Sinéad Magee Thesis 24253842

by SINÉAD MAGEE

Submission date: 15-Sep-2025 11:02PM (UTC+0100)
Submission ID: 2752113867
File name: 80888_SINEAD_MAGEE_Sinead_Magee_Thesis_24253842_918641_80553351.pdf (2.34M)
Word count: 33934
Character count: 189147

Sinéad Magee 24253842

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

M.Ed (Research in Practice)

(2024-2025)

The Need to Belong

Fostering belonging through circle work in a disadvantage primary school setting

Sinéad Magee

A Research Dissertation submitted to the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Date: 12th September 2025

Supervised by: Professor Marie McLoughlin

Assignment Cover Sheet

Ainm / Name:	Sinéad Magee
Bliain / Year group:	M.Ed (Research in Practice) 2024-25
Umhir mhic léinn / Student number:	24253842
Ábhar / Subject:	Research Dissertation
Léachtóir / Teagascóir: Lecturer / Tutor:	Professor Marie McLoughlin
Sprioclá / Due date:	12th September 2025

Teideal an tionscadail / Assignment title:

'How can I use circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging in a 6th Class DEIS 1 Primary School?'

Líon na bhfocal / Word Count:	21,939
Líon leathanach / Number of pages:	171

Aon ábhar eile sa tionscadal / Any other material in the assignment: N/A

Dearbhaím gur mise amháin a rinne an saothar seo. Aithním go soiléir aon chabhair a fuair mé ó aon duine eile, baill fhoirne nó gaol clainne san áireamh. Mo chuid scríbhneoireachta féin atá sa tionscadal seo ach amháin nuair a úsáidtear ábhar ar bith as foinsí eile. Tugtar aitheantas do na foinsí seo sna fo-nótaí nó sna tagairtí.
Dearbhaím go bhfuil treoirlínte an choláiste do thionscadail léite agam agus go dtuigim iad. Tá cóip den tionscadal coinnithe agam dom féin.

I confirm that I alone produced this project. I clearly acknowledge any help I received from any other person, staff members or relatives included. This project is my own composition except for material of any kind taken from other sources. These sources are acknowledged in the footnotes or references.
I confirm that I have read and understand the Department assignment guidelines. I have also retained a copy of the assignment for myself.

Síniú / Signature: Sinéad Magee

Dáta / Date: 12th September 2025

Declaration

Declaration I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Sinéad Magee

12th September 2025

Abstract

People are driven to seek belonging through relationships, a need for love, and a sense of community. This is a drive as old as civilization itself. The devastating consequences of exclusion are deeply rooted in our DNA, a legacy from a time when membership in a tribe was a guarantee of survival. The human desire to belong is an enduring necessity, and the children in our classrooms are no exception to this drive for connection and acceptance.

Over my 25 years of working in a DEIS community, I have witnessed the effects of marginalisation and exclusion, where school can become a place of unintentional 'othering', as middle-class values embedded in the curriculum fail to connect with the lived experiences of many marginalised students. Eighteen months before deciding to undertake my master's degree, two of my past pupils took their own lives, I learnt that another two had been placed in a juvenile detention centre. It was a turning point for me, leading me to consider if fostering a sense of belonging could improve the lives of my students.

I chose action research as my methodology, allowing me to ask, *"How do I improve what I'm doing?"* It enabled me to examine my practice through my values of social justice, children's voice, care, and belonging. I decided to undertake this research to see if it was possible to create a 'third space' within my classroom in which both my world and the world of the children could exist together – a place where we all belonged. We created this space by placing our chairs in a circle, a formation that became a space for all voices to be heard. Two main themes emerged from the data: *The Need for a Third Space* and *The Critical Role of Relationships.* The circle was key to creating the space needed for both of these critical components of belonging to flourish.

The rituals that became embedded into the circle helped transform it into a space of authentic belonging: *'Mind the Gap*' to draw everyone in close, *'Get Fred*' represented uninterrupted

speech, *'Now You See Me'* for acknowledgement through eye contact, and *'Check-In'* to indicate emotional readiness to participate.

Everyone has a right to belong, and we as teachers need to foster every child's right to belong within our classroom. In a world where everyone is more connected than ever, we have never been so far apart. Belonging is key to lifelong wellbeing and fostering it should be at the heart of every class. Ethical consent was granted through Maynooth University, the School Principal, the Board of Management, the children, and their parents/guardians.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, to the fantastic children in my class whose razor-sharp wit and brutal honesty kept my feet firmly on the ground, this project would not exist without you. A special thanks to our wonderful class SNA Jake whose caring support for everyone in our class kept us going throughout the year. I would like to thank my principal and colleagues whose interest and encouragement throughout my research kept me going, especially when I felt at times I had lost my way.

A big thank you to my critical friends, especially Sarah, Helena and Sonia who fully believed in the value of the research and provided insights that stretched my own understanding of what I was learning.

I would also like to say thank you to my husband Frank and my three children, Seán, Niamh and Aoife for managing to survive while I was busy studying.

A very special thank you to my best friend Jane who has been with me from the first day of primary school, and whose love, support and proof reading has been invaluable throughout this project.

To my wonderful sister-in-law Jane, whose patience and understanding with my limited computer skills and invaluable guidance helped me every step of the way.

Finally, my sincerest gratitude goes to Marie McLoughlin for her unwavering support, understanding and insights. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. You are the reason that I completed the course. Thank you.

List of tables and figures

List of Abbreviations

DES: Department of Education and Science

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

HSCL: Home School Community Liaison

SET: Special Education Teacher

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

WHO: World Health Organisation

Word Count

Chapter Number: Name	Word Count
Chapter 1: Introduction	2,398
Chapter 2: Literature Review	4,122
Chapter 3: Methodology	4,673
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis	7,787
Chapter 5: Conclusion	2,959
Total:	**21,939**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context and Background to this Research

Eighteen months before deciding to undertake my master's degree, two of my past pupils took their own lives. Two more were placed in a juvenile detention centre. It was a turning point for me. What was missing? Was there more that could be done to help students feel a greater sense of belonging within school?

Students from Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) communities often struggle with their sense of school belonging (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015). Prins et al. (2023) state that children from marginalised communities who do not experience a sense of school belonging, are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system. These are children from communities historically denied a platform for their voice, compounding feelings of marginalisation and exclusion (Department of Education, 2024). Middle-class values embedded in educational curricula, often fail to connect with the lived experiences of many marginalised students (Lynch & Phelan, 2022). In this context, children can experience school as a place of 'othering' - a social process of defining a person or group as fundamentally different (Rodriguez et al., 2025). I had watched this pattern of 'not belonging' and feeling 'other' repeat itself over my 25 years of service in my own DEIS school. It led me to consider if circle work could create a space where the children's world and my world could come together- a place where we could all belong.

It was necessary to commence circle work as a vehicle for fostering belonging from in September 2024. Serious divisions had developed the previous year, created through the

exclusion and othering of certain students by a group in the class. Parents threatened to remove children from the school if the situation did not improve. My decision to use circle work to heal the divisions in the class, was, at this time, based on instinct rather than theory. I believed that time spent in the circle, focusing on empathy and relationship building to foster belonging would counteract feelings of exclusion. This echoes Arslan et al., (2020) and Jose et al., (2012) assertion that belonging has a positive effect on socio-emotional wellbeing and feelings of inclusion.

As I progressed through this study however, that gut response developed into evidence-based practice. As highlighted by Baumeister and Leary, (1995), belonging is a primary, fundamental, pervasive motivation, which can have many long-lasting effects on health, cognitive processes and emotional patterns. Therefore, this was an intervention that could not wait.

