methods for working with children and adults. An opportunity was presented – and grasped – to train with its leading UK proponent, Jenny Mosley, as a preparation for working in schools with teachers to promote this method.

Shortly after this I was appointed to coordinate a substance misuse prevention programme (*Walk Tall*) which involved design and coordination of delivery of in-service (as it was then called) on a national basis. Part of that work entailed promoting circle time as a method for enhancing self-esteem in the classroom. A commitment to self-esteem building was a key principle in the *Walk Tall Programme* (1999), the clear message being that this inoculated children against substance misuse. During that time I became familiar with the work of Robert Reasoner (1994), whose model of self-esteem

is incorporated into the SPHE Curriculum (1999), and whose work influenced my thinking and delivery of in-career education to teachers.

Since 2000, I have been employed as a SPHE lecturer in a college of education where I have been in a position as part of my work to model and promote active learning methods (including circle time) as well as other aspects of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). During this time I also have taken an opportunity to study the work of William Glasser which has informed both my personal and professional life, particularly in relation to his work on choice theory (Glasser, 1998). As Glasser is also cited by Mosley as an influence, his work is outlined later.

More recently, pursuit of a Doctorate in Education has allowed me to interrogate my professional practice and prompted me to find out more about how circle time has evolved and is being used in Irish primary classrooms. This research interest is a natural and integral stage of my professional development journey.

To quote Eisner (2001:136): “[t]hat brief personal history is, as they say, to let you know where I am coming from.” I am aware that my status as an ‘insider’ in the primary education system is an advantage in relation to providing insights into what happens in primary school classrooms. It is also a potential weakness if this blinds me to aspects of practice outside my range of experience. This has been borne in mind at each stage of the research journey.

Summary and Conclusion

A historical context for the phenomenon of circle time was outlined in this chapter, where it was established that its origins were most likely in the USA, with a clear psychological focus. Curriculum documents were examined and the case was made that the transition from the 1971 PSC to its successor in 1999 was influential in legitimising the use of a method such as circle time. Its meteoric rise in Irish primary classrooms, with 81 per cent of class teachers using it frequently or sometimes (NCCA, 2008) cannot just be explained by curriculum reform however, given that there is very little mention of it in the SPHE Curriculum (1999). Other influences are examined in subsequent chapters. Even if its use is over-reported, it still points to a significant familiarity with and adoption of a method of working with children which is under-researched.

The Mosley Model was established as the most likely informing model for practice in Irish primary schools, for a variety of reasons. The main features, principles and processes of the Model were described, along with some associated areas of debate.

A personal narrative was provided to help the reader understand my interest in the phenomenon and to acknowledge in advance my relationship with circle time over a long number of years. That this relationship might change after the research journey was a distinct possibility.

Two key elements were presented in this chapter as motivating forces for the research – the reported widespread use of circle time and my association with it over a long number of years. The fact that there was little or no Irish research into the phenomenon acted as a further spur to find out what exactly was happening in circle times in Irish primary school classrooms. Experience suggested there were key questions to be investigated in relation to its purposes and practices, its benefits and

challenges. This thesis brings you on the journey undertaken and how that impacted on my relationship with circle time. The following diagram presents the thesis in visual form:

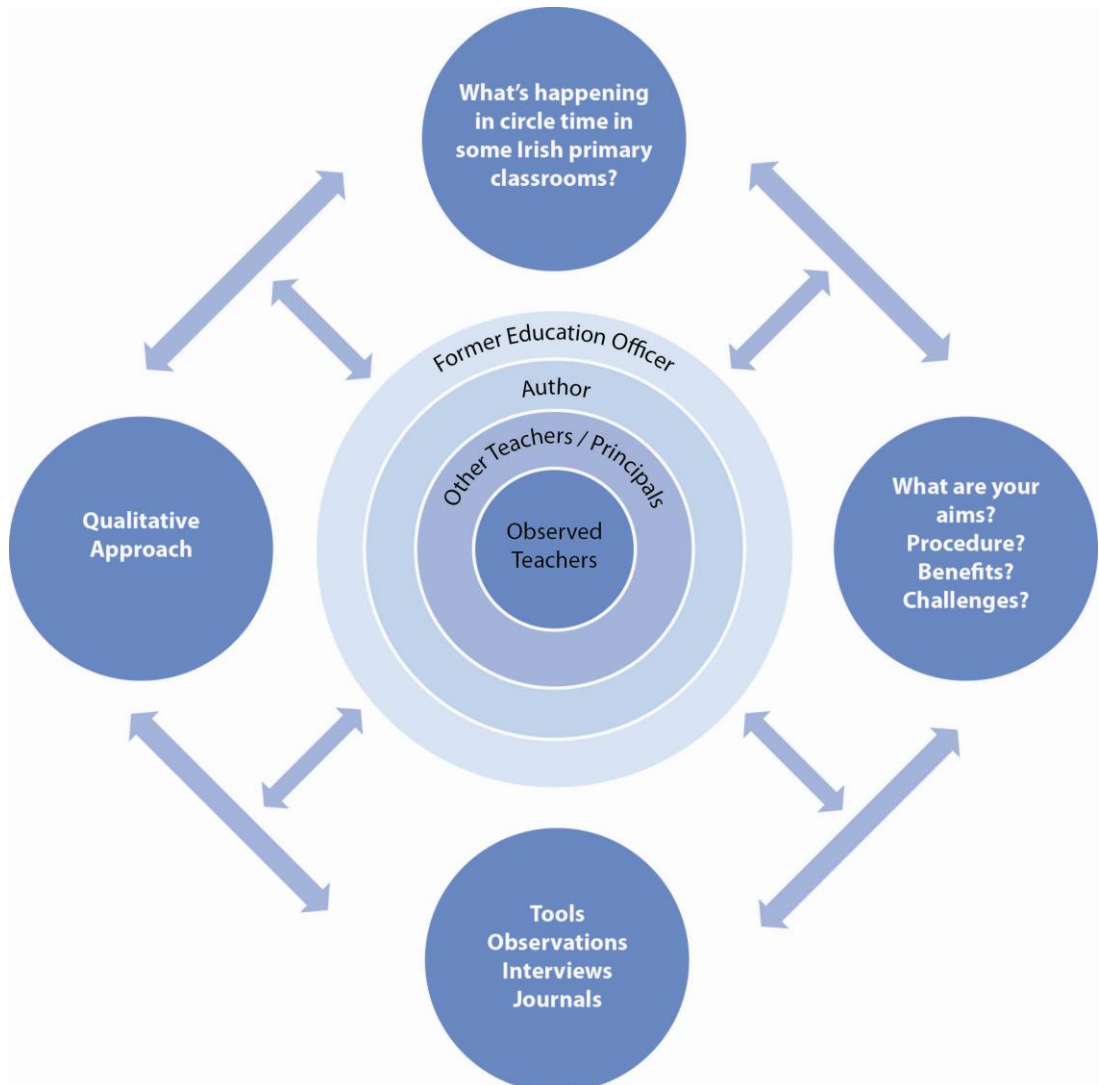


Diagram 1: Thesis in visual form

The remainder of the thesis is laid out as follows:

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework outlines the concepts and theories used to provide a framework for analysis in the research undertaken on circle time.

The unifying concept is that of empowerment through circle time, promoted by key concepts of self-esteem, voice and emotional intelligence. These are further underpinned by approaches to learning which inform both the practice of circle time and the SPHE Curriculum (1999). In particular, the work of Piaget and Vygotsky is outlined. Counselling theories and approaches are included in the conceptual framework in order to interrogate the notion of circle time as a form of therapy or counselling.

Chapter Three: Literature Review explores some of the literature on the concepts and theories in Chapter Two in order to establish the legitimacy of some of the claims made on their behalf. Reviews of SPHE Curriculum (1999) implementation are included to provide information and insight into the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools. Existing research into circle time is outlined and critiqued. This is confined to research in Ireland and the UK, where it is contended the practice of circle time is similar and most likely to be based on the Mosley Model.

Chapter Four: Methodology describes my epistemological and researcher stance in detail. The research on circle time is described, including the approach and methods chosen and their rationale, along with ethical and validity considerations. The limitations of the research are also outlined.

Chapter Five: Findings presents the teacher participants and their contexts, along with contributions from other informants such as principals, teachers not using circle time, and the author Jenny Mosley, whose model is contrasted with practice in the research. The findings of the research are presented under four main headings: aims and focus, strategies and processes, benefits and assessment, and challenges of the circle time method.

Chapter Six: Discussion interrogates the findings and explores how they relate to the conceptual framework chosen and the literature that was explored. The practice of circle time as evidenced in the research is problematized and questions are raised in relation to its future direction in Irish primary schools.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions acknowledges the need for me to take a position in relation to circle time in my work as teacher educator. The arguments for and against the practice are articulated, based on the literature and the research. A new model of circle time is presented, and key strategies for making this a reality are identified. The potential for future research in the field is highlighted, and I make a commitment to continuing on this research journey.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Researchers are increasingly asked to explain the theories or concepts that inform their work (Lincoln, 2010; Anfara *et al.*, 2006). While there is a lack of definition in much of the literature about what these terms mean, for the purposes of this chapter, a concept refers to a general idea (e.g. self-esteem), while theory refers to a belief or assumption about how a concept might act in the world. So, for example, self-esteem theory suggests, among other things, that positive self-esteem is a prerequisite for happiness.

The advantages of using theory at various stages in the life of a qualitative study are well-argued in Anfara *et al.* (2006). They suggest that:

A theoretical framework has the ability to (1) focus a study, (2) reveal and conceal meaning and understanding, (3) situate the research in a scholarly conversation and provide a vernacular, and (4) reveal its strengths and weaknesses.

(Anfara *et al.*, 2006: 195)

This illustrates the two-sided nature of theoretical frameworks by acknowledging the potential to miss important data that does not fit into the preconceived framework of the researcher. This holds true for all stages of the research process.

The rise of social, personal and health education (SPHE), within which circle time is a method, has been charted in the previous chapter. Emotional well-being is a focus of this curriculum, which is indicative for some of the pervasive influence of psychology (Furedi, 2004) while for others it indicates a postmodern view of the individual as an integrated and holistic being (McWilliam and Hatcher, 2004; Taylor, 2001). Taylor (2001) made a convincing case for the role of the emotions in learning, both at a

conscious and unconscious level. The work of Gardner and Goleman has been influential in educational policy and practice with regard to social and emotional education in the 1980s and 1990s, even though some cast great doubt on the academic credibility of the latter as is seen later in this chapter. I believed that theories in the psychological domain were the most promising to explore based on my insider knowledge of circle time, the developments in curriculum outlined earlier, and an examination of the relevant literature.

A number of concepts and theories were examined in search of a framework that would inform and enlighten the research. Also examined were commentators and critics of the concepts and theories outlined. Some theories were not examined because of lack of space. For example, it might have been interesting to explore curriculum reform theory as a way of explaining the rise of circle time in primary schools in Ireland. The choices made were deemed to be those that would deliver the greatest insights into teacher's practice of circle time in Irish primary school classrooms. The selection of particular concepts and theories was undertaken with considerable thought, and reflected both my knowledge and experience of Irish primary schools, as well as imperatives linked to the literature on circle time. However, I acknowledge that others might have chosen differently, and that the research could suggest other concepts and theories for exploration in the future.

Fenwick (2000: 3) acknowledged her "desire for conceptual control" in her work on perspectives of cognition. I also felt this desire to present the concepts and theories examined as a coherent, logical and meaningful framework for the research to be undertaken.

The overarching concept chosen was that of empowerment, as this is how I saw the potential of circle time. In order to achieve that, and to explore it with teachers, I chose

what I identified as key underpinning concepts and theories which could promote empowerment for children in circle time. These were self-esteem theory, emotional intelligence theory, and children's voice theory. These were deemed to be appropriate for looking at teachers' aims in conducting circle time. Theories embedded in particular learning and counselling approaches have also influenced the development and conduct of circle time, and therefore needed to form part of the conceptual and theoretical framework, although they were seen as more supportive than central. It was hoped these would provide a framework for examining practices and procedures used by teachers in circle time. The rationale for choosing each concept and theory is outlined as follows:

Self-esteem (SE) Theory

Self-esteem (SE) is promoted as a key aim and benefit of circle time (Mosley, 1993; 1996). The SE literature has influenced the revision of Irish primary school curricula in recent times, as evidenced in particular in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), within which circle time is advocated. The potential of SE for empowerment of individuals is a key argument in its literature. I was interested in identifying what was the primary motivation for teachers to use circle time in their classrooms, and the literature on circle time suggested that this concept would be significant. SE theory, it was hoped, would illuminate teachers' responses in relation to their aims and the perceived benefits.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory

There is no doubt that the theory of multiple intelligences has influenced Irish curriculum reform. Of particular interest here were the intelligences associated with social and personal education, namely inter- and intrapersonal intelligences (Gardner, 1999). Linked to these was the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), which had become a focus in the Irish educational context (e.g. Walk Tall Conference on Emotional Intelligence: November, 2009). Mosley (1998: 8) asked: “[c]an circle time

contribute to emotional intelligence?” and answered with a resounding ‘yes’, citing the work of Gardner and Goleman in this regard. I wanted to find out if this was part of teachers’ rationale for the use of circle time in Irish primary schools, and how this was promoted in their practice.

For some commentators, the concept of EI is self-esteem in new clothes (Craig 2007), adding further merit to its inclusion in the conceptual framework for the research. It too had empowerment potential for children through its promotion of particular personal and social skills.

Children’s Voice Theory

Children’s right to articulate views, to be heard and to have their opinions and views taken into account in matters that affect them has been enshrined in the United Nations Charter of Rights for Children (UNCRC, 1989). Article 12 in particular provides a legal basis for ensuring that children have the right to “express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.” Ireland ratified the UNCRC (1989) in 1992, which imposed a responsibility to make the provisions known and to ensure implementation. The *National Children’s Strategy 2000- 2010* had as its vision “an Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own” (p. 7). Circle time is characterised by its promoters as a forum for children to express views openly, and equal opportunity to do this is safeguarded by particular techniques employed during a circle time meeting. For this reason, it was seen as a central theory to be explored with teachers in their use of circle time, particularly in relation to its potential for empowerment in a wider context. How voice was exercised in circle time was an area of interest in the research.

Active Learning Theories and Approaches

Circle time is listed in a suite of active learning methods advocated in the revised Irish PSC (1999). Learning theory had potential to explain some of the processes of circle time, and the role adopted by teachers in the circle. I wanted to find out why teachers would choose a method such as circle time over other methods available to them, and it was expected that learning theory might have some bearing on this.

Counselling Theories and Approaches

A number of specific counselling theories are referred to in the literature on circle time. Rogers is credited with being an influence by Housego *et al.* (1994) and Mosley (1996). Maslow's hierarchy of needs was cited by Mosley (1998: 10) as "one of the strongest psychological theories influencing the development of this [Mosley] model." Glasser was also identified by Mosley as someone who was "not given enough credit" in the rise of circle time in classrooms (Mosley, interview one). The work of these writers was examined in order to identify aspects of teacher practice that might be informed by their theories, and their influence on teachers' approach in circle time, in particular the role and processes adopted.

I was aware of some unease at school level about the perception of circle time as a form of counselling. This was reflected in some of the literature (e.g. Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009). I wanted to establish if circle time was indeed a form of counselling, and if so, what form did it take.

These concepts and theories provided the conceptual framework for the research. Key contributors were identified who were directly relevant to the research in hand, and who represented current thinking and controversies in the field. Chapter Three: Literature Review provides additional material on research involving some of the concepts and theories.

The three key theories of SE, voice and EI formed the central ideas for empowerment of children in circle time. These were to be promoted in circle time through particular approaches that were embedded in theories of learning and counselling. The following diagram illustrates the theories and their relationships as I conceptualised them in advance of the research:

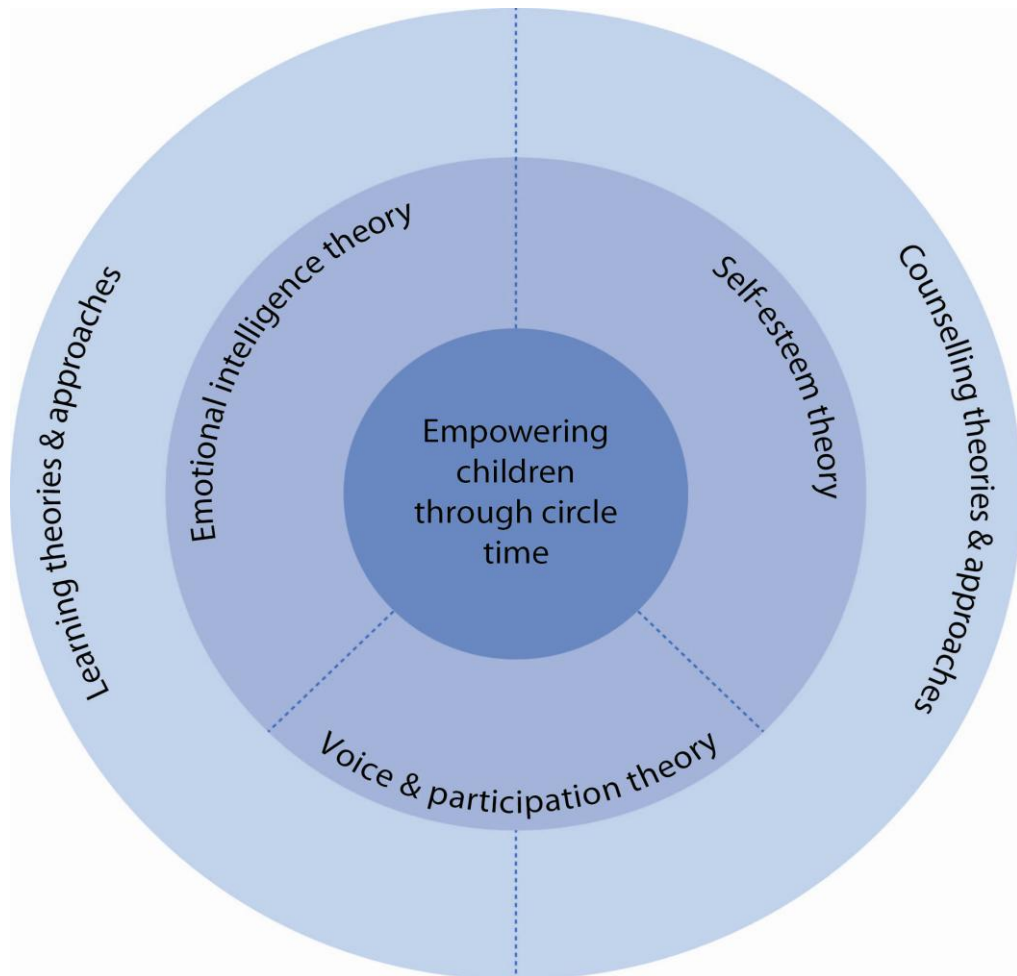


Diagram 2: Conceptual Framework

Self-Esteem (SE) Theory

A number of writers have traced the rise of SE theory from its early origins. Greenstone (2008: 676), writing from the perspective of children’s literature, suggested that “[a]s a concept, self-esteem took on its current meaning and gained currency in the popular mind only in the middle years of the twentieth century.” Greenstone (2008)

credited Rousseau and the Romantics as a turning point in the conceptualisation of childhood and children, which led to the interest in the development of children's SE. Others pointed to the rise of psychology from the late nineteenth century as significant (e.g. Furedi, 2004). Bednar, Gawain Welles and Peterson (1989) provided a time line starting with the early theorists in psychology and traced their contribution to theories of self and SE. Miller and Moran (2007: 602) suggested that the work of James reflected a concern with the competence aspect of self-esteem, while they posited that Rogers's work was more concerned with feelings of self-worth. Allport's contribution as identified by Bednar *et al.* (1989: 30) was "the recognition of the part played by psychological defenses." The work of some of these theorists is explored in more detail in a later section.

Of the contemporary theorists, Bednar *et al.* (1989: 44) suggested that "[i]n contrast to the historical theorists, current authors view the selves as being more personalized and capable of conflict." They quoted Higgins, Klein and Strauman (1985) who broke self-conceptions into three classes: "the *actual* self..., the *ideal* self..., and the *ought* self..." (Bednar *et al.*, 1989: 40). Discrepancy among these selves could produce some discomfort to the individual. Likewise, Rosenberg's work in the 1970s also provided a similar picture of split selves: the private or extant self, the desired self, and the presenting self (Bednar *et al.*, 1989: 40).

The notion of the conflicted or vulnerable self proposed by the contemporary theorists has spawned the therapeutic industry (Furedi, 2004; Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009). Furedi (2004: 5) suggested that life was now viewed through the therapeutic lens, and that many of the normal experiences of life "have been redefined as damaging to people's emotions." One only has to look at print and other media to confirm this, where therapy or counselling are often mentioned in the aftermath of a personal or

community tragedy, and “closure” is a common concept. While Furedi (2004: 106) linked theorists such as Maslow and Rogers with promotion of the “self-determining self”, he suggested that this had been replaced in contemporary culture by a view of the individual as vulnerable. This in turn had led to a rise in therapeutic education (with a focus on SE) to the detriment of the subject curriculum (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009).

Just as many see the USA as the home of circle time, it is also associated with the interest in education for SE, where it was seen as “a panacea – as something which would cure almost all modern ills such as teenage pregnancy, drug taking, violence, low academic achievement...” (Craig, 2007: 10). Its curative or preventative effects have been queried in recent times (e.g. Craig, 2007; Maclellan, 2005). Others suggested its pursuit was indicative of an “anti-intellectual emotional stance” and a “climate of intellectual pessimism” (Furedi, 2004: 159, 161). It appeared that opposition to the modern-day emphasis on SE was increasing, in some quarters at least, leading to a “self-esteem backlash” (Miller and Parker, 2006: 19). Claims for its effectiveness and benefits are explored in the next chapter.

In an Irish educational context, it is obvious from curriculum documents that the concept of SE has informed curriculum reform at a fundamental level. In the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999) in particular, teachers and schools are left in no doubt as to the importance of SE as, without positive self-worth, “the well-being of either the individual or the community is unlikely to flourish” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 24). SE is defined as “the degree to which people feel worthy, capable, significant and effective” (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 24). While not specifically mentioned or credited, the work of Robert Reasoner (1994) appears to have influenced the concept of

SE promoted in the SPHE Curriculum (e.g. *SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 24)⁶. In his research, Reasoner (1994) identified five characteristics of children with positive SE. These were a sense of identity, purpose, belonging, security and competence. These “building blocks” have been popularised in Irish education through the use of the manual *Building Self-esteem in the Elementary School* (Reasoner, 1994) which provided detailed lesson plans and worksheets for use in the primary school classroom. This is an example of the development of classroom materials directly related to concepts and theories. That Reasoner’s research was based on children in another country raises some doubt about its applicability in the Irish educational context.

The literature on SE and related theories is vast and littered with concepts and terms that are often used interchangeably. The term SE may be used in the same way as self-concept or self-worth by some, while self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-evaluation were described as “other labels” in Bednar *et al.* (1989). Lack of definition was identified as a problem for those working in education (Weare and Gray, 2003). In order to analyse teacher responses in the research, clarity was needed about the concept of SE. Miller *et al.* (2007) had clarified the terms used for SE. They suggested that the “wide variety of definitions, models and measures reflects a lack of consensus on how it should be conceived” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 601). They argued that there were two aspects which could be traced historically: “those which focus primarily on feelings of self-worth, and those which are based upon an individual’s judgement of their personal competence” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 602). In their research, they used a model of SE which was “seen as the integrated sum of self-competence and self-worth” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 602). Their definition of SE was chosen as an analytic heuristic for my research, i.e. an integrated model of self-competence and self-worth. This had the advantage of a

⁶ The *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999: 24) list the five building blocks associated with Reasoner (1994) and provide a commentary on how these can be fostered in the classroom.

historical base, and also tied in with the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999: 24) definition, where worth and significance might equate with self-worth, while capability and effectiveness might equate with self-competence. However, I was aware that this might not fit the reality of what was happening in circle time and was open to possibilities that other perspectives on SE might emerge.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory

Debates about intelligence and its many and varied forms have occupied academic minds for most of the twentieth century (Gardner and Moran, 2006). They proposed a concept of intelligence that encompassed “what the individual brings and what the cultural and social environments contribute to a particular cognitive performance” (Gardner *et al.*, 2006: 228).

Gardner himself is considered the leading exponent of the concept and theory of multiple intelligences (MI). His interest in the area grew from his work with stroke patients and gifted children. From this work he concluded that “the human mind is better thought of as a series of relatively separate faculties...than as a single, all-purpose machine” (Gardner, 1999: 32). Gardner toyed with many types of intelligences (for example, spiritual, existential), but finally categorised intelligence under eight headings: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. These met his criteria for an intelligence, which included a neural link in the brain for each capability, as well as an identifiable set of operations and a distinct developmental history (Gardner, 1999). He further justified his theory by suggesting that existing psychometric tests showed little correlation, for example, between spatial and linguistic capabilities, thereby pointing to their separateness as intelligences (Gardner, 1999: 40).

Gardner, Kornhaber and Wake (1996: 29) suggested that in some traditional cultures, “intelligence, or “using one’s mind well,” was often linked to skill in dealing with other people.” Gardner (1999) classified interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences as the personal intelligences, the inclusion of which “raised the most eyebrows...” (Gardner, 1999: 43). While Gardner (1999: 41) suggested that “the new construct of emotional intelligence – [was] roughly an amalgam of the two personal intelligences”, he appeared to have changed his mind later when he stated that he never combined these two intelligences, claiming they were “clearly different” (Gardner *et al.*, 2006: 229).

It could be argued that Daniel Goleman did just that. Goleman is popularly credited with coining the phrase “emotional intelligence”, with the preferred term in the UK being emotional literacy (Qualter, Gardner and Whiteley, 2007). Goleman (1998) broke the concept into five main features, which included self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy and adeptness in relationships, features that Mosley referred to in her rationale for circle time (Mosley, 1998: 8). With Goleman’s five features, the first three could arguably fall within Gardner’s interpersonal intelligence, while the last two could be classified under intrapersonal intelligence. Goleman’s work has been much criticised both for his depiction of EI as “a rich soup of positive personality characteristics” (Craig, 2007: 9) and his “extraordinary claims” (Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2008: 504). Gardner went so far as to suggest that the popularity of Goleman’s work owed much to its simplicity: “[a]nd – this is meant without disrespect – the message of the book is contained in its title and sub-title...” (Gardner, 1999: 10). One gets a sense of chagrin from some of the critics of Goleman, who, notwithstanding the negativity, managed to sell a million copies of his book with the simple title.

If Goleman is discredited by some, where was one to look for guidance on this concept? Mayer, Salovey and Caruso are key authors in the field. Their work has been described as “the intellectually respectable end of emotional intelligence” (Craig, 2007: 8). In 1990, they wrote articles that “explicitly defined EI and developed a theory and demonstration measure of it” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 198). They dismissed Goleman’s work as “naïve representations” of the concept which did little to advance the scientific argument for EI (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 197; 2008: 503). Their definition, they argued, allowed for measurement of EI and, unlike Goleman’s, did not include any claims for its potency. Nor did it include behaviours and was therefore considered by the researchers as value-free:

The capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth...

(Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 197)

EI was described by Mayer *et al.* (2004) as one of the “hot” intelligences which included the “social, practical, and personal intelligences” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 197). EI could be regarded as a form of intelligence because it was “operationalized as a mental ability”, it met correlational criterion for a “unitary ability that represents a new kind of performance relative to earlier measures of intelligence”, and it could “exhibit growth with age – a developmental course similar to that of other intelligences” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 209). This work echoed Gardner’s criteria for MI outlined earlier.

EI operates on emotional information which is conveyed by a “unique set of identifying signals” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 198). They divided EI into four main areas: “the ability to (a) perceive emotion, (b) use emotion to facilitate thought, (c) understand emotions, and (d) manage emotion” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 199). Within each of these so-

called branches one could progress through a “developmental progression of skills from the more basic to the more sophisticated” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 199). I was attracted to this model of EI on the basis that it made clear what the construct was about. The model also allowed for the possibility of design of a staged, developmental programme of EI education, an area of interest in my role as teacher educator.

Mayer *et al.* (2004) outlined their test for EI which they called the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). This has items which measure each of the four branches of EI. While acknowledging that improvements could be made to the test, “like any such test”, they argued for its reliability and validity.

In contrast, Qualter *et al.* (2007) argued that there were two types of EI – trait and ability – and that educators needed to be clear which type they were interested in: “[a]re they trying to develop specific cognitive abilities in their pupils, or are they more interested in facilitating the development of particular self-perceptions?” (Qualter *et al.*, 2007: 13). They suggested that educators should adopt programmes based on either trait or ability EI as opposed to programmes that tried to develop both types. Qualter *et al.*’s (2007) delineation of EI combined EI and SE. This was because these umbrella terms (trait and ability EI), “[encompass] many previously investigated and empirically supported psychological constructs” (Qualter *et al.*, 2007: 12). This lends some weight to the argument that EI is a new version of SE. This merging of the two concepts did not appeal to me, and smacked of expediency. Nor did this merging allow for easy measurement of gains. Gardner might take issue on a number of fronts with Qualter *et al.*’s (2007) work, given that they offered no evidence of a neural link or a developmental path for their particular brand of EI. He might also take issue with the traits listed in Qualter *et al.*’s (2007: 12) definition of EI: “optimism, happiness, social competence and self-esteem.” Gardner argued that intelligences were value-free and not

linked to behaviours such as might be envisaged under social competence (for example).

I found the work of Mayer *et al.* (2004; 2008) persuasive, more amenable to measurement than that proposed by others, and more useful from an educational programme design viewpoint. However, the work of the latter has been criticised on many fronts. Craig (2007: 13), while crediting Mayer *et al.*'s (2008) "positive stance" on EI and their academic credibility, documented a number of key works that questioned its existence at all. Quoting Matthews, Zeidner and Roberts (2004), she suggested that there were "major conceptual, psychometric and theoretical problems to be overcome before EI may be considered a genuine, scientifically validated construct" (Craig, 2007: 8). She also pointed out that the "consensus based scoring" of the MSCEIT measured "how much an individual is in tune with the norms in that culture" and not necessarily a type of intelligence. However, if one views intelligence as a largely cultural construct this may be overly harsh. Ratner, writing about the work of Vygotsky, suggested that the social and cultural environment was the key to the development of "any specific capability which people's cultural lives demand" (Ratner, in Rieber and Salzinger (eds.), 1998: 465). Qualter *et al.* (2007: 14) highlighted the difficulties of measurement of EI and cast doubt on the construct validity of the MSCEIT, while also pointing out that few studies had been carried out with primary-aged children. Ecclestone *et al.* (2009: 40) suggested that "just as measures of IQ became reified creations that labelled and shaped their recipients, proponents of emotional intelligence fall in to the same traps as those who promoted old forms of IQ..." On a similar note, Craig (2007: 12) wondered if this would create "an emotional elite" which would promote inequity. On the other hand, Gardner (1999) endorsed their work as largely in line with his personal intelligences.

Even if one was convinced of the existence of EI, it still had to be proven that this has an empowering effect for individuals, groups or indeed societies. This is examined in the next chapter.

Children's Voice Theory

From a historical perspective, the legitimisation of children's voice is a relatively recent phenomenon, but one which holds significant potential for empowerment. Singer identified the industrialisation and urbanisation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as turning points in the rise of educational institutions for children. Practices within these institutions gradually came to be influenced by what she called "enlightened pedagogues" (Singer, 2005: 611). Names such as Froebel and Montessori are cited as significant change-makers in the active engagement of children in their own learning (Singer, 2005).

Howe and Covell (2005) documented the rise of children as rights-bearers. They suggested that in the early nineteenth century, children were regarded as the property of their parents. This gave way to a "new concept of children as a special and vulnerable class in need of paternalistic state protection" which continued up to the mid-twentieth century (Howe *et al.*, 2005: 21). They identified the Second World War as a watershed for human rights in general, which eventually paved the way for an increasing focus on the rights of children.

The most significant driver of the legitimisation of children's rights has been the United Nations Charter for the Rights of Children (UNCRC, 1989). This identified children as rights-bearers in their own right and presented children as autonomous social actors with potential to exercise agency on their own behalf. Howe *et al.* (2005) highlighted what they saw as the unprecedented support for the UNCRC which was "the most widely ratified and more quickly ratified treaty in world history" (Howe *et al.*,

2005: 25). Ireland's ratification of the charter entered them into a legal obligation to uphold and promote children's rights, and to be "held accountable for this commitment in the international community" (www.UNICEF.ORG/CRC).

Of most interest in the current research focus is Article 12, which enshrined the right for children to have a voice. While this has been since popularised by the use of phrases such as 'pupil voice' and 'equality of voice', Lundy (2007) advised that these tend to diminish the impact of Article 12, which she encouraged us to study in depth. This is as follows:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

(www2.ohchr.org/english/law)

While the age at which children are capable of forming views might be open to question, there is no doubt that most children of school-going age would fall within this category. Lundy (2007) took issue with some interpretations of Article 12, including a tokenistic 'listening' to children without resulting action. She provided a model for auditing the facilitation of children's voice in a variety of fora. This four part model is useful in the research on circle time, as it gives specific factors to address in the practice:

...successful implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of the implications of four separate factors: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.

(Lundy, 2007: 932)

These four factors can be used to evaluate any forum where children are entitled to express views, whether it be in a court of law, a school council, or a forum such as circle time. In Irish primary schools, circle time potentially provides a space within which children are facilitated to express views on a range of issues. Their ability to voice opinions is promoted through various techniques such as turn-taking and rules around listening. A ready-made audience exists consisting of the teacher or facilitator, and the children in the class, along with other adults who may be present (for example, special needs assistants). Mosley advocated mechanisms for bringing children's voice outside the class circle to a wider audience i.e. a school management forum (Mosley, 1998). Lundy (2007) suggested that the audience must be a listening one, which again is promoted in circle time through rules around listening to the person who is speaking at any given time. What was less clear prior to the research was the influence the views expressed by children in circle time had either inside or outside the circle. This then became a point of investigation in the research to be undertaken.

Another article of note in UNCRC (1989) in relation to children's voice is Article 13, where the expression of views is dealt with specifically:

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.
2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - a. For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
 - b. For the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.

(www2.ochr.org/English/law)

In terms of the practice of circle time, the right to impart or receive information in a variety of forms and media was also of interest because of its perceived link to empowerment. This prompted a close look at the way in which information and ideas

were presented and sought in circle time by children, and the choices children had about the prominent media and forms used in circle time.

In some of the literature on children's rights, the concept of participation is used interchangeably with that of voice (e.g. Sinclair, 2004; Bragg, 2007). This is a point that needed some consideration in the current research. In circle time, children are encouraged to exercise personal choice in using their voice in the circle. This might mean that in any given session, a child's voice might not be heard. This does not preclude the child from participation which can and should take many forms, including oral, written, and other non-verbal contributions such as physical/dramatic activities. Howe *et al.* (2005) outlined a list of what they called the "rights of participation" which included "the rights to be heard, to freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly" (Howe *et al.*, 2005: 63). In *Desk Review* (UNICEF 2009), there is an important clarification of what participation might mean:

Most importantly, children and young people must be free to form their own opinions, decide whether or not to express them and decide whether or not to participate in activities or events. Their participation must be voluntary and they must feel free not to participate or to leave a project or activity at any time.

(Desk Review, UNICEF, March 2009)

Researchers will be familiar with these principles, as they are incorporated into ethical research guidelines in many institutions. These do not always sit easily with teachers, as will be seen in Chapter Four: Methodology. This right of non-participation, either through voice or other means, was of interest in the current research, where a captive audience of children are the main participants in the circle.

Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of Participation' is often cited as a model for evaluating levels of participation. While originally designed for work at community level, it has

been widely applied. His eight-stage model moves from ‘manipulation’, ‘decoration’ and ‘tokenism’ right up to ‘child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’ (Hart, 1992)⁷.

Hart offered a critique of his original ladder metaphor, which he said “addresses only a rather narrow range of ways that most children in the world participate in their communities” (Hart, in Read, Jensen, Nikel and Simovska, 2008: 20). Drawing on the work of Vygotsky, he suggested that “a scaffold may be a more suitable model than a ladder for much of what we are discussing because it implies multiple routes to growth” and is “a mutually reinforcing structure” which can be used by adults and children to “help each other in their different climbing goals...” (Hart, in Read *et al.*, 2008: 21).

Simovska (in Read *et al.*, 2008) also invoked Vygotsky in relation to the social process of knowledge creation. She proposed a model of participation across three dimensions as follows:

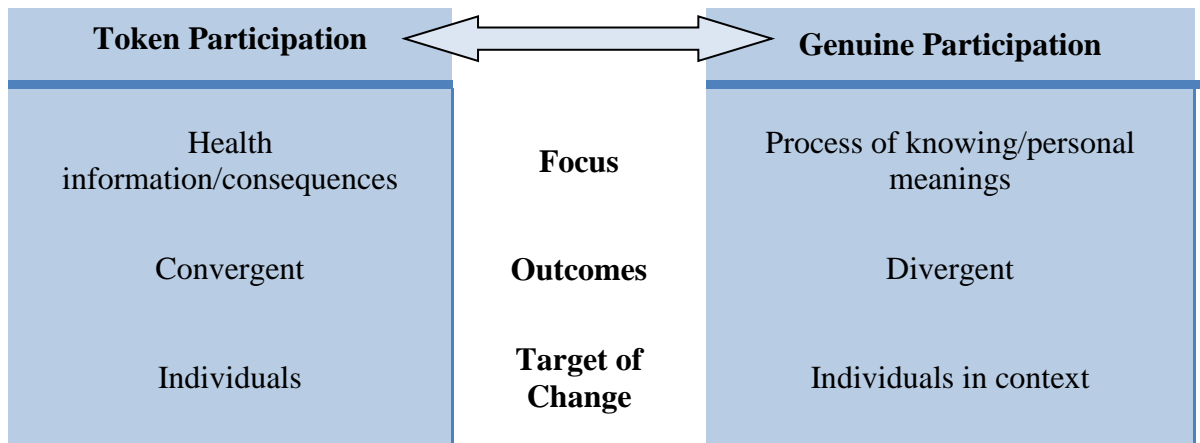


Table 1: Simovska’s model of participation (adapted from Read *et al.*, 2008: 65)

Simovska characterised her model as one concerned with “the quality of participation” rather than Hart’s which she suggested was more concerned with degrees

⁷ There are two main stages in Hart’s Ladder of Participation: non-participation and degrees of participation. Degrees of participation start with ‘assigned but informed participation’, ‘participation in which children are consulted and informed’, ‘adult-initiated, sharing decisions with children’, ‘child-initiated and child-directed projects’ and finally ‘child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’. (Evaluation Technical Note No. 1, UNICEF 2002: 2)

of participation (Simovska, in Read *et al.*, 2008: 65). In her model, the focus is on personal meaning-making rather than just information provision, the outcomes are not pre-determined as they depend on the ideas and interests of the individuals, and the context (personal, interpersonal and cultural) is seen as a determinant of competence and ability to initiate positive change (Simovska, in Read *et al.*, 2008: 67). As the quality of participation was of interest in the research, Simovska's model of participation was considered more helpful than Hart's Ladder in examining the practice of circle time in primary schools.

Howe *et al.* (2005) clarified further that while children's rights were inviolable, their rights as citizens should be seen as differentiated. What they meant by this is that children differ considerably in terms of age, ability, and capacity to engage in society. This allows consideration of these differences:

In the area of participation rights, for example, younger children have the right under the Convention to express their views, but they do not have the right that their views be given weight in the same way that older children's views are.

(Howe *et al.*, 2005: 73)

This was a significant factor to be taken into account when looking at the practice of circle time in primary schools, where differences of age, ability and capacity might be expected across the spectrum of classes in the primary school.

Power and Empowerment

Child empowerment was identified at the outset as an overarching aim and potential outcome of the practice of circle time. This was underpinned by the promotion of SE, and EI, both of which might contribute to children's personal or embodied power. The power of children's voice and participation was conceptualised as more outer-focused,

with potential for agency and “action competence” (Simovska, in Read *et al.*, 2008) in a wider world context.

Schools are characterised as places where power is exercised “in the dynamic interplay between teachers and their students in schools” (Devine, 2003: 16). Devine drew on the work of Michel Foucault in her examination of the workings of Irish primary schools. Foucault suggested that power must be analysed as “something which circulates...through a netlike organisation” and that “individuals are the vehicles of power” (in Gordon (ed.), 1980: 98). The individual is both a carrier and a product of power, according to Foucault. This is manifest in the gestures we use, the discourses we engage in and how we act in the world. The exercise of power is fundamental to the creation of knowledge: “it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault, in Gordon, 1980: 52). Devine identified the “highly contained nature of classroom life” as a “central aspect of the exercise of power in schools” (Devine, 2003: 65). This underlined her thesis that it was adults and not children who exercised power in schools, mainly through control of “time and space” (Devine, 2003: 34). The space being investigated was the circle created in primary school classrooms, facilitated by an adult with power in the school setting. How this power was exercised was seen as key to the potential of circle time to empower children.

Counselling Theories and Approaches

As a teacher educator, I was aware of challenges to circle time in relation to its perceived ‘therapeutic’ nature, and was also conscious that teachers had expressed concerns about this aspect of circle time to me in the past. A number of counselling theorists and practitioners were identified in the literature on circle time. These were

listed earlier as Rogers, Maslow, and Glasser. Their work was scrutinised with a view to its possible impact on and application to circle time practices.

Carl Rogers

According to Housego *et al.* (1994), the origin of circle time owed much to:

...the thinking of the American Christian therapist Carl Rogers (1983), who sought to offer his clients warm and non-judgemental settings in which to reflect and develop positive self-esteem.

(Housego *et al.*, 1994: 26)

Rogers was also mentioned by Mosley (1996) when she listed a trail of influential theorists. It was appropriate to look at Rogers's work in some detail in order to identify key aspects which might be applied to the practice of circle time.

Carl Rogers was described by Kirschenbaum (2004: 116) as "America's most influential counselor and psychotherapist – and one of its most prominent psychologists." Kirschenbaum credited him with popularizing the use of the term *client* for those receiving counselling which, he suggested, was a departure from "the medical model of illness" towards a counselling model that emphasised the power of individuals to help themselves (Kirschenbaum, 2004: 117).

Rogers had a positive view of the individual, whom he characterised as "*positive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy*" (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum and Henderson (eds.), 1990: 403). This allowed him to develop a model of counselling based on trusting the individual to "move in this constructive direction when he lives, even briefly, in a non-threatening climate where he is free to choose any direction" (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 408). A condition for creating a climate conducive to growth of the individual was the motivation of the client to solve a particular problem. The therapist had to demonstrate three key attitudes – "congruence",

“unconditional positive regard” and “empathic understanding” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 283). Congruence as defined by Rogers occurred when the therapist was a “unified, or integrated, or congruent person” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 282). Unconditional positive regard was demonstrated when the therapist showed “a warm caring for the client – a caring which is not possessive, which demands no personal gratification” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 283). Empathic understanding required the therapist to “sense the client’s private world as if it were your own, but without losing the “as if” quality – this is empathy” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 284). Rogers was keen to point out that these attitudes needed to be communicated in the therapeutic relationship: “it is not enough that these conditions exist in the therapist” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 284).

Rogers stated in *On Becoming a Person* (1967: 279) that he had come to the “closest formulation ... of the meaning of the hypothesis of client-centered therapy in the field of education.” In this work, he described what he called “significant learning” (Rogers, 1967: 280) which had the potential to change attitudes and actions. This contrasted with the type of learning valued in schools which stressed accumulation of information and facts, according to Rogers. The implications for education were perceived by Rogers at the time as revolutionary, although to the present-day reader, they may not appear so. The student was to be permitted to be “in real contact with the relevant problems of his existence, so that he perceives problems and issues which he wishes to resolve” (Rogers, 1967: 286-7). This provided the motivation to engage in the educational process. The teacher then demonstrated the attitudes outlined previously in order to be “real” to the student. Empathy and understanding was to be shown by accepting “the whole gamut of attitudes...” including, for example, “feelings of hatred for brother or sister...” (Rogers, 1967: 288). Teachers were to be the providers of resources, which included the resources of their own experience and “knowledge in the field” which

might be accepted or rejected by the students (Rogers, 1967: 288-9). There was no place for examination in this type of learning, rather evaluation was to be seen “as a ticket of entrance, not as a club over the recalcitrant” (Rogers, 1967: 291). As will be seen later, this belief coincided with the views of teachers surveyed in NCCA (2008) who expressed a reluctance to assess children in the SPHE Curriculum (1999).

Rogers was keen to underline the importance of the teacher’s attitudes and their impact on student academic progress. Where principals also backed up these teachers, this was the “most conducive to learning” (Rogers, 1980: 309). For those who might query whether all teachers had the capacity to initiate and sustain the kind of helping relationships that Rogers had in mind, he stated that teachers “can improve in their levels of facilitative conditions with as little as 15 hours of carefully planned intensive training...” (Rogers, 1980: 309).

In his interest in exploring the “the intuitive, the psychic, the vast inner space that looms before us...”, Rogers (1980: 312) paved the way for Gardner, Goleman, and Salovey, Mayer and Caruso who foregrounded new intelligences in the psychological domain.

One area of Rogers’s work outside individual therapy or counselling is noteworthy in the context of the current research. Rogers (1980) outlined work with very large groups of up to 800 in Brazil. The striking aspects of these workshops or *ciclos* were their similarity to the structures and processes of circle time. For example, after moving through a period at the beginning of chaos and challenge, the “middle portion of the process might be called the working portion...individuals begin to use the session for expression of more feelings about themselves, the group, their personal problems and concerns” (Rogers, 1980: 322). This equates to the open forum part of circle time in the Mosley Model. In the final portion of the *ciclos* the participants “begin to talk about

how they will deal with their new learning in the “back-home” situation...” (Rogers, 1980: 323). This equates to the winding down phase in circle time where learning is identified and children are encouraged to develop plans for putting their learning into action. Yet another aspect of the *ciclos* that resonated was the realization that not everyone would speak, but that the speakers, “though talking of highly personal things, are unwittingly speaking for many others in the audience” (Rogers, 1980: 322). This allowed a sense of “community that is building” (Rogers, 1980: 322). In circle time, children choose to speak or not. However, it is likely that those who do speak may talk about experiences to which other children in the circle can relate.

It appeared from an examination of some of the work of Rogers that he would approve of recent curricular reform which allows celebration and development of different types of intelligences in schools. It is likely he would also approve of the practice of circle time as a means of creating a space where facilitative attitudes could be demonstrated towards enhancing personal skills. On the other hand, he might disapprove of moves to measure or evaluate this kind of education which would concur with teachers’ views as evidenced by recent Irish research.

One of the challenges posed by Rogers’s application of his work in the field of education is the role of the teacher as facilitator. In Rogers’s therapeutic work he increasingly resisted any form of advice-giving or control over what happened, stating that “it would be presumptuous to think that I can or should *direct* that movement towards a specific goal” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990). This echoes Simovska’s (2008) view of divergent outcomes. However, he modified this stance in relation to education where he suggested that the teacher could allow his/her expertise and knowledge to be “perceived as an offer, which could as easily be refused as accepted” (Rogers, in Kirschenbaum *et al.*, 1990: 289). This begs a question about the

promotion in schools of particular religious or moral beliefs, or indeed any curriculum with a body of knowledge which a teacher might feel obliged not only to offer but to expect the student to accept. The acceptance of all feelings (for example, sibling hatred), might also be queried by educators who have a view of some feelings as appropriate or inappropriate. These issues are explored in more depth in a later section.

Abraham Maslow

For many educators, the most well-known aspect of Maslow's "psychology of being" (Maslow, 1968) is his pyramid depiction of human needs. This is reproduced in Mosley (1993: 59). Maslow (1968) shared with Rogers a positive view of the potential of man for growth. All men have a "biologically based inner nature", unique to the individual, which could be discovered in the environment or culture (Maslow, 1968: 3). This inner core, consisting of "the basic human emotions, and the basic human capacities", was either "neutral, pre-moral or positively "good"" (Maslow, 1968: 3). Maslow's theory of need gratification suggested that basic needs (such as safety and security, belongingness, respect and SE) had to be met before the individual could grow towards self-actualization. The latter involved growth needs such as "talents, capacities, creative tendencies, [and] constitutional potentialities" (Maslow, 1968: 26). Self-actualization occurred in episodic form which could, "in theory, come at any time in life to any person" (Maslow, 1968: 97). These episodes he called "peak-experiences", which were "moments of highest happiness and fulfilment" (Maslow, 1968: 73), where people "are *most* their identities, closest to their real selves, most idiosyncratic..." (Maslow, 1968: 103). Each of us was in varying stages of self-actualizing: "self-actualization [was] a matter of degree and of frequency rather than all-or-none affair" (Maslow, 1968: 97). Maslow (1968) acknowledged that the theory of self-actualization was considered by some to be too inner-focussed or selfish, and asserted that it was "an empirical *fact*

that self-actualized people are altruistic, dedicated, self-transcending, social, etc.” (Maslow, 1968: vi).

While Maslow is full of the theory of becoming, one searches long and hard to find practical ways for educators to facilitate the move towards self-actualization in his writing. Like Rogers, he encouraged educators to create an environment conducive to growth. The good educator “understands that growth can emerge only from safety” and that teachers should “offer only and rarely force” (Maslow, 1968: 54). This echoed Rogers’s stance on the facilitative role of the teacher, and is consistent with the attention to growth in child-centred education espoused by, for example, Froebel and Dewey.

William Glasser

Glasser’s contribution to circle time is well-established. He was included in the “theoretical underpinnings” section of Mosley (1996: 74). Glasser was credited by Lang (1998) with the promotion of circle time in the form of class meetings. William Glasser is a psychiatrist who has written extensively on choice theory which was described in a sub-title as “a new psychology of personal freedom” (Glasser, 1998). Choice theory involved the individual recognising that they could control only themselves, that relationships were generally the source of our happiness or misery, and that the past should not be dwelt on to solve the problems of the present (Glasser, 1998: 332-6). Like Rogers and Maslow, Glasser had a positive view of the individual as someone who could take control of their own lives to satisfy their basic needs. Glasser’s needs were different to Maslow’s, in that he listed survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun as the basic “genetic needs” (Glasser, 1998: 335). Individual behaviour was focused on satisfying these needs throughout our lives, and our success or failure at this task determined our level of happiness.

Glasser has written about the application of choice theory in the school setting (e.g. *The Quality School* (1998), *Every Student Can Succeed* (2000)). He stressed the centrality of relationships in his work in schools and used “the circle-up [as] the basic mechanism for all communication, concerns and solving problems” (Glasser, 2000: 61). The problems could be a “personal, class or school problem” (Glasser, 2000: 60). In keeping with the axioms of choice theory, students were encouraged in the circle-up to take “responsibility for saying what he or she will do to solve the problem regardless of what the others do” (Glasser, 2000: 62). This focus on finding solutions to problems is found in the Mosley Model.

Glasser is unique among the psychological theorists whose work has been outlined in this section – he is the first to show how his theories translate into classroom practice, and to the practice of circle time in particular. I studied his work over a number of years and have incorporated some of his principles into my work with student and practicing teachers.

While Mosley cited many theorists in her literature, their theories are not discussed in any great detail, nor are the links overtly made between theory and circle time practice with children. For example, Mosley (1993) provided Maslow’s “hierarchy of human needs” for use in staff training, and commented on it as follows:

A child or adult cannot hope to have their needs met all the time by home or school, but if the needs of each stage are not met by either one or the other then that person will not be able to progress to the next level towards self-fulfilment.

(Mosley, 1993: 59)

There is no attempt to clarify how circle time contributes specifically to progression towards self-fulfilment. However, one can relate much of the Mosley Model to theories outlined here in an inferential way. The values of “respect for self, respect for others,

respect for our immediate and wider environment” underpinning quality circle time (Mosley, 1998:19) encourages schools to provide for children’s SE needs. The use of groundrules in the Model potentially promotes safety needs (Mosley, 1998: 13) which Maslow saw as a prerequisite to self-actualization. The notion of the inherent “goodness” of the individual which Maslow and Rogers offered may also be inferred from statements such as “this model has the underlying philosophy of trusting a child from the outset” (Mosley, 1998: 37). Children don’t earn “golden time” which is one of the incentives used in her model – they are given it as a right on a Monday morning. Glasser’s influence on the Mosley Model might be surmised in the focus on individual problem-solving. Mosley (interview one) also highlighted the fact that Glasser was “the only psychologist who talks about fun as being a human need.” The fun element in her Model contrasts with the circle work exemplar outlined in the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999) which does not include games.

It may be that Mosley in her literature focuses on the practicalities of working in an esteeming way in schools more than concentrating on theoretical perspectives. She admitted this in Mosley (1996: 71) when she stated:

For many years I have never challenged myself to explore the historical, psychological, sociological or philosophical theories that could explain or inform my understanding of why my Circle Times were so successful.

(Mosley, 1996: 71)

This lack of attention to theoretical and conceptual underpinnings is not unique to Mosley – it is also a feature of much curriculum literature for teachers in Ireland.

Learning Theories and Approaches

Theories of how children learn have informed curriculum reform in this and other countries. Karpov (2005) outlined what he saw as the evolution of theoretical developmental psychology in Western psychology, starting with “naturists”, “behaviourists”, and the “constructivist/interactional” approach (whose main proponent was Piaget). While Karpov (2005) appeared to suggest that there was one dominant theory of learning at each point of evolution, Fenwick proposed five “contemporary perspectives”, categorised as:

Reflection (a constructivist perspective), interference (a psychoanalytic perspective rooted in Freudian tradition), participation (from perspectives of situated cognition), resistance (a critical cultural perspective), and co-emergence (from the enactivist perspective emanating from neuroscience and evolutionary theory).

(Fenwick, 2000: 3-4)

Within each of these, Fenwick (2000) outlined a view of knowledge, learning and teaching; how the knower, culture and knowledge relationship is typified; and what the role of the educator was within the perspective.

While all perspectives were of interest as possible conceptual underpinnings in the current research, the constructivist perspective was explored in some depth. The reason for this was that it was this perspective that had informed my practice for most of my working life. The constructivist approach was also advocated in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) (e.g. *SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 54-57). However, it was acknowledged that while working predominantly from a particular perspective, other perspectives might inform how we look at educational practice. Thus, the participation (situated cognition) perspective as outlined by Fenwick (2000: 8-9) appeared to hold some promise in relation to the practice of circle time, and some time was spent examining its potential.

The Constructivist Perspective

Gordon (2009) suggested that in recent decades, “a constructivist discourse has emerged as a very powerful model for explaining how knowledge is produced in the world, as well as how students learn” (Gordon, 2009: 39). Both he and Fenwick (2000) pointed out that this was not a unified discourse. However, Fenwick (2000: 4) asserted that “all views share one central premise: A learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world.”

Among the theorists listed by both Fenwick (2000) and Gordon (2009) in the constructivist field were Vygotsky and Piaget, although neither theorist used the term in their writings (Gordon, 2009: 56).

When I attended college for teacher education in the mid-1970s, the work of Piaget was a major influence on the instructional strategies advocated at that time. Piaget proposed a staged development in children’s ability to learn, which moved from the sensory motor stage to symbolic thought in a process of “children ... working individually and with freedom, at tasks of their own choosing”, (Piaget, in Ginsburg and Opper (eds.), 1979: 237). A critical aspect of his work related to self-regulation, according to Ginsberg *et al.* (1979: 238). This proposed that children learned best when they were active and “learn early to find out about themselves, partly by their own *spontaneous activity* and partly *through materials* we set up for them” (Piaget, in Ginsberg and Opper, 1979: 237-8). Vygotsky (1962) suggested that Piaget was a significant figure in child psychology:

...he revolutionized the study of child language and thought. He developed the clinical method of exploring children’s ideas which has since been widely used. He was the first to investigate child perception and logic systematically...

(Vygotsky, 1962: 9)

However, Vygotsky (1962) also criticised Piaget on a number of fronts, in terms of methodology and theory. He queried whether Piaget's research in one setting (a kindergarten) could be applied generally (a point also made by Ginsberg *et al.* 1979). He disagreed with Piaget's theoretical stance on the pleasure principle as "the prime mover of psychic development" (Vygotsky, 1962: 22), among other theoretical differences. Karpov (2005) criticised Piaget's lack of information on how children progress from one stage of development to the next. He was also critical of the fact that Piaget only looked at cognitive development. Ginsburg *et al.* (1979: 177) also pinpointed a weakness in Piaget's research relating to "an overreliance on verbalizations as a source of evidence", however they pointed out that he was the first to provide extensive data on child development. Donaldson made the point that "pre-school children are not nearly so limited in their ability to 'decentre' or appreciate someone else's point of view, as Piaget has for many years maintained" (Donaldson, 1978: 30). Notwithstanding the criticism, Piaget's influence on teacher education in Ireland was significant in terms of teaching strategies for implementing the 1971 PSC.

In the constructivist field, the theory of learning that holds most currency in teacher education at the moment is that proposed by Vygotsky. Vygotsky differed significantly from Piaget in terms of the role of adults (or more capable peers) in mediating children's learning and development. When adults and children interact, there was an opportunity to enter what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development which allowed the child to operate at a level of mastery not yet possible independently. Vygotsky defined this zone as the difference between the child's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and a higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: in Parke, Ornstein, Reiser and Zahn-Waxler (eds.) 1994: 336). Wertsch and Tulviste (in Parke *et al.*, 1994) emphasised

the “social origins and social nature of higher (i.e. uniquely human) mental functioning” in Vygotsky’s theory of learning. This is significant in terms of circle time which is carried out in a social (peer group) setting and mediated by an adult in most instances, whereas Piaget’s conception of learning is more solitary. The psychological tools required for cognitive development in Vygotsky’s theory are modelled by the adult or peer over time and become internalized by the child. There was a need to concentrate “not on the *product* of development but on the very *process* by which higher forms are established” (Vygotsky, 1978: in Parke *et al.*, 1994: 339). Educators were to focus not so much on the level of the child’s actual development but on bringing them to the next stage of their development.

The neo-Vygotskians queried some of Vygotsky’s original work, particularly in relation to a perceived lack of emphasis on child activity (Karpov, 2005). While acknowledging his work in identifying the importance of adult mediation in providing the psychological tools necessary to bring children from one level of development to the next, Karpov (2005) commented that Vygotsky did not elaborate enough on how this movement occurred. The neo-Vygotskians proposed an activity theory, building on the work of Vygotsky. This involved children moving from one “leading activity” to the next in a process involving cognition and motivation which was mediated by adults. Wertsch *et al.* (in Parke *et al.*, 1994: 344) suggested that Vygotsky did not pay enough attention to the variation in performance of his subjects relative to “experience with the activity of a particular institutional setting, formal schooling.” They also highlighted a criticism of “Eurocentrism” against Vygotsky where European “cultural tools and forms of mental functioning were assumed to be generally superior to the tools and functioning of other peoples” (Wertsch *et al.*, 1994: 346).

On a more positive note, Gordon (2009) credited Vygotsky with the increase in cooperative learning practices in schools, where “teachers take into account what students can do with the help of more capable peers” (Gordon, 2009: 52). I would add Johnson and Johnson’s work (e.g. Johnson and Johnson, 1987) as a significant influence on cooperative learning in schools.

A number of criticisms of constructivism were outlined by Fenwick (2000: 5), including its emphasis on “rational control and mastery”, and a lack of attention to learner motivation. Gordon (2009: 41) offered further critique in relation to the descriptive nature of its discourse. He suggested that constructivism had offered little to educational practice other than “critiques of current educational practice”, and that teachers’ experience and knowledge “are not generally considered legitimate resources that can be used to evaluate and revise educational theory” (Gordon, 2009: 42). He proposed to rectify this by introducing a “pragmatic discourse of constructivism...that is based on good teaching practice” (Gordon, 2009: 49), drawing on the work of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Freire, whom he believed “share[d] a conception of constructivism that is essentially pragmatic” (Gordon, 2009: 55). This involved a “mutual interaction between educational theory and practice – that each can be influenced by the other” (Gordon, 2009: 55). He illustrated his proposal with two examples of classroom practice which highlighted, according to him, the “notion that genuine learning requires students to be active, not passive”, and that teachers should “take an active role in the learning process” (Gordon, 2009: 48)⁸. The examples showed an “integration of individual cognitive processes and social processes” (Gordon, 2009: 48). This pragmatic constructivism held promise for examining the practice of circle time in Irish primary classrooms, and suggested that the examples and learning drawn

⁸ Gordon (2009) outlined one example which related to the teaching of history through role play, and another which used techniques such as students teaching unfamiliar concepts, brainstorming and writing explanations in their own words in the teaching of maths.

from the research could become part of an educational discourse that Gordon (2009) and others (e.g. Kane, 2004), were trying to promote. While teachers shared their practice of circle time in the research, I brought some theoretical knowledge to the process. The interplay between these two elements is at the heart of pragmatic constructivism, as envisaged by Gordon.

Participation (from perspectives of situated cognition)

On the surface, this perspective appeared relevant to the research into the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools. Situated cognition perspective, as outlined by Fenwick (2000: 8-9), typified learning as firmly “rooted in the situation in which a person participates”. She suggested that the educator’s role was “not to develop individuals but to help them participate meaningfully in the practices they choose to enter” (Fenwick, 2000: 8). Quoting Sfard (1998), Fenwick (2000) suggested that the “participation metaphor invokes themes of togetherness, solidarity, and collaboration, which could promote more positive risk taking and inquiry in learning environments” (Fenwick, 2000: 9). Knowledge came from a combination of the interaction, the activity and “the tools in hand (including objects, technology, languages, and images)” (Fenwick, 2000: 8).

Although Fenwick wrote from an adult education perspective where choices are made by individuals to enter, it appeared that the situated cognitive perspective with its emphasis on participation was one that could inform research into circle time. Its emphasis on togetherness, solidarity and collaboration added a dimension missing from the constructivist theory of learning *à la* Vygotsky. In circle time, the teacher sets up a learning situation where pupils develop particular skills in interaction with one another, as well as with the teacher. Participation is enabled in a variety of ways, and a supportive, cooperative atmosphere is promoted through various groundrules and

underlying principles. All of this is in keeping with the participation perspective of situated cognition.

However, Fenwick identified criticisms of the situated cognition perspective in relation to, among other things, the contextual nature of the knowledge created and its apolitical nature. She asked: “[w]hose knowledge, among the various participants in the system, is afforded the greatest influence over the movements and direction of the system?” (Fenwick, 2000: 9). In Irish primary school education, the school ethos is an important influence in teaching and learning. The teacher’s knowledge, informed by the particular school ethos, is given primacy in many schools, and teachers are generally expected to show leadership in this regard when working with children. This became a point of inquiry in the practice of circle time – the influence of a particular ethos and its impact on the potential of circle time to empower children.

While Mosley did not refer to Piaget or Vygotsky (or the neo-Vygotskians) in her writings, she mentioned Bandura (1977) and Michenbaum (1977) as providing a “social learning theory” which emphasised “observational learning modelling plus enactment” as a powerful form of learning (Mosley, 1996: 73). This appeared to echo the importance attached to adult mediation proposed by Vygotsky and the importance of child activity emphasised by the neo-Vygotskians as described earlier.

The SPHE Curriculum (1999: 54) advocates active learning, described as a process that allows children to “experience and discover the learning for themselves”, “engages children at different levels”, allows them to “construct new meanings and acquire new understanding”, promotes increased responsibility for learning among pupils, helps them to “become more critical and discerning”, leading to transferability of learning to other situations (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines* 1999: 54-5). There is no theoretical base outlined in the curriculum documentation, although it is apparent that its model of

learning owes something to both Piaget and Vygotsky. The fact that neither are mentioned suggests either an expectation that teachers are familiar with the underpinning learning theories, or that familiarity is not a necessary prerequisite for successful implementation of the curriculum.

The Role of Facilitator in Education

The learning theories and approaches outlined were adopted as lenses through which the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools might be explored. Within these learning theories there were indications (if not prescriptions) of how educators or teachers should act in the learning situation. In constructivism, the educator might be described as a mediator and a scaffolder of learning, while in situated cognition, the educator set up the learning situations and promoted participation in a variety of ways without a political agenda. Both theories suggested a facilitative role, albeit in different ways. That these perspectives have influenced the SPHE Curriculum (1999) is apparent. Teacher role is seen as crucial to the learning process. This is described as follows:

The teacher needs to act as a guide, a facilitator and a resource, providing a variety of appropriate opportunities for children to engage in their own learning. The teacher also needs to continually encourage them to construct meaning and make connections for themselves. How the activities are organised and the depth of exploration and the level of questioning and critical reflection will all be determined by the classroom teacher.

(SPHE Teacher Guidelines, 1999: 55)

Circle time (or circle work) is mentioned specifically within the approaches and methodologies advocated (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines, 1999: 83*). The centrality of the teacher in circle time to promote empowerment revolves around their communication and facilitation skills, and their ability to move away from a hierarchical power structure (Doveston, 2007; Canney and Byrne, 2006).

Of the theorist outlined earlier, Rogers was the most helpful in terms of providing facilitation principles which might act as a guide for teachers in circle time. However, while genuineness and empathic understanding might be viewed as relatively unproblematic in education, the notion of unconditionality of regard could pose some problems for teachers operating out of a particular religious or school ethos. In the example cited earlier of expression of sibling hatred, Rogerians might accept the feeling, while those operating out of a Christian belief might advocate forgiveness, turning the other cheek or rejection of the feeling altogether (although it is acknowledged that Rogers was a Christian). The unconditionality of regard was echoed in the writings of Mosley (1996: 35) when she advocated that teachers accept pupil responses “no matter how ‘offbeat’”. This suggested that teachers might be conflicted between what some of the literature on circle time advocated, and their own beliefs or school ethos.

The stance adopted by therapists or teachers is informed by philosophical or psychological beliefs. Rogers and Maslow believed in the innate capacity of the individual to self-actualise. This allowed them to pursue an open, facilitative relationship with the client with no pre-ordained agenda. Bednar *et al.* (1989) identified a number of dimensions along which the therapist’s role might be examined. These included high or low therapist involvement, past or present orientation, and expert teacher or facilitator role in the counselling process. In the case of the latter, the therapist’s role was described along a continuum of therapist as expert teacher at one end, utilising the full range of skills and experience of the therapist, to therapist as “facilitator of experiential learning” who allows the individual to find themselves by creating a “client-centred, supportive environment” (Bednar *et al.*, 1989: 238). They advocated a “straddling” of the fine line between expert teacher and facilitator in therapy.

If this therapeutic relationship model was transposed to the classroom context, and circle time in particular, it could be used as an analytic tool for typifying teacher role in the circle. For example, within any circle time session, a teacher could move from an expert role (e.g. imparting information) to a more facilitative stance (e.g. eliciting responses from children). Likewise, teachers could move from high involvement to low involvement, or a focus on present or past situations. Bednar's *et al.*'s (1989) model held some possibilities for analysis of teacher role in the circle.

Harwood suggested that a lack of role clarity was not untypical of many "active/democratic programmes" (Harwood, 2001: 297), but underlined that the role was significant in terms of pupil participation, while acknowledging that teacher's "survival needs or coping interests" might well dictate the role they adopted in this type of method. Freire, (in Freire and Macedo, 1995), poured cold water on the idea of facilitation in education. He suggested that it was a dishonest stance, as the teacher turned facilitator is always in control – even if they have temporarily set that aside. He was adamant that educators should assume responsibility for the processes and objectives of education. This is not to say that students' interests and curiosities should be overshadowed by the teacher's – rather the teacher should stimulate students to "live in a critically conscious presence in the pedagogical and historical process" (Freire and Macedo, 1995: 378). It is possible that this critical stance could also lead to tensions within a particular school ethos.

In my conceptual framework I envisaged a dialogue between learning and counselling theories and approaches that would inform teacher role in circle time. It is likely that Vygotsky (and the neo-Vygotskians) would have adults mediate in a more significant way than the role advocated by some counselling theorists. Holden (2003: 25) saw teachers' role in circle time as "one of provider of information, of models of

value systems and promoter of authentic discussion”, which tied in with Freire’s emphasis on the active role of the teacher. This combination of expert/facilitator role in circle time had potential to promote empowerment.

Summary and Conclusion

Concepts and theories relevant to the research on circle time were explored in this chapter. SE theory, EI theory, voice and participation theory, learning and counselling theories and approaches were all established as important lenses through which to examine the practices and processes of circle time. SE theory was established as an informing concept in the literature on circle time, but suffered in the literature from a lack of definition, and doubt was cast about some of the claims made for its potency. The definition adopted for this research was “the integrated sum of self-competence and self-worth” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 602). Varying views of EI were also noted, and it was the four stage model from Mayer *et al.* (2004: 197) that was identified as being most useful for the research in hand and possible programme development. This model involved accurately perceiving and identifying emotions as well as their understanding and regulation. I wanted to establish whether SE was an important aim of the teacher in circle time, and what particular conception of the theory the teachers were working from. Was time spent on promoting SE justified, or could its pursuit impinge on other important educational goals? I also was interested in finding out if SE had been largely replaced by the newer concept of EI.

A key instrument was identified in the UNCRC (1989) which established children’s rights, among which were the right to a voice. An examination of voice and participation theory provided models for analysis of research findings – the work of Lundy (2007) and Simovska (in Read *et al.*, 2008) was chosen with this in mind. Factors to assess voice and participation were space, voice, audience and influence

(Lundy, 2007), while Simovska's work was concerned with the quality of participation. These models provided potential ways of interrogating how voice and participation were facilitated, and where and how power circulated in the circle. The extent of children's influence in the classroom, school and community was a further area of interest.

Particular learning theories which offered a constructivist participative model of engagement with children were adopted as lenses through which the interactions of circle time could be understood, particularly in relation to activities and processes chosen. The work of Vygotsky provided a model of scaffolded, mediated learning that was considered appropriate for looking at circle time. Bednar *et al.*'s (1989) therapeutic relationship model allowed for analysis of teacher role in the circle across three key dimensions, which were expert/facilitator, past/present orientation and high or low teacher involvement.

While these concepts and theories were examined individually, the conceptual framework diagram presented conveys the interactive and supportive relationship of these concepts, and the fluidity of their boundaries, indicative of how they might operate in a classroom context.

Key questions prompted by the conceptual and theoretical investigation included questions around purposes and processes; the aims of teachers in circle time, and how they pursue those aims; the approaches and role adopted in the practice of circle time; the benefits of circle time for children and its potential for empowerment. The following chapter examines curriculum reviews which have relevance for the practice of circle time, along with an overview of some of the existing research on circle time to lend further impetus to the research. The literature on EI and SE is extended to assess the impact and effect of these theories on individuals, as evidenced in research.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter focuses on key areas of literature including the psychological and educational drivers of the use of circle time in Irish primary classrooms, an examination of SPHE Curriculum (1999) implementation and circle time use as evidenced in two major Irish curriculum reviews, and an overview of research into circle time in both Ireland and the UK. Reference has already been made to the theoretical base for some of the drivers (in Chapter Two), here the emphasis is on research or commentary in the literature that builds on the theories. Two obvious areas for further investigation were those that related to efforts to enhance children's self-esteem (SE) and emotional intelligence (EI), and any proven benefits.

Psychological and Educational Drivers of Circle Time

Self-esteem and Emotional Intelligence

Many commentators have identified a psychological turn in education discourse (e.g. Baker, Lynch and Cantillon, 2005). These discourses provided an impetus and rationale for a range of psychological foci in schools (Furedi, 2004; Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009). The Mosley literature (1993; 1996; 1998) firmly places circle time within this domain.

In both Ireland and the UK, similar drivers facilitated the implementation of circle time in schools. Miller and Parker (2006: 19) identified positive SE as a type of "social vaccine" to protect individuals and societies from a "range of personal and social ills." In spite of what they saw as a "self-esteem backlash" they believed that concern for the development of SE was well-embedded in primary schools in the UK. Their research mentioned circle time as a strategy used by teachers to promote SE.

Fernandez-Berrocal and Ruiz (2008) made a link between the UK's relatively low rating in a UNICEF (2007) report on childhood poverty and aspects of school reform⁹. They suggested that the rating prompted the introduction of Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) into primary and second-level schools in the UK (Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.*, 2008: 425-7). This policy advocated a yearly programme of social and emotional skills for children between three and eighteen, which, it was argued, was a programme for the development of EI, and represented an appropriate response to the challenge of promoting happiness and well-being (Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.*, 2008). Opponents of this type of education come from many quarters, and include those who might be seen as insiders in the SE camp. Craig (2007) provided well-argued opposition to education for EI, particularly at primary school level¹⁰. She targeted the SEAL policy in particular for much of her criticism. While acknowledging that there were aspects of the work that she would recommend (e.g. fostering good relationships between pupils and teachers), she was against its formality, its intensity and its emphasis on assessment of skills. She was particularly scathing of its use of Goleman's work "as the intellectual foundation, and justification of large-scale work of this type in school" (Craig, 2007: 24). She suggested that pursuit of EI education was just a passing fad, like "the self-esteem movement ... in America a decade or so earlier" (Craig, 2007: 43).

The SPHE Curriculum (1999: 104) listed Goldman (*sic*) under its source references. However, no reference could be found to EI in either the SPHE Curriculum or Teacher Guidelines (1999). This could be due to the timing of Goleman's work, coming as it did in the early stages of curriculum revisions. The concept of SE, as has already been

⁹ While Ireland had a ranking above the UK in the dimensions of child well-being addressed in the report, falling within the middle third of the first-world countries included, its ranking fell significantly in terms of material well-being of children, and health and safety dimensions (UNICEF, 2007: 2).

¹⁰ Craig is listed as the chief executive of the Centre for Confidence and Well-being (www.centreforconfidence.co.uk).

mentioned, is referenced in the curriculum documentation, although no one theorist or writer is cited except under source materials.

Another driver of the interest in circle time was a move towards more democratic and child-centred educational practices (Harwood, 2001; Sinclair, 2004). In Ireland, there has been a parallel development of interest in increased pupil participation and consultation (Devine, 2002; 2003; Deegan, Devine and Lodge, 2004). International developments such as the UNCRC (1989) (explored in Chapter Two), and the *National Children's Strategy* (2000) in Ireland have provided significant impetus for this move, but the latter has been criticised for its individual child focus (Deegan, in Deegan *et al.*, 2004). Circle time is cited as a strategy for inclusion of children (Devine, 2003) and a means of involving children in school decision-making and citizenship (McLoughlin, in Deegan *et al.*, 2004). However, these drivers for participation do not always deliver on their promise, and fall short of providing real engagement of children in decision-making activity in schools (May, 2005; DES, 2009).

Mental health (and ill-health) among young people is a cause of concern in Ireland and elsewhere, adding further impetus to interventions (such as circle time) which are seen to provide coping skills in a supportive and engaging process. Gowers, Thomas and Deeley (2004), reporting in the UK, stated that 10-20 per cent of primary school children showed symptoms of mental health problems in middle childhood. In their study, teachers mentioned circle time (among other solutions) as a way of coping with diverse pupil needs in mainstream classrooms. In the Irish context, the *Mental Health Commission Annual Report* (2010: 42-4) reported increases in admissions of children to both child and adult mental health services, although it is not clear what overall percentage of the child population here might be in need of such services. I could find no figures in relation to Irish children attending school who might be deemed to have

mental health problems. Also in Ireland, in *State of the Nation's Children* (2010:144) reference is made to suicide, which “accounted for 23.1% of all deaths of children aged 10-17”. It also reported that “58.2 % of children aged 9-17 reported feeling happy with the way they are” (a measure of self-esteem, according to the report), which contrasted with findings of “self-reported happiness” of 90.8%, (a measure of being happy with their lives at present) (*State of the Nation's Children*, 2010: 140).

The move towards integration of children with diverse needs into Irish primary classrooms (including mental health needs) may have provided a further impetus to implementing methods such as circle time. There are many examples of research using circle time as a way of both including children with special educational needs and providing them with particular social skills (Lee and Wright, 2001; Canney *et al.*, 2006; Hundert, 2007; Messiou, 2008). Curriculum reform in Ireland also facilitated the implementation of circle time in schools, as was outlined in Chapter One. However, as has been mentioned, the rise of the method is not without its critics on a number of fronts.

“The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education”

The therapeutic industry has been spawned by a view of the individual as flawed and vulnerable. Psychological and therapeutic language pervades everyday discourses to the point that concepts such as SE and ‘closure’ are commonly used. In education, Ecclestone *et al.* (2009) suggested that:

The underlying principles and processes of liberal humanist counselling are now a staple part of children’s primary school experience through activities such as circle time and philosophy for children...

(Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009: 28)

They defined therapeutic education as:

...any activity that focuses on perceived emotional problems and which aims to make educational content and learning processes more ‘emotionally engaging’...

(Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009: x)

It could be argued that much of education falls within their definition of ‘therapeutic’ as teachers endeavour to support individual students to overcome problems which may have a root in the emotions, or be explicitly related to emotional problems, in order to advance their learning. Likewise, teachers at primary level (where my experience lies) regularly endeavour to make the learning emotionally engaging, either by using games, paired and group work, for example, as well as trying to establish a positive relationship with children. There are those who insist on a central role for emotions in learning from a neurobiological perspective (e.g. Taylor, 2001). While it might be argued that education is mainly therapeutic in a broad sense, I remained to be convinced (unlike others) that circle time constituted a counselling or therapeutic forum.

In the Mosley Model, as demonstrated in *Quality Circle Time in Action* (1999) there is a clear focus on helping individual children with problems they are invited to present to their peers and teacher in the circle¹¹. Circle time could therefore be seen as a ‘therapeutic’ intervention for the individual child involved in the problem-solving part of circle time. Did this practice within the circle place circle time in the counselling domain? Counselling literature was examined as it related to schools to assess whether the Mosley Model could be categorised as a counselling intervention.

¹¹ This DVD is available through the circle-time.co.uk website.

Bor, Ebner-Landy, Gill and Brace (2002) defined counselling as follows:

Counselling is an interaction in a therapeutic setting, focusing primarily on a conversation about relationships, beliefs and behaviour (including feelings), through which the child's perceived problem is elucidated and framed or reframed in a fitting or useful way, and in which new solutions are generated and the problem takes on a new meaning.