1.2 Layout of Chapter One

In this chapter I use extracts from my reflective journal to frame what was essentially a personal experience, in a way that makes it applicable within a wider context (Brookfield, 2017). I detail, what Whitehead and McNiff (2006) refer to as tension between my stated values of belonging, social justice, care and children's voice, versus the reality of my practice. This 'tension', when examined through critical reflection, brought me face to face with myself as 'a living contradiction', revealing that my stated values and my lived practice were not aligned (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). This chapter examines the impact of this realisation on my teacher identity and resulting changes to my practice, through realignment with my values of belonging, care, children's voice and social justice.

I outline my decision to use circle work to create a 'third space' - a space where my world and the world of my students could come together, as a vehicle for fostering belonging. Finally, I expand upon my research question and outline the overall broad aims of this study.

1.3 What Do I Really Value? Tension Between Values and Practice

The question of values, what they might be and their influence on my motivation as a teacher, was not something that I had dwelt on before engaging in action research. I had always been guided by my Froebelian training, particularly Froebel's child-centred principle of the inherent goodness of the child (Froebel & Hailmann, 2012). I viewed my teaching role to be that of a guide, rather than someone who imposed information on students, thus endeavouring to keep child-centred education at the heart of my practice (Bruce, 2021). My classroom had always been a place where children had a voice and agency and where work we engaged in, was, as much as possible, guided by their interests. This also reflected my epistemological belief in the cognitive constructivism approaches of Dewey (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) - that knowledge is actively created together.

Despite this, at the start of this study, I found it difficult to distil these values down to a few that I could easily articulate. I eventually settled on - belonging, nurture, children's voice and social justice as values that best described what I felt I incorporated into my practice. One of my earliest entries in my reflective journal states that,

> *"I want school to be a place where my students feel like they belong, where they can see many of their values reflected back at them"*
>
> (Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 19th August 2024)

However, as this study progressed, critical reflection using Moon's (1999) reflective framework revealed that my stated values of belonging and student's voice were being denied by the reality of my practice. It highlighted that although I valued children's voices, it was my

own voice that dominated classroom discourse, leaving limited time for student response, thus limiting their opportunities to construct meaning and learn from each other. This reflects Skopinskaja's, (2019) observation that when teachers are "dominant and controlling, the learners take no responsibility for their own learning but learn what the teacher decides and when" (p.25). It became clear that I engaged in my practice in what Glenn (2006) describes as an *"*unknowing manner*"* (p.53). My engagement with critical reflection forced me to truly examine my practice and eventually acknowledge that there was a significant gap between my stated values and the reality of my practice,

"I have come to realise all the ways that I had failed to live up to my professed values and pedagogical beliefs"

(Magee, 'Reflective Task One': 27th September 2024)

Critical reflection also revealed that, I applied my stated values of care and belonging in certain circumstances, applying them to children who seemed to be most in need and having minimal one to one contact with the rest of the class. Carr and Kemmis, (2005) caution against educators selecting values to accommodate the status quo, rather than challenging it. This further highlighted the denial of my values of care and belonging, as I only focused on 'keeping the peace' by seeking connection with the most critical cases in the class.

I had become what Whitehead (2009) describes as 'a living contradiction' - when someone's values and practice are not aligned. I came to understand that who I aspired to be as a teacher, and who I was, were two different things. Critical reflection provided a way to exam my practice and offered theories for what I was doing (McNiff, et al. 1998). Brookfield (1995),

suggests that critical reflection is a process that can be "uncomfortable, messy, and unpredictable" (p.22), which aptly captures the feelings that surround the process. This process made me question my teacher identity. Who was I really?

1.4 Reshaping Values Through Reflection

Critical self-reflection enabled me to refine and realign my values, revealing the tensions between the teacher I assumed I was, and the genuine 'warts and all' one that I actually was. Greene, (1973) argues that teachers should 'strive to become aware of the tacit understandings that shape their teaching, to bring them to consciousness, and to critically examine them' (p. 82).

The first entry in my reflective journal revealed that my teaching values were still firmly rooted in Froebelian philosophy,

"What makes me happiest when I'm teaching is those moments of deeper connection with a child where I know they feel seen and heard."

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 19th August 2024)

This echoes the Froebelian belief that teacher/student relationships are foundational to learning (Bruce, 2021). However, as I progressed through this action research study, critical reflection also highlighted an assumption I held, that I had fostered what Rogers and Freiberg, (1994) refer to as an 'attitude of empathy and non-judgmental acceptance' in my professional practice,

"I realise now that the values that I profess to live my life by, may only apply to certain circumstances.

(Magee, 'Reflective Task One': 27th September 2024).

Examination of my practice through the lens of my values (Glenn et al., 2023), revealed the biases, contradictions and assumptions that made up aspects of my practice. These appeared to be centred around my tendency to focus on specific children rather than endeavouring to make connections with all of them, thus denying my values of belonging and care. My overly didactic approach highlighted a denial of my epistemological belief that knowledge is co-created and constructed, as I alone dictated what would be learnt through *my* interpretation of the subject. These insights enabled me to identify changes needed to re-align my practice with my values (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). To accomplish this and truly foster belonging, I first needed the circle to be a 'third space' within my classroom, where my world and the world of the children could come together on an equal basis. Where we could all belong.

1.5 A Change in Practice - Circles as a Third Space

Using the circle to create a third space meant that within the circle, all cultures, values and identities in the class were provided with a protected space in which to be heard (Lin Wu, 2024). I viewed my world and values as one space, and the children's world and values as another. Viewing the circle as a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994), a *new* space where my world and the children's world could intersect was a key in fostering belonging within the class and realigning with my educational and personal values.

The non-hierarchical seating arrangements and the use of a talking piece promoted everyone's equal right to be heard - another vital tool for fostering belonging within our new 'third space'. The seating arrangement within the circle reflected the interconnectedness of the tribal circles of ancient Ireland and other first nation communities (Cozolino, 2014; Nic an Bhaird & Ní Chléirigh, 2024; Berryman, Rameka and Togo, 2022). Signing the class contract on expected behaviour within the circle, helped protect this space and guarantee everyone's right to belong (Kuttner, 2023).

The creation of a third space enabled me to realign with my Froebelian values of child-centred education (Bruce, 2021), as the circle created a space that enabled me to connect with every child on an equal basis, providing the space for relationships to develop and for the co-creation of knowledge (Atasoy and Koleva, 2018).

1.6 The Purpose and Aims of this Study

The main purpose and broad aims of this action research study are outlined in bullet points below.

- The improvement of my teaching practice through reflective, cyclical enquiry enabled me to systematically identify issues, make changes, reflect on those changes and adjust my practice accordingly (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).
- Bridging the gap between theory and practice enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of how I was denying my values of belonging, care and children's voice in my practice. This enabled me to integrate this new learning directly back into my work (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).
- The creation of a living theory enabled me to explain how and why using circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging changed my practice, offering insights that can be transferred across settings (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

My research question of *"How do I use circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging in my 6th Class DEIS One Primary class?"* and related sub questions were designed to provide an in-depth look at how circle work could be used to foster belonging within my class. They are laid out in Figure 1.1 below.