(Bor *et al.*, 2002: 15)

If school is a therapeutic setting, and there is a focus on the individual child's problem in the Mosley Model with a solution-focused conversation taking place within the circle, it could be said that circle time is a type of counselling. However, Bor *et al.* (2002) listed what they described as the traditional ethos of counsellors working in schools. This included the notion of the problem "residing within the individual child", the individual child as the "focus or target of the intervention", the emphasis on the child's "pathology and dysfunction" in sessions, involvement of adults close to the child, the counsellor operating separately from other members of staff with professional boundaries "rigidly preserved", and the potential long term nature of the intervention (Bor *et al.*, 2002: 4). Based on these criteria, it is difficult to see how circle time could be described as counselling, given that all children in the class take part in the 'intervention', with only a small portion of the time devoted to individual problem-solving in the Mosley Model. Another significant factor is that class teachers generally conduct the circle times. They are usually not qualified counsellors, and do not operate as bounded professionals as envisaged by Bor *et al.* (2002).

In Ireland there is no provision for formal one-to-one counselling at primary school level. The picture is different at second-level, where qualified school counsellors are core members of the school staff, often with a dual counselling and career guidance remit. Apart from the teacher counsellor pilot project (now ceased), I was not aware of any dedicated counselling service available on an on-going basis in primary schools.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides limited support to schools where, for example, a local occurrence triggers support mechanisms for individuals and classes in primary and second-level schools. Their main function is to provide psychological testing at both primary and second-level for children who are identified by schools as having significant behavioural, emotional or intellectual problems. In consultation with the class teacher and other professionals in the school, NEPS psychologists devise an individual education plan (IEP) for the student in question. Interestingly, this in some instances specifies circle time as an intervention, particularly if the child's problems are related to social skills deficits. For example, in *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (NEPS, 2007: 14), teachers are advised that interventions may include “a focus on the individual needs of the pupil within whole class interventions e.g. Circle Time or small group activities.” In *Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties: A Continuum of Support* (DES, undated: 42), the case study of Lucy suggests that “Lucy's co-operation and turn-taking skills will be addressed through the SPHE curriculum and circle time activities.” The endorsement by NEPS of circle time as a strategy for addressing special individual needs is one which is in keeping with research outlined later in this chapter.

A further search through the school-related counselling literature uncovered a counselling model which I believed might describe the type of counselling in circle times. Høigaard and Mathisen (2008) were of the opinion that there was a blurring of the lines between counselling and non-counselling conversations in the school setting. They suggested that the “close and direct connection to the participants' experiences and events create a situated learning situation” (Høigaard *et al.*, 2008: 295). Within that situated learning situation, “informal situated counselling” could take place. This characterisation of counselling allowed it to occur at many different levels and places in the school context. They suggested that “place, time, situation and relationship” were

vital elements for informal situated counselling to take place. Circle time potentially offered these elements. Høigaard *et al.*'s (2008) work is of note in its characterisation of the everyday interactions in schools as counselling. Its incidental nature, occurrence at different levels and within different contexts in a school setting was considered helpful in describing the kind of counselling that might occur in circle times.

Another concern that has been raised about the practice of circle time is the child's right to privacy. Hanafin *et al.* (2009) identified school and classroom practices that facilitated "breaches of privacy which can occur through subtle intrusive activities which can manifest themselves within the groves of education" (Hanafin *et al.*, 2009: 2). Among those listed were assessment procedures, the "early –morning "news slot"", the communicative method of language teaching, the emphasis on exploring the child's own life in History and Geography, and the practice of circle time, which was depicted as "an opportunity for public exposure of both private and family issues" (Hanafin *et al.*, 2009: 4). While much of this article is praiseworthy in terms of raising a significant issue such as a child's right to privacy, there are questions left unanswered by its authors. One wonders how language teaching in the average primary classroom is to be conducted if not by communication with and between the children. Another striking aspect of the arguments is the implicit criticism of teachers who are characterised as having "excesses of...curiosity" (Hanafin *et al.*, 2009: 4). It could also be argued that their depiction of circle time is at best inaccurate, and at worst not based on any examination of the literature (e.g. Mosley, 1993; 1996; 1998), where children are encouraged to exercise choice in communicating in the circle. In Mosley (1996: 35) teachers are advised that "a child has the right to say 'Pass' in a round if she does not wish to speak." A related point is made about family privacy: "[w]e must help children respect the privacy of their families..." (Mosley, 1996: 35). On the other hand, the public nature of the problem-solving advocated by Mosley (e.g. Mosley, 1996: 55-6)

could be viewed as problematic in terms of children's privacy, given the potential for individual children to expose themselves either wittingly or unwittingly as part of the problem-solving exercise.

There is no acknowledgment in Hanafin *et al.* (2009) of the fun, enjoyment and learning children (and their teachers) might derive from their interactions together, in exploring their own environment in History or Geography, or interacting with peers in a circle time session. And, as was pointed out by a key informant, "teachers who wanted to be nosy didn't need circle time in order to find those things out, there are other opportunities" (former education officer, NCCA, in interview). Notwithstanding the criticisms, this article was a timely reminder that challenges to the practices and processes of circle time were gathering, which made the current research more pertinent.

Studies of SPHE in Irish Primary Schools

The circle time method (also known as circle work) is one of a suite of active learning strategies promoted in the SPHE Curriculum (1999). It is listed specifically under "discussion" strategies (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 57), and is cited as a means of encouraging "good communication and reflects the principles of sharing, equality and inclusiveness and a sense of caring for each other" (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 83). Teachers are advised that it is particularly useful for engaging children in "critical thinking" and that it may help them to "base decisions on more than emotion or a momentary whim" (*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 83).

Two major studies have been conducted into implementation of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). For the research in hand, they offered a snapshot of classroom and school life, and provided some insights into the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools. These reviews were examined with a view to finding out what they said about

circle time, and to identify where there was scope for further evidence to be gathered. While there was some overlap in the findings of the reviews, their differing methods of data gathering provided some answers and suggested more questions on current practice.

Primary Curriculum Review (NCCA, 2008)

Since its introduction in 1999, the revised PSC has been the subject of two reviews by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Phase 1 (NCCA, 2005) examined English, Mathematics and Visual Arts curricula. Phase 2 (PCR 2) (NCCA, 2008) involved Gaeilge, Science and SPHE. The latter was of most relevance to the current research.

Two hundred schools were involved in the research in PCR 2, with approximately 50 per cent of the teachers returning completed questionnaires¹². In addition, a school case study involving interviews with principals, parents and children in eight schools was undertaken. The main data outlined in the review document were from the questionnaires.

The typical questionnaire respondent was:

...a female class teacher (88%), who taught a single-grade class (70%) of between 26-30 children (42%). She taught infants to second class (49%) in a mixed-gender (65%), urban (76%), English-medium school (92%).

(PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 56)

The fact that 37% of respondents had between one and five years teaching experience was noted as significant, given that “her pre-service teacher education and all subsequent CPD [continuing professional development] happened since the

¹² In PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) it is unclear how many teachers from each of the 200 participating schools completed the questionnaire. It is stated that in 138 of the schools there was at least one respondent. This suggests that in some schools there were multiple respondents. The response rate was higher from English-medium schools (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 35-6).

introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (1999)” (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 56). Findings of relevance to the research in hand are mainly found in the *Approaches and Methodologies* and *General* sections.

Approaches and Methodologies

This covered aspects of organisation including teaching strategies, settings, differentiation and integration, along with resources and use of ICT. Teaching strategies in use in SPHE included talk and discussion, with 93 per cent of respondents saying they used this frequently (PCR2, NCCA, 2008: 79). Circle time is suggested as a strategy for promotion of discussion in the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999). It is still somewhat surprising that 49 per cent said they used circle time frequently, and a further 32 per cent used it “sometimes” (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 79). This suggested that circle time was widely used in primary classrooms. However, these figures may not fully reflect classroom reality, given the profile of teachers already outlined, half of whom taught junior classes where you might expect this method to be more prevalent. The fact that some teachers cited this as a method of differentiation is puzzling, as it was not evident how this might work, nor was there any detail given.

Of further significance here were findings in relation to organisational settings that highlighted the prevalence of whole class teaching as a “*frequent*” organisational strategy way ahead of group or paired work. Also of note was the preponderance of individual work by children which appeared to fly in the face of the emphasis on relationship building in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), and contrasted with the reported use of circle time. It was equally noteworthy that even where teachers had classes of 15 children or less, they were only “*somewhat less likely*” to use whole class teaching or individual work (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 68).

While the questionnaire used the term *circle work*, the findings were reported about *circle time* (e.g. PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 72, 75, 79). I raised this issue with a former education officer of the NCCA who had worked on the SPHE part of the review. He provided a note as follows:

The term 'Circle Work' is used in the original Teacher Template (p. 36). However, the vast majority of teachers referred to it as 'Circle Time' in their comments and responses. Both terms are used interchangeably in the Report's discussion of findings, most often 'Circle Time'.

(Former Education officer, NCCA, notes provided to me, April 2011)

This confirmed my belief that teachers did not differentiate between the terms, and favoured circle time over circle work in discussion.

The most interesting aspect of the findings in relation to assessment related to the reluctance of some teachers to assess SPHE at all. For some, this was because of the long-term nature of SPHE objectives, while others cited the sensitivity of some areas in the curriculum under this heading. For those who are critical of this type of curriculum, lack of assessment does little to convince the critics that there is a value for children in its implementation. However, as a former education officer of the NCCA pointed out, it is not just in SPHE that the difficulty with assessment occurs:

...the same kind of feedback came back from Drama and from Visual Arts, so SPHE is not singled out as being an unassessable quantity, it's more to do with the dimensions of different types of learning that are difficult to assess.

(Former Education Officer, NCCA, in interview)

General

Under this heading were findings in relation to the perceived impact of the curriculum on children's learning, and successes, challenges and priorities. Respondents listed the following as evidence of the impact of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) on children's learning:

- Awareness of others
- Personal development
- The environment

(PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 115)

These highlighted aspects neatly mirror the strands of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). While most comments referred to the content of the *Myself and Others* strand, citing empathy, cooperation and listening among other learning, it is noteworthy that only 18 per cent commented on the content of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand. This strand includes citizenship education, media education and environmental care. It may be that the timing of the review influenced this finding, given that many teachers start on the *Myself* and *Myself and Others* strands before teaching the *Myself and the Wider World* strand in the last term. It may also point to a prioritisation by teachers of personal and social development over other objectives in the SPHE Curriculum (1999).

Self-expression, communication and teaching methods were listed as the top three successes of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) in the review. Under self-expression, SE and confidence were mentioned, along with expressing feelings and taking responsibility for actions. Communication aspects included improved interactions, conflict resolution, and social skills, among others. The listing of teaching methods in the top three successes related to teachers who “cited circle time as their greatest success” (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 123), in terms of children being able to listen to one another and show empathy. This, coupled with the level of use of the method cited earlier, leads one to believe that circle time was seen as a desirable way of working with children in SPHE, and that it delivered particular outcomes of use in the classroom. It appeared from the data that for many teachers, SE was linked to confidence. While there was no mention of EI, it could be inferred from the focus on expressing feelings, improved interactions, conflict resolution and social skills mentioned.

Challenges identified by respondents were predictable, with “scope of content”, “time” and “resources” in the top three (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 133). The main priorities for respondents related to curriculum content (43 per cent), resources (22 per cent) and

teaching methods (31 per cent). In the case of the latter, respondents wanted to improve their use of circle time, develop reflective abilities of students, and tackle issues (such as planning) related to the time allocation for SPHE (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 139).

The information on circle time contained in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) was overwhelmingly positive. What was lacking was any specific detail on the practice or processes, or indeed the aims of the teachers in engaging with the method. This is not a criticism of the review, which had a far broader aim than investigation of one method. A word of caution in relation to PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) findings is required in relation to percentages reported and number of respondents in any given question. For example, the percentages quoted in relation to the use of circle time have $N = 16 - 1,165$, with no way of knowing which part of the question had a response of 16 teachers, or any other number between that and 1,165 out of a possible 1,200. Access to the original documents which might have allowed greater clarity in the matter was not possible for ethical reasons.

We turn now to a second review of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) for further data on its implementation.

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies (DES, 2009)

The role of the Irish Inspectorate at primary level involves, among other things, whole school inspections every five or six years in primary schools. Generally these are conducted across all curricula and in all classes in a school. From time to time, however, a “thematic evaluation” is carried out, and it was fortunate that one such evaluation was carried out for SPHE in 2007, and reported in 2009 (referred to hereafter as DES, 2009). The tools for the evaluation included observation of teaching and learning, interviews with teachers, management and pupils, questionnaires with parents and senior pupils, and examination of school documentation in forty schools. This

contrasted with the methods in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008), which relied heavily on self-reporting of teachers for their data. Another point of difference is that DES (2009) had a whole school focus rather than the mainly individual focus in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008). Classroom observations in DES (2009) also provided some contrasts with the findings in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008).

In relation to whole school plans reviewed, five per cent of schools had sought pupils' views during the planning process, which might signify a move towards more democratic planning processes in schools. However, given the reported high use of circle time, and the low level of children's engagement with school planning issues, it might be surmised that either circle time does not lead to involvement of children in democratic processes in schools, or that this move towards democratisation stopped at the classroom door in many instances. May (2005: 32) suggested that while schools might have moved towards "eliciting" children's thoughts and ideas this did not lead to shared action. That the trend is towards less rather than more involvement of children in decision-making is borne out by the *State of the Nation's Children* (2010: 116), where it was reported that children's participation in decision-making in their schools had declined significantly from 1998 to 2006.

A common finding between the two reviews was the over-emphasis on the strands *Myself* and *Myself and Others* to the detriment of the strand *Myself and the Wider World*. The inspectors found that "in some schools there was no evidence of content from the *Myself and the Wider World* strand being addressed at all" (DES, 2009: 49). One explanation offered was that teachers planned for this in the last term when "it might not be attended" (DES, 2009: 26). However, as stated already, another interpretation is that teachers prioritised personal and social development to the detriment of wider world issues.

Classroom climate was not highlighted in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008), but was given attention in DES (2009), where 20 per cent of classrooms were deemed to have scope for development in relation to the “richness of the classroom as an SPHE environment” (DES, 2009: 28). This contrasted with the most SPHE-rich environments, which included the “abundance of pupils’ work on display.... Pupils’ efforts are praised appropriately.... Every opportunity is taken to celebrate successes....many “I can...” and “Now look what I have learnt...” displays...” (DES, 2009: 28). Again, this focus on “I” could be interpreted as promotion of SE which might link to the reported high use of circle time in classrooms in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008).

While most pupils were positive about their schools and classrooms across a range of aspects such as friendships, learning environment and sense of community, they showed more ambivalence in relation to involvement in decision-making and equality of treatment. This was consistent with the figure mentioned earlier in relation to pupil involvement in school planning activities, but called into question again the overwhelming endorsement of circle time (a democratic method) in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008). Inspectors reported over-use of whole class discussion and teacher domination of discussion in 10 per cent of classes which might help to explain this ambivalence on the part of pupils. One wondered whether these same classrooms listed circle time as a teaching strategy – unfortunately that kind of information was not available.

DES (2009) highlighted the narrow range of approaches and methods in use in classrooms, predominated by talk and discussion and over-use of written activities. Worryingly for such a predominant approach was the finding that one in five teachers was not skilled at leading the talk and discussion. In a quarter of classrooms there were insufficient opportunities for students to work collaboratively (highlighted as a source of enjoyment for pupils in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008), which DES (2009: 67) noted “is a

guiding feature of teaching and learning in SPHE...”. Even where this approach was used, there was scope for development in the practice of a quarter of the teachers observed. Teachers tended to over-report their use of other approaches and methods, according to DES (2009), a factor which should be taken into account when looking at the PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) data, where the potential for over-reporting was higher. There is a possibility that the narrow range of approaches and methods found by the inspectorate reflected a deliberate choice by teachers not to use such methods while under observation. This would explain the discrepancy between some of the research data in the two reviews, however this is speculative.

There was considerable overlap in the findings of the two reviews in relation to assessment. This was an area that rated below other aspects of practice, with the inspectors finding weaknesses in the “majority of classrooms” (DES, 2009: 64). While observation was the main assessment strategy, there were few attempts to record this in any systematic way. Pupil work was part of the assessment procedure, but the inspectorate felt that assessment was in the main “carried out on an incidental basis” (DES, 2009: 65). This tied in closely with findings in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008), where teachers expressed a reluctance to assess in this curriculum because of the sensitive nature of some of the content and the perception that a longer-term view needed to be taken of benefits. However, the inspectors quite reasonably urged teachers and schools to focus on “the aspects of the SPHE programme that can be realistically assessed during the pupil’s time in school” (DES, 2009: 65). Good assessments strategies listed were structured teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, collation of portfolios of children’s work and records of pupils’ engagement in project activity. Again, one wondered what, if any, type of assessment was used by teachers using circle time, or was it viewed as a sensitive area? Further research was required to answer that question.

While the views of parents and pupils were elicited in both reviews, their voices were given more prominence in DES (2009). Pupils were generally positive about SPHE and in both reviews indicated their preference for working in groups, doing role play, circle time and cooperative games. Most pupils portrayed themselves as happy (94 per cent), responsible (93 per cent), thoughtful (80 per cent) and confident (76 per cent) (DES, 2009: 77). While pupils in focus groups in DES (2009) indicated their enjoyment in talking about their feelings, only 36 per cent in the questionnaire responses said they found it easy to do so. This finding echoed the fears around privacy raised by Hanafin *et al.* (2009) outlined earlier. It also raised questions about engaging in this type of work in schools, where discussion of feelings is seen as a legitimate part of the SPHE Curriculum (1999). Teachers were also ambivalent about eliciting children's feelings (NCCA, 2008). This might suggest that a focus on EI in primary classrooms could prove uncomfortable for both teachers and pupils.

Pupils reported they knew how to protect themselves in dangerous situations, but a significant number said they did not learn about the influence of advertising (30 per cent), or know how government worked (64 per cent) (DES, 2009: 80). This is in keeping with the finding that the *Myself and the Wider World* strand is the most neglected of the SPHE strands. On the positive side, pupils' learning about the environment and respect for different cultures was given a ringing endorsement in both reviews, even though inspectors found little evidence of use of the intercultural guidelines issued by the NCCA (2005).

While it was helpful to have information of the type found in the reviews of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) implementation, there were some queries raised by the research, particularly in relation to circle time. Some of these lacunae were due to the methods employed, which in one instance allowed teachers scope for over-reporting

their use of particular teaching strategies (including circle time). Others related more to the lack of information on teacher's priorities in implementing circle time, their assessment practices (if any) when using the method, and the practices and processes followed during circle time. The figure of 81 per cent of teachers reporting its use was an enticement to investigate further. The following research is specifically focussed on circle time.

Overview of Research on Circle Time in Ireland and the UK

Reference was already made to the difficulty of conducting research into the effects of circle time, mainly to do with lack of definition and ambiguity around key concepts such as SE and EI. Many terms are used interchangeably without sufficient recognition of the nuanced meanings of the concepts. Another difficulty encountered in examining the research was the range of activities under the umbrella term of circle time, some of which differed significantly from the Mosley Model. Adding to the complexity was the wide range of research methods used which did not allow for easy comparisons across research projects.

In an attempt to find a logical path through the field of research on circle time, I grouped projects according to the aims of circle time that were the focus of the research, and limited the field to those which largely followed the Mosley Model. This excluded research in other countries such as Italy, the USA and Canada where it was reasonable to assume that the Mosley Model might not be in use. In many of the research projects there were multiple research foci. In the interests of clarity and coherence, the research projects were categorised according to the main question or focus of the research in the following analysis. The research outlined in this chapter gives a good flavour of activity in this area.

Circle Time and Self-esteem (SE)

Kelly (1999) was an example of a small-scale study which used the Mosley Model as “it appeared to incorporate many of the factors and processes identified ... as successful in bringing about change in self-concept and behaviour” (Kelly, 1999: 41). SE and self-concept are used interchangeably in the reported research. Children with low self-concept were identified using an observation schedule devised by Moss (1996) (in Kelly, 1999). These were either put into a group on their own, or took part in circle time as a whole-class exercise. Both targeted groups showed improvement in behaviour, with the whole-class approach seen to be the most effective. Kelly (1999), an educational psychologist, concluded: “Circle Time *did seem* [my italics] to bring about marked positive change in the behaviour of children previously showing delayed adjustment” (Kelly, 1999: 44). The study raised questions about the measurement of success, the lack of baseline measures or control groups, and the effectiveness of teacher observation alone as a basis for evaluation of research questions, and the lack of definition about what they were trying to measure.

Teacher judgements of children’s SE (a basis of measurement in this research) have been found to be frequently inaccurate (Miller *et al.*, 2005; Miller and Parker, 2006). We could also compare Kelly’s (1999) research methods to those of Macy and Bricker (2007) in the USA, the latter being an example of a more robust study in a similar situation.

A much larger scale study was conducted by Miller *et al.* (2007) into the effects of circle time on pupil SE which they defined as “the integrated sum of self-competence and self-worth” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 602). An illuminating aspect of this project was the comparison made between circle time and what they called “an efficacy-based approach” to SE enhancement (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 605). Using pre- and post-testing, the

authors concluded that, relative to a control group, both circle time and efficacy-based groups had made significant gains, but on different dimensions of SE. The circle time group made most gains in self-worth, while the efficacy-based group made most gains in self-competence measures. While acknowledging some reservations, the authors concluded that their study “provides empirical support for the claims which have been made for the approach [circle time] for some time now” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 610). The authors also highlight a challenge for teacher educators when they suggested that teachers might only have a “superficial understanding of the pedagogy” (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 611). The teachers in their study were experienced and committed to circle time. It could be that in less experienced or committed hands the same results would not be replicated. The significance of this research was that it was one of the few that attempted to define the concepts in advance of the fieldwork undertaken. Their definition of SE was particularly useful, and provided guidance in my data analysis.

Circle Time and Social Skills Development

Canney *et al.*'s (2006) research, based in Ireland, investigated whether circle time could improve social skills of children with a mild intellectual disability. A special feature of this study was the level of teacher education provided by the researchers which included researcher-led circle time demonstration sessions for some of the teachers. At the end of the research project, teachers were unanimous that circle time offered “an effective means of promoting social skills development” (Canney *et al.*, 2006: 22), however there was no discussion of the evidence for this with the children. Noteworthy too was the fact that those teachers who had received most support implemented circle time the least. This begged the question: who is most likely to implement circle time? Like the Kelly (1999) study, there seemed to have been an over-reliance on teacher perception to measure success; however the authors typified their

study as “exploratory” and gave several pointers for future research (mainly in the area of teacher education).

Moss and Wilson (1998) undertook research in a Year 6 class in the UK to see if social interaction could be improved. They readily admitted that this was a form of “reactive crisis management”, but notwithstanding this, they found, after seven circle time sessions, that “ the sociometric measure revealed significant differences in pupil preferences in terms of the number of pupils they were willing to mix with at break time or work with in the classroom”(Moss *et al.*, 1998: 15). As they were the class teachers involved in the classroom work, they were also of the opinion that making circle time part of their class routine “led to a more positive classroom climate where the class teachers had more time for teaching and spent less time sorting out arguments” (Moss *et al.*, 1998: 16). The downside of being that close to the research site every day is that there is potential for cross-over between the intervention (circle time) and the day-to-day running of the classroom, as well as the possibility in all teacher observation research of seeing only the incidents that confirm the positive findings. The interesting aspect of this research was the design and implementation of a dedicated set of lessons to solve a typical classroom problem using circle time as the method of engagement, and the use of a method other than teacher observation to substantiate some of the claims made.

Tew (1998) also sought to improve relationships and promote a sense of group using circle time. Like the Miller *et al.* (2007) research, two approaches were used simultaneously - circle time and a “student-centred approach” that involved many of the same activities as circle time but not the circle formation. She concluded that while “student-centred methods ... have a positive impact, circle time techniques are even more effective” (Tew, 1998: 26), particularly in relation to students getting to know one

another. Pre- and post-student questionnaires formed the basis for the findings, along with teacher perception, so there was an attempt at objectivity. However, it is clear that Tew had a very positive view of circle time prior to the research which raised a question about possible bias in the findings.

Doveston (2007) aimed to improve children's working relationships in the classroom. Using a suite of strategies which she named as the "Responsive Classroom" action research project, the "morning meeting" was a key component. She noted that while this drew on the Mosley Model, it was a "community-building strategy, not a problem-solving technique" (Doveston, 2007: 48). Improvements were noted in speaking and listening skills which Doveston (2007) related directly to circle time. While the data gathered were impressive, I felt it was impossible to say that circle time was directly responsible for the gains made, given that other strategies such as role play and cooperative exercises were also used. Coppock's (2007) research on the promotion of emotional literacy was another example of a multi-strategy approach using circle time. While these are interesting and comprehensive studies, for those whose interest is solely circle time they are of limited use.

Circle Time and Special Educational Needs

Galbraith and Alexander (2005: 28) targeted the weakest readers in one school to see whether "constructs such as self-concept and self-esteem have a bearing on academic achievement". A number of strategies were employed, including circle time, specifically targeting the low SE of the children involved. Among those identified as low in SE (9 children), six improved their SE score (using Lawrence's Teacher Self-esteem Checklist, 1996), two remained the same and one dropped during the research cycle. More details are given for three children all of whose reading scores improved (two quite significantly). This research raised more questions than it answered about

circle time and SE, given that other strategies were also used to address low reading scores, making it more difficult to say that circle time was the most significant strategy. It is typical of a number of studies which have too many variables to make claims on the effectiveness of circle time *per se*.

Lee *et al.* (2001) also reported on a research project involving students with emotional and emotional/behavioural difficulties in a school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. Using “the principles of circle time” and a “circle time approach” for lessons (Lee *et al.*, 2001: 186), there were some gains in terms of pupil awareness of their own and others’ strengths and abilities. Teachers perceived that listening skills had improved, and general feedback from both pupils and teachers was positive. Some of the criticisms laid at the door of other research can also be laid here, in terms of teacher observation as a measurement tool. The equation of pupil enjoyment with development of skills merited further investigation, as I was not clear whether one always led to the other. Overall, the study added little to what was known about the practices, processes and benefits of circle time.

Circle Time and Perceptions of Pupils and Teachers

While much of the research cited already touched on pupil and teacher perceptions of the method (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2001; Canney *et al.*, 2006), there were some who chose this as their main focus. Clancy (2002) sought the views of pupils with specific learning difficulties, their parents and teachers. She found that teachers and parents were “consistently positive in their perceptions of circle time” (Clancy, 2002: 112). It is not clear what the basis for the positive perceptions was, and there was acknowledgement that “the novelty factor” may have contributed to the positive comments by the pupils.

Lown (2002) undertook a research project with eight schools and 15 teachers. Three main issues were targeted in the research: exploration of the impact of circle time as

perceived by teachers and pupils; establishing pupil and teacher feelings about the process of circle time; and exploration of any relationship between the impact of circle time and variables such as frequency and age of children. Like Clancy (2002), Lown (2002) found that teachers were “consistently positive” about circle time as a result of their *perceptions* [my italics] of improvements in children’s “personal and social behaviour” (Lown, 2002: 98). Personal skills such as SE and “ability to express feelings” were mentioned, and social skills such as listening, turn-taking and cooperative skills were also cited by teachers. Lown (2002: 99) found that pupil perceptions “were largely consistent with these themes”. Teachers commented that circle time gave them a better understanding of the children themselves and the problems they faced. Pupils and teachers both responded positively to the process of circle time in terms of enjoyment and fun. Like Miller *et al.* (2007), Lown (2002) identified a link between the length of time teachers had been doing circle time, whether it had started at the beginning of the school year, and whether there was more than one adult involved in the process, all of which tended to have a positive effect on teacher perceptions of the method. Lown (2002) acknowledged that more rigour was required in terms of assessing gain, and that more clarity in terms of activities and content would allow for better understanding of the variables that impacted on the effects of circle time.

Circle Time and Citizenship Education

There was little evidence of circle time being used to promote citizenship in schools. Holden (2003) suggested that while circle time “provides a good starting point for many of the social and moral issues which are linked to citizenship” she argued that teachers should “go beyond circle time” to embrace global issues.

Self-esteem and Emotional Intelligence: Legitimate Educational Goals?

The difficulty with definition and measurement of the concepts of SE and EI has already been discussed. These must be taken into account in any critique of the impact of either as it is often impossible to know what is being measured, and to have confidence in the measurement tools.

A starting point in critiquing the theory that SE and EI are worthwhile education goals was the contention by a number of commentators that their promotion did not necessarily make one a better person. Gardner (1999) and Mayer *et al.* (2004) argued that intelligence was value-free. Carr (2000) made the same point in relation to SE when he stated:

Confidence and self-esteem are thus the raw materials out of which genuine character or virtue are or are not built rather than virtues or moral ends in themselves.

(Carr, 2000: 32)

I have suggested from time to time that EI (as defined by Mayer *et al.* 2004) would be very useful for conmen and serial killers, while the creators of weapons of mass destruction must have been very intelligent people (possibly of the logical-mathematical kind). There is no guarantee that the pursuit of EI or SE will necessarily produce the kinds of citizens a society might wish for.

There is a vast literature on the effects of SE and EI on a whole range of abilities pertinent to the school and work environment. Even if one were to narrow the search to those that are situated in the education field alone there would still be a vast amount. I chose a number of key contributors to the literature to give a flavour of what was being claimed for and against SE and EI.

Questioning the pursuit of SE a few years ago might have led one to be considered “silly, stupid, or worse” (Kernis, 2003: 3). This has changed and there are plenty of commentators who suggest that promoting SE is of dubious benefit (e.g. Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs, 2005). In a major review of the research (*Exploding the Self-esteem Myth*) the authors suggested that “such efforts are of little value in fostering academic progress or preventing undesirable behaviour” (Baumeister *et al.*, 2005: 1). Their writing highlighted the difficulty of self-reports of SE, and they confined their review to “emphasize objective measure wherever possible – a requirement that greatly reduced the number of relevant studies” (Baumeister *et al.*, 2005: 3). The findings outlined showed little evidence of a causal link between SE and academic achievement, popularity, sustaining relationships, and problematic behaviours (such as drug-taking and violence). They did suggest, however, that SE seemed to be linked to happiness, but it was difficult to know what direction the causality took (Baumeister *et al.*, 2005: 5).

Writing in Scotland, Maclellan (2005: 7) suggested that although SE was an “important idea in psychological health”, it was “not of direct importance to the teacher.” She argued that concepts such as self-efficacy and self-concept were more useful constructs and that these should be pursued in the classroom “through a structured, relevant and differentiated curriculum” (Maclellan, 2005: 7). Kennedy (2010) also made the case for self-efficacy in reading achievement and provided such a programme in her work in a high-poverty school in Dublin. So it may be that in schools, a much more carefully defined and delineated form of SE needs to be articulated and explored for the benefit of pupils. I was impressed with both the work of Maclellan (2005) and Kennedy (2010), particularly in relation to providing children with developmental academic goals and supports to promote self-efficacy.

Perhaps because the EI literature is relatively recent in comparison to the SE literature, there is less evidence of nay-sayers and more support for the concept than appeared to be the case with SE. Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell and Woods (2007: 235) conducted a “critical review” of EI and education. While acknowledging the difficulties of terminology and measurement alluded to previously, they made a case for linking EI and academic achievement, in particular the decision-making aspect of education. Thi Lam and Kirby (2002: 139) found that EI also made a contribution over and above general intelligence to “cognitive tasks”. They argued for more research along gender lines, as they contended that there were “differences in emotional expression between men and women” (Thi Lam *et al.*, 2002: 142) which might impact on the promotion of EI. McWilliam *et al.* (2004: 184) in contrast, raised questions about how what they described as “the new literacy” had been “normalized, naturalized and romanticized.” They also queried what were considered appropriate emotional responses, and suggested that these could serve “as a lynchpin for new forms of regulation” (McWilliam *et al.*, 2004: 187). Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.* (2008) were convinced that if educators stuck to the Mayer *et al.* (2004) model of EI (as opposed to Goleman’s) there were gains to be made across a range of areas. Their review included research that linked EI to interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, academic performance and disruptive behaviours (Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.*, 2008: 429)¹³. So it can be surmised that there are differing views on the importance of EI, but that the picture painted in this stage of the research appears more positive than negative. It may be that, as with SE, this will change as more and more research is conducted into the construct.

¹³ In their review, Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.* (2008) identified research that suggested that EI had a positive effect on interpersonal relationships, well-being, and academic performance. The lack of EI was found to increase the risk of disruptive behaviours, including anti-social and self-destructive behaviours such as substance use.

Summary and Conclusion

Several drivers that facilitated the rise of circle time in Irish primary schools were identified. These included influences from the field of psychology in relation to the promotion of SE and EI in education; a move towards participative decision-making in schools informed by the concept of children as rights-bearers; and moves towards inclusion of children with diverse intellectual, social and psychological needs. While the rhetoric of participation was evident in the literature, the reality did not always deliver on the promise. That the widespread use of circle time was not universally welcomed was seen in challenges to its legitimacy on a number of grounds, predicated in some instances on valid concerns for the potentially vulnerable child in the classroom.

Recent reviews of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) gave a mixed picture of what was happening in classrooms in relation to circle time. On the one hand, there was evidence of widespread reported use of circle time, while on the other, the inability of some 20 per cent of teachers to conduct classroom discussions raised questions about the facilitation of circle time. Common findings in the reviews of SPHE implementation were the focus on the *Myself* strand with much less attention paid to the *Myself and the wider world* strand. Both reviews also highlighted assessment as a challenge, with teachers suggesting that sensitive areas of the curriculum should not be assessed and that the long-term nature of aims made assessment difficult. There was little evidence of children's involvement in school planning and decision-making. Pupils were generally positive about SPHE, but did not always find it easy to talk about their feelings, which was also identified as an ambivalent area for teachers. A mixed picture in relation to approaches and methods emerged from both reviews, with the inspectorate finding a narrow range of approaches, while circle time appeared to be in widespread use (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008). Neither review provided any evidence of what was actually happening in circle time in Irish primary schools.

An examination of the research on the Mosley Model of circle time in Ireland and the UK showed the reported findings were without exception positive in the view that circle time could indeed deliver what its promoters claimed (e.g. enhanced SE). A serious concern was the overreliance on teacher perception of SE gains in pupils in much of the research outlined, as teachers' ability to accurately identify children's SE has been questioned. Research projects that defined their concepts (such as SE) were more credible than those that assumed a universal understanding, and were in a better position to prove gains. There was little information about the teachers who implemented circle time, and the practices and processes they used. It was not clear in the research outlined what role the teacher adopted in the circle, and whether this affected outcomes in any way. It appeared that just saying that "the principles of circle time" (Lee *et al.*, 2001: 186) were being upheld entitled one to make assumptions about the interactions and activities that occurred in the circle. Very few of the research projects indicated the type of training that teachers underwent prior to or during circle time implementation - the exception was Canney *et al.*'s (2006) research which suggested that support for teachers might not lead to increased implementation. Issues raised by Lown (2002) in relation to the effect of variables such as duration and frequency of sessions had also been insufficiently researched. As much of the research outlined occurred in the UK, one would have to query whether findings in one jurisdiction could be transferred to another (echoing Edwards, 2003). No mention was made in any of the research about concerns raised in relation to children's privacy, or doubts about the pursuit of SE enhancement in the school setting. There was little evidence of the use of circle time for citizenship or rights education.

Other approaches investigated in the research outlined delivered some of the same effects as circle time (e.g. the efficacy-based approach in Miller *et al.* (2007) and the student-centred approach in Tew (1998)). This begged the question as to whether there

were approaches that could deliver the same outcomes as or more effectively than circle time.

The existing research on circle time is predicated on the assumption that enhancing children's SE and/or EI is beneficial for the individual. A review of the literature suggested that these claims in relation to SE appeared to be exaggerated at best, while the benefits that EI promotion might potentially deliver had yet to be conclusively proven. Causality was problematic for much of the claims made, and caution was needed in pursuing either construct for particular outcomes such as academic achievement, relationship-building or healthy lifestyles.

It appeared that further research on circle time in Ireland was full of possibilities still to be exploited. The timeliness of this research was underlined by recent challenges to the use of the method in schools. Increased scrutiny of the PSC (1999) in light of falling literacy and numeracy standards and scarce resources also provided motivation. The literature review suggested that depth of information might be useful at this point in time. This kind of data might help to silence some of the critics, or confirm their worst fears. An illuminatory study was envisaged, which would answer some of the questions raised.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research undertaken related to a method in use in the Irish school system called circle time. The particular location of the research was primary school classrooms. The historical path of the method was traced in Chapter One. A conceptual basis for the method was presented in Chapter Two. It was established that 81 per cent of primary teachers reported using it in their classrooms (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008). While that much was known about its use, little other information was available in the Irish context. This research also came at a time when challenges to the method were being articulated (outlined in Chapter Three). It was also conducted during a period of economic uncertainty for Ireland, and concern about educational standards as evidenced in the recently published *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011), which is discussed in Chapter Six.

A qualitative study was chosen in order to get as close to the practice of teachers as possible so that a clear picture could be created about what was happening in some circle times in Irish primary schools. Five teachers were observed during three circle time sessions (fifteen observations in all). Pre and post observation interviews were held with each participating teacher (ten interviews). Principals in the schools were interviewed (five interviews), as were three teachers from different schools who were not using circle time (three interviews). Pre and post fieldwork interviews were held with Jenny Mosley, a leading author on circle time (two interviews). Finally, a former education officer in the NCCA was interviewed. The following table presents a summary of the fieldwork:

Teachers using circle time (Pseudonyms)	School/ Organisation	Observations (30 – 50 mins each)	Journals	Interviews
Neasa (6 th Class)	Rural mixed	3	3	2
Majella (3 rd Class)	Urban mixed	3	3	2
Tomás (3 rd Class)	Urban boys	3	3	2
Annette (6 th Class)	Urban mixed	3	3	2
Sally (Senior Infants)	Urban mixed	3	3	2
Principals	See above			5 (one per principal)
Jenny Mosley	Jenny Mosley Consultancies			2 interviews – pre and post school fieldwork
Teachers not using circle time (Pseudonyms)				
Michael	Urban mixed			1
Teresa	Urban boys			1
Alan	Urban mixed			1
Former Education Officer	NCCA			1
Totals		15 observations	15 journals	21 interviews

Table 2: Summary of fieldwork

This chapter outlines the rationale for the methodological choices made, and the journey of the data gathering which ensued. The limitations of the study are outlined and it is acknowledged that no claims for generalizability or representativeness can be made, given the small number of participants involved. Depth of information on the actual practice of circle time was sought, which it was felt was better facilitated by repeat visits and interviews with a small number of teachers rather than less activity with a larger number.