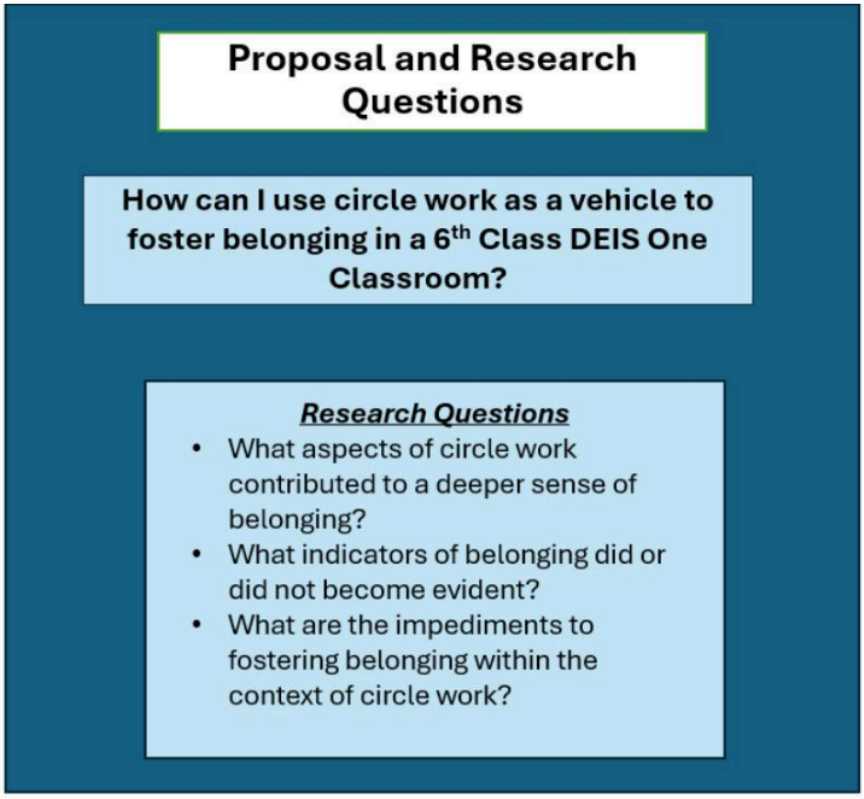

Figure 1.1 Proposal and Research Questions

1.7 Methodology of Action Research

Action research differs from more traditional forms of research with its focus on qualitative rather than quantitative forms of data collection. It is worth noting that given the qualitative nature of the research undertaken in this project, it was not limited to focusing on whether my intervention had a quantifiable measurable effect, as may be the case in traditional quantitative research (Kemmis, et al. 2013). Rather, it focused on *how* and *why* changes to my practice occurred, enabling me to capture the lived experiences underlying my practice (McNiff, et al. 2003). It provided me with a voice and the means to demonstrate that, as a practising professional, I was "best placed to make professional judgements about evaluating and improving" my own work ((McNiff & Whitehead, 2005, p.3).

1.8 Organisation of this Thesis

This thesis is organised around the steps undertaken in action research, as outlined by McNiff and Whitehead, (2011) - identify a concern where my values of belonging, care and children's voice are being denied in my practice, provide examples of this denial, then implement an intervention. Finally, evaluate the outcomes of that intervention and adjust my practice accordingly.

The five chapters of this thesis address each of the areas listed above. This *first chapter* has outlined my concern that children from marginalised communities may experience a lack of belonging in school when they struggle to connect with the middle-class value's embedded within the system, and the potential consequences of 'othering' within this context. Examples from my reflective journal illustrate the tension between my stated values and the reality of my practice, detailing my experience of being "a living contradiction" (Whitehead, 2018).

Chapter Two explores the literature around my research question, which enabled me to view how the situation is currently framed in international and national literature. This facilitated the articulation of my own intervention. *Chapter Three* expounds upon my decision to choose action research as a methodology and provides a detailed outline of the implementation of my intervention, the procedures that were followed and how I ensured the validity and accuracy of my work. *Chapter Four* details my journey through data analysis and evaluates the outcomes of my intervention. Finally, *Chapter Five* outlines how the conclusions I have come to 'are reasonably fair and accurate', the significance of my work and its future implications for educational policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Extensive research studies validate that a strong sense of belonging is essential for human flourishing, while its absence is linked to reduced well-being and even lower life expectancy (Allen et al., 2021; WHO, 2023). The world-wide disruption to social-bonds and school engagement following the Covid-19 pandemic, significantly impacted students' sense of belonging, with studies reporting increased anxiety and chronic absenteeism (Anna E. Casey Fondation, 2024). In Ireland, reports suggest similar trends, with students requiring increased support for social and emotional challenges post-COVID, particularly in primary schools (O'Brien, 2024).

My literature review explores the concept of belonging as a fundamental human need and its role in educational settings (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021; Kuttner, 2023). It also examines the use of circle work as a suitable vehicle to fostering school belonging. The review is divided into three distinct sections. In the first section, I look at definitions of belonging and how it has been framed in international and national educational policies. In section two, I examine both the advantages and disadvantages of using circle work to foster school belonging. In the third and final section, I pose the question of the need for a 'third space' within classrooms, a space where different value systems can co-exist and true belonging can be fostered.

2.2 Belonging- A Basic Human Need

There is no one defined global view of belonging as the concept cuts across disciplines, cultures, and lived experiences (Allen et al. 2021). Psychologists, however, widely recognise

belonging as a key motivator in human behaviour and as a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1954; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2008). This consensus underscores the importance of belonging as a central element across various motivational theories.

Abraham Maslow (1954) places the concept of belonging firmly in motivational theory. His hierarchy of needs, positions belonging just above the basic needs for safety, shelter and stability (Healy, 2016). Maslow surmises that once the primary needs for food and shelter are met, humans are driven to seek out belonging, through relationships, a desire for affection, and a sense of community (Maslow, 1993). Here, belonging is portrayed as a natural progression in human development and motivation.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) also place belonging in motivational theory, viewing it as a primary need. They suggest that the need to belong is a primary, fundamental, pervasive motivation, which can have many long-lasting effects on health, cognitive processes and emotional patterns (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This further reinforces the central role, that belonging plays in shaping human behaviour and wellbeing.

Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory (SDT) substitutes "relatedness" for "belonging" as it refers to the need to connect with and be valued by others. They also argue that belonging is crucial for motivation and wellbeing, aligning with the perspectives of Maslow, Baumeister and Leary.

Cozolino, (2020) suggests that our brains evolved into 'social organs', and therefore humans are sustained and thrive by being energised and connected to other people. Cozolino describes relationships as our "natural habitat" and that "the drive to belong is a fundamental human motivation" (p.269). He states that we evolved to depend upon deep connections with others for the mutual benefit of the whole tribe. Every person within a tribe was valued and

their difficulties or weaknesses were worked around as everyone played an integral part of the tribe's survival. In neuroscientific terms, our brains have evolved to be activated through positive regard and through the intentional focus of other people (Desautels, 2020).

Within this context, fostering belonging in schools becomes an essential aspect to consider given its fundamental role in peoples' overall wellbeing. But what exactly do we mean when we talk about school belonging?

2.3 Defining Belonging within a School Setting

Despite its global prominence in curricular frameworks (Guo and Dalli, 2016; Tillett and Wong, 2018; Viljamaa and Takala, 2017), research indicates varied interpretations of belonging amongst educators. According to Allen et al., (2021) school belonging is a multidimensional construct encompassing numerous emotional and behavioural components. In contrast, Goodenow (1993) defined school belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80).

Defining school belonging is complex, as it is a multifaceted concept encompassing various dimensions (Kuttner, 2023). A large variety of synonyms and indicators have been used by theorists to capture the essence of school belonging. A study by Alink et al. (2023) explored the concept of school belonging using expert ratings of synonyms and indicators related to students' sense of connection to their school. Connectedness was identified as the most suitable synonym of school belonging, with inclusion, acceptance, connection, and respect the best indicators (Alink et al., 2023). The synonym connectedness will therefore be used interchangeably with belonging throughout this thesis. Inclusion, acceptance, connection, and respect will be used as indicators relating to the concept of belonging.