Research Questions

The focus of the research was the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools. While some research had been conducted on the method of circle time both in Ireland and the UK (outlined in Chapter Three), there was little evidence of data on what exactly happened in circle time sessions. I believed that this should be the starting point of any research endeavour into circle time in Irish primary classrooms, while I was aware of many other research paths in the field. The main research question was: what is happening in circle times in some Irish primary school classrooms? A number of areas were of interest under this umbrella question. These are presented as follows:

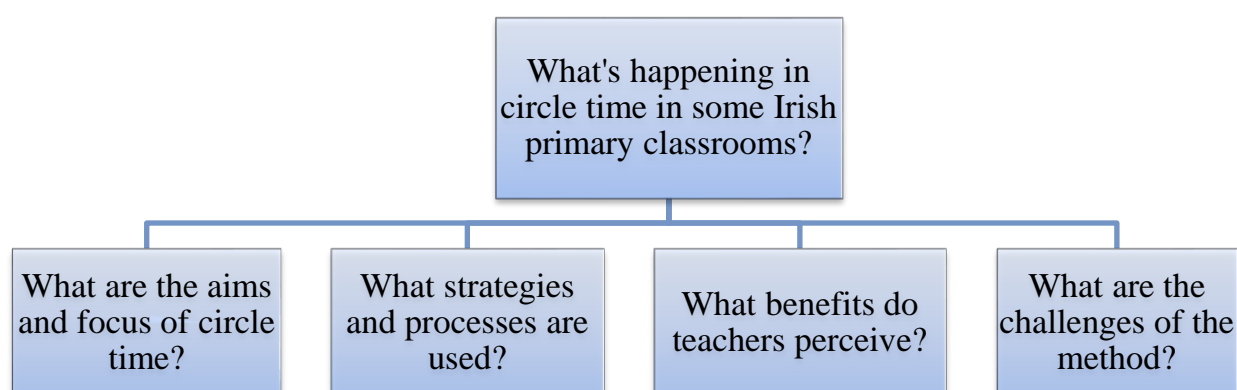


Diagram 3: Research Questions

Circle time is promoted as a method for enhancing SE in classrooms (see, for example, Mosley 1993; 1996; 1998). Much of the existing research into circle time in primary schools had asked teachers to evaluate its effectiveness in this regard. Typically, teachers were asked to identify gains based on their observations of pupils during and outside circle time sessions (Kelly, 1999; Lown, 2002). This approach is problematic for a variety of reasons, as was outlined in Chapter Three.

Asking teachers about their aims and purposes in using the method might yield predictable answers already contained in its promotional literature, the use of which was widespread at primary school level in Ireland. Notwithstanding that, this was an area of interest in the research as this question had not yet been asked in the Irish primary school context, and could yield information relating to the relative priority of aims. A key research question therefore related to the aims and focus of circle time for teachers.

Of interest, and with potentially less predictable results, were questions around the processes and strategies that Irish primary teachers employed in using circle time in the classroom – the “how” questions. While it was known that many teachers were self-reporting use of circle time, it was not known what model (if any) informed practice. Of particular interest here were questions around the strategies for facilitating children’s voice and participation in the circle, the rules of circle time, and the role adopted by the teacher in the circle.

Perceptions of teachers around what they saw as successes or benefits in their practice of circle time were also deemed significant in relation to their reasons for using the method. This allowed me to compare responses of teachers in the research to the literature on circle time and the conceptual framework adopted (in Chapter Two). Recent reviews of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) suggested that teachers were reluctant to assess in this area for two reasons: the need to take a long-term view of gains or benefits, and the sensitivity of some of the curriculum content. Notwithstanding this, teachers in these reviews cited confidence-building and better relationships as benefits of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) in general. I wanted to find out if these benefits applied to circle time, and how teachers assessed or measured the gains. These questions were deemed to be of interest to both practitioners and other stakeholders in Irish primary

school education, and were considered timely in view of reduced resources for education and an increased focus on numeracy and literacy.

Challenges to the use of circle time were gathering pace at the time the research was conducted (outlined in Chapter Two). I was also aware through my work as a teacher educator that there were challenges in the implementation of circle time itself relating to its processes and the role of the teacher. This became another focus in the research.

Finally, because of the large numbers of teachers who said they were using circle time, it was anticipated that there would be a variety of teachers to work with on this research. I was also interested in getting information from teachers who were not using the method. In PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008), only five per cent of teachers said they never used circle time. It was anticipated that it might be more difficult to identify teachers not using circle time, nonetheless this was seen as an opportunity to gather contrasting views on the method.

Because of the reported wide usage of circle time in Irish primary schools, it was anticipated that there would be a large audience of practitioners, policy makers, and other educationalists interested in the findings of this research. As a teacher educator, I had a vested interest in finding out more about the method in order to inform my work with student and practising teachers. The focus on the practice of teachers reflected my professional interest in teacher education. It is acknowledged that the study of circle time from children's and parents' perspective was also an area worthy of investigation. The overview of available research on circle time in Ireland and the UK (presented in Chapter Three) suggested that there was scope for further research on a number of fronts.

Epistemology

Researchers come to their task with particular world views, not least about how knowledge is created. This is made explicit so that readers' expectations can be informed by the researcher's position. Woods (2006: 2) suggested that quality in research could only be judged on the basis of "the particular epistemology you work within". McIntosh (2008: 35) posited that an epistemological stance included "what we think we know, and how we know it, including knowing what we don't know", while O' Donoghue (2007) suggested that how knowledge is accepted as valid was an important aspect of any discussion of epistemology. Based on my initial and continuing teacher education endeavours, I believe that knowledge involves active construction by the individual. Human relationships and contexts for learning impact on our ability to know and to generate knowledge. Because of our unique learning situations and dispositions, each of us will construct and use our knowledge in different ways, although there may also be shared knowledge. Research, whether quantitative or qualitative, can only give at best a partial view of any individual's reality. The life stories, roles and personalities of the researcher and the researched interact to provide one view of the reality under study, regardless of the approach taken. In qualitative research, the impact of the researcher is often acknowledged and allowed to inform the research in a deliberate, planned way. This is seen not as a flaw in the research but as an inherent aspect of it, that, if managed skilfully, can enhance the data being gathered. I believed that any knowledge generated through the research would depend on a co-creation between participants and researcher, and that the relationship would be crucial. The extent to which I connected with the experiences of teachers would be one determinant of the quality of the research.

I believed that the answers to the key questions would be illuminated best by engaging with teachers operating in classrooms where circle time was being used.

Getting close to the action in this way allowed me to gain insights into the thinking behind the practice in classrooms in order to interrogate that in a variety of ways. Eisner (2001:138) outlined the idea of “practical knowledge”, where the emphasis is on developing “insights we can work with”. This emphasis on practical application of knowledge was one that resonated deeply with me, and this was pursued throughout the research process.

O’Donoghue (2007) outlined what he called the ‘big theories’ in which to situate research endeavours – these were positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and postmodernism. Others added feminism to this list of “theoretical perspectives” (Crotty, in Anfara *et al.*, 2006: xxi). The difficulty for the new researcher is the swamp-like mire of paradigms, perspectives and theories that can ensnare the unwary (O’Donoghue, 2007). What is clear is that theories inform the research process at a number of levels. At the paradigmatic level, my epistemological stance placed me in the interpretivist ‘big theory’ as outlined in O’Donoghue’s (2007) work. Perspectives and actions are important in the interpretivist paradigm, according to O’Donoghue (2007). Several perspectives were at play in the research – my own and the research participants with whom I engaged. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises the creation of knowledge through “social interaction” (O’Donoghue, 2007: 10). The emphasis on social construction of knowledge sat easily with me, as did the idea of knowledge constructed by “mutual negotiation” and “specific to the situation being investigated.” (O’Donoghue, 2007: 10). It echoed my adoption of Vygotsky’s constructivist learning theory in the conceptual framework (Chapter Two) and underpinned a desire to co-construct with teachers (in particular) knowledge that would build on their and my prior learning to move forward. This was the ‘big theory’ informing the current research.

Feminist theory played a lesser role in my paradigmatic choices, however, I was aware that underlying the appeal of the qualitative research approach was a feminine view of the world, which valued 'soft' over 'hard' facts, human research relationships over mechanistic analyses, and the potential of the 'researcher as person' in knowledge creation.

Research Design

One way of proceeding is to view the initial stage in the research process as consisting of two major steps. The first step has its origins in an observation one makes....What may quickly follow is some curiosity, perplexity, confusion or doubt on one's part. Thisin turn, prompts one to want to know something. The result is that one begins to engage in research.

(O'Donoghue, 2007: 3)

I had a clear idea of the questions I wanted to pose in order to create new insights about circle time in the Irish context, based on the conceptual framework and the literature review. In order to proceed, the research approach had to be chosen with a view to yielding the kind of data to answer those questions.

It became evident that competing personal and professional interests and preferences would have to be balanced with practical constraints, particularly in relation to issues of accessibility and timescale. The thinking behind the choices made is described in the following paragraphs.

For and Against Quantitative Inquiry in this Research

A quantitative inquiry (PCR 2, NCCA, 2008), involving 200 schools and 1,369 respondents, had resulted in information about the prevalence of use of circle time in the context of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) as reported by primary teachers. What was known was that four out of five teachers claimed that they used it either frequently or sometimes. It could be argued that further information could (or should) be garnered

from a large scale randomised study in relation to, for example, teacher aims in using the method, frequency of use, perceived benefits - questions that were not asked in the NCCA (2008) survey. This would have had the advantage of delivering a broad picture of its use in primary schools, across a number of different dimensions – information that was not available in the system at the time of the research.

Another advantage of conducting a large-scale study through, for example, questionnaire, was the reduced risk of ethical issues arising in the research. Ethical considerations are important in any research, particularly with what are perceived to be vulnerable groups. Schools, teachers and researchers have become sensitised to the ethics of the work they conduct. Quantitative approaches were likely to pose low risk to the participants, particularly if instruments such as questionnaires were used. However, apart from the practical difficulty of finding a randomised large group of teachers who were using the method (not insurmountable one might assume), it was not apparent how this would illuminate the focus of this research as described earlier.

A quantitative approach to research de-emphasises the researcher as ‘person’ by advocating a neutral researcher stance where the hand and/or influence of the researcher becomes to a large extent invisible in the gathering and reporting of data. The advantage this would have would be the lessening of the potential for my teacher education role to influence the findings in any significant way. However, many authors have questioned the idea that quantitative inquiry can deliver such objective knowledge and have suggested that the human factor is just “more hidden” in quantitative research (Diefenbach, 2008: 876).

Further large-scale questionnaire or interview research might leave us still wondering if practice in classrooms actually mirrored accurately teachers’ stated intentions and practices (Sugrue, 2004). Without any corroborating evidence of

classroom practice the picture would be incomplete at best or inaccurate at worst. And, as already mentioned, the potential for predictability of teacher answers was a possibility, given my experience of widespread use of the Mosley (1993; 1996; 1998) literature in schools.

In terms of informing educationalists (including teacher educators) about what was happening in circle time sessions in the classrooms, I believed that a large scale study might not be in the best interests of the education system at the time. What was envisaged was an illumination of practice rather than a numerical account of teachers' reasoning and rationale for use of the circle time method.

For and Against Qualitative Inquiry

The qualitative approach opened up the possibility of getting much closer to the actual practice than might be possible in a quantitative inquiry. This would allow me to focus on a small number of 'teachers in practice' in some depth, identifying what their priorities and plans were for circle time, observing their practice in the classroom, and engaging with them in an exploration of the data.

The potential benefits of this were manifold. As a teacher educator, the opportunity to engage with practice firsthand would inform future work with student and practising teachers. The effects of the learning would be immediately felt at the chalkface of teacher education. Experience suggested that teachers, whether practising or student, favoured information that was grounded in practice, over that which was theoretical or aspirational. A close examination of practice would allow the voices of children and teachers to be carried beyond the classroom, adding authenticity to the findings and subsequent dissemination.

The potential for a spirit of mutual inquiry, where the teacher/practitioner and the researcher/teacher educator cooperated to gain new insights into practice, was

considered to be higher where the researcher/practitioner relationship was at close range. The management of the research relationship between researcher and teachers would be significant in this regard.

From a distance it appeared that it might be easier to find this small number of teachers who were using circle time. However, the possibility that it might prove more difficult to identify teachers who would allow me to observe in their classrooms during a circle time, particularly in light of my role as teacher educator, was also considered.

In addition, there were ethical issues involved in getting close to the action in classrooms, which were significant in this research, given the nature of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) and circle time itself. Careful consideration was required of issues such as consent, researcher role 'in the field', data analysis and reporting to ensure that that the level of risk to all participants (teachers, schools and children) was minimal.

Earlier, the possibility of establishing broad knowledge about the use of circle time was acknowledged as a strength in the quantitative approach to research. In many qualitative studies involving small sample size it is not possible to make broad statements or generalizations, although a "petite generalization" may be possible (Stake, 1995: 7). Hargreaves 1993 (in O' Donoghue, 2007: 67) identified these as a "potential source of correction to macro theories, which frequently over-simplify, underestimate or ignore the complexity of the detailed operation of relevant factors in actual social settings". O'Donoghue (2007: 66) pointed out that a theory could have "reader or user generalisability", if it provided the reader with useful insights into practice which might resonate with their own experience. These points were an argument for valuing what could be learned in qualitative research. They suggested that what was gained in terms of insights into real practice in a qualitative study might be of more value to practitioners than broad sweeps of knowledge garnered from quantitative research.

The thorny problem of the researcher as ‘person’ is acknowledged in qualitative research – indeed in some instances this is deliberately exploited (as in some narrative inquiry practices). Given my role as teacher educator over a number of years, and prior involvement in the promotion of circle time, it was possible that this profile could influence the inquiry if conducted at close range with teachers, some of whom could potentially have been taught by the researcher. There was also a danger that my positive predisposition to circle time could colour perceptions of the classroom practice of teachers.

A further disadvantage of conducting research at close quarters was outlined by Epstein (in Walford, 1998: 38). She highlighted the effect of researchers in classrooms where “the inescapable consequence of the presence of an observing outsider is that the practices and relationships ...will be changed however subtly.” It was difficult to see how this effect could be avoided if working closely with teachers and children in classrooms. Minimisation of this effect was a consideration.

For and Against Mixed Methods Inquiry

A mixed method inquiry would have the potential to deliver broad information from a potentially large group of teachers about various aspects of circle time, where it was acknowledged there were information deficits, while an in-depth qualitative study of classroom practice would allow for interplay between particular and broad findings.

Time constraints were a potent argument for an either/or approach, given the timescale involved in the research project, and the difficulty of completing both quantitative and qualitative approaches to a high standard within the time allowed. There was a need for prioritisation of one type of information over another for practical reasons, coupled with the desirability of creating knowledge that would have the greatest potential to influence classroom practice in a positive way.

In addition, it should be recognised that, notwithstanding the importance of the research questions in influencing research design, the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher may lead him or her towards one research paradigm or approach over another. I have always been drawn towards people more than tools, and towards knowledge grounded in practice rather than hypothesis. From this standpoint, it appeared that the qualitative approach held most potential for a high quality research endeavour for me. I adopted a research design firmly rooted in the qualitative approach, in the knowledge that further research could be undertaken at a later time using a different approach.

The idea of a case study was explored in the initial stages, and the literature was examined to see if the research design fitted the criteria for a case study approach.

Case study is described as a “qualitative research approach ...to constructivist inquiry” in Anthony and Jack (2009: 1171-2). VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007: 2) identified more than 25 different definitions of case study in their work and concluded that it was neither a method, methodology or research design, although this would no doubt be challenged by Anthony *et al.* (2009: 1171) who described it as “an exclusive methodology” in their review of it. They defined it as:

...a research methodology grounded in an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, which guides an empirical inquiry of contemporary phenomena within inseparable real-life contexts.

(Anthony *et al.*, 2009: 1172)

This differed from VanWynsberghe *et al.*'s (2007) definition in some key respects, where they saw case study as:

...a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process etc.)

(VanWynsberghe *et al.*, 2007: 2)

In their prototype view of case study, which they suggested offered a “defensible, rather than a definitive, take on case study” (VanWynsberghe *et al.*, 2007: 4), they listed seven features which were examined for fit with the research to be undertaken. These are paraphrased as follows:

Small sample size allowing for detailed description.
Contextual detail to convey a ‘sense of being there’.
Natural settings where there is little researcher control over behaviour, organisation or events.
Boundedness in terms of for example space and time.
Working hypotheses and lessons learned, including openness to “serendipitous findings”.
Multiple data sources facilitating converging lines of inquiry and triangulation.
Extendability in terms of the reader’s experience.

(VanWynsberghe *et al.*, 2007: 4)

While a number of these features could arguably have fitted the research design, in terms of small sample size, natural settings, openness to serendipitous findings and multiple data sources, the contextual detail gathered in the research fell well short of the “thick description” envisaged by Stake (1995) and others in relation to case study research. The school, pupil and teacher data gathered related only to the practice of circle time, and the period in each classroom was of relatively short duration. However, the potential of the case study approach in relation to the practice of circle time holds promise in the future, as witnessed in Cunningham’s work (in Barton, 2006) in relation to the cultivation of historical empathy in students.

Methods

Methodology links the “paradigm-related questions and the methods” (O’Donoghue, 2007: 12) in a given research project, and can be viewed as a “strategy/plan of action, process or design” (O’ Donoghue, 2007: 57). In the research literature surveyed, methodology and methods are sometimes used interchangeably, with resulting confusion for the would-be researcher, a point that is well made in VanWynsberghe *et al.*’s (2007) work. In trying to identify a philosophical system, the paradigmatic choice was interpretivist as outlined earlier. The plan of action was to get as close to the action as possible. VanWynsberghe *et al.* (2007) advocated multiple data sources to allow findings to emerge that could be validated through triangulation. The tools chosen must also deliver enough descriptive material to vividly convey the phenomenon being studied. Three methods of data gathering are described which, it was hoped, answered these demands. These tools had the greatest potential to deliver answers to the key research questions.

Interview

A key data gathering tool was interviews with teachers who were using circle time regularly in their classrooms. Other key informants were also interviewed, details of whom are provided in a later section.

Franklin (in Gergen and Davis, 1997: 100-105) outlined different models of interviewing, which she characterised as “the information extraction”, “shared understanding” or “the discourse” models. She acknowledged herself that there was rarely a pure form of these models in her own work, which she typified as leaning towards the “shared understanding” mode while also drawing on the discursive mode. This blend, which I adopted, allowed me to explore the phenomenon to be studied as a cooperative enterprise. Use of pre-set questions (Appendix A) provided a focus but did

not preclude areas of interest emerging and being pursued with participants as and when these arose. Franklin (1997) also highlighted the difficulties in establishing an equal relationship with the interviewee which would allow for on-going interpretations to be tested by the interviewer, but which also might involve questioning by the interviewee. This aspiration was in keeping with my epistemological stance. All teacher participants who were using circle time were interviewed twice. This allowed me to test interpretations and information gathered in the first interview and by other means in a member checking exercise. This also allowed for the kind of “shared understanding” envisaged by Franklin (1997) to emerge.

Journal

Teachers using circle time were asked to keep a journal of their circle time sessions, noting aims, themes, activities and any notable pupil or teacher reactions (Appendix B). This format allowed for information to be gathered on the thinking behind the session planning, and any insights gained by the teacher in the course of the circle time session. It also facilitated an interrogation of my notes of the observed session against the teacher’s account of the same session. In this way it was hoped that a more accurate account of practices and processes could be gained. Teachers were asked to email their journal to me shortly after each observed session. Griffiee (2005: 36) stated that “the sooner an entry is made after the class – with no delays – the better.” While teachers were reminded on the same day as observation or the next via email to fill in journals, in some cases this did not happen. School closures during the research period also delayed completion and return of journals. This delayed completion was borne in mind when analysing data from this source.

Observation

I observed practice in five classrooms to gain insight into practices and processes, and to get insights for interrogating the interview and diary data of the observed teacher participants. Siegel (2005: 340) believed that observations were essential in exploring implementation in “real-life classrooms.” It was anticipated that teachers would have constructed their own views of what circle time was in their practice, and that multiple observations would allow insight into their interpretations. Three observations were arranged in each of the classrooms, ranging in duration from 30 minutes in junior classes to 50-60 minutes in the 6th classes. From an ethical viewpoint, observation was the most challenging aspect of the research process.

These three tools formed a triangular approach to the data gathering. Dargie (1998: 67) suggested that this combination was powerful as “the researcher gains valuable insight into the subject’s mind set and thought processes because they can be measured against the researcher’s own interpretation of events.” This approach also allowed for detailed description of the circle time sessions, as well as promotion of reliability, dependability and validity.

Selection of Participants

Teachers

I anticipated that there would be a large number of teachers to draw from based on the reported widespread use of the method. The difficulty of identifying teacher participants who were using circle time on a regular basis (here defined as at least 2-3 times per month) was a challenge. I was fortunate that my experience as a teacher educator for a lengthy period afforded opportunities to make contact with a number of principals and teachers who could be approached in this regard. At the outset principals received an information letter (Appendix C) to establish contact and provide

information on the research design. This was followed up by personal contact with the principal to see if any teachers were interested in getting further information. Teachers who expressed an initial interest were provided with additional information during a short meeting¹⁴. In some schools there were three teachers at the initial meeting, in others only one. Teachers who wished to find out more or proceed with the research were asked to contact me by email, after which they were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D). In all, eleven teachers were met individually or in groups.

The typical primary teacher in Ireland is:

...female (83%), teaches a single-grade class (60%), of approximately 24 children, infants to second (52%), in a mixed-gender (83%) English-medium school (92%).

(PCR 2, NCCA, 2008: 58)

If one were claiming representation of the primary teacher population this would suggest that at least four out of five research participants should be female, that a third should be teaching in a single grade classroom, that half should teach from infants to second, and that nearly all should be teaching in an English-medium school. I was anticipating that choices would have to be made from among those volunteering to be part of the research, and I decided that these would be guided by the teacher profile outlined. This proved overly optimistic, as I struggled to find teachers who were using the method and who were willing to allow me in to observe sessions. As time passed, it became clear that I would have to settle for a smaller number of participants than originally anticipated, and that there would not be a pool of willing participants from which to select. There was a range of school type and class level in the final list of participants, however it is acknowledged that this was not due to any strategic choices. Five teachers (one male, four female) signed up to participate in the research. While

¹⁴ This consisted of an oral presentation to a teacher or group of teachers where I outlined my proposal and answered any queries the teachers had.

they can all be described as unique individuals, they are not deemed to be untypical of teachers at primary level, nor are they presented as typical. Their practice is illuminatory and is not presented as representative or generalisable. More detail on them and the schools is outlined in Chapter Five: Findings.

Principals

Principals in the schools were interviewed to gain information on the level and type of support available (if any) for circle time in the participating schools and the rationale for this.

Teachers Not Using Circle Time

To provide a contrast to the teacher participants who were using circle time, it was envisaged that at least one teacher who did not use circle time in the same school would also be interviewed. This proved an even more difficult task than getting teacher participants who were using the method. Only three such teachers (from three schools) chose to be interviewed. It may be that teachers were reluctant to volunteer information in relation to what they were not doing. Nonetheless, the data gathered from the three teachers not using circle time was useful for purposes of contrast.

Other Perspectives

Ms. Jenny Mosley is a key author in the circle time literature. It was Jenny Mosley who first introduced circle time into Ireland in the early 1990s. She was interviewed prior to and after data gathering in the schools had been undertaken. Along with an in-depth study of her literature, the interview material provided interesting data on the historical development of circle time, and the evolution of the practice in Ireland from its original introduction.

The NCCA and the Inspectorate are key stakeholders in education provision in Ireland. Key individuals in both organisations were approached for interview. It was

hoped that this would provide data on how circle time was viewed at policy level. Arrangements were made at senior level in the NCCA to facilitate an interview with an official who had been involved in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008). This provided valuable insights into some aspects of that curriculum review. The Inspectorate declined to be interviewed at all, giving as its reason a policy of non-participation in research other than its own (Appendix E). This left one to surmise official policy in relation to circle time from curriculum documentation which is not helpful in this regard.

Piloting Process

Prior to the main data gathering phase, pilot interviews were held with a small sample of teachers and principals. In one instance, a group interview with three teachers took place. These pilot interviews led to a clearer focus in the interview questions in the main research. A number of observation sessions were also undertaken in the pilot phase. These prompted changes in recording techniques and child identification procedures allowing for better data analysis. A journal sample was provided to these teachers for piloting and the feedback received was used to make minor modifications to it.

Because of the unique nature of the author and key agency interviews, they were not undertaken in the pilot phase. However, they were conducted after the pilot teacher interviews which allowed me to hone my interview skills.

Data Collection

Three main types of data were collected during the piloting and main research activity. All teacher interview data were recorded and transcribed for each interview held. Teachers were provided with a generic template for the journal entries (Appendix B). As these were completed, they were sent electronically by the teachers to me. Each

teacher was observed three times and digital sound recordings made of the sessions. I also made notes manually during these sessions. The teachers were interviewed prior to the first observation (with one exception) and a final interview was conducted after all observations had been completed, where I tested some of my interpretations of the data. Teachers were given transcripts of their first interview prior to the final interview and invited to amend if they chose – none of the teachers asked for any changes.

Principal interviews were conducted either before or during the observations in their schools. All principals in the schools participated, and these were transcribed. In addition, one teacher not using circle time from three of the schools was interviewed. These were also transcribed.

Interviews were conducted with Ms. Jenny Mosley before and after the class observations, both of which were transcribed. A transcript of the initial interview was sent to the author prior to meeting for the second interview. At the second interview, Ms. Mosley asked for any quotations used to be sent to her for approval in advance of submission. I complied with this request and received approval.

Finally, an official from the NCCA who had been involved with PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) was interviewed. This was transcribed and details of quotes used were submitted for approval to the individual and the NCCA.

Data collection took place in schools between November 2010 and March 2011. This covered a period of school closure due to adverse weather conditions which affected the timing of the observations. I am grateful to the teachers who remained committed to the research process in spite of the considerable pressure they were under to catch up on lost teaching and learning during this period.

Data Analysis

Anfara *et al.* (2006) outlined the use of theory and theoretical frameworks at various stages in the life of a research project. Quoting Strauss (1995), they suggested that theory “provides a model or map of why the world is the way it is” (Anfara *et al.*, 2006: xiv). Various viewpoints are outlined as to when a theoretical lens is useful in research, with some contributors suggesting that it should inform all stages of the process, while others see its use more in the analytical stages.

The main goal of the data analysis was to explain “the teacher’s conceptualization and enactment” of circle time (Siegel, 2005: 341). Each transcript was examined on a number of occasions and sentences and paragraphs were categorised using the research questions as the frame. Cunningham (in Barton, 2006: 198) endorsed this move when she stated that “[c]oding had to be relevant to the research questions, and named precisely to capture the essence of their content...”. The main themes examined were the aims and focus of circle time; the format/process employed in circle times; the perceived benefits of the method; and challenges arising from the method. Sub-headings were created in some of these categories to cater for nuance and subtlety. For example, under *Format/Process*, there were sub-categories for the rules in the circle, teacher role, and particular strategies or techniques employed. In a similar manner, *Challenges* was divided into two categories - those that arose from the method itself, and ways of coping with challenges. Another category related to background information about the school, class and teacher. Teachers were asked about any parental feedback and awareness of the method. This was coded under *Parents/Circle Time*. Teachers were also asked about assessment in relation to circle time. This became another category in the coding process. The data from interviews and journals were inputted into MaxQDA (2010) for

ease of retrieval and comparison across data sets¹⁵. They were then coded using the headings outlined. The ease of retrieval allowed for comparison of data from individual teachers and across the teacher and other data sets. The following table presents the codes and sub-codes used:

CODES	SUB-CODES
Background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience • Resources • Evolution of practice • Type of school
Aims of circle time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus • Rules • Teacher Role
Format/process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Techniques (self-disclosure, fictional lens) • Follow up
Benefits of circle time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For children • For teachers
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moments of challenge • Coping strategies
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative • Summative
Parent views of circle time	
Miscellaneous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptions of circle time • Feedback on research process

Table 3: Overview of Coding System (MaxQDA 2010)

I listened to the recordings of each observation on several occasions, made extensive notes and extracted segments which were used to illustrate key themes and sub-themes.

The data analysis phase of the research engendered some anxiety on my part, not only in terms of coding and analysis but in the realisation that other data could have been gathered (for example in relation to philosophical dispositions of the teachers involved). I was tempted to re-enter the field at times but resisted on the basis that I did not want to test the goodwill of the teachers involved, nor to appear disorganised. Delamont (1992) devoted a chapter to the issue of leaving the field from a number of

¹⁵ Further information on this data package can be obtained from maxqda.com.

often amusing perspectives. She suggested that researchers “have to stay in the field long enough to share certain aspects of it with the participants, but not too long” (Delamont, 1992: 142). I was aware that other data could have been gathered – this became a limitation in the research which is dealt with in a later section.

Validity

There are two main areas of validity to be explored in a research project – internal and external. According to Merriam (1986), (quoted in O’ Donoghue, 2007: 196), “[i]nternal validity deals with the question of how the findings of a study capture reality”. Given the potential for multiple realities to emerge in a qualitative study such as the one undertaken, and the potential impact of the researcher in the data collection and analysis, it is a significant task to convince the reader that the findings are credible. The final interview with teachers was used to test tentative interpretations with the participants and check initial understandings, often referred to as member checking. Peer review of some of the research was possible as I am employed in an academic institution in which staff routinely support one another in similar projects – this was undertaken at key stages in the research process. The data gathered must be presented truthfully and with sufficient detail provided to allow for internal validity judgements. This was a guiding principle in presentation of the data throughout this thesis.

External validity refers to applicability of the findings to other similar settings to those highlighted in the research project – which in this instance is classrooms where circle time is conducted regularly. Because of the small number of teacher participants involved, no claims are made regarding wider applicability of findings. However, it may be that readers in primary schools will be able to relate what is described to their own situations, thus providing “reader generalisability” (O’ Donoghue, 2007: 67).

Rather than focus on reliability, which refers to the ability to replicate findings in other similar settings, dependability is a more useful concept in interpretivist research (O' Donoghue, 2007). This requires the reader to agree with the research findings. The reader must have sufficient access to the data in order to make that judgement. I believe that building trust with the reader is a crucial aspect of dependability. I provide significant data, including direct quotes, segments of journals and observations with this in mind.

In this research project, data were stored both in written and electronic form. The data will be available for audit for one year after the date of submission of the thesis, after which time it will be destroyed in line with the research policy of my work institution.

Locke and Riley (2009) suggested that the researcher should aspire to be an educational connoisseur. This was no easy task, as they outlined, but was helped by “a depth of experience” and an “ability to identify significances in a range of classroom practices” (Locke *et al.*, 2009: 490). I had significant experience in teacher education which helped me to understand and filter what was happening in the classroom setting. However, I was also aware that this familiarity could be a double-edged sword in terms of assumptions. Cunningham (in Barton 2006: 188) talked about approaching her research with the “unhabituated eyes” of the outsider. I was conscious of the need to become such an observer in my research in schools.

Ethical Concerns

The decision to embark on a qualitative research journey raised ethical issues that needed to be addressed early in the process. As already indicated, teachers were the main source of data in this research. Each teacher received an information letter outlining the purpose of the research, what was involved, and their right to withdraw at

any stage. A sample letter is provided in Appendix F. Teachers indicated informed consent by signing a form prior to the first interview.

Consideration was given to the dual role of teacher educator and researcher in this research. Two of the teacher participants had been taught by me in their teacher education programme. The potential for role ambiguity was an issue, as was a possible expectation of researcher expertise. Bulpitt and Martin (2010: 10) suggested that while “skills, knowledge and expertise learnt in one identity” can allow for “better practice of another”, they believed that this may give rise to ethical issues. They concluded that the researcher and researched must be clear about the purpose of the research, which in this case focused on the practice of circle time and not on education of the teacher participants. The participant as helper and the researcher as the helped was underlined at the outset of the research (Bulpitt *et al.*, 2010), and was in keeping with social constructivism where there is engagement to scaffold learning.

As the observations involved children, their parents were sent a letter outlining what was envisaged during the observations. In *Ethics for Researchers* (Pauwels, 2007: 18), researchers were exhorted to illustrate “minimum risk and minimum burden” for children, particularly where they are unlikely to benefit directly from the research. This was clearly outlined in the letter to parents (Appendix G).

Many schools now have a policy of opting out (as opposed to opting in) when seeking participation of pupils. This means that unless the parent requests that the child be withdrawn, the assumption is made that consent to participate has been given. In this regard, Morrow (2008) highlighted the awkwardness for the researcher when school policy or practice was in conflict with university ethical guidelines. She argued for a “common-sense viewpoint”, and pointed out that it was the “consent of the children that [wa]s crucial for any research” (Morrow, 2008: 54). However, what is common sense to

one individual may not appear so for another. Furthermore, lack of response from a parent in relation to consent might be an indicator that the parent never received the information letter, particularly where the letter has been distributed through the pupils. While the school policy in these matters was acknowledged, I proposed significant modifications which were accepted in four of the participating classrooms¹⁶. Each teacher was asked to ensure that there was a signed consent form from each parent for every child who was to take part in the observed sessions. The teachers complied in every school, even where this was not part of their policy. Only one child in the five classes involved withdrew from the research on the basis of a lack of parental permission. The principal agreed to supervise this child during the circle time sessions and was of the opinion that the child was quite happy with the arrangement.

I was aware that many schools did not elicit pupil consent when undertaking research activities, particularly where parental consent had already been received. This could be taken as an indication that the adults involved do not see the child as capable of making decisions of this type. Bell (2008) suggests that many research ethics guidelines do not adequately reflect developments in the rights of the child, and that “human rights principles can be relied upon to inform research ethical dilemmas in child research” (Bell, 2008: 9). Even though the focus of the research was not primarily the children in the class, the fact that children were observed was of ethical significance. This was even more pertinent because of the focus of the observation (a circle time session), where children might be expected to be more open about personal issues. The SPHE Curriculum (1999) promotes the idea of children taking responsibility for their decisions and choices. Their inclusion in decision-making (for example, in the appointment of an Irish children’s ombudsman) is an example of how this capacity has

¹⁶ In the case of one school, there was provision already for pupil consent to be sought. Additionally, it was practice in this school to track parental consents so that an individual consent form was recorded for each child.

been exercised on a national level. I wanted to allow children to exercise choice around involvement in the research, regardless of the school policy in individual schools.

Each class was visited prior to the first observation. The nature of the research was outlined in child-friendly, age-appropriate language, and children were invited to ask questions about the research and their role in it - this could be described as “shallow cover” (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988: 19). It was made clear to the children that they could opt out if they wished. One child (in Third Class) wanted to know what he would be doing if he chose to opt out – it was made clear that no one would have to do extra school work if they chose that option. Another child (in Senior Infants) seemed more interested in the fact that I shared a name with her aunt than any other aspect of the research. Children were asked to sign a simple consent form which they filled out after I had left and returned to their teacher (see Appendix H). I checked regularly with all participants to see if they were willing to continue. No participant withdrew from the research during the process.

Confidentiality was maintained at all times during the research process. The raw data were seen only by me, and in writing up the findings, pseudonyms were used. Any contextual and personal data supplied were written in a way that minimised the risk of identification of teachers, children, or their schools.

Much has been written about the role of the researcher in observations in the field. I wanted to be unobtrusive in order to allow the teachers and pupils to proceed as close to normal practice as was possible in the circumstances. Stake’s advice to be “as interesting as wallpaper” appealed, along with his exhortation to “leave the site having made no one less able to carry out their responsibilities” (Stake, 1995: 59-60). However, I was aware that my presence could have influenced proceedings – it would be unlikely that the presence of another adult, however unobtrusive, would not have some impact.

To assess this, each teacher participating in the observations was asked to evaluate this possibility in the final interview. They were all of the opinion that my presence had not changed any aspect of their practice or the children's pattern of responses. Most of them suggested that in the present-day classroom, children were well used to having other adults around during instruction. In the writing up of the findings the possibility of researcher influence on the classroom proceedings was examined and is commented on in Chapter Five: Findings. What is suggested here is that the influence was at a minimal level and not enough to cast doubt on the findings.

In my teacher education role, I am aware of the obligations of education and other frontline professionals in relation to child safety and protection issues. I decided that in the unlikely event of becoming aware of any threat to a child's safety, this would be discussed with the class teacher and, if necessary, the designated liaison person (DLP) in the school. Morrow (2008: 54) suggested that because researchers cannot always anticipate the ethical dilemmas that will arise, research ethics should be seen as "situational and responsive". This was borne in mind throughout the research, and a rights-based approach informed decisions with regard to all participants, particularly child participants (Bell, 2008).

I believed there was an ethical question mark inherent in the research design which related to the use of the work of teachers (and their pupils) in order to advance my researcher goals. While it was probable that teachers had varying reasons for engaging in the research, I acknowledged their contribution at all times, and indicated my willingness to return to the schools to provide any assistance I could relating to the SPHE Curriculum (1999) in the future. It is hoped that the findings of the research will be disseminated to the teachers, schools and other stakeholders in the education field,

including policy-makers and teacher educators, which ultimately may benefit the children who will be participants in circle times in the future.

Limitations of the Research

Mention has been made previously about some of the limitations of the present research. In the first instance, the decision to undertake a qualitative study precluded the gathering of extensive data on the practice of circle time. I was aware that for many, this would be considered a limitation in the research which is acknowledged. The length of time in the field was short, for practical reasons. While the data gathered were illuminating in many respects, I was aware that much more data could have been gathered over a longer period of time, with larger numbers of teachers which might have provided more in-depth data for analysis. Depth with a small number of teachers was pursued over breadth involving larger numbers. Also, it has already been acknowledged that more data could have been garnered from the small number of participants in the research. The intense focus on the practice of circle time obscured other data that might have been interesting and illuminating, for example in relation to teachers' philosophical stance on education.

The research tools had potential to provide for a triangulation of data, however the delay by some teachers in filling out the journals was a concern. In the final interview, the observed teachers were asked how the research design could be improved, and I specifically sought information on the use of the journal. Two teachers felt they worked well, while two more suggested that I should have been more assertive about demanding them on time. One teacher suggested that a short meeting after the observed session would have been a more effective way of gathering the same information. While practical considerations of work commitments and the necessity of organising class

supervision were barriers to this approach, I believe that this option, if it were feasible, would be preferable to the journal employed in the present research.

If every piece of research that was conducted was perfect, there would be little work for researchers. There is some sense of satisfaction in having gained some important insights into the practice of circle time. This is significant, given the prevalence of the method in Irish primary schools and the scant research available in relation to the practice. As a familiar Irish political slogan suggested, there is “more to be done” in this field of research, and I have been energised by the research conducted and its insights about circle time, and am determined to contribute more in the future.

Summary and Conclusion

The challenge was to create a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of circle time in some Irish primary schools. The main question related to finding out what was actually happening in circle times. Key questions around aims, benefits, processes, roles and challenges were identified as worthy of investigation, particularly in view of the age and abilities of the child participants and emerging challenges to the practice. While several research options were examined, the choice of a qualitative research approach was the best way forward in advancing my purpose at this time. Key informants were the teachers who were using the method in their classrooms. Observation of practice was essential to establish how teachers interpreted circle time as a method, while interviews and journals allowed for exploration of the meanings behind the practice. Interviews were also conducted with principals, teachers not using circle time, a leading author in the field, and a former education officer in NCCA.

The ethical stance adopted was informed by a rights-based approach to the conduct of the research. In some schools, this involved a deviation from school policy in relation to pupil and parental consent which was negotiated and accommodated. The intention

was to illuminate practice in order to inform debate on the legitimacy of circle time in the school context. I was aware that there were mounting challenges to the method and the broader SPHE Curriculum (1999) from psychological, educational and economic perspectives. The timeliness of the research added to my motivation and sense of purpose. The data collection experience was rewarding, challenging and provided much food for thought as will be seen in the subsequent chapters. The limitations of the current research have been acknowledged and include a recognition that the participants may not be representative, that the research findings are not generalizable, and that there is a need for further data to be gathered. Notwithstanding these limitations, the research undertaken was important in shining a light on the practice of circle time in some Irish primary school classrooms. More can be done in the future. The next chapter outlines the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

It is Friday afternoon. I wait in the corridor for the children and teacher to come in from their lunch break. In the distance, the sounds of the children's play are gradually subdued as the bell signals the return to class. Neasa's children file by in an orderly but not regimented fashion. "Hi, Bernie" is the greeting from the more outgoing ones, smiles of recognition from some of the others. As we enter the class, I note the chairs are already laid out in a circle, and after stowing their lunch boxes, the children take their places quickly and enthusiastically for circle time, and in no discernible order. I slip into a seat beside the sinks and try to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. There's an air of anticipation and energy in the room.

Introduction

The research set out to find what was happening in circle time, identified as a widespread method in use in Irish primary school classrooms¹⁷. The key research informants were the classroom teachers who were using circle time on a regular basis. In this research, 'regularly' was defined as at least twice or more a month. Some teachers in the study were conducting weekly circle time sessions.

The data gathered are outlined under the headings that directly related to the research questions. These included key questions relating to the teachers' aims in using circle time, and how these linked to the themes and foci chosen by teachers for circle time. Another key question sought to establish the format and processes employed by teachers in pursuit of their stated aims. Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of using circle time with their classes are also outlined, as are the challenges faced by teachers in

¹⁷ It should be noted that circle time (as opposed to circle work) is the term all of the participants used throughout the research. It could be argued that this is because I used it in outlining my research and in my research documentation. However, there is evidence to suggest that this is the preferred term for teachers (as outlined in Chapter Three).

using circle time. While the data are presented here in discrete sections, this is done only as an organising mechanism. It is recognised that some data could fit under a number of headings, and that the lines between the concepts and themes presented are often indistinct. Data codes and sub-codes were presented and discussed in Chapter Four.

The data from the principal interviews is presented under the same headings, while data from the teachers not using circle time is presented in a separate section.

Other interviewees included a leading author on circle time (Ms. Jenny Mosley), whose work is widely available in Irish primary schools. Two interviews were conducted with the author, one before and one after the school-based fieldwork. This data provided some reference points for the practice of circle time as evidenced in the observed circle times.

Finally, a former education officer was interviewed who was involved in the writing of PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008). The relevant data from this interview have already been outlined in Chapter Three.

In summary, the data should be viewed as a series of concentric circles, with the teachers at the core of the practice of circle time, and other informants placed in ever-widening circles as they are situated in relation to classroom practice (Chapter One: Diagram 1). In outlining the findings, it is hoped to do justice to the rich and varied data that were gathered throughout the research journey. The findings are not presented as representative of the large number of teachers using circle time, rather they are intended to give insights into the practice of some teachers.

In advance of outlining the findings, a short profile is given of each teacher and school. Pseudonyms have been used throughout for the teachers, and also when children

are named. Context details are provided in a way that helps the reader to identify the kinds of schools and areas in which the teacher is located while preserving anonymity. For ease of identification for the reader, each principal is denoted by the first letter of the observed teacher's name (for example, Neasa's principal is Principal N). In a similar manner, teachers not using circle time are denoted by names with the same first letter as the other participants in the school.

To avoid repetition, the quotes used are representative of the teachers' and principals' responses rather than an exhaustive presentation. Where views pertain to only one or two respondents, this is noted in the following sections by saying "one" or "a few teachers"; "most" refers to three or four teachers; "all" means that the findings pertain to all five teachers or principals.

Teacher Profile One: Neasa

Neasa is in her second year of teaching in a rural seaside village which has seen significant growth in the last ten years, mainly from Dublin families moving into the area. The school has 15 teachers, five teachers in learning support and resource roles, and one home school liaison teacher. It is a mixed primary school (catering for boys and girls), and according to the principal, it should be a disadvantaged (DEIS) school because of the profile of the pupils, however it has not yet been designated as such.

Neasa taught some of the children she has now in her previous year's teaching. She is in 6th class, with 11 boys and 13 girls.

Neasa has been using circle time since she was in college. Her initial interest was prompted during her teacher education degree course, particularly in curriculum courses for SPHE and Drama. As she didn't see any teachers using circle time while on teaching practice, this is her main source of information about circle time.

She used circle time last year and has continued it with her present class this year. There are two forms of circle time used by Neasa on a regular basis. What she describes as the “in-depth circle time” (Neasa, interview 1) usually takes place in the classroom every Friday afternoon for about 30-45 minutes, with children sitting in chairs. At other times, children create a circle to do a quick review of their learning in a particular subject (history, for example):

I might say at the end of a history lesson, right, quickly, circle time, let’s just for five minutes, let’s run through it ...but for the actual in-depth circle time on Friday...

(Neasa, interview 1)

When planning her circle times, the main programme that she uses is *Walk Tall* (1999), a substance misuse prevention education programme used by teachers in implementing the SPHE Curriculum (1999). She also mentions the *Stay Safe* (1998) programme as a resource she uses from time to time, which deals with personal safety. However, some weeks she identifies a particular issue that she wants to address in the circle, and looks for a suitable story or DVD to use. In one observed session she used little scenarios from the *Walk Tall* (1999) programme, while in another she made up some herself. She says that she is not familiar with the work of Mosley. She suggests that her circle times have become more organised since she started using the method - children are prompted in advance to bring the resources they need into the circle such as pencils or a book to lean on.

Neasa’s principal has been a principal for 33 years, and has been principal in his present school for eight of those. He has no experience of using circle time formally, but says he often sat with the children in his last teaching principal post “for a chat” (Principal N, in interview). He thinks that most of the teachers are using circle time in the school, which may explain why it was not possible to interview a teacher not using

circle time in this school. He believes that “for something like circle time”, he would leave it up to the staff to decide whether they wanted to use it or not. While he thinks it’s a good idea for the shyer children, he wouldn’t want it “100 per cent of the time”.

Teacher Profile Two: Tomás

Tomás has been teaching for eleven years in the same school, which he describes as a middle class boys’ school in Dublin. There are 18 class teachers, two special language teachers, three resource teachers and one each of learning support for English and Maths. Tomás is teaching Third Class and has twenty-seven boys. His teacher education degree was completed in a Dublin college of education, where he first heard of circle time. He has used it most years since then, “pretty much on an on-going basis” (Tomás, interview 1). He describes a booklet on circle time as his “bible” for his initial use of circle time (*Circle Time Booklet* compiled by the Making Belfast Work Discipline in School Team and Holy Cross Boy’s Primary School).

Tomás is familiar with the work of Mosley, and is currently using *Step by Step Guide To Circle Time for SEAL* (Mosley, 2006), however he wouldn’t follow this “religiously”, but dips into it from time to time. He has also accessed the Mosley website (www.circle-time.co.uk) from time to time. Like Neasa, Tomás uses circle time for a variety of reasons:

I use my circle time as a teaching tool, or I use it as a tool for whatever it is I’m using it for, whether it be to sort out a dilemma, to learn something, or to show them something, to talk about something, to listen to each other...

(Tomás, wrap up interview)

Tomás was also involved some time ago in a group for teachers wishing to promote philosophy with children. While this group has long since disbanded, Tomás believes their methods were similar to those employed in circle time, in format if not in intent.

This may explain the variety evident in the observed sessions, where the focus could be on tackling a current issue, or listening to music and poetry to stimulate children's imaginations, or doing a quiz on work done earlier in the morning. Tomás has done circle time in classes of thirty-five, but he is fortunate this year to have a colleague in resource teaching who takes half the class while he conducts circle time with the other half. While this has many obvious advantages, it can add to pressure to make the circle an attractive place to be:

I'd be very conscious, not that they've said it, but they'd know that when half the group are here, the other half are in the hall, and that they're doing something perhaps, be it dance, or they're having a run around or whatever, so you know, until you get them all on to something that they're all kind of really interested in...

(Tomás, wrap up interview)

In terms of how his practice has evolved, Tomás has used a suggestion box for children to put in ideas of what they would like to talk about in circle time. This he felt was particularly successful in his first year of teaching:

I literally could not get through the suggestions that would go in to the box from one end of the year to the next...if there was something that I thought, an issue over bullying, an issue that a child wasn't happy with or whatever, then I would rig it in such a way that we would talk about that the following week...

(Tomás, interview 1)

In the current academic year he finds that his circle times are much more "teacher-driven" because of a dynamic in the class where there is "absolutely no gel with them at all, and...no loyalties..." (Tomás, interview 1). He is hoping as the year progresses that this will change and that he can begin to devolve responsibility to the children in relation to the topics for circle times through the suggestion box.

Tomás's principal has been in the school for sixteen years, and principal for the last seven years. He says he has never used circle time himself, but is familiar with some of

the features of it, like the speaking object. He thinks there are very few teachers using circle time in the school (“quite a low percentage”). He wonders if this is related to behaviour: “the children here are actually very well-behaved...we don’t have a problem generally with discipline” (Principal T, interview). This suggests that Principal T locates the practice of circle time in a problem-solving arena where it might be used for dealing with discipline issues. He also wonders about the skills and training needed to conduct effective circle times: “I would have thought you’d need some kind of training at least, to observe in action, rather than just trying to instigate it yourself off your own bat...” (Principal T, interview).

Teacher Profile Three: Sally

Sally is in her fourth year of teaching in a multi-denomenational school in Dublin. There are eight class teachers and two learning support/resource teachers. Sally is teaching Senior Infants this year, and had the same class in Junior Infants. There are 13 boys and 13 girls in her class. She has taught more senior classes previously. She first came across circle time in college, in lectures given by me, but also in other areas: “...discussed even in different lectures other than SPHE, in drama and that kind of thing” (Sally, interview one).

Sally also saw it used by teachers on her college teaching practices, and has read some of the literature by Mosley. She refers to a book called *Circle Time for the Very Young* (Collins, 2007) as a resource. Sally also mentions other features of the Mosley Model in her interviews. She has established ‘golden rules’ in her classroom based on the Model, and has books that explain to the children what each rule is about. Recently, a drama course for adults that she undertook has convinced her of the value of warm up or ice-breaking games. She uses these in her circle times to create a relaxed, fun atmosphere. Sally’s circle times are typically conducted with children sitting on the

floor at the top of the classroom. She uses games, story and rounds to engage children in the topics. Sometimes there is preparatory work done outside the circle, for example a story or work on the interactive white board, which primes the children for the work in the circle.

Sally says her practice has evolved into a more structured circle time session with a “beginning, middle and end” (Sally, interview one) and she has become more conscious recently of the need to make the circle relaxed and create energy through games.

Sally’s principal (Principal S) has been principal in the school for 27 years. She is familiar with the circle time method, and the work of Mosley. She thinks over half of the teachers are using circle time, and feels that “every class in the school at some stage has sat in the circle, had to listen to each other, had to take turns speaking,” but doubts if anyone is “doing circle time exactly as Jenny Mosley laid it out” (Principal S, interview). Like Principal N, Principal S is not in favour of “prescribing that for every teacher in the school” and is clear that it might not suit every class in the school: “[w]e would have certain classes, it would be a disaster with, because it’s not what they need at that particular time” (Principal S, interview). Principal S thinks circle time grew in the school through teachers coming out of college, or maybe an in-service course:

...when a teacher finds something works well for them they tend to tell other teachers. They try it and see if it works – if it does they keep going, if it doesn’t they don’t.

(Principal S, interview)

Mosley also attributed the use of circle time in Ireland to teacher networking: “I think in teaching it’s not top down initiatives, it’s word of mouth initiatives that make things work” (Mosley, interview one).

Teacher Profile Four: Annette

At the time of the research, Annette has been teaching for nearly 30 years. This has been mainly in Dublin schools. She has been teaching in her current school in south Dublin for the past 13 years, and also taught there for five years in the early 1980s. In the current academic year Annette has a mixed group of 27 boys and girls in Sixth Class (16 girls and 11 boys). She describes the school as being in a middle class area, and says the typical parents are very interested in their children's education. There are 17 class teachers and eight special education teachers in the school, including learning support (three), resource (four) and language (one) teachers.

Annette says she first came across circle time when she did an extended period of teaching in San Francisco in the late 1980s to early 1990s. She worked in a private school there at kindergarten level, and "everything they did in that school began with circle time, all circle time" (Annette, interview one). The children worked in stations around the room, and congregated for group meetings in a carpeted area. When Annette came back from the USA, the revised Irish PSC (1999) was introduced a few years later. It was then that she began to make the connection between what she had experienced abroad relating to classroom methods and the SPHE Curriculum (1999) (Annette, interview one).

Annette has also done a peer mediation course where the Mosley Model of circle time was introduced. She has completed a master's degree in peer mediation, and sees circle time as an ideal way to teach the skills of mediation to her class. She says that she only uses circle time for SPHE, and in one of her journals quotes the content objectives from that curriculum as her main aims for a session. This is the only instance of a direct linkage with the SPHE Curriculum (1999) objectives in the research.

In the observed sessions, the children sit in a circle on chairs, and typically there are mixing up games, rounds, and open fora discussions with lively and often intense debate by the children whom she describes as extremely articulate. While Annette says she sticks to the basic format of “open it and close it and do something in between”, she is always on the lookout for new ideas and “to try out new things” (Annette, interview one).

Annette’s principal (Principal A) has been teaching in the school since 1982, and has been principal for the last eight years. He was seconded to a SPHE programme in the past, and is very familiar with circle time. He has gone into classrooms and taken circle time with the children to “discuss the issue that’s going on”. Like Principal T, he sees the need for training for teachers in this area, particularly modelling:

Unless they see something modelled, and modelled in an effective way, they won’t do it. And once they see the benefits of it then they will begin gradually to take it on board. And providing them with the in-service on that afterwards can be greatly beneficial.

(Principal A, interview)

Principal A thinks the revised PSC (1999) was the catalyst for the introduction of circle time in his school:

...once SPHE came on board with the revised curriculum, that active learning methodology would have been advocated by the revised curriculum trainers...

(Principal A, interview)

Principal A is aware that circle time can be diluted, and that in a small number of classrooms in the school it is used as “Elastoplast. In other words, if something happens in the yard, for example, or if there’s issues going on in the class, oh, we’ll do a circle time on it” (Principal A, interview). However, he cites the observed teacher (Annette) as an example of effective practice in his school.

Teacher Profile Five: Majella

Majella has been teaching for 11 years, and had a break of seven years from teaching when she worked in a large computer company in Ireland. She now teaches in a Gaelscoil outside Dublin, where she has been for six years. There are 17 class teachers, including two learning support and two resource teachers in the school. Her current class is Third Class, with 18 boys and 15 girls. She had these children last year as well, and at that time she was involved in the pilot phase of the current research.

Majella says she cannot remember where she heard about circle time first, but is clear that it was not in college, which she left in 1993. As she was working outside education at the time of the in-career education that went with the revised PSC (1999), she believes that it was her industrial experience that may have sown the seeds for her use of circle time in the classroom:

I remembered it was a process that we used when I was working in industry, to get employee feedback on certain things. And it was another version of circle time with adults, where there were certain questions, but it was left very open, and the person who was facilitating it just took some notes, but they didn't counteract a point, they didn't question a point, they just, whatever was coming out, it was very much an upward process whatever was coming back, came back.

(Majella, wrap up pilot interview)

In interview, Mosley echoed Majella's experience when she stated that "circle time started in industry in the 1930s anyway with quality circles" (Mosley, interview one). In the observed sessions, Majella's children sat on the floor in a circle with Majella to talk about a particular theme or question. Recently she has begun to use what she calls mini-circles in the classroom where children work in groups and report back to the large class group. However, none of the observed sessions used this format. Majella is not familiar with the work of Mosley, and says she would like to read more about circle time in order to maximise the benefits for her children.

Majella's principal (Principal M) has been teaching for 25 years, and has been principal of the school for 13 years since it opened. Like Principal A, other roles she has undertaken leave her predisposed to circle time and SPHE. She was a teacher counsellor, a role developed as a pilot in primary schools in the mid-1990s which no longer exists (this is described in Chapter Three: Literature Review). As part of that role, Principal M promoted circle time in her school through modelling and mentoring. She is not sure how many teachers are using circle time in the school but feels it's quite prevalent among younger teachers. This she attributes partly to the fact that the school mentor (a designated role held by the deputy principal) is an advocate of circle time, and as part of the mentoring programme Principal M has demonstrated circle time in classrooms in her school. Like some of the other principals, she is not in favour of pressuring teachers: "[w]e don't ram it down anybody's throats..." but feels that "children will get it at some stage in the school" (Principal M, interview). From her experience, she feels circle time is "extremely effective" with the "vast majority of children" (Principal M: interview).

These short descriptions of the teachers, the schools and the principals are to set a context for the reader in relation to the research undertaken. The varying paths, resources, and levels of experience suggested that diversity would be evident in the observed circle times and accompanying journals. Extensive data under specific headings is presented to give a flavour of what emerged.

The Aims and Focus of Circle Time

In relation to their aims in conducting circle time with their children, four major themes emerged. The main aims articulated by the teacher group related to the development of particular social and personal skills, confidence and SE building, the promotion of equality in terms of voice, and the fostering of a positive classroom atmosphere. These translate into particular foci in the observed sessions, and the following sections are illustrated by examples from the different data sets as appropriate.

Development of Social and Personal Skills

All of the observed teachers were interested in promoting particular skills in circle time. The main kinds of skills promoted were coping skills, conflict management skills, dealing with the feelings of self and others, and communication skills. The particular skills focus in a given session usually arose from some kind of incident or issue in the yard or classroom, involving individual or groups of children. These issues could be related to bullying in the yard, friends falling out, breaches of school or classroom rules, or exclusion or isolation issues. The teacher is generally the initiator of these issue-driven circle times, although Neasa sometimes asks her class to nominate an issue for discussion in the circle. Tomás has used a suggestion box for the same purpose in his class, but notes that this year he is focusing on what he sees as a negative classroom dynamic:

I would use it [circle time] more this year than in previous years, for to resolve something, an issue perhaps of intimidation on the yard or bullying that is ongoing in the class at the moment...

(Tomás, interview one)

Observation two in Tomás's class dealt with a discipline issue that had arisen that morning in the classroom:

The theme of listening arose following a "difficult" morning, I had envisaged doing a "new beginnings" session, new year, resolutions....

(Tomás, journal two)

A significant part of this session was taken up with identifying good listening skills and testing children's recall of what had been taught earlier in the morning. While this was the only instance in the research of such an immediate response to an issue, other observed sessions had a similar problem-solving focus. Annette became aware that there was a lack of respect in the class for 'non-friends'. She chose circle time as a way of initiating a discussion on this. Her main aim in observation three was to "initiate a conversation about inequalities that appear to exist among the children" (Annette, journal three).

Sally explains that her aim and focus in observation one was to encourage the children to be kind:

...in particular how to use our hands in a kind way (an issue had arisen the previous week where three children in the class were being rough with a Junior Infant child).

(Sally, journal one)

Neasa highlights the benefits of using circle time to tackle issues, which links to the idea of giving children equality of voice in the circle:

...it's one thing that everybody in the class is gonna have twenty-four other different points of views and my point of view, so they're going to understand it [the issue] on so many different levels.

(Neasa, interview one)

This comment incorporates a social constructivist view of learning as discussed in Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework, whereby children learn from their teacher and peers. While the eliciting of children's viewpoints is not without its difficulties, as will be seen in a later section, the provision of a forum where children can discuss and learn from one another is seen by Neasa and most of the teacher group as a key aim and benefit in circle time.

Although none of the teachers in the group mentioned emotional intelligence (EI) as a concept, many of the skills listed by the observed teachers fall into this category. The ability to identify emotions in self and others, and to manage emotions is given particular attention. Neasa and Sally had specific sessions which dealt with feelings. In observation three, Neasa says: “[g]ive me a method you could use to control your anger”. The children suggest various strategies including “deep breaths” and “stress ball” (observation three). Even where the session is not specifically about feelings, children are often asked how they feel, or might feel, in a given situation. Majella asks: “[w]hen you think about your happiest memory, how do you feel?” (Majella, observation two). EI theory was already outlined in Chapter Two. The relationship between EI and the observed circle times will be analysed further in the next chapter.

Confidence and Self-esteem (SE)

Neasa talks about the importance of building confidence, particularly as she feels the children are at a vulnerable stage of their school career:

I think this year with 6th class I think it's confidence, personally speaking, because I know myself, I'm only twenty-two, I'm only ten years older than most of the kids in my class, so I know what it was like, and I remember so well coming into school in January thinking, this is my last couple of months in primary school.

(Neasa, interview one)

A journal entry illustrates how her aim of developing confidence becomes a focus in circle time:

How different situations make us feel - how you would react to various scenarios - the right and wrong way to react to various situations and scenarios.

(Neasa, journal two)

That confidence and SE are linked not only for Neasa but also for some of the children can be seen from the following exchange:

Neasa: If you were in that scenario, how would you feel?

Child: Low self-esteem, I feel really unconfident.

Neasa: Yea, it can shake your confidence, self-esteem.

(Neasa, observation three)

Majella says that for her, circle time is associated with:

...all those kind of fuzzy things...more feelings, self-confidence, esteem, all those kind of things...

(Majella, interview one)

However, because of the large numbers in most classrooms, she is not certain that circle time is always the best place to focus on children's SE:

...but the circle time can be so big, and for the person with self-esteem [issues] being handed that object [the speaking object], it's like the worst thing that can happen for them, isn't it?

(Majella, interview one)

Majella does not use a speaking object in her circle times, preferring instead to invite children to contribute through encouragement and questioning. This may be linked to her pathway to circle time, which differed from the other observed teachers.

Sally says that her main aim with her Senior Infants is “to affirm their own self-worth, and affirm what they’re able to do...” (Sally, interview one). Two of the observed sessions were about children’s feelings and being able to recognise and cope with feelings such as worry. Sally likes the circle formation because it facilitates the involvement of everybody, “even if they don’t speak...” (Sally, interview one). This is a common aspiration of the teachers observed in this research.

I was struck by the low number of mentions of SE building in the teacher interviews and journals, with other aims given more attention. This is noteworthy given the emphasis on SE in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), and in the Mosley literature. Mosley suggested that “at the heart of circle time is a commitment to self-esteem” (Mosley, interview one). The comment of one principal is presented as one explanation for the relative low-key status of SE in the observed teachers’ comments:

I think it’s that sense of, I know I will get my turn, I am confident that I will be heard, that I will be listened to. And that of course it is self-esteem building but I would take that as a given.

(Principal S, interview)

It may be that SE building is implicit in the practice of circle time, and is a ‘taken-for granted’ aim in education as some commentators have stated (e.g. Craig, 2007).

Earlier, the dual model of Miller *et al.* (2007) was adopted as the theoretical model of SE against which the data would be considered. This refers to self-competence and self-worth. The concept of self-efficacy was also noted as worthy of examination. It is likely that as children develop social and personal skills (such as dealing with feelings) this contributes to their self-competence, worth and efficacy. Thus the delineation of the concepts of SE and EI as separate constructs may not be helpful. It is possible that teachers do not differentiate between the concepts, and that this is one explanation for

the relative lack of focus on SE. The relationship between these concepts and the research data is teased out in the next chapter.

Equality of Voice

Tomás echoes the intentions of most of the observed teachers when he says:

...everybody has a voice in circle time, during circle time, so everybody has a right to be listened to as well, and that right, whatever their answer, response is, they have a right to be respected for that as well.

(Tomás, interview one)

The difficulty of this happening in the usual classroom routines is acknowledged by some of the teachers as well:

...when you have them at tables, there's an option to distance yourself from it or like I said opt out, and I think a lot of the shyer children wouldn't put up their hands, it means if they want to contribute they have to put up their hands and everybody turns around to look and it's much more of a big deal, whereas I find that the circle is a safer space to discuss things.

(Sally, interview one)

This right to a voice is coupled with respectful listening which is emphasised by all the teachers through specific rules for the circle time sessions. In Tomás's first session, the children read out the rules from prepared slips of paper, one of which refers to this: "[w]e know that everyone has the right to have opinions that are different from our own" (Tomás's class, observation one). This focus on voice and audience echoes one of the drivers identified as facilitating the introduction and practice of circle time in Irish primary schools. In particular, the work of Deegan *et al.* (2004) pointed to an increased interest in pupil participation and consultation in schools. It may also be inspired by the UNCRC (1989) which enshrines children's right to a voice. In the observed sessions, facilitating children's voices did not extend beyond the confines of the classroom, suggesting that their capacity to influence (Lundy, 2007) is limited. It may be that teachers focus on the confidence-building aspect of giving children voice more than its

potential for agency. This is discussed further in the next chapter, drawing on Lundy's (2007) and Simovska's (2008) work.

Fostering a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

Majella is particularly strong on the benefit of circle time as a way of promoting a “feel good” atmosphere in her classroom:

What I wanted to get was them talking about the fuzzy stuff again, I wanted the feel good atmosphere that they would leave, finish up a session feeling, we've achieved a lot, we've had some fun, we've learned some stuff...

(Majella, wrap up pilot interview)

Parents in Majella's class also comment on the positive atmosphere in her classroom:

... it's funny, they would have mentioned the dynamic, the atmosphere this year, the atmosphere they feel is there from what they're hearing, and I think some of that is coming from circle time – circle time extends that, or helps that.

(Majella, wrap up interview)

The contribution of circle time to a good classroom atmosphere is taken up by other teachers. Tomás and Neasa also talk about the atmosphere created through working in a circle: “[i]t is kind of quality time, you know, and it's a lot more relaxed and it's informal...” (Tomás, wrap up interview).

...they see it [circle time] as that half hour it's a friend, I'm a teacher at the same time but I'm a friend, they can open up a little bit more about normal stuff and not just school stuff.

(Neasa, interview one)

Annette sees circle time as an ideal way to promote positive relationships and cooperation in the class:

I'd say the main aim is to cooperate as a whole group. It's a whole group activity that demands something from each of them so that it will work as a process.

(Annette, interview one)

I was impressed with the relationship between the teachers and their children in all five classrooms visited. However, it is difficult to quantify the contribution of circle time *per se* in this regard, as the teachers themselves acknowledge. It is possible that teachers who use circle time may have a predisposition towards promotion of a positive atmosphere and supportive relationships in their classrooms in any case, which makes it more difficult to quantify the effects it is having in any classroom. It may also be that teachers who use one particular active learning method will use other similar methods (such as, for example, drama) which may contribute to relationship-building in any given classroom. Is relationship-building and positive atmosphere a legitimate goal in Irish primary classrooms and what, if any, is its contribution to learning? Or is it part of the psychological (and therapeutic) turn in education which detractors say impacts on other educational goals?

Principals

Principals in the participating schools concur with the aims expressed by teachers. Both Principal A and Principal M spoke about the equality that is a potential benefit of circle time. Principal T spoke about children's voice being heard "without fear" (Principal T, interview). Principal N and Principal S talked about communication skills that were fostered in circle time. Both Principal M and Principal A spoke about SE and self-confidence as aims in circle time. This may be reflective of their prior experience of working with teachers in SPHE in-service.

The Format and Process of the Circle Times

There was a significant focus in the research on finding out what went on in circle time in the five classrooms. This was to address a lack of detail in much of the research on circle time in this regard. This section outlines the format or process employed by teachers, the rules that applied, the role adopted by teachers in the circle, and particular techniques used.

Typical Format of Observed Circle Times

Table Four gives a summary of the circle time format used by the teachers in the observations:

Teacher (pseudonym)	Typical Format for Circle Time
Sally Senior Infants	Warm up game/physical activity Story told by teacher Whole class discussion Round using speaking object Game/closing activity
Tomás 3 rd Class	Review of circle time rules Icebreaker/game Rounds Closing activity, reminder about suggestion box
Majella 3 rd Class	Reminder of preferred behaviours Introduction of topic/theme Open discussion Rating the circle time
Annette 6 th Class	Mixing up games Introduction of theme – posing a question Rounds Paired/group work Reporting back/round/discussion
Neasa 6 th Class	Introduction by teacher Series of questions or scenarios relating to the theme or focus of the session Role play, paired or group work Open discussion Goal setting

Table 4: Typical format of circle time for the five teachers

Some of the variation in format is explained by the age and class level at which the teacher is working (for example the use of group work at senior class level). It is also likely that the resources the teachers are using as their reference point are reflected in the format used, as well as their experience of using circle time (for example, Majella's less structured approach).

For Sally, the importance of the warm up game or activity has been highlighted in her own extra-curricular drama course. She is also conscious of ending the session on a positive note:

I would generally start with some kind of a game, or some kind of physical activity like I did that clapping thing last time. I would do that just to build a bit of energy in the circle and then I would go on to...I would lead into them dealing with, maybe a difficult topic, you know, maybe about, if you did something wrong sometime, there'd be a lead into that, or talking about times you felt sad, times you felt happy, or about friendship, and we'd have a discussion on that, and it would usually be, I would pass around, I'd give them a sentence to complete, and we'd pass that around first, just so everyone gets a chance to have an input in the conversation, and then... I would ask a question where they could just put up their hand. And then generally I try to close it on a bit of a high note, just so that they're not leaving the circle...on a negative note. Then we might play a game or say something like pass the smile I did at the end of the last session, that kind of thing. Again, to reinforce the camaraderie of the circle.

(Sally, interview one)

At the end of observation one, Sally praised the children and encouraged them to "give yourselves a big silent cheer and tiptoe back to your seats" (Sally, observation one). This is an example of one way she used to finish the circle time session on a positive note.

While both have Third Class, Tomás and Majella have quite different formats, perhaps reflecting their differing paths to circle time, and their aims:

- a. Re-cap of Circle time rules Class read them aloud
- b. A warm up game to begin (passing on shaking hands)
- c. We then did a few ‘what if’ scenarios...as well as a new name for Santa’s reindeers as a memory game.
- d. We did a “what do you think makes a good school”, before finishing off with if you had one wish for someone else what or who might it be for.
- e. Then we conclude with a warm down “fruit basket” game and then see if some of them can remember the naming game we did, whilst sitting in new seats (A little more difficult).

(Tomás, journal one)

- a. Session set up i.e. get everyone sitting comfortably in a circle whereby everyone is visible to everyone else.
- b. Introduction, what do we want to get out of today’s session, what are our preferred behaviours.
- c. Briefly introduce the topic without influencing what the children are thinking.
- d. Facilitate the session, allowing opportunities for all children. Make links to what others have said where appropriate. Reinforce/encourage/praise where appropriate.
- e. Conclude the session by thanking the children for their inputs, ask some general questions to evaluate the session (score out of ten if appropriate) i.e. what was good, what would we like to take away from the session, what we would like to leave behind etc?

(Majella, journal one)

While there is considerable variation in the format of the observed circle times, there is a very clear commitment to children’s participation in a variety of ways, and in particular, to eliciting their responses in an inclusive way. The formats outlined are similar to that advocated by Mosley:

- Starting game
- Round/follow-up activity
- Open forum
- Celebration of success
- Ending activity

(Mosley, 1998: 30)

While there is less emphasis on celebration of success in the formats outlined in the teacher journals, there is a marked similarity in relation to other features.

In contrast, the circle work exemplar in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) differs significantly from the practice observed. This outlines a four stage plan as follows:

- Sentence completion
- Volunteering opinions
- Affirmation exercise
- Writing exercise

(*SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999: 83)

The absence of games and the introduction of a writing exercise which children complete at their desks suggests a different approach to the running of circle times than was evident in most of the observed sessions. While there was plenty of evidence of children volunteering opinions in the observed circle times, there was no specific affirmation exercise, although the conduct of the circle times was affirming in a general sense. Based on the observations and journals, it appears that it is the Mosley Model more than the circle work curriculum model that informs the practice of most of the observed teachers.

Rules for Circle Time

The following rules are taken from *Quality Circle Time*:

- To signal if they wish to speak
- Not to use any put-downs towards each other
- Not to interrupt when someone else is talking
- That a child has the right to say 'Pass' in a round if she does not wish to speak
- Children who pass in the initial round will, at the end of the round, be allowed to signal if they'd like a second chance
- Not to name anyone in the circle in a negative way. Instead, they must say, for example, 'Someone hit me' or 'Some people are ganging up on me.'

(Mosley, 1996: 35)

Mosley goes on to explain that the last rule is to protect family privacy in particular, but that children should be reminded that if they want to talk about a serious issue, they should do so on an individual basis (Mosley, 1996: 35-6). In Mosley (1993: 116) she talked about confidentiality as desirable “within realistic constraints”, and appeared to be more concerned about what children might say in the circle rather than what they might divulge elsewhere about the circle time proceedings.

The similarity between the Mosley rules and those articulated by the teachers in the research project is striking, suggesting that these may have become commonplace even among primary school teachers who are not familiar with the Mosley Model of circle time (e.g. Neasa and Majella). For one of the teachers, the rules are explicitly mentioned in the early part of the circle time sessions (Tomás), while Majella adopts a more informal approach, where there is a short discussion on desired behaviours at the beginning of the session:

Majella: So, just to recap before we start, what are some of the things we want as part of our circle time session today? I don't want to say rules, 'cos that sounds a bit formal, but what are some of the things that will make our circle time a bit more inclusive and a bit more interactive? What are the things we want in the session?

Child: Don't talk over other people when they're talking.

Majella: Good idea, thank you very much. Well Colm?

Colm: Don't be rude.

Majella: Don't be rude, very good. Anything else?

Child: Put your hand up when you want to say something.

Majella: And we don't have to keep it too formal. Anything else?

Child: Listen to other people.

Majella: Very good. Can I add one, if that's ok? [chorus of yes] That everybody takes part, and we try and get a contribution or an input from everybody – is that ok? [chorus of yes] And sometimes I might end up doing a little bit of a verbal poke if I feel that I'm looking over there, Fiona, and I'd love to hear what she thinks. And it's only because I think it's great if everybody gets to hear what everyone else thinks. I think that's when we have a really good circle time – ok?

(Majella, observation one)

Sally elicited some simple rules around listening and looking in a similar way. For one teacher, the rules had already been established by drawing up a contract (Neasa) at the beginning of the year.

Generally, there is a consistency between the rules in operation in a particular class for circle time and the aims and focus outlined in an earlier section, particularly where they relate to confidence and SE, and equality of voice. For example, Annette is clear in her circle times that:

...nobody could knock anybody else's comment, that if they didn't agree that they have the proper mechanism by which to disagree, other than shout a person down, or call them names...and finding the right way to disagree with somebody's point of view and using the proper language.

(Annette, interview one)

This is consistent with her aim in using circle time:

It's all about the process of getting into the circle, of knowing that their voice is important but that they also have to listen to other viewpoints. So no matter what we're discussing, they have to be both contributor and listener during that activity.

(Annette, interview one)

Two areas of significance emerge from the observations in relation to rules for circle time. As outlined earlier, one of the ground rules relates to children being given an opportunity to speak in the circle. This is one of the main aims of circle time for the teacher group. It also is a key element in the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two (voice and participation). This principle is generally regulated by a speaking object for some part of the session, where an item (for example a small teddy) is passed around the circle - the child holding the speaking object can speak or say pass. This round system is used by three of the five teachers in the observed sessions. Tomás uses a speaking object two or three times in each observed session, and reminds the children to "feel free, boys, if there's something that you can't think of, pass, if something won't

come to you, and we'll try not to repeat the same answer if we can" (Tomás, observation one). This contrasts with his views in interview:

Circle time for others maybe it's ok to pass, and maybe sometimes it is ok to pass if there is something they can't really think about or whatever, but as a rule I try to omit that rule, that other people may enforce, and I say c'mon, think of something...because it does encourage them to get out of their 'I can't think of anything' ..., even to repeat an answer that has already been said, that's acceptable as well.

(Tomás, interview one)

Ambivalence is also evident in Annette's transcripts, although not as strongly as in Tomás's:

...they have permission to pass. But that if they were passing continually we might encourage them to make a contribution at some stage during the session...

(Annette, interview one)

An example occurs in Annette's first observed session that illustrates this point. Annette is leading a discussion about rights and responsibilities. She tries to encourage a child not to pass by saying, "don't pass, try it" (Annette, observation one). The child doesn't respond then, but in the next round which is about children's rights, he says, "I have a right to pass" (child, Annette's class, observation one). The interesting aspect of this incident is the child's ability to articulate his right to pass in spite of some ambivalence on the part of the teacher. It may be that a younger or less articulate child would find it more difficult to resist teacher pressure to speak.

Sally uses a magic star as a speaking object in her Senior Infant class. In observation one, she reminds the children how it works:

We're going to send around our magic star. Only the person with the magic star is allowed to speak, so everyone will get a turn. I'm going to start this end of the circle, and if you really don't want to say something, that's ok, but have a little think about it 'cos I'm sure everybody is able to contribute to our discussion. Ok, I'll start off...

(Sally, observation one)

When children do not contribute, Sally encourages them by saying “do you want me to come back to you?” (Sally: observation one). However, no child is put under pressure if they cannot think of anything or choose not to contribute.

It is notable that two of the teachers do not use a speaking object in the observed sessions (Majella and Neasa), although the latter says she does use one from time to time. As was mentioned earlier, Majella's reluctance to use one may be about putting children on the spot. For Neasa, this may also be a reason:

If I'm looking for everybody to make a contribution in something not so sensitive, probably I have a speaking object...

(Neasa, wrap up interview)

In observation one, where the children are talking about “something that made me sad”, she clarifies: “[i]f it's something really personal you don't have to tell me” (Neasa, observation one). She did not use a speaking object in this session. However, she also feels in 6th class that children need to gain discussion skills that might not happen if the speaking object is used:

...but sometimes, when they're at the age...you can actually have an open discussion and ...that's where the teaching them to listen comes in to play maybe more so, because they're trying not to speak over each other, trying to get their speak in at the same time.

(Neasa, wrap up interview)

It appears that some teachers, in their eagerness to develop children's speaking skills and participation in the circle, may try to limit the 'pass' option in their circle times. Mosley (wrap up interview) suggested that children may use the pass rule to exercise power in the circle:

...there are power-brokers who are deliberately doing it to get attention. So sometimes the silence is far more powerful than the speaking.

(Mosley, wrap up interview)

She emphasised the need for preparation for children to contribute in the circle, with topics for discussion being given in advance, "non-emotional" and "prepared rounds" initially, and "coaching" where necessary (Mosley, wrap up interview). Mosley acknowledged that her own use of the speaking object in circle time had changed: "I only use it once now, I used to use it a lot" (Mosley, wrap up interview). The right to participate (and not to participate) is one that has been highlighted in Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework. In circle time, it may be linked to a use of power on the part of the child or teacher. It is unlikely that children who are pressurised to speak in the circle will feel a sense of empowerment, however well-meaning the intention. There is a danger that the turn-taking in circle time could impose a rigid and formulaic dialogue undermining its potential for authentic voice and participation (Macedo, in Freire and Macedo, 1995). May (2005: 32) was in favour of a readdressing of the balance between pupil and teacher, "with more acknowledgement of the pupils as motivators and executors of their own participation". This issue will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Another significant and possibly more controversial issue arises in relation to a confidentiality rule which is sometimes used by the observed teachers in circle time.

Only one teacher has a formal contract with the children in relation to circle time. This was drawn up jointly by the teacher and the children at the beginning of the year:

I'd say, right, if you were to sign a privacy contract, what kind of things would you have in it? And they'd say, oh you couldn't mention it outside a certain room, or outside the meeting room, and I'd say, right, this is the meeting room then. Certain things should not be discussed outside circle time, they said yea. So I wrote that one down.

(Neasa, interview one)

This was clarified in the wrap up interview, when I asked about whether parents could be told what went on in circle time:

Researcher: If they wanted to go home and talk to their parents?
Neasa: Oh, yea the parents of course.
Researcher: But not ...?
Neasa: Basically if you heard, if somebody got upset, you don't go out and say it on the yard, or things like that.
Researcher: But they could go home and share it with the parents.
Neasa: Oh, yea, yea.