2.3.1 The Complexity of Belonging

It is however the seminal work of Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) in pioneering an intersectional approach to belonging, which has enduring relevance. Her approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how race, gender, class, nationality, and other axes of identity shape experiences of belonging and exclusion (Nira Yuval-Davis ,2011). This approach has been influential in reframing belonging as a political and contested process (Johansson et, al. 2024), therefore facilitators of circle work should ensure that democratic, fair processes are part of every circle to foster belonging.

Paul Kuttner (2023) builds on Yuval-Davis's idea of an intersectional approach to school belonging. Kuttner asserts that basing a conception of school belonging mainly in the disciple of psychology, offers only a limited understanding. Kuttner argues that belonging is far more than just a psychological sense, "it is also a social, cultural, and even political process" (Kuttner, 2023, p1). Kuttner (2023) offers the following alternative definition of school belonging:

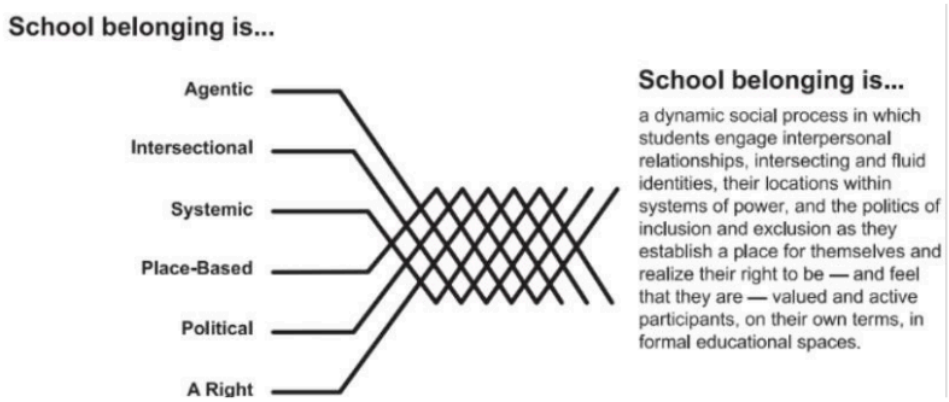

Figure 2.1 Braiding Definition of School Belonging (Kuttner, 2023)

Kuttner expands on Yuval-Davis assertion that traditional views, which focus on belonging as a simple sense of acceptance, fall short of capturing its complexity (Yuval-Davis, 2011). In the above definition he offers a transdisciplinary and justice-oriented definition of school belonging. Kuttner's use of braiding as a metaphor offers a multifaceted framework for understanding belonging. He presents belonging as agentic, where students actively shape their own inclusion. Belonging is also intersectional, acknowledging the interplay of identities such as race, class, and gender. Additionally, belonging is systemic and political, shaped by institutional structures, power relations, and questions of rights. Finally, Kuttner asserts that it is place-based, rooted in cultural contexts, and recognised as a fundamental right for all students (Kuttner, 2023).

These intersectional ways of belonging are also examined by Johansson, et. al (2024), viewing school belonging as an ever-evolving process with constant negotiations between multiple stakeholders in relation to who belongs, and who will be excluded. It is crucial therefore to consider the benefits of school belonging.

2.4 The Benefits of School Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging in school yields significant positive outcomes for academic achievement (Delgado et al., 2016) and socio-emotional wellbeing (Arslan et al., 2020: Jose et al., 2012). Feeling connected in school fosters emotional resilience and acts as a protective factor against mental health challenges (Raniti et al., 2022; Osterman, 2000). Erwin et al., (2022) note that feelings of belonging enhanced confidence in students' willingness to explore new ideas and to express themselves. This in turn was shown to reduce loneliness and promote social engagement.

In terms of behavioural outcomes, belonging has been shown to reduce negative behaviours and enhance school engagement (Demanet and Van Houtte, 2012; Van Ryzin, 2009). Belonging-focused interventions have become particularly relevant in Ireland over the last number of years. Post-COVID challenges, such as increased social anxiety and school refusal, underscore the need for interventions that foster belonging (OECD, 2023; *O'Brien*, 2024).

These findings emphasise the critical role of fostering belonging in Irish primary schools to enhance students' academic success and mental health. Addressing the growing disconnection in students' sense of belonging observed in recent years must be prioritised.

2.4.1 Diversity and Belonging

The above findings are of significant relevance in the case of students from disadvantaged and marginalised communities where fostering belonging can help mitigate disengagement (Allink, et al., 2023). Studies have also shown that students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, a sense of belonging reduces feelings of marginalisation with peer support playing a critical role (Orolet and Arcand, 2013). As a result, fostering children's sense of

belonging and through that, preventing a sense of exclusion, has become a priority in educational settings (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011; Stratigos, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014). The role belonging plays in the development of children's identity and its ability to shape how they view others and respond to diversity (Eek-Karlsson & Emilson, 2021), has become a growing area of interest in educational policy agendas worldwide. The growing diversity within Irish and European classrooms while enriching, presents challenges such as navigating cultural tensions and providing pedagogical frameworks for fostering inclusive belonging (Eek-Karlsson & Emilson, 2021).

2.5 How has Belonging been framed in International Educational Policy?

To fully examine the importance placed on fostering belonging within international and national educational policy, we must understand its placement within wellbeing.

Belonging has long been identified by the world health organisation as a key element of wellbeing (WHO, 2001). Contemporary wellbeing policies in education increasingly emphasise that a critical component of holistic health is belonging (WHO, 2023). As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2001), wellbeing is achieved when an individual realises their potential, manages everyday stresses with resilience, maintains physical health, and experience's purpose, connection, and belonging within a wider community.

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations signed up to the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and its *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) (WHO, 2023b). In alignment with these objectives, the *UN H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-Being* introduced a comprehensive conceptual framework for adolescent well-being in 2020, focusing on individuals aged 10–19 (Ross et al., 2020). Within this framework, "connectedness, positive values and contribution to society" are highlighted as

key elements (Ross et al., 2020, p.210), with connectedness capturing the essence of belonging. The WHO identifies schools as best placed to deliver programmes promoting belonging and other initiatives that embrace the core values of the framework (WHO, 2023).

Enhancing student belonging has been identified as a pivotal strategy for improving school climates (Smith et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2010; OECD, 2024; Kuttner, 2023). The OECD report *Nurturing Social and Emotional Learning Across the Globe*, presents findings from a 2023 OECD survey of the emotional and social skills of 10–15-year-olds across 37 countries. It found that fostering a sense of belonging is emphasised as essential (OECD, 2024). The report offers recommendations for refining school policies and practices, with a particular focus on creating environments where students feel connected and valued. It is important therefore to consider how belonging has been framed within an Irish context.

2.6 The Irish Context

Creating an environment within the school where children feel a sense of belonging has also been explicitly identified by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2019) as an indicator of success within the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019). “Implementation of this process will help our children …to have a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to their wider community, including their school community “, (DES, 2019, p3). The Irish government views schools as playing a vital role in the promotion of children’s “academic, physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual development”, (DES, 2019, p.10). The policy statement within the *Framework for Practice* outlines its key guiding principles, first of which is “Child/Young person-centred” (DES, 2019, p.10), stating that “This requires us to … foster their belonging and connectedness to the school community”, (DES, 2019, p.10).

The Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (NCCA, 2023) addresses belonging indirectly through its focus on wellbeing through the Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) programme. Programmes under current curriculum guidelines are *The Walk Tall Programme, The Stay Safe Programme* and *The Relationships and Sexual Education Programme,* none of which specifically mention belonging. SPHE is allocated 30 minutes per week in primary schools under the 1999 curriculum. The 2023 PCF proposes integrating SPHE and physical education within a 3-hour weekly wellbeing allocation for primary schools, but this is not yet fully implemented (NCCA, 2023). Research suggests that the pressure educators feel to rush through an overloaded curriculum, results in wellbeing programmes being sidelined (Durlak et al., 2011; Lynch, 2022). This leaves little time for the development of vital teacher/student bonds, which O'Brien et al. (2024) suggest "emerges as a crucial factor, as students express reluctance to engage with less approachable teachers" (p.866).

2.7 Teacher/Student Relationships-At the Heart of Belonging

Based on Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory that emphasises the critical importance that nurturing relationships play in human development, Noddings (1992), emphasises the importance of care for learning, particularly the carer role of the educator. She contends that educators ought to create a space where learners feel appreciated and cared for, as this promotes a supportive learning environment and raises student involvement. These spaces must also have a nurturing aspect to them to foster that critical connection between student and teacher (Noddings, 1992). Nurture, according to Boxall and Lucas (2010), is a process of optimism, a progress that spirals upward and outward. In other words, everything stems from these nurturing relationships. If the teacher/student relationship is a critical aspect of school belonging, can circles also be used to foster them?

2.8 The Need for a Pedagogical Framework that Works

The positioning of belonging as integral to student wellbeing, advocating for inclusive, child-centred environments that nurture connection (DES, 2019) and bombarding teachers with wellbeing programmes, simply adds to the overwhelm that many teachers report feeling (Hascher and Waber, 2021). This highlights the need for support through the provision of a flexible pedagogical framework. One that can be incorporated into every school day and that meets all these needs. Circle work emerges as a pedagogical strategy uniquely suited to these aspirations. Working in the circle embodies the values of equity and community central to wellbeing frameworks (Garnett et al. 2022) while also fostering belonging through the building of critical teacher/student relationships and promotion of student voice.

The following section examines how circle work aligns with international and national policy objectives, offering a practical means to foster belonging in a DEIS One sixth class primary school context.

2.9 Historical Context of Using Circles as Learning Spaces

For the ancient Irish, circles held deep symbolic meaning. Often associated with the sun, moon and other natural cycles, the circle reinforced the concept of the interconnectedness of all things (Nic an Bhaird & Ní Chléirigh, 2025). In ancient Irish culture, the circle was used by the Druids-the spiritual and intellectual class in ancient Ireland, as a learning space (Cunliffe, 2018). Social and spiritual gatherings and ceremonies such as Samhain meaning "summer's end," Imbolc, meaning "in the belly,", Beltane meaning "bright fire" and Lughnasadh meaning "Lugh's gathering", would have involved circular formations, as suggested by archaeological evidence of ritual enclosures (Waddell, 2014).

Learning circles also played a major role in Ireland's rich oral tradition, where elders or bards -poets and story tellers, would sit in circles with apprentices and young listeners to impart knowledge (Nagy, 1997). While serving as entertainment, these sessions also provided an educational function, with stories conveying laws, moral lessons, cultural practices and history (Nic an Bhaird & Ní Chléirigh, 2025). In practical terms, the circle facilitated effective group engagement, enabling all participants to see and hear each other clearly, as seen in the design of early Irish communal spaces (Gibson, 2012).

2.9.1 Circles Beyond Ireland

The use of circles as collaborative learning spaces is also deeply rooted in the traditions of many First Nation people and indigenous communities (Bishop, 1998). Inclusion is a cornerstone of circle practices in Aboriginal Australian and Māori communities (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Berryman, Rameka and Togo, 2022). These practices foster a sense of belonging by ensuring all participants feel valued and heard, creating culturally safe spaces for communal dialogue (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Berryman, Rameka and Togo, 2022). In these traditions, the circle symbolises interconnectedness among community members. Every voice is valued, and in Māori circles, a talking piece ensures uninterrupted speech, a practice adapted by foundational theorist Jenny Mosley into modern Circle Time formats (Mosley, 1993).

2.9.2 Contemporary use of Circle Work

The practice of sitting children in circles, often referred to as 'circle time', is rooted in the educational theories of social constructivism (Vygotsky,1978) that we learn best through our interaction with others. The circle format emphasises equality through a non-hierarchal seating position and aligns with theories on democratic classroom (Dewey, 1966).

Similarly, Mosley's (1993) foundational work 'Quality Circle Time' aims to build community, enhance self-esteem, and develop social skills through structured group activities. A key component of Mosley's model is the class meeting which is described as '… an ideal group listening system for enhancing children's self-esteem, promoting more values, building a sense of team and developing social skills' (Mosley, 1993, p33). Using the circle to create a sense of team and for the development of social skills, aligns with Cozolino's (2014) concept of building belonging through the fostering of a 'tribal' culture within classrooms. He too advocates for non-hierarchical seating arrangements to foster a sense of belonging.

While Mosley argues that circles empower children by giving them a voice, other theorists have critiqued the assumption that circle time is inherently equitable (Leach and Lewis, 2013; Collins, 2011 ; Vaandering 2014).

2.9.3 A Not So Perfect Circle

Leach and Lewis (2013) suggest that "voicing" children may not always have the intended positive outcomes that might be expected and may not be an "all empowering" procedure. Collins (2011) concurs with this sentiment by suggesting that the rigid rules of circle time can stifle authentic voice and can inadvertently reinforce power imbalances. A study by Vaandering (2014) discovered that teachers frequently used circles to reinforce silence

around controversial or uncomfortable subjects rather than attempting to foster authentic dialogue.

Similarly, Collins & Kavanagh, (2015) noted that some students felt that they were "not provided with opportunities to participate on an equal basis either with each other or with the facilitating teacher" during circle work (p1.). This contrasts with the view held by theorists who highlight circle work's ability to amplify student voice and encourage peer discussion as key benefits (Burke & Collier, 2024; Mosley, 1993). These results indicate a need to adjust circle work practices to foster belonging, engagement, and equal representation (Collins & Kavanagh, 2015).

2.9.4 Teacher or Councillor?

The widespread use of circle work as an intervention to promote social and emotional learning in schools has also drawn criticism in recent years. Critics have raised concerns about the potential for social and emotional learning initiatives to label and stigmatize vulnerable children, particularly those targeting specific groups (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). They argue that education should not focus on mental health and well-being, emphasising that teachers are educators, not substitute psychologists or mental health professionals (Craig, 2009). However, Cefai and Cavioni (2013), argue that these theorists have misunderstood the true goal of social and emotional learning in schools which is to promote well-being and unlock the growth and potential of all students, including those at risk in their development. In stark contrast to these criticisms, Chacon, et al. (2023), found that circle work resulted in nearly 95% of students surveyed feeling that circles increased peer connectedness, 92% felt they improved content learning, and 90% felt they increased engagement (p.1).

2.9.5 The Evolution of the Circle

To use circles to foster belonging, there is a clear need to develop a new pedagogical approach to circle work that promotes the multi-intersectional complexity of belonging suggested by Kuttner, (2023) and Yuval-Davis, (2011) - one that ensures a safe space for diverse voices and opinions (Bhabha, 1994) and where different value systems can co-exist through the integration of teachers' and students' cultural identities (Wu, 2024). It must also foster the inclusion, engagement, and equal representation called for by Collins and Kavanagh, (2015). Viewing the circle as a 'Third Space' where these various ideologies intersect, may achieve this.