(Neasa, wrap up interview)

Tomás also spoke about limited confidentiality:

...what we talk about in the class, it's not private or confidential in that they can go home and talk to Mam or Dad about it or whatever, but we don't necessarily talk about it to other boys in other classes in the school.

(Tomás, interview one)

For Sally, confidentiality is not an issue with her Senior Infants children because of their age, and the fact that "they're much more egocentric and...trying to get them to remember what they said, let alone what other people said" makes a confidentiality rule redundant. She did say that when she taught 4th class, this was a rule in circle time.

Annette does not have confidentiality as a general rule. However, in one instance of a circle time about exclusion where the principal took part, the children were asked not to mention it to the child in question, who was absent on the day. This circle time was undertaken with full parental knowledge and approval.

Majella is not in favour of any mention of confidentiality with the children, and feels she would be “digging a massive hole” for herself (Majella, interview one) if she were to impose it in her circle times. On the other hand, as a parent she is aware that children could unwittingly reveal family matters in the classroom:

...you see a story starting, you're thinking this is not what... (researcher: where you want to go?), yea, because it's something to do with home and they don't realise in their innocence...

(Majella, interview one)

In interview, Mosley was adamant that:

I don't like the idea, it wasn't my idea that teachers say 'we keep it all secret here'. No we don't. There's nothing to keep secret.

(Mosley, interview one)

In spite of the lack of endorsement of confidentiality in the Mosley Model, it appears that it is sometimes applied on a limited basis by the observed teachers. The point raised by Majella in relation to children disclosing family matters is one to which we will return, as this is one of the criticisms of circle time (e.g. Hanafin *et al.*, 2009). Even if there is a limited confidentiality rule in place in circle time, the audience within any circle can be made up of a large number of people, including children, the teacher, and possibly special needs assistants (SNAs). The potential breach of children's right to privacy is significant in circle time, especially if there is any ambivalence about the pass rule. Would confidentiality protect privacy? Or would it encourage children to be more

open than might be considered prudent in such a public forum? This is discussed in the next chapter.

Overall, a light touch in terms of rules was maintained in all the observed sessions, with very few infringements of rules. Where there were minor incidents, these were dealt with discreetly. As Neasa says, “the smallest amount of teacher guidance put them in the right direction!” (Neasa, journal three). This approach was evident throughout the observed sessions in her class. In one instance observed, she cautions two boys: “Declan and Colm, come on – separate if you can’t calm down” (Neasa, observation one), which gave children a warning and also suggested they had choices which could be exercised in relation to the management of their own behaviour.

Teacher Role in Circle Time

The crucial role of the teacher in facilitating children’s participation and promotion of group safety was highlighted by a number of authors (Mosley, 1996; May, 2007; Doveston, 2007) earlier, while role ambiguity was signalled by Harwood (2001: 297) as typical in “active/democratic programmes”. Reference was made to circle time as a form of counselling, with some commentators suggesting that circle time was part of a move towards ‘therapeutic education’ (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009; Furedi, 2004), while the psychological underpinnings of circle time were held to owe much to therapists such as Rogers, Maslow and Glasser (Chapter Two). Bednar *et al.*’s (1989) model of the therapist’s role was also presented as a way to analyse the role adopted by teachers in circle time. Bor *et al.*’s (2002) characteristics of school counselling provided a lens through which the practice of circle time could be viewed.

That some of the observed teachers saw a difference in their role in circle time relative to other classroom activity is apparent from the interview transcripts. Neasa thought that circle time allowed the children to see the teacher “as not such a scary

person... I'm a teacher at the same time but I'm a friend...they see it as that half hour it's a friend" (Neasa, interview one). However, the children knew that there were still boundaries in circle time, even if the atmosphere was less formal:

I'm still teacher, you can raise issues, you can do this, that and the other, x, y, z, but that boundary is still there and they're like, yea, we get it, so...

(Neasa, interview one)

Annette saw the reactive aspect of her role in circle time as challenging:

...as a facilitator or a leader, you're constantly aware of how much you can change the whole thing, and how much you can do the wrong thing and the right thing, it's because it's all happening there in front of you, so it's not as if you're getting a heads up on anything. You're reacting to all of the things they're saying, you're letting them speak.

(Annette, wrap up interview)

This kind of self-doubt was echoed by some of the other observed teachers in relation to their role in the circle. Tomás wondered was he "doing it right or not, I mean the experts don't even tell you..." (Tomás, interview one). Majella also wondered was she "using it properly at all" (Majella, wrap up interview). However, she was clear that in circle time, the emphasis was "not about me, it's about them", it was about allowing "stuff to be coming back from them more so...it's more upward than downward" (Majella, wrap up interview). It may be that as teachers move out of the comfort of their day to day classroom role, the role shift creates uncertainty. For the observed teachers, this is not enough to stop them using the method, suggesting that they see a value in it in spite of some discomfort.

Techniques employed by the teachers in conducting their circle times include the use of a fictional lens and self-disclosure. In a number of the observed circle times there was a problem-solving focus where an incident had occurred in the yard or in the classroom. This incident could involve an individual child as well as a group of

children. In either case, the way this was dealt with in the circle was to fictionalise the problem, either through the use of an apt story or scenarios created by the teacher, involving one or more fictional children. This fictional lens is also used when the focus is not on a particular issue but on teaching a general skill such as dealing with feelings. Two of Sally's sessions aimed to give children skills around identifying feelings in others and dealing with worries. She used story and discussion to allow the children to identify strategies for handling feelings appropriately.

In the Mosley Model (e.g. *Quality Circle Time in Action*, 1999) the problem-solving focus generally centres on individual children, who are invited to nominate themselves for help with behaviour in the circle. Other children are then invited to give advice, usually in the form of: "[w]ould it help if...?" It is notable that none of the observed teachers adopted this approach in any of the sessions. When Sally wanted to deal with a group of children being unkind in the yard to a Junior Infant child, she told a story about kind hands in circle time, and asked all the children to reflect on how they could be kind to one another, and to suggest ways of remedying a situation if they had been unkind (Sally, observation one). Neasa used short scenarios to introduce problems which the children then explored through the fictional lens of role play. Annette used a DVD on children's rights to highlight breaches of rights. This distancing technique removes circle time from some counselling practice, as the advice is generally not delivered at an individual level. However, in the broader sense of counselling as a way of modifying behaviours, the technique described could be a type of group counselling. It certainly falls within Høigaard *et al.*'s (2008) model of informal situated counselling as outlined in Chapter Three: Literature Review.

The use of the fictional lens begs the question as to whether the individual child or group of children actually receive the message that the teacher is trying to deliver in this

indirect way. Sally agreed that there were some children and “it would go over their heads” (Sally, wrap up interview). However, she was certain that the children she had been targeting in observation one would get the message: “[t]he ones I had in mind that day, I knew they would pick up on it” (Sally, wrap up interview). Neasa was also convinced that the children would pick up on the messages being conveyed. She assessed this by noting in particular the contributions of the targeted children in the circle:

...you wouldn't ask that person first, you'd say, all right, if you were that person what would you think? If they gave you an answer that coincided with the point you were trying to get across, you'd think, yea, if they can go out and do that, that'd be ok.

(Neasa, interview one)

Of course the teachers are hoping that all of the children are listening and learning from this problem-solving approach, as well as those who are the indirect target of the activities. It appears from the observations of circle time for this research that, while it might fit into the category of ‘therapeutic education’ as defined by Ecclestone *et al.* (2009), it fell short of what Bor *et al.* (2002) described as the characteristics of “the traditional ethos” of counselling in schools. This had a clear focus on the individual child, and involved a long-term intervention with bounded professionals. Circle time could therefore be branded as “counselling-lite”.

Mosley was of the opinion that “there had to be a personal buy-in” with children in the circle, which involved children “owning the issues” (Mosley, wrap up interview). This occurred in only one instance in the observed sessions, when Neasa tackled a child on a behavioural issue, and asked: “[h]ow would it feel if it happened to you?” (Neasa, observation one). This was not a pre-planned focus but arose out of interactions in the circle. The lack of evidence of an individual problem-solving focus suggests that the

practice of the teachers observed is a variation from the Mosley Model which is discussed further in Chapter Six.

Another technique used by the teachers in the group from time to time is where the teacher relates to the children an incident or experience from their own life. This is in keeping with the equality espoused in circle time, where teachers sit at the same level as the children and take part as an equal. It may also owe something to Rogers's (1967: 284) notion of "empathic understanding" where the therapist shows an understanding of "the client's private world". In the observed sessions, it was also used as a way of illustrating a point, or encouraging reticent children to make a contribution, or normalising a behaviour. For example, in the third observation on dealing with bullying, Neasa talks to the children in a jocose way about the difficulty of getting her hands on the remote control for the television as the youngest in her family. She was clear, however, that these types of disclosures were not overly personal, and that because the children were older:

...they're aware of what they can ask you, and not ask you, they know I'm going to tell them the story, and that's as much as I'm going to tell them...

(Neasa, wrap up interview)

Sally also uses self-disclosure in observation three where the discussion was about being mean to people. She confides that she was mean to her sister one day:

I can think of a time when I called my sister a name, and I could see from her face that she was very sad and very upset, and then I felt bad 'cos I had hurt her feelings.

(Sally, observation three)

She explained why she did this:

...just to give them an example and to start them off, especially if they think it's something they might get in trouble for, well if I say I did this...

(Sally, wrap up interview)

Majella did not tend to self-disclose, even though it was obvious that she had a warm and open relationship with the children. She explained her reticence in the following way:

My fear would be in circle times, while sometimes it's very good to start off, it feels sometimes like, circle time is supposed to be about the group, but we're going to start with me. And I would feel sometimes that, where I am trying to facilitate, that I'm then going and putting myself as centre first...

(Majella, wrap up interview)

Mosley spoke about the rigour of the Mosley Model of circle time, in terms of “groundrules...its five steps...” but acknowledged that this might not have been “taken up rigorously in circle time. I think the philosophy of it has appealed a lot” (Mosley, interview one). It may be that the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of circle time are being kept alive in circle times in the Irish primary school but that some of the detail of rules (such as the pass rule) as originally envisaged by the author is being lost. Does this evolution represent progress or its opposite for circle time? What is the effect of these shifts on empowerment of children through circle time?

Principals

As might be expected, principals who were interviewed were uncertain about the model or format of circle time in use in their school. Principal S doubted that “anybody’s doing circle time exactly as Jenny Mosley laid it out – that would be my gut...” (Principal S). Principal M said that while she assumed it was the Mosley model, she “actually ha[d] no idea” (Principal M). Most of the principals were aware of groundrules, with Principal S stating that “how well laid down the groundrules are” had a bearing on how “protected the children are” (Principal S, interview). While Principal S did not mention confidentiality, Principal N asked: “how do you talk about confidentiality with an eight year old?”, signalling his belief that such a rule was

unhelpful. This contrasts with Neasa's commitment to confidentiality in the class contract, however she was dealing with older children. Principal A clarified that for him, confidentiality concerned "respect [for] what people have said" (Principal A, interview). Children in his school were told circle time was not a "secret society" and they were encouraged to discuss issues that arose with parents, "but you discuss it in the way that it has been discussed here in circle time" (Principal A, interview). Annette, like her principal, was not in favour of a confidentiality rule. Principal M, in relation to the pass rule, felt "it should be very well explained" to the children to preserve their privacy. The fact that Majella didn't use a speaking object shows a congruence between principal and observed teacher, as her approach allowed children to exercise choice in the circle in relation to their contributions.

The Benefits of Circle Time

Getting children into a circle in the average primary school classroom requires time, training and planning. That teachers do this regularly suggests that they see benefits in the method, and the observed teachers were asked to identify these. Some of the benefits are linked to the aims and focus of circle time as outlined earlier. For example, teachers in the group were aiming for equality in terms of participation from the children. This was also cited as a benefit, as the physical formation allowed for greater involvement than when children were seated at their desks in the regular manner, or even if they were engaged in an activity like drama. Three key themes emerged in relation to the question about benefits. Where these link to aims and focus this is noted.

Enjoyment

A key benefit of circle time as expressed by the observed teachers is the enjoyment the children get from circle time:

I see that they get very excited when we change the room around...what we're going to do, so it's a big change from sitting in the regular classroom, they love that idea...

(Annette, interview one)

The novelty of the circle is also mentioned by other teachers. Tomás talks about it as “time outside of the ordinary time”, (Tomás, interview one). The sense of enjoyment also extends to the teachers, some of whom feel their own benefits of circle time:

I'm always amazed at how they enrich my life...you really get to talk to them and hear from them more as people than you do as students...

(Annette, interview one)

Tomás also wrote in one journal about how he “really enjoyed this week's lesson, they really seemed to enjoy it too...” (Tomás, journal three).

In interview, Mosley highlighted that, for her, Glasser's basic needs theory was important as it emphasises fun in learning (Mosley, interview one). The fun element may be a significant contributor to teacher's commitment to circle time. I was struck by the amount of laughter that occurred in many of the circle time sessions, signifying the enjoyment children and their teachers were experiencing. The fun also strengthens the relationship between the children and their teacher, and may contribute to a positive view of classroom life.

Safety

A number of teachers in the group mention the safety that they and children feel in the circle as a key benefit. For Sally, this is linked to the fact that everyone is at the

same level: “[w]e’re all on one level. I think it just makes it a safer space to discuss things” (Sally, interview one). Neasa also mentions that security allows the children to express themselves honestly:

...you could get a real opinion from them because they have that sense of security that we’re in circle time now, we’re not allowed to get in trouble...

(Neasa, interview one)

The sense of children being able to express themselves openly and honestly is also noted by Annette:

...it was more the fact that they’d risk saying some of the things. Like, I thought (child’s) statement about lighting fires as a young kid...and that he was just a dreadful child, and didn’t like himself as a child, just said a whole lot of stuff...

(Annette, wrap up interview)

Sally also notes how “one child mentioned that he worried when his mam and dad argued, which at first I found surprising that that particular child would share something like that” (Sally, journal two). These kinds of disclosures only happen if children feel safe to do so. On a lighter note, Majella is surprised as a mother herself that a child would talk about their teddy:

I thought someone was brave enough to talk about their teddy, and bringing it to bed. And that kind of resonated with me.

(Majella, wrap up pilot interview)

The relationship between teacher and children, and among the children, in the observed sessions, contributed to the sense of safety that was apparent. It may be that the intimacy of circle time, if handled properly, fosters the positive relationships needed for a sense of safety for participants, although this would be difficult to prove. This notion of a safe space could be seen by some as problematic if it leads to disclosures

that might not otherwise occur in the classroom. Or will children find a space to disclose particular information if that is what they wish to do regardless of whether circle time is used?

Communication

Another key benefit identified by the teachers in the group is the ease of communication between teacher and children, and among children, that circle time facilitates. This relates not only to the fact that everyone had an equal chance to speak (which links to the aims of the teachers), but also to the need for children to communicate with their teacher. Both Neasa and Sally, teaching at different levels, spoke about children's constant demands for teacher to listen to them:

I have children up to me all the time wanting to tell me their life story and other children that wouldn't get a word in edgeways...

(Sally, interview one)

And they like to tell me everything, but like that I can't listen to everybody's story so if I don't get it in between eating time at lunch and eating time at break I say, right, we'll bring it up at circle time on Friday. I'll give you a minute and you can talk about it and see what the class think.

(Neasa, interview one)

An additional difficulty identified by Neasa was the public nature of individual discussions with children:

I like circle time because my class the way they are, if you have somebody up at your desk and you're talking to them one on one they're all "oh my God, I wonder why they're up there, what's she talking to them about, they must be in trouble". Obviously you have to have one on one still but circle time is a way of saying what I want to say to people in particular but it's valid for the whole class.

(Neasa, interview one)

As perceived by some of the observed teachers, ease of communication allows them to listen to children in a way that is not possible in the busy classroom routine. This ease of communication also has benefits for the relationship between children themselves. The focus on listening allows children to hear about likes and dislikes of other children, to get to “know one another” (Sally, interview one), to realise that “everybody is the same” (Majella, interview one), and to “gel” together better (Tomás, interview one). Ease of communication also allows children to problem-solve, to acquire communication skills, and Annette suggests that these skills have potential to transfer outside the circle:

I could use the language I use in circle time and they would know exactly what I was talking about – everybody has a right to speak or would you like to pass or whatever, they might transfer those skills...

(Annette, interview one)

Majella talks about the lack of opportunity for children to communicate meaningfully because of the busy lives people lead:

...because of working parents, and people being busy, there isn't a whole lot of books, there's tv, there's games...

(Majella, wrap up interview)

Circle time for her then becomes a place where children can practice communicating with one another in a way that they might not do ordinarily. This may be what one child (an only child) in Tomás's class has in mind when he says circle time allows him “more bonding time” (child, Tomás's class, observation three) when asked what he enjoys about circle time.

It appears that the benefits identified by the observed teachers fall within the range of benefits associated with circle time in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) and other research that has been undertaken. However, it is significant that in the observed teacher group there

was little mention of SE or confidence as a benefit of circle time, even though this was an aim of some. It may be that this was a ‘taken-for-granted’ benefit as was mentioned previously. Alternatively, it could be that teachers are aware that claims in relation to SE building are difficult to prove. Another possibility is that it was too early in the academic year for teachers to see benefits in relation to SE which might require a longer-term view. Sally noticed that “especially from last year” there were a few children who had “become much more confident” (Sally, interview one). Whether this would have happened without circle time as children got used to the school routine and their teacher is impossible to say.

It is also significant that giving children a voice was not mentioned as a benefit, even though this is a key aim identified among the teacher group. It could be that providing a forum for ease of communication is seen as equivalent to giving children a voice, and that this also becomes a ‘taken-for-granted’ benefit.

Principals

The principal’s data in relation to perceived benefits mirrored that of the teachers to a great extent, with more emphasis on SE and self-confidence than was apparent with the teachers. For some of this group, the principles associated with circle time (such as equality) were ones that informed their dealings with staff in their schools. Principal M stated that: “I would have tried, since I came here, to run the school like a circle time, and to give everybody an equal say” (Principal M, interview). Principal S talked about the principles of circle time which informed a buddy system in operation in the school:

I would see that as a really good use of the principles of circle time because children are thinking about what has made someone feel good, and it is totally in a positive context.

(Principal S, interview)

Two of the principals saw a benefit in the problem-solving potential of circle time and had participated in circle times with teachers and children in relation to a particular issue. This could be an exclusion issue (Principal A) or a discipline or bullying issue (Principal M). Principal T saw a benefit in children being able to air grievances which might have an impact on other children:

Kids can have an opportunity to speak out and say something that may make this person or people aware that they're interfering, or let's say, they're not being good citizens.

(Principal T, interview)

While all of the principals were clear that giving children a voice in circle time was a key benefit, it did not appear that there was any effort on the part of the teachers and principals to use circle time as a consultation forum for wider school issues. That some of them saw it as a problem-solving forum for issues that arose in the classroom can be surmised from their commentary. This suggests that circle time is seen in these schools as an in-class problem-solving activity rather than a space to promote democracy or citizenship education beyond the classroom setting. This may impact on the potential of circle time to empower children.

Evaluation and Assessment

Over-reliance on teacher perception of benefits as a result of circle time was earlier identified as a weakness in much of the research. Also highlighted in Chapter Three was the reported lack of assessment by teachers in SPHE (NCCA, 2008; DES, 2009). This was for a variety of reasons, including reluctance by teachers to assess in this curriculum, a perceived “narrow range of assessment strategies”, and an “incidental” approach to assessment (DES, 2009: 64-5). The observed teachers were asked how they assessed and evaluated their circle times.

While all of the teachers identify particular benefits as has been outlined previously, there is also an acknowledgement by most that it is difficult to say definitively whether circle time is directly responsible for the effects or benefits listed. So while Tomás is certain that there is “a greater gel forming there”, he is aware that “whether I’d put it down to circle time or not I’m not sure because again it’s difficult to say” (Tomás: interview one).

Evaluation occurs in relation to the actual running of the circle time, and teachers evaluate whether they have completed what they set out to do in the session. Annette puts it this way:

Well, you can evaluate it very easily if it has been a success and you’ve gotten from the beginning to the end, and it’s all gone well – that in itself (researcher: the plan has been done) – exactly.

(Annette, interview one)

Most of the teachers also mention enjoyment as a criterion for judging success of the circle time: “[t]hey really enjoyed talking about their likes and dislikes” (Annette, journal two).

Majella, in common with some of the other teachers, evaluates circle time in relation to the atmosphere in the circle:

The atmosphere in the room. Sometimes you’d feel a certain energy as a result...you can see it in the kid’s faces, you can see more of a relaxed smiley, there’s more like it’s just feeling the energy I think and the atmosphere has changed.

(Majella, interview one)

Majella also likes to ask the children to rate the circle time at the end of a session out of ten. This is done either by a show of hands or children orally giving their rating (out of ten).

Another kind of evaluation taking place is the teacher assessing his/her own role in the circle. While Tomás is doubtful if teachers “are geared to appraise ourselves, or if we’re given the time even to appraise ourselves”, this doesn’t stop him from questioning himself from time to time:

...sometimes I wonder am I doing too much talking during circle time, am I giving enough praise, did I deal with something effectively, could I have done something differently...this process has got me thinking I suppose and reflecting...

(Tomás, wrap up interview)

It may be that the research process prompted some of the teachers to reflect on their own role in the circle and the effects of circle time more than might have happened if they had not been involved.

Children’s reaction in the circle forms part of both the evaluation of the circle time and also an assessment of what children might have learned. While enjoyment is mentioned as one criterion for evaluating success, engagement and the type of responses of the children are also noted by the teachers. Sally feels from observing the children in one session that “they were more engaged in this session” (Sally, journal three). She also notes that many children, after one session on being kind, use the phrase: “hands are not for hurting” as they have been encouraged to do in the circle. This is seen as evidence of learning. Neasa also notes the responses of the children in the circle:

If they gave you sort of an answer that coincided with the point you were trying to get across, you’d think, yea, if they can go out and do that, that’d be ok.

(Neasa, interview one)

While some of the teachers do a short review of learning at the end of their circle times and encourage children to set a task for themselves (e.g. Neasa, observation one), it is reasonable to say that assessment of children’s learning (AoL) in circle time is not

undertaken with any great rigour by the observed teachers. This may be due to the fact that teachers see circle time as “something completely informal” (Neasa, wrap up interview), or, as Sally states, it is “very difficult to do in circle time” (Sally, wrap up interview). Tomás’s response echoes some of the comments made by teachers in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) when he says:

...because the classroom I have to say it’s manic, because you’re literally running from one end of the day to the next, you’re running between all of the other subject areas, and you’re trying to fit in a bit of time out with the class on their own, a bit of quality time with them, and do I appraise myself afterwards – no.

(Tomás, interview one)

Finally, the observed teachers are monitoring at all times what children say in the circle, and how they react to the topic or theme in hand. This prompts two main types of follow-up, one of which might be deemed to be a type of formative assessment, or assessment for learning (AfL). For example, some teachers identify what they would do next as a result of what they have observed in a particular circle time session. Annette notes that she wants to develop the topic in hand, and “really get the children to focus upon the fact that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand” (Annette, journal one). At other times, teachers speak to children afterwards as a direct result of something that is said or not said in the circle. Majella spoke to one boy about comments he made about shooting Nazis. As this comes up again in the next section on challenges it is only mentioned here. Sally also spoke to some children whom she felt had been reticent about expressing worries in the circle:

...if I thought they would be afraid, that they would be worrying about something, and that they wouldn’t come up, just to clarify that you don’t have to come up in a big circle and tell us about it, you could come up to me and tell me separately.

(Sally, wrap up interview)

Overall, evidence from this research suggests that while the observed teachers see benefits in using circle time, they acknowledge the difficulty of a direct causal link. This begs a question in relation to other research on circle time which sets out to prove that the method has made a difference in some way.

There may be many reasons why teachers don't assess children's learning in a formal way in circle time, including the difficulty of assessment as well as its appropriateness in the informal atmosphere of circle time. It is likely that lack of evidence-gathering gives ammunition to those who view circle time as out of place in schools. It is also possible that a lack of assessment hinders planning for future circle times to address particular skills deficits (for example). This is further discussed in the next chapter.

The issue of assessment in circle time was not raised with the principals, nor did it come up incidentally in the interviews held with them.

Assessment of circle time could be described as a challenge for teachers, on the basis of the data gathered, although not one about which they are overly concerned. In the next section we discuss other challenges encountered by the observed teachers in their use of circle time.

The Challenges of Using Circle Time

I was interested in finding out if teachers found circle time challenging, and if so, what were the kind of challenges that arose in relation to its use. The challenges of assessment and evaluation have been dealt with previously.

Some of the challenges identified by teachers are not exclusive to circle time, but arise from the age or personalities of the children, as well as class size. So for Sally, concentration "would be a big thing" (Sally, interview one), whereas for Annette, issues

in the classroom such as personality clashes or isolation issues are definitely going to be evident “from a circle time” (Annette, interview one). Tomás has done circle time with classes as big as 35 (identified as a considerable challenge), even though now he is in a fortunate position to be able to work with half of the class at a time.

As already stated, there were very few infringements of rules by children in the observed sessions. However, the difficulty of dealing with even minor infringements while maintaining an esteeming and respectful atmosphere (key aspects of circle time) is challenging. For Sally, trying to tackle “a few chatterers...without interrupting the speaker” (Sally, journal two) was an issue. This she does by:

As discreetly as possible look in the direction of the children chatting which should redirect their attention. At one point I had to call on the children chatting and moving by name. I usually then make sure that I reaffirm the child that was contributing to the circle.

(Sally, journal one)

This demonstrates the light touch that all the teachers used in keeping children on track in circle time.

Some challenges identified relate to responses that children might make in the circle, as well as their lack of responses. Majella felt in observation three that the children were slow to take part: “I felt that I had to prompt their engagement too often and therefore felt the session contrived (Majella, journal three).

The way she handled the reticence was to give some examples to the children, or to ask a different question about the topic. Majella was more unnerved by an incident that occurred in one of the observed circle times in the pilot phase of the research. A child gave what she felt was an inappropriate response to a question and said he would “shoot them” in talking about Nazis (child, Majella’s class, observation two pilot phase). Majella dealt with this was by talking to the child afterwards on an individual basis.

However, she spoke about the dilemma of challenging the child over what he had said in a way that would not dent his confidence:

I felt I couldn't give out to him and turn around in the next circle time and expect the child to open up again. I thought it was more about speaking to him about what's appropriate and what's not. So he didn't walk away feeling upset ...I don't feel he had been given out to.

(Majella, wrap up pilot interview)

This is a good example of the tension that can exist for teachers in trying to balance the openness and esteeming nature of circle time with the need to guide children in moral matters. Although the literature on circle time suggests that there are no right or wrong answers in circle time in order to promote participation, Tomás suggested that this idea, “as you reflect on it, sure it's pure daft, because I mean there has to be a right answer, or there will be a wrong answer” (Tomás, wrap up interview). The ‘unconditional’ acceptance of children's answers in the circle time literature owes much to Rogerian principles. However, it may be in conflict with the desire to instil moral values which is another aim of circle time (Mosley, 1993; 1996). Social constructivists would provide scaffolds to children to move them forward, perhaps through dialogue or discussion. This apparent tension is analysed more fully in the next chapter.

Although Neasa has heard “horror stories” (Neasa, interview one) from fellow students in college, she herself has never had a bad experience in circle time. Ways of avoiding difficulties were readily identified by Neasa. These included knowing the children well, and using diversionary tactics:

...if you know your kids you can be on the ball and if you see them leaning towards that they want to talk about a particular topic that you know won't go down well, bring up something even if it's ridiculous, bring it up (researcher: to distract them?) and just distract them.

(Neasa, interview one)

Neasa had a contract drawn up at the beginning of the year which she felt was helpful in avoiding some of the pitfalls of circle time.

Notwithstanding Neasa's assertion about not running into any difficulties in her circle times, I noted a number of minor challenges during the observations that subsequently turned up in Neasa's journals. These included children giving answers to impress other children or appear "cool" (Neasa, journal three), children relaying advice given by parents which the teacher deemed unhelpful or inappropriate, and one child being embarrassed when some children laughed at something he said. Neasa was quick to point out in the wrap up interview that these were challenges that didn't just occur in circle times. However, because of the open nature of working in a circle, they have to be dealt with publicly, which might not be the case with other classroom incidents. This requires the teacher to act quickly and also within the constraints of any rules that have been agreed in advance for circle time, as well as within the principles of openness, equality and esteem implicit and explicit in the practice.

The immediacy of response is something Sally identified as a challenge when she was working with a fourth class previously. Loss was the topic:

...and the discussion led on to losing family members and one child got very upset about it. I mean, in saying that she was kind of nearly wanting to discuss it in the circle, but it made me, I wasn't sure what to do in that situation, I didn't know whether it was a case I should have stopped it, whether I shouldn't have brought it up at all, or if I hadn't really created a safe environment in the first place.

(Sally, interview one)

This raises two points about children's need to communicate noted in an earlier section (benefits of circle time). It may be that Sally was actually successful in creating an atmosphere where a child could discuss an issue, even though she doubts herself in this regard. It also illustrates the potential for issues to emerge in circle time that may be

unpredictable, but also the lack of intention on the part of the teacher in this instance to expose children in this way.

The role of the teacher in coping with difficulties associated with circle time is important, both in terms of adopting strategies to avoid obvious pitfalls, but also to manage the unpredictable occurrences that are part of conducting circle time with children, as illustrated by Majella's and Sally's experiences. The observed teachers adopt a number of tactics to reduce potential pitfalls and challenges, but feel constrained at times by the rules and principles of circle time in dealing with these challenges. The examples given here demonstrate a measured response by teachers to the challenges that faced them in the observed circle times. They also indicate that the principles of equality, esteem and openness were dear to these practitioners and were upheld in spite of these challenges.

Principals

Principals were cognisant of some of the challenges faced by teachers in their circle times, and were particularly aware of the potential for information being disclosed by a child in circle time that could breach family privacy or make a child vulnerable in some way. Principal S felt that what was a strength of circle time (giving children a voice) was also a weakness:

...the fact that children may come out with something that afterwards they might regret that the whole class had heard.

(Principal S, interview)

Principal N was also aware of the potential for children to disclose information in circle time:

...you imagine say in a country area where everybody knows everybody, the teacher, and she's finding out things about families...it can be a little bit gossipy.

(Principal N, interview)

As well as the challenge of dealing with disclosures, Principal A and Principal M were aware of the practical difficulties of time, space and numbers in the classroom setting. Principal M also felt that, especially in senior classes, there was a possibility that children would "say what you want to hear" (Principal M, interview) rather than voicing a true opinion. She also spoke about children who had told her they found it difficult to sit in the same circle as someone who was bullying them.

Notwithstanding the difficulties identified by teachers and principals, it seems these were not enough either to deter teachers, or for principals to question the conduct of circle time in teachers' classrooms.

Teachers Not Using Circle Time

As has already been noted, it was more difficult to find teachers not using circle time who would agree to be interviewed than had been anticipated. Because of the small-scale nature of the research, it is only possible to speculate as to why this might be the case. It may be that teachers are reluctant to talk about why they are not doing something as opposed to talking about something they are doing. Nonetheless, the three teachers interviewed in this category provide some interesting commentary on the practice of circle time which may be considered insightful.

Alan taught in a Fifth Class in Annette's school. He had never used circle time, even though he had seen a demonstration of it in his school at some stage. He was aware that

circle time allowed everybody to get “a chance to speak if they want to...” (Alan, interview). Alan did SPHE with the children from time to time, particularly if there was an issue such as bullying, making friends or a personal safety issue that needed to be discussed. These classes would be done with the children “all sitting at their table, they’re all giving their views on various things” (Alan, interview). Alan had never used circle time, and cited “huge overload” as a possible reason for this. He also felt that circle time might be more useful in the school if there were more discipline issues: “[h]ere we really do have very few, quite honestly, so you’d be rarely doing circle time to solve behavioural problems” (Alan, interview). Alan was adamant that SE was an important part of education: “[t]he whole person is most important” (Alan, interview). This he tried to promote in various ways in the classroom, including reward schemes for the children, and acknowledgement of individual strengths and talents. He was unsure how many teachers in the school were using circle time, but felt that it might be between ten and 20 per cent: “[t]hat’s what I would have thought” (Alan, interview). This contrasts with Principal A’s estimate of the number of teachers practicing circle time (about 50 per cent).

Two other teachers were interviewed who were not using circle time – Teresa who taught First Class in Tomás’s school, and Michael who was in a Sixth Class in Majella’s. Both had used it previously when a resource teacher had worked with them in the classroom, and the children were split into two groups, with the resource teacher taking one half (including a child with special needs) and the class teacher taking the other half for circle time. This contrasts with Tomás’s practice in that only one half of his class were doing circle time, while the other half could be doing PE, or other activities. Both Teresa and Michael were positive about their prior experience of doing circle time with a split class, but found it difficult to continue with circle time when this support was not available.

In Michael's case, the resource teacher provided a plan that both of them worked through in sight of each other in the classroom. Michael admitted that he had felt "very uncomfortable" when doing circle time in college as part of his SPHE course, but felt that working alongside an experienced teacher, "the first week the penny had dropped more than it had in college" (Michael, interview). Michael cited lack of space and Confirmation and entrance exam preparation as compelling reasons for not doing circle time in the current academic year - this pressure had been compounded by school closure due to adverse weather and a school fire. However, he was conscious that the children he had might benefit from circle time:

I have a good nucleus of children, more than half of my class, that don't get to express themselves verbally in front of the group.

(Michael, interview)

Michael was hoping that in the last term, he could "make it more enjoyable for the kids from now on" (Michael, interview) and this might include some circle times, suggesting that circle time was associated with fun.

While both Teresa and Michael had some common elements in their experience of circle time, Teresa wasn't planning to start it with her class in the current academic year. She felt it had worked when the class were split in two, but with 30 boys in first class, "it is a big number, and they don't wait for their turn..." (Teresa, interview). She also mentioned "the hassle of moving tables, creating the space..." (Teresa, interview). Some of her comments echoed challenges already identified in relation to behavioural issues that arise in the circle:

The other thing is, sometimes they misbehave, or they don't wait their turn. And then it's a question of, do you put somebody out of the circle...I think that defeats the purpose, the atmosphere that you're trying to create, by isolating a boy from the circle. But then again, it has to be done because they don't realistically sit and listen in the circle.

(Teresa, interview)

Teresa also spoke about occasions when she taught previously in a girls' school where children had said what she deemed were "borderline inappropriate things" which caused a similar dilemma:

...you were encouraging them to open up and say what they thought, and there was no wrong answer. And then when they came out with the things, you were like, oh God.

(Teresa, interview)

On another occasion, one parent had complained after a circle time about the fact that her child had been laughed at in the circle, and suggested that Teresa was responsible for facilitating this. Overall, Teresa felt "it was the numbers [of children]" that were the main barrier for implementing circle time. This led her to conclude that "it's easier to teach SPHE in a normal context, or in groups or through drama" (Teresa, interview). Teresa had no plans to use circle time in the remainder of the academic year.

It could be surmised that, in the case of the teachers not currently using circle time, positive experiences (or no experience) with the method was more likely to lead to future use. However, the practicalities of space (for Michael) and class size (for Teresa) were formidable barriers, as was curriculum overload (for Alan). As with previous findings, no claims are made for representativeness for this group.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings relating to the key informants (the observed teachers), with commentary from other informants (principals and the author Jenny Mosley) have been outlined under a number of headings that related to the research questions outlined in Chapter Four: Methodology. In terms of aims, those identified by the observed teachers are similar to the Mosley Model which aims to enhance SE, self-discipline and positive relationships. They are also in keeping with the aims of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) as

laid out in the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999: 2). Where there is a difference, it is in emphasis, with the observed teachers focusing on personal and social skills development more than SE. The way they develop these skills is through solving problems or dealing with issues that have arisen in the classroom or yard through a fictional lens. While some teachers mention confidence and SE as a focus, this is not emphasised as much as I had expected, given its prominence in the circle time literature and the *SPHE Curriculum* (1999). Giving children an equal voice is a key aim, however this relates more to the development of communication and problem-solving skills than an attempt to establish in-class or in-school democratic structures or skills. Some of the observed teachers identify the promotion of a positive classroom atmosphere as an aim.

The format and strategies used by teachers in circle time are similar to those in the Mosley Model of circle time, and are dissimilar in some respects to the framework outlined in the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999). However, there is a divergence from the Mosley Model in relation to some of the rules that are in use in the circle times observed, in particular a rule relating to confidentiality, and an ambivalence on the part of some teachers about the pass rule. The use of a fictional lens rather than the individual problem-solving modelled in the Mosley Model indicates another divergence. The role adopted by teachers in the circle is facilitative, and falls short of a counselling role in a number of respects, prompting a designation of it as ‘counselling-lite’.

There is acknowledgement among the observed teachers that assessment and evaluation is problematic in circle time. While some of the observed teachers evaluate their circle times in terms of getting things done, all are wary of linking perceived benefits to circle time practice exclusively. Some feel that circle time should not be assessed because of its informality and the perception that it is ‘special time’.

Notwithstanding difficulties around assessment, teachers identify key benefits relating to enjoyment, safety and ease of communication as a result of circle time. These in turn foster positive relationships in the classroom among the children, and between the teacher and children.

There are challenges for the teachers in conducting circle times, including the usual behaviour management issues and those that are particular to the method. These include inappropriate or controversial contributions from children, and the potential exposure of both children and teachers in the circle. These do not deter the observed teachers from continuing circle time with the children, even when they find it difficult to quantify the gains made as a result of the practice.

As the findings were collated and presented, it became obvious that there was overlap in some of the key concepts, and that some of the aims and benefits were complementary. This is explored in Chapter Six.

A link was made to these findings, the conceptual framework in Chapter Two and the literature review in Chapter Three. Some of the findings were in keeping with the concepts and literature outlined previously, while other findings contrasted with these in a way that needs further discussion. It is to those that we now turn in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The research findings were outlined under four main headings: the aims and focus of circle time; the format and strategies employed by the observed teachers; the benefits of circle time; and challenges for the teachers in using the method. This framework is used to discuss key issues flagged in the previous chapter. It is not possible to treat every issue that arose in the research in an in-depth manner. In each section the case for exploring some issues in more depth and others in less is made. This chapter draws on the conceptual framework (Chapter Two), the literature review (Chapter Three), and my own expertise and experience as a teacher educator to enrich the discussion. While no claims of representativeness of a larger teacher group are made in relation to the findings, they do provide a snapshot of what was happening in some classrooms, and are of value for this reason.

The Aims and Focus of Circle Time

The observed teachers were aiming to develop particular social and personal skills, to raise confidence and SE, to promote equality in terms of voice, and to foster a positive classroom atmosphere. It was noted that development of social and personal skills could be a way of promoting confidence and SE in children, and the point was made that some of the skills mentioned by the teacher group fell within EI as defined by Mayer *et al.* (2004). Particular incidents in the classroom and yard were sometimes the trigger for introducing the children to these skills in circle time.

The rationale for discussing SE in relation to research findings is that it is seen as a cornerstone of the SPHE Curriculum (1999) and is a key goal of circle time in the Mosley Model. EI is seen by some commentators (e.g. Craig, 2007) as the natural successor to the SE focus in educational circles, and as has already been stated, some of

the skills mentioned fall into this category. The fact that promotion of these concepts in education is contested provides added interest in further discussion, as did my surprise at SE's relative low-key status among the observed teachers.

Giving children an equal voice was mentioned by those who used circle time as a key aim. It was also mentioned by principals and teachers not using circle time as a key feature of circle time. Therefore it could be said that circle time's reputation for giving children a voice is a widely-held belief, at least among these research participants. This prompted an interrogation of the concept of voice as evidenced in the research findings.

The promotion of a positive classroom atmosphere was mentioned to a lesser extent. I am not aware of any controversy in relation to an aim such as this, even from those who challenge the practice of circle time. Therefore it does not feature in the following discussion.

Confidence and Self-esteem (SE)

SE is a long-established concept in the field of psychology. The term is used liberally and loosely in both the general population and among educationalists. Its pursuit in education has been criticised in recent times (e.g. Craig, 2007; Maclellan, 2005). The definition by Miller *et al.* (2007) was adopted as a touchstone for comparison in this research. This drew on two historical strands of SE and proposed a model that integrated "self-competence and self-worth" (Miller *et al.*, 2007: 602).

Confidence was mentioned by a few of the teachers in the research, which might equate to Miller *et al.*'s (2007) "self-competence". One teacher mentioned "self-worth" (Sally, interview one). Miller and *et al.*'s (2007) study found evidence that it was the self-worth aspect of SE that was enhanced in circle time rather than the self-competence aspect. This contrasted with the emphasis placed on confidence by some of the teachers.

It was also noted earlier that affirmation exercises were not used by the observed teachers, although an affirming atmosphere was promoted, adding further weight to the argument that self-worth has a lesser focus, at least for this group of teachers.

The term 'self-esteem' was seldom used by the observed teachers. This could be accounted for in a number of ways: either the teachers took for granted that this was implicit in their practice of circle time, or the teachers recognised that SE building was a nebulous business. Greenstone (2008) suggested that sentiments attached to SE building have become so "commonplace and commonsensical that few readers have thought to question them" (Greenstone, 2008: 675). High SE as an end in itself may not be a laudable goal (Carr, 2000) and may be in conflict with particular educational goals (Maclellan, 2005). Majella suggested that "circle time is not the place to raise their self-esteem", and thought that "sometimes it's the one-on-one" that was more effective in this regard (Majella, interview one, pilot phase). This might also explain the apparent lack of focus on SE in the findings. All of the observed teachers acknowledged the difficulty of measuring gains (including enhanced SE) as a result of circle time. It may be that their reticence to articulate aims in relation to SE building in circle time is well-founded, for a variety of reasons.

This begs the question as to whether SE should be promoted in circle time, or more generally in the modern primary school classroom. In the most recent curriculum reform (PSC, 1999), it is held up as an aspiration and a legitimate goal of education (SPHE Curriculum, 1999). While I recognise that my teacher-education endeavours have been heavily influenced by the SE movement in education, this is now tempered by the literature which shows a marked ambivalence about the concept. In its favour, it provides a framework for teachers interacting with children in classrooms in a respectful and relationship-enhancing way. But if SE is pursued at the expense of other goals in

education, it may be counterproductive. Maclellan (2005: 8) argued for teachers promoting “competence through a structured, relevant and differentiated curriculum”, while Kennedy (2010) was in favour of building self-efficacy through similar means. This argument resonated with my experience, as I believe that some of my greatest successes in enhancing SE in the primary school classroom were teaching children to read and write, particularly those who were experiencing difficulty in these areas. This may be what Maclellan (2005) had in mind when she said: “[t]he influence of academic achievement on self-concept is greater than is the influence of self-concept on academic achievement” (Maclellan, 2005: 8). This suggests that teachers should focus on academic achievement as a way of building SE, rather than the other way round.

In Ireland, an increased focus on numeracy and literacy has been triggered by falling results for Irish students in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2009). While this has engendered much debate in educational circles (not least about the causes), it could be argued that this move is a positive step, as it may be through academic achievement that teachers can make the most significant contribution to a child’s SE. *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011) sets down clear actions for improved performance from 2011 to 2020. Highlighted are:

...learning approaches, including cooperative learning, differentiated learning, active learning and problem-solving activity, which we know not only contribute to more effective learning but increase learners’ participation in and enjoyment of the learning process.

(DES, 2011: 43)

While this may give some comfort to those who fear the demise of these types of approaches, among which circle time could be numbered, this needs to be balanced with the prioritisation of literacy and numeracy in DES (2011) and the need for proof in

relation to specific learning outcomes contained in the plan, all of which may impact on time available for methods such as circle time.

Based on the evidence outlined in preceding chapters, and the findings of the current research, it is reasonable to suggest that SE building should not be the primary focus of circle time (or indeed education in general), and that it could provide an informing rather than a central role. A focus on self-concept and self-efficacy may be more worthwhile through enhancement of children's competencies in key areas of school curriculum (such as literacy and numeracy). This proposal contrasts with the focus of much of the Mosley literature, which provides a rose-tinted view of SE promotion, and fails to acknowledge any doubts about the benefits or opportunity costs of an over-enthusiastic focus on the concept.

It may be that the lack of a ringing endorsement of SE promotion evidenced in the current research is indicative of teachers who have discerned a chink in the armour of the SE bandwagon and developed a quiet scepticism about its claims. Or it could mean that SE promotion is so embedded in the primary school system that it barely needs a mention by teachers. Further research is needed to establish which of these hypotheses holds sway in Irish primary schools.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

All of the observed teachers listed particular skills that they were aiming to promote in circle times as a way of tackling in-class or yard problems, as well as children's personal problems identified by the teachers as needing attention. These included dealing with feelings, conflict management, communication and coping skills. Some of these skills fell within the definition of EI as delineated by Mayer *et al.* (2004). None of the teachers in the research spoke of EI as a concept, but talked about dealing with feelings in more general terms. Mayer *et al.*'s (2004) definition of EI was as follows:

It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth ...

(Mayer *et al.*, 2004: 197)

When Sally spoke about children "talking about times you felt sad, times you felt happy..." (Sally, interview one), she was conceivably contributing to children's development of EI in terms of understanding emotions and emotional knowledge. When she documented her aim as: "to be able to recognise the feelings of others" (Sally, journal three), she was definitely interested in developing children's ability to accurately perceive emotions. When Neasa spoke of "everybody in the class feeling a little bit better", (Neasa, interview one) she may have wished for children to understand emotions and emotional knowledge. Likewise, when Majella spoke about using circle time "for all that soft fuzzy stuff...more feelings", (Majella, interview one, pilot phase) she may have wished to contribute to children's EI. And even though EI is not mentioned in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), giving children skills in dealing with emotions is a key aspect of the *Myself* strand (SPHE Teacher Guidelines, 1999: 12). What this suggests is an implicit endorsement of the concept of EI.

Gardner's work on inter- and intrapersonal intelligences may have contributed to this endorsement, although he stopped short of acknowledging EI as an intelligence. However, there is no mention of Gardner or multiple intelligences in the SPHE Curriculum (1999), apart from two references listed in the source references, neither of which are Gardner's own work.

It must be remembered that in several instances in the current research, the observed teachers were trying to tackle particular classroom and yard behavioural issues when they discussed feelings in circle time. It is unclear how much of their focus was on the elimination of problematic behaviours, and how much was devoted to the personal development of the children. It is likely that the teachers had long-term aims of personal development rather than just on-the-spot management of issues, although this is only speculation based on my overall impression of the observed teachers. It may be that the focusing on day-to-day issues in circle time allowed the teachers to develop particular skills with the children that might not have been introduced or discussed otherwise – circle time provided a forum for such development. Whether this would have been done if circle time was not being used is unclear, although Alan's discussions on such issues were not conducted in a circle in his classroom. It could be that teachers not familiar with circle time would tackle these issues less, or perhaps adopt a more punitive approach to problems that arise in the yard or classroom– this is however speculative, and is worthy of further research.

The specific targeting of feelings work in circle time suggested that teachers, at least implicitly, saw value in doing this work, either to tackle immediate issues or to prepare children for life's challenges. The fact that it is not named by them does not necessarily either endorse or challenge the concept of EI. As was seen in the case of SE, terminology is often vague and terms are bandied about without too much thought as to

specific meanings and evidence in education. For those who would deny a place in classrooms for EI, it appears from the current research that it is difficult to avoid discussions of children's feelings, even if only for practical reasons of behaviour management. Children in general are less adept at hiding their feelings than adults, particularly in their early school years, and teachers have to manage emotions on a daily basis in primary school classrooms. It is likely that the observed teachers had more medium- or long-term aspirations for the children in their focus on feelings in circle time, rather than just the resolution of day-to-day problems. Classrooms informed by the concepts of SE and EI are likely to be more pleasant and positive for all parties than those that are not. While it is acknowledged that the research base for any benefits for children in classrooms informed by such concepts is incomplete at best, or unproven or contradicted at worst (as outlined in Chapter Three), the reality is that in the normal rough and tumble of classroom life teachers have to deal with feelings daily. Ideally this should happen in a planned, developmental rather than just a reactive way. Ways of dealing with feelings are culturally mediated, and this may pose problems in the multicultural classrooms of today, particularly if there is a perception that there are optimum or ideal coping strategies. EI holds promise in terms of personal development, behaviour management and problem-solving in schools, but its pursuit should not become a straitjacket of conformity and homogeneity. The danger if this were to happen would be that a 'one size fits all' approach might be used in the development of children's EI, resulting in a generation of children with a narrow range of coping strategies for dealing with their feelings (what I have been known to call "the deep breath brigade"). This requires some thought and discussion among teachers, a point that is taken up in the Conclusion.

Children's Voice

The idea that circle time was a forum for giving children a voice in the classroom was a widely-held belief among those who were interviewed for this research, including those who were at some remove from the practice, such as principals and teachers not using circle time. While the use of the speaking object is dealt with in a later section in this chapter, the relationship between the findings in the research and a move towards a more democratic and rights-based agenda (identified as a driver of circle time implementation) also merited further discussion.

Circle time is a unique opportunity to provide an inclusive, participative forum with built-in safeguards for upholding equality of children's voice. Most of the observed teachers employed a round system with a speaking object to facilitate equal opportunity for children to speak. Two teachers did not – Majella and Neasa – as they preferred to allow children to volunteer responses in a more informal way. Majella did this so as to reduce pressure on individual children to speak, although she made a conscious effort to draw in children who had not spoken by inviting children “who haven't already said something” to speak (Majella, observation one). Neasa felt that inviting children to speak in a less formal manner gave them an opportunity to practice discussion skills that they might not otherwise get a chance to do. I was impressed with the participation of the children in all the classes observed, whether a formal or informal approach was used. Extending the analysis to the focus and extent of children's voice was the next step.

If we examine the main themes of the observed circle times (as identified by the teachers in their journals) these were all teacher-selected, although some were prompted by teachers noting a difficulty a particular child or children were having:

Teacher	Theme One	Theme Two	Theme Three
Sally	Being Kind to Others	Feelings - worries	Feelings – recognising feelings of others
Tomás	General/Christmas	Listening	Dreams/imagination
Majella	Christmas traditions	My earliest/happiest memory	Showing Love
Neasa	Selflessness (Christmas)	Coping with different situations	Dealing with bullying
Annette	Rights and Responsibilities (One)	Rights and Responsibilities (Two)	Inequality

Table 5: Themes and Foci of Observed Circle Times

The themes in the main related to the development of particular skills or dispositions (Sally, Neasa, Annette), or were topical (Majella, Tomás). Sally’s first theme arose out of an incident in the yard involving a small number of children in her class. Majella’s sessions were very focused on eliciting responses from individual children using topical themes (the “showing love” theme took place around St. Valentine’s Day). Neasa’s and Annette’s were more outer-focussed (perhaps reflecting the age of the children), with Neasa’s first session encouraging children to think about people in their immediate environment and further afield for whom Christmas might not be a joyous time. The children were encouraged to make wishes for people (other than themselves) to help make Christmas happier. Two further sessions were concerned with providing opportunities for children in the class to develop coping skills. Annette’s sessions were clearly focussed on children’s rights and responsibilities in a general way, but also

specifically on the rights of children in her classroom to be different – this arose out of concerns voiced by some of the children in the class who felt they were treated differently because they were ”not as cool” (Annette, journals two and three).

It is clear from the findings that while equality of children’s voice was promoted in circle time, this did not necessarily lead to the promotion of democracy in the classroom, citizenship or rights education (with one exception), although it is possible that this occurred at other times in these classrooms. Children’s voice was exercised to develop personal skills (such as confidence, communication and coping skills) rather than democratic or citizenship skills. While personal skills are an obvious starting point for working with children, there was little evidence that the focus changed as children moved up to through the school. Themes in the observed sessions illustrated findings in PCR 2 (NCCA, 2008) and DES (2009) where it was found that teachers primarily focussed on the *Myself* and *Myself and others* strands in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) rather than the *Myself and the wider world* strand. As was mentioned earlier, this may have been due to the timing of the observations, all of which took place late in the first term or early in the second term of the academic year. There is a possibility that teachers move through the strands in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) as the year progresses, leaving more global issues till the last term. An alternate explanation is that when time is scarce and curriculum overload is perceived as high, teachers tend to focus on more immediate personal, behavioural and topical matters to the detriment of wider world issues.

Earlier, the UNCRC (1989) was identified as a watershed for children’s rights, and Article 32 was highlighted as particularly important for children’s participation in matters that affect their lives. Lundy (2007) proposed that participation should be assessed along four dimensions: space, voice, audience and influence. While circle time

was identified as an ideal space for giving children voice and access to an audience (albeit a limited one), there was no evidence in the observed sessions that this led to influence outside the circle. This limits its potential for empowerment. That children are capable of contributing to decision-making in Irish primary schools is upheld by McLoughlin's work (in Deegan *et al.*, 2004: 132). On the other hand, the evidence from DES (2009) suggested that children's voice is rarely heard in school planning matters, confirming the limited use of their voice in primary schools. As was noted in Chapter Three, the trend appears to be in the opposite direction, with children's involvement in school planning issues decreasing (*State of the Nation's Children*, 2010). If circle time were to become a vehicle for empowerment beyond the confines of classroom or yard (Holden, 2003), it would need to be reconceptualised based on the evidence. There is further potential to be developed in giving children equality of voice both in terms of exercising democracy in the classroom and school, and promoting citizenship and rights education at an age-appropriate time. This may require teachers to move beyond the current practice to facilitate varied and extended use of children's voice. For example, if children were to engage in decision-making at school or community level it would potentially extend their voice beyond discussion of personal or classroom issues. They would still be developing communication skills, along with citizenship and democratic skills.

Simovska provided a model for participation which focused on the quality of the experience, as opposed to Lundy's which is more concerned with the dimensions of the participation. Focus, outcomes and the target of the change are important elements of the assessment of quality. In the observed circle times, the focus was teacher-driven but did allow for the "personal meaning-making" envisaged by Simovska (in Read *et al.*, 2008: 67), as children discussed coping strategies and behaviour modification. While there was potential divergence in terms of outcomes generated (children identified many

ways of coping with particular situations), this was understandably limited in some instances by consideration of school rules and cultural norms which led to a narrow range of options being explored. The target of change was mainly the individual child or children in the classroom context, rather than the “individual-in-context” (Simovska: in Read *et al.*, 2008: 65) in a wider school, community or global context. What both models of participation suggest is a re-orientation of circle time outwards where children might begin to exercise agency and power in their worlds in a more purposeful and rights-informed way. This should not be done at the expense of the personal development focus of circle time which might derive from EI and SE goals, but should be seen as an integral and logical development of personal or embodied empowerment.

Format and Process of the Circle Times

The format of the observed circle times was deemed to be largely based on the Mosley Model rather than the model of circle work outlined in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) which provides little in the way of instruction for teachers. Even teachers who weren't aware of Mosley's work (e.g. Neasa) still used a format which was very much in keeping with Mosley's Model. This finding is not unexpected, given the presence of Mosley and her literature in Ireland over a long number of years, and the propensity of teachers to share materials and resources. Findings in relation to the rules of circle time, and role adopted by teachers in that space were of interest for a variety of reasons and are discussed here.

Rules of Circle Time

Rules such as respect for the opinions of others were vigorously upheld by the observed teachers, and children were encouraged to listen to one another and take turns in contributing in the circle. Other rules applied by teachers echoed Mosley, such as not naming names in a negative way and not interrupting when someone is talking. Tomás

liked to start his circle times with a reiteration of the rules, while some of the teachers spent little time discussing rules, suggesting familiarity among the children around expectations of behaviour.

Two rules were identified as worthy of further discussion based on an apparent mismatch between the Mosley Model and the practice in classrooms – these were the confidentiality and ‘pass’ rules. Experience in in-career education with teachers also suggested that these were areas of concern, and therefore worthy of further examination.

The Confidentiality Rule

Perhaps because of its association with counselling (presented in Chapter Two), circle time is often associated with a confidentiality rule which would typically be part of a client/counsellor contract (see, for example, the Association of Professional Counsellors and Psychotherapists in Ireland’s code of ethics at www.apcp.ie). This aspect of circle time is often brought up as an area of concern by teachers during in-career activity. The observed teachers were ambivalent about its use. Neither Annette nor Sally had a confidentiality rule in operation at the time of the research, but both outlined how they had used it in the past (in Annette’s case on just one occasion). Majella was opposed to a confidentiality rule in circle time. Two of the teachers (Neasa and Tomás) operated a limited form of confidentiality, where children were expected to exercise confidentiality about aspects of work in the circle, but were allowed to talk to parents about what had been discussed. Neasa had drawn up a contract with her children which included a “privacy” clause that “certain things should not be discussed outside circle time” (Neasa, interview one). She clarified later why she felt this was important: “[i]f someone got upset you don’t go out and say it on the yard” (Neasa, wrap up interview).

One wonders if all children have the ability to distinguish between what is confidential material in circle times, and what can be shared with parties external to the circle time session. This becomes more problematic the younger the children are, although at primary level it is debatable whether even senior children would have the necessary judgement. I have worked with groups of teachers who saw confidentiality as an important aspiration, but who did not manage to maintain this over an extended time, suggesting that it is not just children who might have difficulties with the concept. Exercise of such a rule, even in the limited form outlined by Tomás and Neasa, is problematic, not least because it appears to contradict the teaching of personal safety skills for children (for example, in the *Stay Safe Programme*, 1998) where children are encouraged to “tell, and keep telling”, although the context is different. Children could be confused about what is appropriate for telling in relation to personal safety issues if such a rule were to be applied in a vague or ill-defined way. The idea of limited confidentiality also suggests that circle time might be a time when children’s vulnerabilities are likely to be more exposed than in the ordinary classroom routines. This contradicts the notion of circle time as a safe space for children to exercise voice, a point that is explored later. It also reinforces the idea that children’s voice does not extend beyond the circle, depriving them of a wider audience and potential for influence. Apart from the desirability of ensuring that children’s vulnerability is not increased in circle time (which might happen if particular incidents or communications were disclosed outside the circle), I argue that there is no compelling reason for a confidentiality rule, either in the limited form practiced by some teachers, or in a more restricted form. This is not to say that children’s sensitivities as displayed in circle time (or any other time in classrooms) should be broadcast to a wider audience. Children should be encouraged to respect the feelings of others, as and when the need arises, which may involve not sharing those feelings outside the classroom as well as other

actions. Teachers need to recognise and exercise their responsibility to keep children emotionally safe in circle time in as far as that is possible. As Majella (interview, pilot phase) pointed out, the potential for teachers to “dig a massive hole” for themselves in this area, and the disadvantages outweigh any benefits such a rule might engender. As already noted, Mosley was not in favour of a confidentiality rule in her Model.

Circle time is seen as a manifestation of the therapeutic turn in education arising out of a view of children as vulnerable and life as damaging (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009). A confidentiality rule emphasises this and runs counter to the argument that circle time is ‘counselling-lite’ and should become more globally (as opposed to classroom) focussed.

Removing the confidentiality rule potentially extends the audience for all communication beyond those present in circle time. This may exacerbate privacy concerns. Hanafin *et al.* (2009) singled out the practice of circle time as particularly invasive:

...even if information is confined to the circle group, with provision being made for children to speak to their parents if they need to do so, the practice may still lead to a lot of people knowing personal details about individual children.

(Hanafin *et al.*, 2009: 4)

The teacher needs to be aware of the right of children to privacy (an issue to which we will return). However, an excessive consideration of privacy issues might hinder relationship-building, an aspect of teaching that many teachers value (including the observed teachers). As was highlighted in Chapter Five, the fun and enjoyment evidenced in the observations of circle time create a positive atmosphere between teacher and children in which learning can flourish. In addition, children’s constant demands to be heard in classrooms often prompted the use of circle time, rather than it being driven by a desire of the teacher to gather or disseminate personal information.

The skill of the teacher to walk the fine line between participation and intrusion is important here. We now turn to the ‘pass’ rule to explore this more fully.

The ‘Pass’ Rule

The Mosley Model incorporates an option to ‘pass’ in circle time if children choose. Some observed teachers were ambivalent about this rule, while others did not use a speaking object in order to reduce pressure on children to speak on a given topic. This is an important issue, from a psychological, rights and privacy perspective.

William Glasser is identified by Mosley (interview one) as a key contributor to the psychological underpinnings of her circle time model. Glasser is committed to the idea of the autonomy of the individual, and their right (and ability) to choose wisely in the pursuit of happiness. It is unlikely that Glasser would approve of a dilution of the ‘pass’ rule in circle times, even if this is done for reasons of inclusion and the development of particular communication skills. In the same vein, Maslow’s exhortation that teachers should “offer only and rarely force” (Maslow, 1998: 54) suggests that he too might be concerned at an attempt to dilute the pass rule.

Rogers’s (1967: 283) principle of “unconditional positive regard” might be undermined if teachers were to insist on children making a contribution when they clearly do not wish to do so, suggesting a judgement on the part of teachers which values oracy over other kinds of participation. As Hanafin *et al.* (2009: 3) pointed out, “[p]articipation is lauded and nonparticipation is construed as lack of interest, lack of motivation or laziness”. If children who pass are seen as less able, lazier or less amenable than other children, this could undermine the positive esteeming effect that proponents of circle time claim for the practice.

The SPHE Curriculum (1999) encourages teachers to develop children's decision-making and assertiveness skills, among others listed under the *Myself* strand. The exercise of autonomy in relation to choices about participation in circle time is one way of allowing children to assert themselves and make their own choices. As I am fond of saying to student teachers, there is little point in introducing these skills if children are not allowed to practice them in the classroom and other settings. There is a danger that what seems like a well-intentioned move (i.e. encouragement of children not to pass in circle time) could undermine some of the psychological foundations on which the practice rests.

From a rights perspective, the right to remain silent is one of the most well-known in judicial matters. For children, implicit in the right to a voice is the right to choose when and where to exercise that voice (as outlined in Chapter Two). Voice is only one form of participation, although it is possibly the most powerful form. There are other ways for children to participate in circle time which does not involve them in sentence completion or other oral exercises. To force them to speak is an exercise of power in the circle in a way that is detrimental to skills development and empowerment.

Teacher Role in Circle Time

That teachers saw their role in circle time as different to that which pertained at other times in their classrooms is evident from the data outlined previously. A key element of Bednar *et al.*'s (1989) model of the role of the therapist concerned the adoption of an 'expert teacher' or 'facilitator' role. A facilitative rather than an expert role was adopted by teachers in the circle. The shift in role caused some trepidation among the teachers (for example Majella, Tomás and Annette). While teachers set the agenda in terms of the focus and activities in the circle to a large extent, there was an openness about what children could say, or how the session might proceed. This created

its own anxieties, as evidenced by Annette's comment: "[y]ou're reacting to all of the things they're saying, you're letting them speak" (Annette, wrap up interview). However, it was noted that while the observed teachers largely adopted a facilitative role, rules around listening and equality of participation were closely monitored and upheld. While children were encouraged to speak, if a child said something that the teacher deemed inappropriate, they were challenged in a variety of ways. In Neasa's second session, when a child relayed what she felt was inappropriate parental advice, she invited the other children to evaluate the advice, and comment on its likely effect, thereby facilitating scaffolding of learning by peers. When a child in Majella's class talked about shooting Nazis, she spoke to him after the session, even though she was conflicted between wanting to acknowledge the child's contribution to circle time and convincing him that it was wrong to talk about killing anyone. The observed teachers handled the various challenges within circle time appropriately, suggesting that the teachers' facilitation skills were more than adequate for the task of running circle times with their classes. However, these teachers are not necessarily representative of teachers in general.

Lack of teaching experience did not appear to be a barrier to good facilitation among the observed teachers. Neasa and Sally were only in the early stages of their teaching career, but both had effective facilitation skills in common with the more experienced teachers in the group. There may still be a case for strengthening the facilitation skills of teachers in primary schools, given the anxiety that was expressed by some of the observed teachers in relation to the handling of particular challenges, and their self-doubt about their role in circle time. The findings in the circle time research contrast with those in DES (2009), where a significant minority of teachers were considered to

be unskilled in leading talk and discussion in classrooms¹⁸. It is quite likely that teachers volunteering for participation in observation-type research feel some level of confidence about their skills in leading circle times, and therefore could not be considered typical of most classroom teachers. The DES (2009) study lends weight to the contention that facilitation skills training could be usefully offered to primary school teachers.

The place of circle time in schools has been contested because of its so-called 'therapeutic nature'. The type of counselling found in the research was described as 'counselling-lite'. Problems were introduced and discussed mainly through a fictional lens, and were focussed on children in general rather than any individual child. In an effort to allow children to debate and practice particular skills (such as conflict resolution) drama processes were used to make the work more personal and engaging in some instances (e.g. Neasa, observation two). While some might argue that this points to a perception of children as vulnerable and fragile, the reality of their lives is that they are not all likely to have developed the coping skills to deal with the everyday occurrences that confront them. Neasa (for example) often identified a skill deficit or an issue during the week that was the focus of circle time on a Friday afternoon. Left to their own devices, the children might have picked these skills up anyway. On the other hand, their vulnerability might be increased by not focusing on key coping skills. The argument for omitting circle time from the school timetable because of its therapeutic nature is not convincing based on the data, particularly because other benefits of circle time might be lost. Further research is needed to see if these research findings are found more generally in circle time.

The approach used by teachers in the observed circle times and how they played out their role was effective in allowing children to explore problems and issues of relevance

¹⁸ It was found that approximately 20 per cent of teachers were not skilled in leading talk and discussion in DES (2009: 54).

to their lives. The ‘counselling-lite’ approach with its fictional focus is appropriate, given the public nature of circle times and the fact that teachers are not qualified counsellors. As Bor *et al.* (2002: 14) pointed out, “[l]ack of training in psychological theories or vague theoretical ideas can lead to confusion in counselling sessions for both the pupil and the counsellor.” It is likely that those who are critical of the practice would find little comfort in the designation of circle time as ‘counselling-lite’. However, there are benefits that arise from the practice over and above the counselling or therapeutic aspects of it. The perceived benefits as relayed by the observed teachers are discussed next.

Benefits of Circle Time

The benefits identified were fun and enjoyment for both children and teachers, a sense of safety for children that allowed them to talk openly and honestly, and the facilitation of communication in the circle between teacher and children, and children and children. Some observed teachers felt this latter aspect of circle time answered a real need that children had to communicate with their teacher which was difficult to facilitate in the day-to-day classroom routine. Majella also made the point that modern life did not facilitate communication which made circle time valuable. Communication in the circle also allowed children to “gel” (Tomás, interview one), to get to know one another (Sally, interview one), and to become aware of commonalities between them (Majella, interview one).

The lack of mention of confidence-building or SE building by teachers under the heading of benefits was noted in Chapter Five. This could be explained in several possible ways:

- As previously mentioned, confidence and SE may have been ‘taken-for-granted’ benefits of circle time
- As the observations and interviews took place at the end of the first term and beginning of the second term it may have been too early for teachers to see gains in confidence or SE
- Given how difficult it is to assess SE and confidence in children, the teachers may have been reluctant to ascribe any gains to circle time
- Teachers are not convinced of the effectiveness of circle time for enhanced SE in children.

Whatever reasons can be surmised, it is likely that critics of circle time could point to this research as an indication of dubious gain in relation to its main *raison d’être*, if these findings were to be replicated in a larger sample size. However, it has already been argued that SE enhancement should not be the primary aim of circle time, given the uncertainty about its effects outlined earlier, and the difficulty of assessing gains.

It could also be argued that providing a safe space for children to express themselves openly and honestly has potential to undermine child and family privacy. I have some sympathy for this argument, however this is tempered by children’s need to communicate with significant adults in their lives (such as their teachers) as noted by some of the teachers in the research. A lot of the joy and fun of teaching would be gone if children (and teachers) felt so constrained in their communication that a good working relationship wasn’t developed. This could happen if children’s natural tendency to communicate with their teacher was overly restricted for privacy considerations. Circle time contributes to relationship-building, as evidenced by the comments of teachers in the research. It should be possible to conduct circle times and

other classroom activities in a way that safeguards children's right to privacy while allowing for fun, skills development and enhancement of classroom relationships. Some pointers in this regard are offered in the final chapter.

Teachers were reluctant to attribute benefits to circle time in acknowledgement of the fact that it was difficult to prove that circle time alone was solely the cause of any benefits. It was found that assessment was informal, based on teacher observation (a legitimate form of assessment encouraged in the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, 1999), and was seen as difficult in this kind of activity. These findings are in keeping with the PCR 2, NCCA (2006) and the DES (2009) findings in relation to assessment in SPHE outlined earlier in Chapter Three. This begs a question: does this matter? Critics of circle time might suggest that because there is little measurement of learning possible or attempted in circle time, the time might be better used for progressing learning that is more amenable to measurement. In the UK, Sir Jim Rose, who was charged with primary curriculum reform, suggested that the time devoted to circle time had to represent "value for money" (Proceedings, House of Commons, 22nd January 2010, accessed at www.parliament.uk). The "value for money" argument has gained currency in this jurisdiction, as the government struggles to manage the national finances. Furthermore, a back to basics move is inherent in the recently published *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011). If we were to follow the UK example of a literacy hour every day for children in primary schools, it is likely that activities such as circle time (and other activities deemed unmeasurable) would be squeezed out. I have no argument with enhancing children's literacy or numeracy skills, given the potential of these to increase confidence and SE in children (Kennedy 2010). However, a move such as this displays a lack of awareness of the potential for circle time to develop personal and interpersonal skills, which have currency in terms of employability and applicability in the workplace. The argument also ignores the potential of circle time to

deliver on key literacy skills (such as oral development) and opportunities to integrate reading and writing as happened in some of the observed circle times in this research (e.g. Neasa, observation one; Annette, observation three).

While it is acknowledged that the benefits of circle time are difficult to quantify and defy measurement in many instances, this does not mean that there are no benefits. It is difficult to argue with professional teachers who are drawn to the practice because they themselves can see benefits in their own classrooms which may go undetected or be undervalued by others. While there is a case for using more variety of assessment techniques to ensure that circle time continues to be a meaningful activity for teachers and children, this should not be seen as an argument that everything that is learned is measurable. Circle time could benefit children more by, for example, quick reviews of their learning, either in or out of the circle, preferably in a format that can be analysed by the teacher to inform planning for future circle time learning opportunities. The NCCA has developed a section on their website (NCCA.ie) on foot of findings from curriculum reviews across a range of areas, one of which is assessment for learning (AfL). There are a number of key resources available to teachers at the click of a mouse to aid in AfL. I was particularly taken with the use of child self-assessment techniques for AfL that can be implemented in any lesson (including an activity such as circle time), and recording techniques such as videoing which could enhance children's learning and teacher's assessment. It is likely that the pressures to focus on literacy, numeracy and value for money will be prevalent in educational discourses for many years to come. There is an onus on those in leadership positions within education to make the case for particular curricula and activities if they really believe they can contribute to children's holistic development. That case has yet to be made for circle time, and the concluding chapter will address this in a concrete way.

The Challenges of Circle Time

The teachers in the research were skilled in classroom management techniques which allowed them to create a circle and conduct circle time without any major behavioural issues disrupting the flow of interaction. Some of the challenges that emerged related to the public nature of the activity, and the perceived need for immediate responses to opinions and issues that arose. The other significant challenge was that the teacher's response had to be in keeping with the principles underpinning circle time such as esteem, equal voice and respect for opinions. There is little point in encouraging children to exercise their voice if teachers are then critical of their opinions and ideas. Because these various challenges were deemed to be significant by most of the observed teachers, and my own interest in the challenges, they are discussed here.

Rogierian counselling theory was referenced in the Mosley Model as a “theoretical underpinning” (Mosley, 1996: 72-3), and was presented in Chapter Two. Of particular interest for this discussion is the notion of unconditional positive regard. This may be what inspired the groundrule contained in Mosley (1996: 35): “[y]ou must accept any contribution, however ‘off beat’, with great respect. Give thanks when possible.” This is sometimes translated by teachers into a rule that says “there are no right or wrong answers in circle time”, indeed I have been known to utter those words on more than one occasion. This is generally done in an effort to assuage children's fears about not having a correct answer or getting things wrong. But as Tomás said, “as you reflect on it, sure it's pure daft...” (Tomás, wrap up interview). Its daftness lies in the fact that teachers do not operate in a vacuum without principles, cultural norms, traditions, or moral frameworks to inform their work with children. Four of the teachers in the research project were working in Catholic schools, where there is an often stated onus on them to uphold Catholic principles and rules. This has been raised by teachers in in-career activity in relation to sexuality issues (for example sexual orientation) and how

these are dealt with in the primary school. The other school in the research was a multi-denominational school which also has its own ethics curriculum which gives moral guidance.

Majella felt she had to act when one of the children spoke about killing Nazis in her circle time. This was particularly difficult for her because there were “thirty-two children” listening to the child expressing the intention (Majella, wrap up pilot interview), but also because this was a child she had identified as having made progress in communicating in circle time in a previous session: “[o]ne child stood out as they are normally quite shy but they seemed to really enjoy discussing feelings” (Majella, journal one, pilot phase). This then became a constraint, as outlined by Majella:

I want to guide him as opposed to saying, well now that you’ve got this new confidence and you’re speaking out, I’m just going to turn around and tell you that what you’re saying is incorrect...

(Majella, wrap up pilot interview)

A further constraint was that this communication happened in circle time, where children had a reasonable expectation of their opinions being listened to and respected.

This was not the only challenge in terms of children giving opinions in circle time. It is possible, even likely, that the parents of Majella’s child would not condone their child expressing ideas about killing. In Neasa’s case, one challenge related to a child who, quoting a parent, offered what she felt was inappropriate advice around handling bullying. She chose to challenge this in the circle by asking the other children what they thought. However, half the class put their hands up to show that they agreed with the strategy: “my Dad says if someone hits you, you hit them back, that’s what my Da says” (child, observation two). This was an instance of where scaffolding of appropriate learning by group discussion was difficult to achieve. In the course of my work as

coordinator of a national programme for substance misuse prevention education at primary level, I came across many instances of a mismatch between school and home culture, in terms of lifestyle and behavioural issues. I believe that children are best served when they can begin to realise that there are choices available about lifestyle and behaviour, some of which are in their control even at a young age. There are times when what the child is hearing or experiencing at home needs to be challenged in a respectful way. Sensitivity is required on the part of teachers and schools in tackling such issues, which don't exclusively rear their heads in the practice of circle time.

On the basis of the research findings in relation to challenges that arose, I suggest that teachers should no longer tell children that there are no right or wrong answers in circle time, and that there will be times when it is not possible to accept, with or without thanks, contributions that are outside the ethical and moral values or principles that pertain in the school and society. That Mosley herself saw circle time as a place that teachers could promote moral development is evident in much of her work (e.g. Mosley, 1996: 240; 1998: 7). In interview she suggested:

Moral values come from debate. They should if there's enough role models in that class, it's trusting the children that within there, there will always be some really good kids that say, I disagree ... But it's pulling back yourself and allowing the children to debate.

(Mosley, wrap up interview)

Facilitating debate may be one way for teachers to challenge children's opinions in a respectful and esteeming way, as long as the rules of engagement are clear, and there is an opportunity for revisiting entrenched views. This may require some further thought in terms of strategies and processes.

Summary and Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter drew on the conceptual framework and literature review to explore the aims and focus of circle time, the format and strategies employed by teachers, the benefits of circle time, and challenges for teachers in using the method. It was argued that the observed teachers were more interested in developing children's skills in key areas rather than their SE, although it should be said that these are not mutually exclusive. While equality of children's voice was seen as a focus of circle time, in the circle times observed this was exercised in the main to develop personal skills or deal with classroom or schoolyard issues. The case was made for using children's voice to explore democratic and rights-based education as outlined in the *wider world* strand of the SPHE Curriculum, 1999.

Two rules associated with the practice of circle time were discussed – the confidentiality rule and the pass rule. The point was made that there is little to be gained and more to be lost from a confidentiality rule in circle time. While those who are concerned about privacy in schools might argue the opposite case, upholding the pass rule would be more beneficial for children's privacy rights than a confidentiality rule. However, it is acknowledged that there may be implications for teachers in these recommendations. Vigilance will be required to safeguard children's privacy rights, and attention will need to be paid to what is not said (as well as what is) in circle time sessions.

The challenges that arose in circle time during the observations were also discussed. From my own experience in in-career education with teachers, I am certain that these are typical of the kinds of challenges that emerge from time to time in circle time. There is a case for moral development in circle time which may necessitate challenging children's opinions and assumptions. At all times this should be done with respect and

care for the dignity of the child and their family. It may be that circle time as a forum for moral development will become increasingly popular with the proposed change in patronage of schools in Ireland. This may fuel a demand for guidance on how to facilitate discussions about moral or cultural issues.

The benefits of circle time were contrasted with the cost in terms of teacher and children's time at a moment in education when value for money and attainment in key skills such as numeracy and literacy are attracting attention. While more could be done in making the learning in circle time explicit and focused, I argue that some of the benefits of circle time may be in the intangible range. The fact that teachers using the method are committed to it suggests that they see benefits (such as fun, enjoyment, and positive atmosphere) not readily quantifiable but valued by practitioners in the field. It may be that the case for circle time needs to include a clearer articulation of its contribution to national educational goals in order to maintain its place in Irish primary classrooms.

Clear implications for practice were identified under each of the facets of circle time discussed this chapter. These related to more focus on the use of children's voice to advance citizenship and democratic skills, respect for privacy and participation and non-participation rights, and an acknowledgement of the challenges in circle time from assessment and procedural viewpoints. This may leave the reader with a sense of ambivalence in relation to the practice of circle time, some of which is shared by me (notwithstanding my long association with the method). The case for and against circle time is outlined in the concluding chapter, along with any implications arising from the findings and discussion.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The popularity of the circle time method among primary school teachers was established in a review by the NCCA (2008), where it was reported that 81 per cent of teachers used the method frequently or sometimes, with only 5 per cent claiming that they never used it. The research into circle time was prompted by an interest and association with the method on my part going back to the mid-1990s. As a teacher educator over a long number of years I had promoted the Mosley Model of circle time in primary school classrooms through my work with both student and practicing teachers. The opportunity to conduct research on the method in the Irish primary school context came at a time of economic challenges for the country, along with a ‘back to basics’ movement in education at primary level. Other challenges were also mounting which questioned the legitimacy of circle time in classrooms. These centred on privacy issues and its so-called therapeutic nature. The case for and against circle time has been woven through the previous chapters. However, the reader may have noted that this is not a ‘black and white’ case, as is common in discourses both in and beyond education. Arguments for circle time are characterised in this chapter as the ‘light’ side of the case, while those against are the ‘shade’. The light and shade is made explicit, and I take a position in relation to circle time practice in Irish primary schools. This is a necessary conclusion to the research, particularly in light of my role as a teacher educator. The position adopted will determine any recommendations that may emerge for the various stakeholders in Irish primary education, but particularly for teachers at the chalkface to whom I am indebted for their cooperation in the research. The thesis content is summarised using the following headings to outline the arguments for and against the practice of circle time: Light and Shade from the Conceptual Framework, Light and

Shade from the Literature Review, Light and Shade from the Findings and Discussion. The final sections will outline my position and the implications arising from that.