2.10 Creating a Third Space

Greene (1984) advocates for the creation of public spaces within our classrooms, spaces where young people can share ideas and be met with respect. This concept is echoed by Bhabha (1994) in her book *The Location of Culture*, when she refers to the creation of a 'third space'- a space were non-dominant epistemologies, and marginalised voices can reclaim agency (Anzaldúa,1987; Bhabha, 1994; Wu, 2024). While as Bhabha (1994) refers to education of the class itself as a third space, Greene (1984) advocates for a specific space to be created within the room itself - a place where all voices are welcomed, respected and listened to. The use of the learning circle as a third space where children's various intersectional ways of belonging (Kuttner, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2011), can be given full expression, aligns with Greene's and Bhabha's theories. This concept is illustrated in Figure 2.2 below.

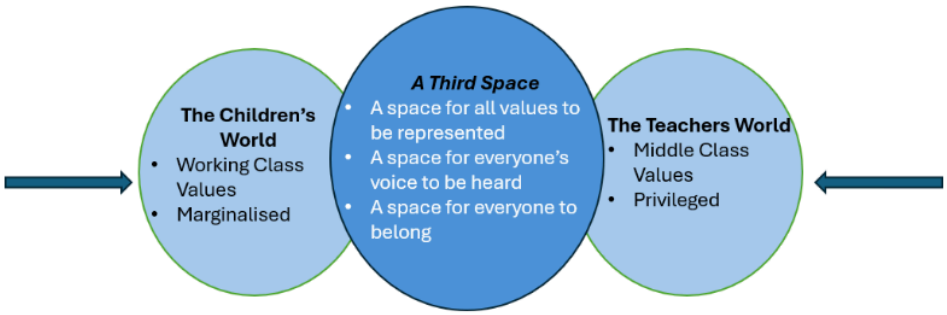

Figure 2.2 The Circle as a Third Space (Magee, 2025)

However, transforming the circle into a space that truly fosters belonging, will largely depend on the educator's ability to facilitate culturally responsive, inclusive dialogue, manage the power dynamics inherent in circle work (Leach and Lewis, 2013) and create a safe space for the nurturing of relationships.

2.11 Power Dynamics and Circle Work

Wing (2009) observes that group dialogue can unintentionally reproduce existing power imbalances. Parker-Shandal and Bickmore (2020) state that "within the specificities of practice, circle norms may evade or silence the feelings, identities and stories of some, while welcoming others: these choices (intentional or not) circulate and normalize unequal power relations"

(p. 472). As previously stated, a talking piece used in traditional and contemporary circles is often used to guarantee an opportunity to speak…but does this effectively disrupt power dynamics? Chacon et al. (2023) argue that the true effectiveness of the circle hinges on the facilitators ability to balance participants' voices. The student-centred philosophy of Dewey, (1938), Froebel, (1887) and Freire, (1970), which advocate for inclusive practices where the students are co-creators of knowledge, has the means to redistribute the power in classrooms

and foster mutual respect. This is demonstrated by Tangen (2008) who observes that involving children as agents of change redefines roles and shifts power dynamics. It is in the fostering of this mutual respect, which is at the heart of teacher student relationships, that has the most impact on disrupting power dynamics within a group and fostering belonging.

2.12 The Tribal Classroom

As previously discussed, circles in ancient Ireland and in first nation communities were crucial in fostering belonging. It is worth exploring the benefits in a contemporary classroom. Cozolino (2014), suggests that our brains evolved in tribal contexts, relying on emotionally significant relationships for development. Cozolino's (2014) pedagogical model is based on ancient tribal communities, where mixed abilities and ages sat in non-hierarchal circular formations, creating knowledge together. At the heart of this model is the establishment of secure teacher/student bonds (Cozolino, 2014). The relationship between the teacher and their students is of critical importance to fostering school belonging. Hughes (2011) reported that "children who perceive their teachers as offering warmth, acceptance, and self-esteem validation are more likely to perceive themselves as academically capable and as belonging to school" (p. 54). The quality of the student teacher relationship has also been identified as having a significant impact on academic achievement (Baker, 2006), social competencies and behaviour (Birch and Ladd, 1997). This echoes Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory that underlines the critical role that relationships play in a human development. Bergin & Bergin, (2009) suggest that secure relationships with teachers, mirror early attachment experiences, thereby creating a secure foundation of belonging from which students can take risks and explore.

2.13 Conclusion

As humans we are motivated by a fundamental need to belong (Maslow, 1954; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2008), the world may have changed but our brains are still wired for connection and a mutual desire to belong (Clark et al., 2019).

As previously established in this literature review, modern circle work is based on the traditional circles used by many first nation people. Our tribal nature motivates students to align with peer groups that offer emotional support and shared identity (Clark et al., 2019), thus fostering belonging. In classrooms where various identities and cultures are brought together (Anzaldúa,1987; Greene, 1984; Kuttner, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2011) using the circle as a third space, a space where relationships can be established and a new tribe can form (Clark et al., 2019), is at the core of fostering belonging.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Action research offers practitioners an innovative approach to transforming their practice. This chapter outlines the qualitative research process, including the rationale for choosing this approach, paradigms, ethical considerations, design, data collection, and analysis. This study, centred on my values of social justice, care, belonging and children's voice, uses circle work to foster belonging, aligning with McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) concept of living theory. It aims to develop a living theory by critically examining practice through Brookfield's (2017) lenses, while drawing on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy to emphasise empowerment and social change. Ethical considerations are informed by Noddings' (1984) ethic of care, prioritising relational responsibility. Data analysis employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, ensuring a systematic approach to generating knowledge that influences others and the community (Whitehead, 2018).

3.2 Research Rationale

My research project emerged from extensive self-study and ongoing critical reflection. Through my engagement with literature, I gained a deep understanding of how belonging shapes children's lives, particularly those from marginalised communities. The middle-class values imbedded in educational curricula, can alienate marginalised students (Lynch et al. 2022) leading to feelings of being 'other' and not belonging (Rodriguez et al., 2025). Watching this pattern repeat itself over my 25 years' service in my own DEIS school, led me to consider if circle work could be used to create a new third space where the children's world and my world could come together- a place where we could all belong.

Critical reflection revealed tension between my stated values of belonging, social justice, care and children's voice, versus the reality of my practice. Examination of this 'tension' brought

me face to face with myself as 'a living contradiction' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). To address this, I designed a research project to create a new 'third' space in my practice. This new space was used to foster belonging through the strengthening of relationships, and amplification of student voices, realigning with my personal, professional, epistemological and ontological values.

3.3 Action Research Paradigm

I have adopted an educational action research approach to this study as it is unique to each researcher and their own values, norms and assumptions for doing things (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). Whitehead, (2018), suggests that in creating their own living theory, an individual includes the unique constellation of values that they use to give meaning and purpose to their existence. I have also chosen action research as my methodology as it allows me to ask the questions "What am I doing?" and "How can I check that I am doing it well?" (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005, p.1). Action research embraces methods and insights from other methodologies (McNiff, 2016) such as autoethnography, self-study and narrative research. It is a far from linear process and creates what Mellor (2001) refers to as a 'messiness' that can prove challenging for researchers. It is out of this messiness that unique living theories are born. There are many different models of action research. Figure 3.1 below illustrates McNiff's model.