Light and Shade from the Conceptual Framework

The main concepts and theories explored related to SE, EI, voice and participation theory, counselling theory, and learning theory. A key uniting concept was that of empowerment of children, which was an aspirational and potential outcome of circle time in the conceptual framework adopted in the research.

SE as a concept has entered the public domain in Ireland as well as in other jurisdictions to the point that its status and importance is unquestioned. High SE has been linked to improved academic performance, while low SE is claimed to predispose young people to delinquency and substance misuse (for example). The reality is that it is difficult to substantiate these claims, or to decide in which direction the causality occurs. This has implications for a focus on SE in education. Its religion-like status does not always stand up to the evidence available (Greenstone, 2008; Craig, 2007; Maclellan, 2005). That the power of SE is contested is borne out by the literature reviewed in Chapters Two and Three. If one were building the rationale for circle time on SE (as Mosley, 1993; 1996 does), one would be on shaky foundations. While SE appeared initially to be a shining beacon for the case of circle time, the rocky territory of unsubstantiated claims and a lack of verifiable evidence loomed large on the horizon.

The theory of EI, perhaps because of its relative newness, had not yet gathered the same body of research to either support or refute its effectiveness, or indeed its existence as a separate intelligence. There was some evidence that where a focus was on the mental skills model of EI (Mayer *et al.*, 2004), there were benefits to the individual in terms of interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, academic performance and behaviours (Fernández-Berrocal *et al.*, 2008). However, there were those who

viewed EI as SE in new clothes. This suggested a number of possible strategies – a shift in focus in circle time to the promotion of EI, or adoption of a ‘wait and see’ approach until more was known about the construct. It appeared that teachers had already moved towards the former, as was seen in the research findings, which may have been due to practical issues of behaviour management in their classrooms.

The UNCRC (1989) gave a status to children’s voice and participation rights which was identified as a driver of teachers’ use of circle time. Lundy’s (2007) and Simovska’s (2008) models of participation were put forward as a means of interrogating the practice. It appeared that circle time might be capable of delivering a space within which children could exercise their right to a voice, with a readymade audience in the classroom to listen. As discussed earlier, the potential for children to influence class, school or wider decision-making proved elusive as evidenced in the practice of circle time with the observed teachers. My research findings indicated that the focus was mainly teacher-driven, outcomes were varied but restrained by school rules and cultural norms, and the target of change was the individual child (or groups of children) rather than the ‘individual-in context’ envisaged by Simovska. There was little research evidence that either of these models was effective in assessing or informing children’s voice and participation rights leading to empowerment, apart from Simovska’s (2008) own research in a health-promoting schools context. What both models suggested was that teachers needed to recognise the potential of children’s voice and participation for agency and change (“action competence” in Simovska’s 2008 work), and that teacher competencies were crucial to success. While the models provided some light, the contrast with practice cast a shadow not easily dispelled in overloaded, curriculum-driven classrooms.

The counselling theories explored were those that had been identified as underpinning the practice of circle time in its literature and in interview with the author Jenny Mosley. What was significant was that the theorists examined all had a positive view of the individual and his/her ability to adapt and have a happy and fulfilled life. This went some way towards refuting the claims of those who saw circle time as symptomatic of a perception of the individual as vulnerable and flawed. Circle time as a therapeutic or counselling intervention was also explored. It was acknowledged that in the broad sense, circle time was a therapeutic intervention, in common with most of education at primary level in schools¹⁹. However, the counselling was deemed to be ‘counselling lite’ as opposed to the more formal models available in post-primary schools in Ireland. The depiction of “informal situated counselling” (Høigaard *et al.*, 2008) was considered appropriate to describe the day to day advice given in schools, and could also typify the type of counselling in circle time. This raised a question as to whether teachers in primary schools had the skills and dispositions to undertake this type of counselling either in or out of circle time. Teachers’ ability to conduct effective talk and discussion had already been questioned (DES, 2009), although this was not borne out in the research. The light that informal situated counselling might furnish in developing personal and social skills in circle time was tempered by a doubt in relation to teachers’ skills to deliver.

Learning theory also formed part of the conceptual framework, in particular social constructivism which is endorsed in the revised PSC (1999). Vygotsky was the main theorist outlined, and his emphasis on the social nature of learning and psychological development was seen as particularly relevant to the practice of circle time. The role of the teacher (and peers) in this kind of learning was highlighted as significant. The difficulty on the one hand of scaffolding children’s learning in a way that might

¹⁹ Ecclestone *et al.*’s (2009) definition of ‘therapeutic’ was explored in Chapter Two.

promote empowerment (and action competence) was set alongside the pursuit of culturally acceptable outcomes in much of education. School culture was identified as potentially limiting in this regard. This could create a situation whereby children were participating in an interactive learning situation where the learning outcomes were pre-determined or predictable. The lack of focus on measuring or assessing learning could be seen as evidence of an open-ended learning agenda, however the children's responses in circle time fell mainly into the predictable range, suggesting that children were good at telling teachers what they perceived they wanted to hear. The transformational aspect of learning is not highlighted in Vygotsky's theory, and there has been criticism of his Eurocentric perspective, which might suggest that for Vygotsky, it is the dominant culture that is learned. The situated cognition perspective on learning (presented in Chapter Two) was also criticised for its context-based knowledge and apolitical nature (Fenwick, 2000), even though it was felt it held promise in terms of its emphasis on participation. It may be that other learning theories (for example, transformative learning theory) hold more promise for the kind of learning envisaged in a conceptual framework which has as its central aim the empowerment of children.

Light and Shade from the Literature Review

Chapter One: Introduction and Chapter Three: Literature Review outlined educational drivers for the use of circle time in both Ireland and the UK. These included an interest in education for SE and EI, the promotion of rights and citizenship education, along with moves to democratise education in terms of equality and inclusion. Curriculum reform in Ireland mirrored some of these drivers, and the emphasis on individual or personal issues and development evident in both the SPHE Curriculum (1999) and its implementation by teachers was noted. The bright light of these empowering drivers may have attracted large numbers of teachers to the method

(NCCA, 2008). However, there was a doubt raised in DES (2009) about teachers' engagement with active learning methods, and their ability to conduct talk and discussion (a major component of circle time). Privacy and legitimacy issues were also raised in relation to the practice of circle time, while concerns about academic standards were linked for some commentators to the SE movement from which circle time draws much of its *raison d'être*. These may be considered the shade in the circle time case.

Existing research into circle time also afforded light and shade. Aspirations of building SE and social skills development, inclusion of children with special needs, and positive perceptions of children and teachers in relation to circle time were all supported, according to the research. These provided a clear purpose and motivation for the use of circle time, if one's interests lay in those areas. However, the research methods in many cases were not robust, raising doubt about the claims made. The difficulty of measuring and proving that circle time was a major factor in SE and skills acquisition over and above other experiences (in and out of school) tempered enthusiasm generated by reported positive research results.

If one were to make a decision to recommend circle time to teachers on the basis of the literature surveyed, one might be tempted to say that there is potential for circle time to deliver on much of the aspirations of education in the early twenty-first century, but that claims for its effectiveness may be exaggerated. The factors determining its future may depend more on the influence of a 'back to basics' movement (driven in large part by economic considerations), which will put pressure on an already overloaded timetable in schools. Its fate may also be determined by those who are concerned with its therapeutic and personal nature. If these concerns were to become more widely debated, circle time would come under increased pressure which might, combined with other factors, be enough to trigger its demise.

If the case for and against circle time is difficult to call after surveying the relevant literature, revisiting the findings and discussion may provide the required clarity.

Light and Shade from the Findings and Discussion

Findings from the research were outlined relating to the aims and focus of circle time, the format and strategies employed in circle time, the benefits of circle time, and the challenges of the method. The bulk of the data was generated by interviewing and observing teachers conducting circle times, and should be viewed as illuminating rather than definitive or representational.

It is self-evident that the observed teachers were pro-circle time, having voluntarily adopted the method. It is therefore not unexpected that there is more light than shade in the data from this small scale study, particularly in relation to perceived benefits identified by teachers. The identification by the observed teachers of circle time as a forum for equality and inclusion, and its contribution to positive relationships and fun contributed significantly to their commitment to the method. Children's voice was exercised in a teacher-driven agenda, often linked more to confidence building than agency. This was a disappointment and limited the concept of empowerment through circle time.

The lack of emphasis on SE building in circle time was replaced by a focus on skills development which lay largely within the EI domain. In this way, it might be evidence that teachers have already moved some distance from the 'quasi-religion' of SE, or it could indicate a 'taken-for-granted' stance as was hinted at by some research participants. Another possibility is that teachers were unaware of the theoretical bases for circle time, and operated from an atheoretical position which would not be surprising given the lack of theory in circle time literature and curriculum documentation.

While teachers listed a range of benefits for the method, little measurement or assessment of such benefits was undertaken or even considered possible. A concern was discussed in relation to the ambivalence expressed by some of the observed teachers about the ‘pass’ rule in circle time. Misgivings were also expressed about the use of a limited form of confidentiality in use in some classrooms. It appeared that some of the principles of the Mosley Model were being eroded, while in the case of confidentiality, a practice had evolved that was not supported by Mosley. In terms of challenges, teachers felt constrained by the principle of ‘unconditional regard’ and a non-judgemental principle in the Mosley Model of circle time in their handling of some of the children’s responses.

The ability of the teachers involved to conduct circle times in a facilitative manner while encouraging children to learn key skills around bullying, handling their feelings and communicating in the circle was impressive, countering the findings in DES (2009) at least among this group of teachers. In this research, circle time delivered more light than shade, and the observed teachers expressed their intention to continue with the method into the future, supporting research findings elsewhere where a ringing endorsement of the method was reported (NCCA, 2008).

Having spent a considerable part of my teacher education career encouraging the use of the method, was it possible that my interpretation of my research journey might persuade me otherwise, in spite of the endorsement of teachers evident in my own and other research? The following section outlines which arguments held most sway and why, and commits me to a position which will inform my work with teachers in the future.

My Position as a Teacher Educator

The light and shade along the research journey has fuelled a sense of loss and guarded optimism on my part. On the one hand, there is cold comfort for educators who worship on the altar of SE, with a lack of definition, difficulties around measurement and conflicting views on how important the construct is for developing individual potential evident in the literature. Academic achievement may be a better route to the promotion of self-efficacy or self-concept than a focus on SE. Given the current interest in literacy and numeracy achievement, it is likely that teachers will have to devote more time to these areas. This is a good thing, particularly for children in disadvantaged areas of the country who have had their disadvantage compounded over the years by abysmal literacy and numeracy levels (Eivers, Shiel, Perkins and Cosgrove 2005). The fact that this has already happened in the UK might prompt a similar move in this jurisdiction. However, the demise of circle time is not inevitable. It should be remembered that much of what takes place in circle time facilitates oral development, a precursor to the development of reading and writing skills.

The concept of EI appears at this stage to hold out more hope in terms of knowing what the construct is, how it might be measured, and how it might be taught in schools. Mayer *et al.*'s (2004) work allowed for a staged development of the construct which appealed to me in my role as teacher educator. The observed teachers have already moved towards developing children's EI in their focus on feelings in circle time, particularly in relation to the management of feelings and recognising the feelings of others. However, much of this work is driven by expediency or crisis management in the classroom or school context. There is a case to be made for a staged, developmental programme of EI education which does not rely on day-to-day incidents for its rationale, although it is presumed that these might diminish if such a programme were in place.

A notable aspect of the practice as observed in the research was the limited application of children's voice in circle time. All of the participants were agreed on its potential as a space for voice and participation, and the potentially inclusive and egalitarian nature of the method. This was given further support from the literature on children's rights (including Ireland's *National Strategy for Children*, 2000) and the citizenship education movement both of which were identified as drivers for the use of circle time in schools. However, the reality of the practice saw this voice being exercised in a limited way, and generally in pursuit of behaviour management or personal skills goals. While these are part of the value of methods such as circle time, the potential of the method to empower children in a broader context deserves more attention. This, along with more focus on EI promotion, might require a new model of circle time.

This prompts the question – do children have to be in a circle for this type of programme to be delivered? The quick answer is no. However, that would be a dismissal of children's and teacher's enjoyment of the method, and its potential to foster positive relationships in the classroom. Notwithstanding some contestation of education that caters for emotional engagement, I believe that children and adults learn best when attention is paid to relationships in classrooms. For that reason alone, it might be worth keeping circle time as part of a suite of active learning methods. If the practice of circle time is to continue and develop, the literature on circle time needs a radical re-focus. This will be facilitated by documentation for teachers outlining how to conduct circle time for empowerment on a number of levels.

So far it should be apparent that while I am arguing for an overhaul of circle time, I am not in favour of abandoning the method for the reasons already listed, as well as its potential to deliver more than might be evident from the observations of the practice of

a small number of teachers. This places an onus on me to identify practical measures to facilitate the shift in aims, skills and teacher disposition that is envisaged. Because of the divergence from the established literature on circle time, a concerted effort will be needed to effect even small changes such as those outlined earlier. The following section outlines how this might be done, and presents the potential future of circle time in Irish primary school classrooms.

The Future of Circle Time

The future of circle time is precarious at this moment in time. Challenges to its legitimacy as an educational method, along with privacy concerns seem likely to gather pace, particularly as they coincide with a ‘back to basics’ movement in education and a tightening of the education budget purse strings. On the other hand, children’s social and emotional needs are, according to some recent reports, becoming greater (see for example, the *Mental Health Commission Annual Report, 2010*; *The State of the Nation’s Children, 2010*). The fact that teachers have endorsed the method in large numbers is evidence of its perceived value in their classrooms. The commitment of teachers to circle time is a significant factor in my decision to stay with the method. I am not aware of any other method that has such widespread reported use. Teacher’s familiarity with the principles and processes of circle time is both a help and a hindrance in the task of developing the method into the future. Their familiarity with and endorsement of the method, along with the findings of the research, spurs me on to propose a model of circle time that might enhance its empowering potential, while addressing legitimate issues raised by some of its detractors. An initial conceptualisation of circle time was presented in Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework. This is presented in its re-conceptualised form to capture the shifts in emphases and intent envisaged in a new model of circle time:

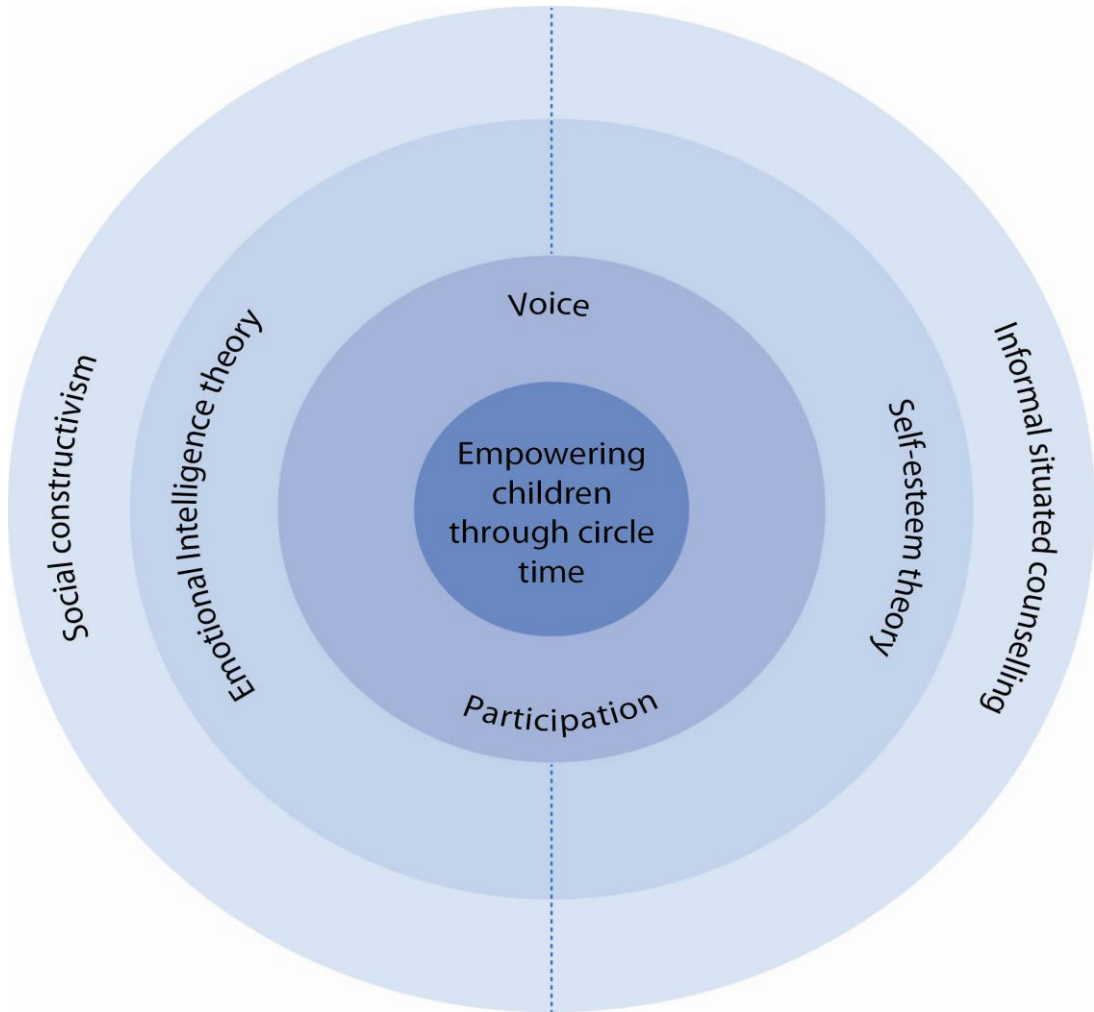


Diagram 4: The new model of circle time

Towards a New Model of Circle Time

The model proposed is outlined under the following headings: aims and focus of circle time, and the format and strategies employed. Potential benefits will be identified in the new model, and challenges addressed. These are the same headings under which the findings of the research were outlined – this allows for comparison between the existing model and the proposed model. The possibilities of further research are also explored in this section.

Aims and Focus of the New Model of Circle Time

The proposal is that circle time shifts its main aim of SE (as in the Mosley Model) towards one of the promotion of empowerment. This addresses several issues, including the lack of consensus on the importance of SE in the promotion of well-being and educational potential. It also acknowledges the difficulty of measuring gains in SE. However, I am convinced that promotion of SE should be a guiding principle in the practice of circle time, as this suggests that teachers would be mindful of (but not overly focussed on) issues of motivation, inclusion and affirmation.

Teachers should instead focus on building EI in their circle time sessions with children. This addresses both the apparent shift that has already taken place in the observed practice, and the need to provide a forum where general solutions to the behavioural problems that are characteristic of all classrooms from time to time could be tackled. It is proposed that Mayer *et al.*'s (2004) four branch model of EI be adopted for this purpose. This has the advantage of breaking the construct into a clearly delineated and staged development. A programme for primary schools based on this could be devised in an age appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. Mayer *et al.*'s (2004; 2008) EI theory also lends itself to measurement, given that the researchers have already provided a test (MSCEIT), although it is acknowledged that there are varying views on its effectiveness. Even if MSCEIT was not deemed suitable for use with children, it should be possible to devise rubrics and checklists for teachers at each stage of the model to assist in this task, similar to those available in areas of the PSC (1999) in Ireland. A focus on EI would have the advantage of developing skills that teachers have already seen as important in the day to day running of their classrooms. It might also deliver further benefits on a long-term basis in terms of social and relationship skills as some have asserted (e.g. Salovey and Grewal, 2005).

However, EI as a construct is value-free. This means that while children's EI can be developed, there is no guarantee that it will be exercised appropriately in a given social context. As Salovey *et al.* (2005) pointed out:

In order to use these skills, one must be aware of what is considered appropriate behaviour by the people with whom one interacts. This point is central to our discussion of how to measure emotional intelligence.

(Salovey *et al.*, 2005: 282)

This point addresses a particular challenge identified in the research on circle time, where teachers felt constrained by principles relating to 'unconditional regard' and 'no right or wrong answers' in circle time in tackling culturally inappropriate or morally unacceptable contributions by children. Circle time should be seen as a space where issues of morality could be debated and explored while developing EI skills. This then becomes part of the new model of circle time, where debate is structured to allow for this type of engagement and learning to take place.

I am also convinced that the notion of equality of children's voice enshrined in the circle time literature needs to be broadened to include voice and participation for agency. The research participants agreed that this was a key feature of circle time, however there was a limited application of that voice beyond the confines of the classroom in the circle times observed. The trend towards less participation of children in decision-making (*State of the Nation's Children*, 2010) could be reversed if circle time was to become a forum for exercise of children's voice not only in relation to social and personal issues, but also in terms of rights, democratic and citizenship education. There is limited evidence that this has been done in primary schools already. A new model of circle time could build on existing good practice and extend it in a way that might appeal to a large number of teachers and schools. Rights and citizenship education then becomes another focus of this new model of circle time. There are a

number of models that could inform the development of participation for citizenship and democracy, including Lundy's (2007) and Simovska's (2008) work outlined earlier.

Format and Strategies of the New Model of Circle Time

It was found that the observed teachers in the main followed the Mosley Model of circle time, which involved an opening warm up phase, followed by rounds and open fora. The session concluded with a game or quiet activity which acted as a wrap up or winding down phase. This format will serve the new model of circle time well. The fact that teachers are familiar with it is considered an advantage.

More adjustment will be required in relation to rules and teacher role within the circle. Most contentious is the rule relating to a limited form of confidentiality evident in the research findings. A confidentiality rule may increase children's vulnerability if it is seen as an invitation to disclose more rather than less in the circle. It may also be counterproductive in the new model of circle time, where the emphasis is on enlarging the audience for children's views. It should be scrapped. As noted by Mosley (interview one), it does not form part of the Mosley Model of circle time, and may have evolved from its counselling origins. Children need to learn what is appropriate to share (or not) in the classroom context. Vigilance will be required on the part of teachers while children learn this skill, and teachers will need to be proactive in facilitating their learning in this regard. There should be no erosion of the 'pass' rule in circle time – rather this will become a strategy for children to exercise judgement which teachers must respect.

Given the focus on developing children's EI in a cultural and moral framework outlined earlier, teachers will need to be creative in scaffolding children's learning in the circle. Techniques employed by teachers in the research project are appropriate for use in the new model of circle time. Engaging children in learning through a fictional

lens should be enhanced in order to create a fun, non-personal atmosphere conducive to learning. This might naturally allow for informal situated counselling to take place. Likewise, appropriate personal disclosures on the part of the teacher seem particularly helpful in the new model, given the focus on children debating cultural and moral norms. This places an onus on teachers to be adept at talk and discussion. The de-emphasising of ‘no wrong answers’ in relation to responses, should be replaced by a commitment to listening to all responses while acknowledging that there may be disagreement about opinions expressed. Acceptance and regard for children should not be equated with acceptance and regard for all opinions uttered in the circle or outside, including those of the teacher. This may be challenging for teachers who operate more out of a ‘teacher as expert’ than a ‘teacher as facilitator’ role.

Potential Benefits of the New Model of Circle Time

While the new model of circle time will remain unresearched for a considerable period of time to come, it is expected that it will deliver benefits at individual, classroom and school level. In the first instance, it is anticipated that some of the benefits identified by teachers in the research will transfer to the new model – indeed it is imperative that they do. These include fun, promotion of a positive classroom atmosphere, and the potential to learn particular skills such as confidence, communication skills and skills related to dealing with feelings (EI skills). A clearer focus on the latter will potentially enable children to develop EI to a greater degree than might have been possible, although any extra benefit from the new model will be difficult to quantify.

Equality and inclusion will remain key principles in the new model of circle time. Children will be encouraged to exercise their voice in the development of key personal and social skills, but this will be extended further to include citizenship and democratic

skills, with a clear focus on empowerment for agency or action competence. This has potential to address the declining trend noted earlier in relation to children's involvement in decision-making at classroom and school level. It could potentially also deliver wider democratic and citizenship skills at local community level and beyond. This might also address the lack of focus on 'wider world' issues highlighted in reviews of SPHE (1999) implementation. The new model of circle could also provide a model of values and moral education which might be useful in the move towards non-denominational and multi-denominational schools.

The de-focusing of circle time in relation to SE may be controversial, given its pursuit in education over an extended period. Some work will be required to convince teachers that self-efficacy and self-concept are more useful concepts for teachers to pursue in relation to children's academic achievement and well-being. In the course of this work, it should be possible to encourage teachers to see academic achievement as a means rather than an end to SE building. This should be considered an added benefit, albeit one which is outside the practice of the new model of circle time.

Challenges in the New Model of Circle Time

The new model of circle time will be an active learning strategy, therefore the same challenges will apply as those experienced by teachers with the old model of circle time. It should be possible to alleviate some of the challenges identified in the research relating to dealing with inappropriate comments or opinions from children in a way that does not undermine fundamental principles of equality and inclusion. In the new model, teachers will be encouraged to challenge children's opinions in a respectful way. They will be encouraged to debate moral and cultural issues, and the tensions therein. This is possibly the biggest challenge that will face teachers, as reluctance to challenge children's responses in circle time was evident in the research. The other challenge will

be in making a judgement call between contributions that are worthy of debate and those that are not. Some guidance and training is envisaged in this regard to support the introduction of the new model of circle time.

The limited form of confidentiality noted in observations of some practice was challenging, given the potential for children to misinterpret its meaning, and, either wittingly or unwittingly, to break confidence. Confidentiality in any form will not be promoted and will be actively discouraged in the new model of circle time. This will move the new model of circle time further from counselling practice which is considered a positive step. It should be noted that not all of the teachers in the research had a confidentiality rule. Dropping the confidentiality rule will remove one challenge of the observed practice but will potentially increase the privacy threat for children in the circle. This will require extra vigilance on the part of the teacher, and will mean also that there can be no ambivalence about the 'pass' rule. We now turn our attention to what is required in order for this new vision of circle time to become a reality, and identify where the road will lead in terms of new research and other opportunities.

The Way Forward

The fact that so many teachers have endorsed circle time in the recent past is both an advantage and a possible drawback. On the one hand teachers will be familiar with and will probably have used the method in their classrooms. On the other hand, there is no information (apart from the small scale research carried out and reported here) about how teachers practice circle time in Irish primary school classrooms. Some practices will be praiseworthy, and teachers may have already moved towards a more empowering model. The intention would be to build on the goodwill and good practice that is evident, while introducing the subtle but significant changes that are envisaged.

I have a long association and experience in teacher education which gives me an insight into ways of proceeding that might have some hope of success. Guidelines and manuals for teachers incorporating the new model are essential. The perceived lack of resources for SPHE was noted in NCCA (2008). This hunger could be fed with an Irish teacher manual for circle time, built on an empowering vision, and providing practical step by step sessions which teachers could then adapt for their classes. This should be based on the *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (1999), as otherwise it may be seen as an additional burden by teachers and schools. The *SPHE Curriculum* (1999), if implemented, would result in empowerment of children – it is incomplete implementation that has hindered this rather than any inherent flaw in the curriculum. The new model of circle time should involve piloting new materials with teachers in classrooms and evaluating their success or otherwise before proceeding with publication.

A new education programme will be designed to introduce teachers to the new model of circle time. This could be part of a wider-ranging course on active learning methods, or *SPHE Curriculum* (1999) implementation to attract as many teachers as possible. It would be desirable to have one or two modules that could be delivered to whole school staffs, given that there is a demand from time to time for such inputs, and the stated aim of developing children's democratic and citizenship skills in class and school contexts and further afield in the new model.

Setting up a community of practice with a view to developing expertise and enhancing the dissemination potential of the new model is an essential phase of the process. Teachers who are newly-qualified and those with experience could form such a group, open to any teacher who has an interest in SPHE and its promotion and who shares an empowering vision for circle time. It may be possible to generate additional

support materials with such a group, including DVDs and occasional themed classroom materials (such as those available for healthy eating weeks in schools). New technologies could also be harnessed to promote the new model of circle time, including social networking and interactive websites that are commonly used in education and beyond at present.

Disseminating of research findings in a variety of fora to initiate discussion and promote the vision will be undertaken. Liaison with groups such as the SPHE Network, organisations such as the DES and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), and other networks such as the Education Centre Network will provide further opportunities to consult teacher educators and teachers about the emerging new model.

I am acutely aware of the limitations of my own research. Avenues for further research on circle time are numerous and could involve various stakeholders in education such as teachers, children, parents and policy-makers. Research with teachers could focus initially on widening the scope of the present research to ascertain if the same findings are replicated across a wider range of teachers and classrooms. In an ideal scenario, this would reveal some practices along the lines envisaged in the new model of circle time. Or it might confirm the desirability of the new model. There is also a case for establishing how widespread the practice actually is, as there is a question mark in relation to the self-reported figures in NCCA (2008).

Notable exclusions from the present research were children and parents. There is a strong case for asking children what their perception of circle time is, and what they are learning from it. This could inform the new model of circle time and provide a rationale for the method in Irish primary classrooms. There are other avenues for exploring the effects of circle time from the child's perspective. For the first time in the current academic year, I have student teachers who experienced circle time in their primary or

second-level schools. This is consistent with the timing of implementation of the revised PSC (1999). It would be instructive to conduct research with the student teachers (even at such a remove from the experience) prior to any inputs that they might receive on circle time, and to present the findings to them as way of generating debate and deepening their understanding.

Research with parents is likely to be more problematic, given that many parents were unaware of the use of circle time in their child's class and teachers received little feedback from parents on the method. It may be more useful to develop information materials for parents in relation to the new model of circle time, and devise targeted parent materials for teachers to disseminate before attempting any research with parents. I am convinced that most parents would welcome an opportunity to support an empowering vision of circle time, and for this reason I am committed to developing such materials.

Policy-makers with an interest in the new model of circle time could be identified to gain their views on the new model at the piloting or post-piloting stage. There is a policy of non-participation in research in the Inspectorate (see Appendix E). It may also be the case that there is limited knowledge of the method among policy-makers. For this reason, the emphasis with policy-makers should be on disseminating information (such as the present research findings), and developing mechanisms for a partnership approach. For example, the NCCA has initiated a forum for innovation in classrooms through the curriculum development portal on their website (NCCA.ie). Called *Innovation Happens: Classrooms as Sites of Change*, this is an opportunity for teachers (and researchers) to contribute examples of innovation such as that envisaged in the new model of circle time. It may also provide an opportunity to promote the new model.

This avenue will be explored as the new model is piloted and developed, along with dissemination of research findings through presentations and publications.

International perspectives on circle time could be researched in order to identify good practice globally. It may be that circle time in other jurisdictions has already moved in the direction anticipated in the new model – this could inform the re-conceptualisation of circle time. The USA, identified at the outset as the home of circle time, might yield an instructive literature in this regard, while other jurisdictions might also usefully be explored.

Undoubtedly, circle time has contributed much to the social and personal development of children in Irish primary classrooms over the last twenty years. Its potential to deliver this and more is envisaged in the new model of circle time proposed here, which enhances the empowerment potential for children so that they can make contributions in and beyond classrooms and schools. This is the motivating vision driving the new model of circle time for the new Ireland in which we live in the twenty-first century.

Finally, I owe a debt to the teachers, principals and other participants in my research endeavours, and my institution which has facilitated my professional development on the Doctorate in Education Programme in many ways. I am grateful to the lecturers and my thesis supervisor for support and guidance throughout the doctoral course and research process. This gratitude will provide impetus over the coming years to establish myself as a post-doctoral researcher and a leading teacher educator in the primary school system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction:

The aim of the research is to explore teacher perspective and practice of circle time in Irish primary schools...

Notes: confidentiality, anonymity, answer only what you want...if you have any questions I'm happy to answer them at any stage...

1. Background information – years teaching, experience in using circle time, how they became interested in using circle time...any training they've had, teacher resources they use etc.
2. How do you explain what circle time is/how might you define it?
3. What are you aiming for when you use CT?
4. What is the importance of these aims?
5. Tell me about a typical circle time session in your class...
6. Why do you think circle time is useful/more than other approaches?
7. Have you noticed any effects of circle time in your classroom?
8. What importance do you think these effects have?
9. What benefits, if any, have you noticed?
10. Do you assess or evaluate your circle time/how?

11. Have you encountered difficulties with the method?
12. What do you think children's perspectives on circle time are?
13. Have you had any feedback from parents about circle time?
14. Has your practice evolved in any way since you started using the method?
15. Any further comments, questions?

Appendix B: Journal Template for Observed Circle Time Sessions

Journal Template for Observed Circle Time Sessions (to be filled in by teachers)

Date:	Initials:	Class:	Duration
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1. Main Aim/Purpose/Theme of the session:

2. Outline of session (brief):

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

3. Anything that stands out from the session (challenges/surprises)?

(a) For child/ren:

(b) For you:

(c) any particular occurrences/moments:

4. What is your response to the challenges/occurrences/moments?

(a)

(b)

(c)

5. Your overall impressions (was this a successful session or not?)
6. What are you basing your answer to (5) above on? (e.g. observation, comments by children etc.)
7. What might you do as follow up (e.g. in your next session)?
8. Anything else you want to add?

Appendix C: Letter to Principals

Dear Principal,

I am currently engaged in a doctoral study in NUIM. The thesis I am writing is about teacher's perspectives on, and practice of, circle time in Irish primary classrooms. I am also interested in talking to principals in participating schools about their perspectives on circle time.

At the moment I am looking for teachers to participate in the classroom study. These teachers would typically be using circle time regularly (2- 3 times per month). The study will have three parts: interviews with the participating teachers, observations of some circle time sessions, and teacher's notes for the sessions observed. The teachers, you or your school will not be identifiable in any subsequent reporting, thesis writing or scholarly paper. Participants can withdraw from the research at any stage if they wish. Permission will be sought from parents and pupils prior to the start of the research (letters will be supplied).

There is no anticipated perceived risk to the school, or to teachers or pupils, as a result of taking part in this research. It is hoped that participation in the study will provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their practice in relation to circle time. Principals may be interested in participating in the research as a way of contributing to overall recommendations for the use of circle time in the primary classroom. Moreover, all participants may access the findings of the research on its completion if they wish. Recommendations from the study will benefit the primary school system by informing the practice of circle time in Irish primary schools.

If you have any teachers in your school whom you think might be interested in cooperating in the research I would be delighted to provide further details – this initial contact will be viewed as preliminary, and it may or may not lead to participation.

My contact details are listed above if needed. I will make contact in the next week or so to see if there is any interest in getting more information.

Yours sincerely,

Bernie Collins (Researcher)

Please note that if participants have any concerns about this research and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Dr. Gerard Jeffers,
National University of Ireland,
Maynooth.
Tel: 01-7086087

Appendix E: Letter from Inspectorate

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Sráid Maoilbhríde
Baile Átha Cliath 1



Department of Education and Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin 1

Ms Bernie Collins
St Patrick's College of Education
Drumcondra
Dublin 9

23 March 2010

Dear Bernie

Thank you for your invitation of 3 March 2011 to participate in an interview for your research on circle time in primary schools.

As a general policy, the management of the Inspectorate advises inspectors not to accept invitations to contribute to third party research. While the aims of such research are usually laudable and worthy of support, the volume of requests received at an organisational level and by individual inspectors in recent times has increased to the extent that it is impossible to accede to every request. In the interest of equity, our current policy is not to participate in third party research projects.

It is therefore with regret that I have to decline your invitation. I would like to take the opportunity, however, to wish you every success with your studies.

Yours sincerely



Harold Hislop
Chief Inspector

Appendix F: Letter to Teacher

Dear Teacher,

I am currently engaged in a doctoral study in NUIM. The thesis I am writing concerns teacher's perspectives on, and practice of, circle time in Irish primary classrooms. My main research question is: what is happening in the practice of circle time in some Irish primary classrooms? I also have a set of sub-questions as follows:

- What are the aims/purposes of circle time for teachers?
- What strategies/processes do teachers use in circle time?
- What benefits do teachers identify in using the method?
- What challenges (if any) have teachers encountered?
- How have teachers dealt with any challenges?

The main methods in the research will be interviews, observations and teacher journals. At the start of the research, I will meet each teacher for a short interview. This will be followed by a number of observations (to be negotiated) of circle time sessions. Each teacher will be asked to fill in a journal for each observed circle time session – a template will be provided with headings. I hope to have a concluding interview with each teacher at the end of the research. No teacher or school will be identifiable in any subsequent reporting, thesis writing or scholarly paper. Teachers can withdraw from the research at any stage if they wish. All relevant consent forms will be provided prior to the start of the research.

It is hoped that participation in the study will provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their practice in relation to circle time. Recommendations from the study will benefit the primary school system by informing decisions relating to the future of the circle time method in Ireland.

At this stage I am looking for expressions of interest from teachers about the research. This just means that you are interested in hearing more about the research before making your mind up as to whether you would like to get involved. If you would like more information, please contact me at *****. If you leave a mobile number I will make arrangements to contact you at your convenience.

Even if you are not sure you are interested I would be delighted to hear from you!

Yours sincerely,

Bernie Collins (Researcher)

Please note that if participants have any concerns about this research and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Dr. Gerard Jeffers,
National University of Ireland,
Maynooth.
Tel: 01-7086087

Appendix G: Letter to Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am doing some research in Irish primary schools on a method called circle time. The main purpose of the research is to find out what is happening in circle time in some Irish primary school classrooms. The class teacher of your child (Mr. Kilcrann) has kindly agreed to allow me to observe him teaching half the class during a circle time session on a few occasions this term or next. I now need your consent so this can go ahead.

What the research involves is me sitting in the classroom while the teacher takes the class for a circle time session. I will be taking notes and will use a small audio recorder to help me remember what happens in the class. The names of children, the teacher or the school will not be used in writing up the research – all information gathered will be confidential.

Within the limitations of the law, confidentiality will be respected at all times. The information gathered will only be used for academic purposes. Notes and recordings of observations will be held for one year and then destroyed by the researcher. The results of the research will be available to schools, teachers and other interested groups when it is finished in 2012.

If you are happy for me to observe in your child's class, please return the consent form to the class teacher in the envelope provided before **7th December**. **Please note that if I do not receive the completed form, I will assume that you don't want your child to be in class at that time.**

I am going to talk to the children before the start of the research to tell them what it is about and to also ask their permission to observe them in class. Suitable arrangements will be made for any child who does not wish to take part.

Yours sincerely,

Ms. Bernie Collins

(Researcher)

Please note that if you have any concerns about this research and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Dr. Gerard Jeffers,
Education Department,
National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
Tel: 01-7086087

Appendix H: Child Consent Form

School/Class: XXX/6th

My Name: _____

I understand what Bernie has said about her job in our classroom for her research:

Yes

No

I would like to be in the class when Bernie is watching our circle time:

Yes

No

Signed: _____

Please give this back to your teacher.