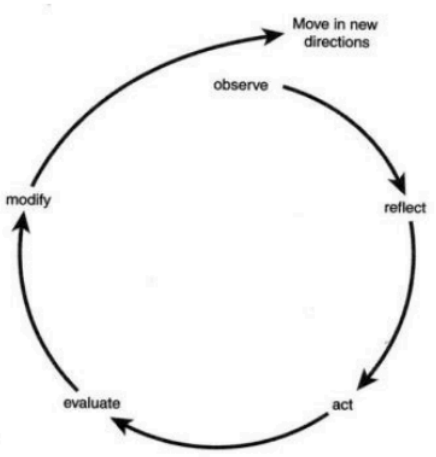

Figure 3.1 An Action-Reflection Cycle (McNiff, 2017, p.12)

They all, however, share common elements; identify an area of concern, design an intervention, collect and analyse data, take action that leads to living closer to one's values, critically reflect on the outcomes and move forward with new knowledge (O'Sullivan, 2020; Whitehead, 2018). Action research can be viewed as a way of valuing the perspectives of others to create new knowledge and meaning from improvements in our practice (McAteer, 2013).

3.3.1 Critical Reflection

Action research is grounded in reflection. It involves reflection in action and reflection on action (Brookfield, 2017). For me, critical reflection allows me not only to become aware of my assumptions but also to challenge those assumptions. Through critical reflection, I examined the dominant ideologies within my practice for instances of hegemony and endeavoured to identify other areas of interest (Brookfield, 2017; Kitchenham, 2015; McNiff, 2016). I used Brookfield's model of reflection through the use of the four lenses of self,

colleagues, students and theory. This method particularly appealed to me as it allowed for triangulation between the data, reflections and perspectives of everyone involved in the research (Brookfield, 2017).

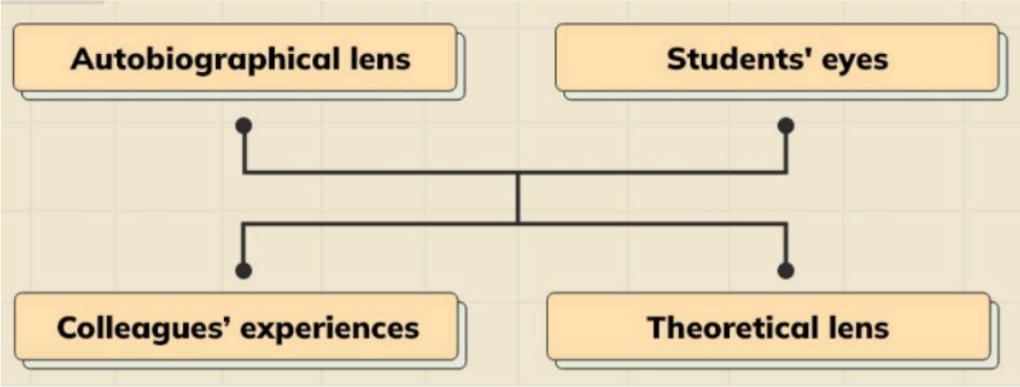

Figure 3.2. Brookfield's Critical Lenses (1995)

3.3.2 Qualitative Research

My research focused on how circle work can be used to foster a sense of belonging among the children in my class. As this question is deeply rooted in the subjectivity of human nature and interactions, it makes it a challenging area to measure through more traditional quantitative methods. Quantitative research relies on detachment from the subject, as emphasised by Comte and Martineau (2010). However, in this study, *I* am an integral part of the research process, and my values and actions directly influence the outcomes, rendering objectivity impossible. This stands in direct contrast to qualitative research, which embraces subjectivity, allowing for a rich and nuanced exploration of the research question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). McNiff and Whitehead, (2011) highlight that this form of research acknowledges that the researcher and their values play a central role in an action research study. Engaging in qualitative research enabled me to critically examine my own assumptions within my practice and recognise their impact on the children's experiences.

This approach allowed me to capture the complex and multifaceted perspectives of the children in my class, along with those of my critical friends, providing a comprehensive understanding of how circle work can be used to foster belonging in a marginalised setting.

3.3.3 Data Collection Sources

Qualitative data was collected from three main sources, as illustrated in Figure 3.3 below.

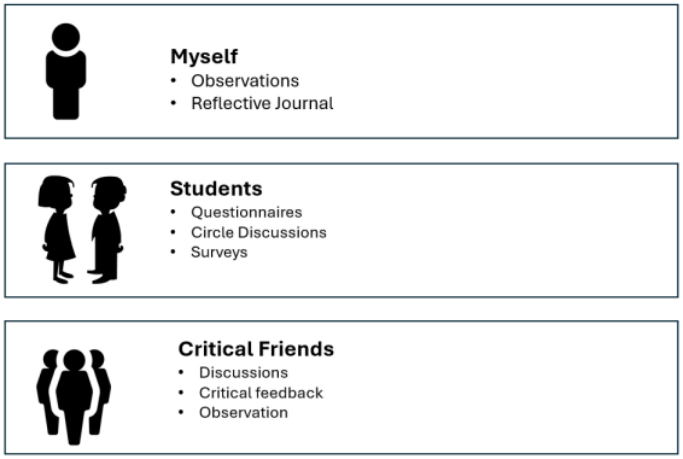

Figure 3.3 Data Collection Sources and Tools

Whitehead, (2018), states that through engagement with Living Theory research, as a way of improving my own practice and knowledge "I clarify my relational and ontological values as they emerge and inform my efforts to improve my educational practice" (p.2). Therefore my own observations and reflections, coupled with those of my students and critical friends, provided crucial data on emerging changes to my practice and the processes that I followed (Glenn et al., 2023).

3.3.3 Data Collection Tools

The following section outlines the data collection tools employed in this research, a justification for their use, how they were used and the challenges encountered**.**

Diamond-9: Base Line Data on Belonging

Prior to the commencement of the first circle, I used a Diamond-9 activity. This is an established active learning approach which involves ranking nine items in a diamond pattern, with the most important item at the top and the least at the bottom (Clark, 2012). See example in Figure 3.4 below.

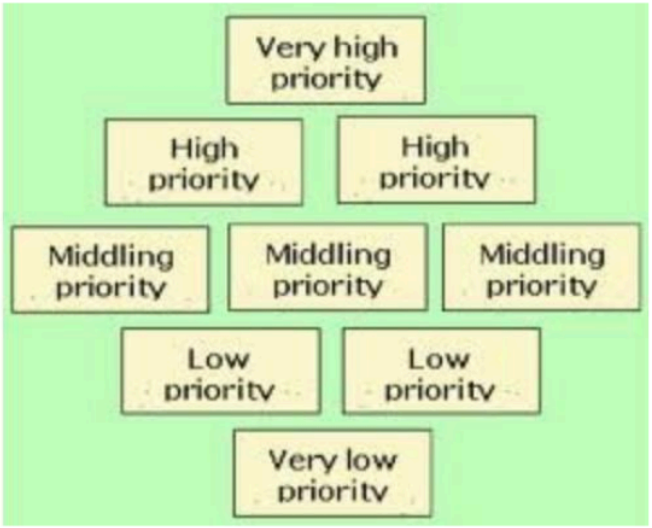

Figure 3.4 Example of Diamond Nine Activity

I based the statements used in the activity (see appendix 11) on the indicators of belonging as identified by Allen et al., (2021), Alink et al.,(2023), Goodenow, (1993), Kuttner, (2023) and Yuval-Davis, (2011), to establish a baseline for how the children viewed belonging and their experience to date of its role in their lives in school. This was to "show the situation as it

was", prior to my research (Glenn, et al., 2023, p.85). This activity was first completed individually by the children (see appendix 13) and then, a week later, in groups of three or four (see appendix 12). Interestingly, both as individuals and in groups, the children ranked *"I feel safe and respected by adults and other students in school"* highest, with *"Having teachers who care and listen to me"* a close second in *both* activities, thus highlighting the importance the children placed on having a safe space and the importance of relationships in fostering school belonging for them. This insight informed my teaching activities within the circle from the outset, ensuring that I focused on creating a safe space to build deeper bonds between us to foster belonging.

It is important to note that my research did not aim to simply measure the levels of belonging already present in the class but rather to observe how I could use circle work to *foster* a greater sense of belonging for *all* children through the creation of a 'third space' where our various value systems could come together (Bhabha, 1994; Greene, 1984). Therefore, unlike traditional quantitative research methods that are results driven, my action research focused on the children's response to the *process* of coming together in the circle as a way of fostering belonging. My data collection therefore continued with observation of the children in my classes responses to being together in the circle.

Tools for Circle Observation

As I was participating in the circle while also observing, the best approach was participant observation method combined with a structured checklist (see appendix 10) as this allowed me to engage naturally (Chaniotakis and Papazoglou, 2019) whilst also capturing key indicators of belonging. I observed dialogue and body language within the circles to study

how the group communicated with one another, the nature of their interactions and the general group dynamics (Bruinenberg et al., 2021). I observed these through the lens of belonging.

1**. Participant Observation** (Engaged Listening & Notetaking)- **Used at every circle**

- Since I was part of the discussion, I made mental notes or jotted down observations discreetly. I always let the children know that the observations were for my own reflection on my teaching and not on them personally.
- I focused my observations on indicators of belonging through the student's engagement, emotional expression, body language and the use of inclusive language within the group.

2. **Structured Observation Checklist**

The checklist was chosen as it kept my observations focused on belonging. It was organised around the six dimensions of belonging identified by Kuttner (2023) in his article "The Right to Belong in School"; agentic, intersectional, systemic, political, place-based, and belonging as a right. It included indicators of belonging adapted from Alink et al., (2023); inclusion, acceptance, connection, and respect. Other positive indicators of belonging that were also included were; improvement in mental health and wellbeing (Arslan et al., 2020: Jose et al., 2012) higher academic achievement ((Delgado *et al.*, 2016) and improved social behaviour (Demanet and Van Houtte, 2012). Indicators of belonging were also identified through the WHO and Irish government publications and strategies. These observations were then recorded and later reflected upon using my reflective journal.

Reflective Journalling and the Role of Critical Reflection

Critical reflection plays a central role in action research, offering a way for practitioners to exam their own practice and offer theories for what they are doing (McNiff, et al. 1998). My reflective journal enabled me to chart the changes to my practice and thinking through engagement with reflective cycles. This process slowly began to reveal the answer to the question 'How does one begin to authentically know oneself as a teacher?' Palmer (2017) suggests that: "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well" (p.4). Palmer acknowledges that this process of 'self-knowing' is 'painful' and 'slow' but ultimately worthwhile, as it can potentially open up 'a world of unexpected, connections' (Palmer, 2017, p.4). Moon's (1999) reflective approach provided the most insights as it enabled me to incorporate the role played by emotion and dialogue. Moon suggests that reflection involves bringing implicit understandings to consciousness and that this process deepens through stages of increasing complexity (Moon, 2004).

The nonlinear nature of Moon's approach proved most effective for my meta-reflection. It enabled me to slowly peel back, layer after layer of understanding, allowing me to challenge my own biases and ultimately endeavour to improve my practice (Brookfield, 2017; Moon, 1999; Whitehead, 1994).

Moon's (1999) reflective framework, seen below in Figure 3.5,

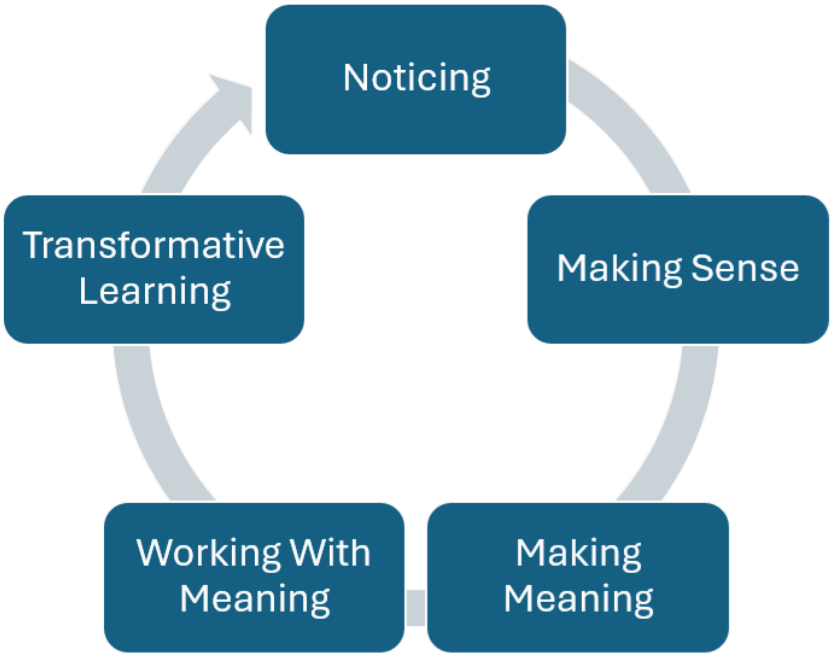

Figure 3.5 Moon's Reflective Framework (Based on Moon 1999)

enabled my reflections to evolve from surface-level observations to a deeper, more critical engagement with my work. It unearthed uncomfortable truths about my practice and brought me face to face with myself as a 'living contradiction'. The observations recorded in my journal enabled me to translate the deep motivation I felt to engage in this research, into concrete actions that I could use to transform my practice through new knowledge and a better understanding of my values (Sullivan et al, 2016). I used this new knowledge to inform my surveys and to gain a deeper understanding of the action research process from the children's perspective…was I truly living closer to my values of social justice, care, belonging and children's voice?

Surveys

Surveys were a very useful tool for older primary aged children (Balch, 2016). Keeping some of them anonymous (see appendix 8) allowed the children the freedom to move away from the "standard, accepted normative views" (Hewson, 2014, p.429), often associated with this method of data collection. The data collected from this method provided topics for discussion in the circle that were based on the children's authentic experiences of belonging or, in many cases, feeling like they did not belong. In turn, my observation of these discussions led me to a deeper understanding of the children's experiences of school belonging and how I might more effectively use the space provided by the circle to truly foster it. The data also provided a clear indication for how closely my practice did, or did not, align with my stated values (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011).

Critical Friends

Critical friends offered valuable insights that helped clarify my thought processes, enhanced my comprehension and prompted new questions to be further investigated (Sullivan et al., 2016). Our class SNA (Special Needs Assistant), who was assigned to my class for the year and had firsthand knowledge of the children and the setting, agreed to be part of my critical friend's group, providing daily insights into each circle as they took place. Three mainstream class teachers, along with a SET (Special Education Teacher), the HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) coordinator, my own school principal and vice-principal along with the principal of a nearby school and my former, now retired school principal, made up my critical friends' group. This group agreed to support my research as it held great appeal in informing, in some cases, their own practice but also for its ability to inform school policy, not only in my own school but also in schools nearby. The multiple informal conversations that took place between myself and my work colleagues, who formed the core of my critical friend

group, coupled with the slightly more formal phone calls and meetings with the two external principals, provided invaluable feedback and insights into my research. By including other voices and opinions, Ahmed, (2024), suggests that "researchers can corroborate information from different angles, enhancing the credibility of the interpretations and reducing the impact of potential biases from a single method or data source" (p.2). This lends credibility and validation to the process.

3.4 Ethical Considerations in Data Collection

Children are considered a vulnerable group in research due to their imperfect understanding of complex processes such as informed consent (Brydon-Miller, 2009). That is why it is necessary to ensure that all possible ethical considerations are taken into account. Below, I lay out the ethical considerations that were taken into account throughout this research.

Vulnerability: Children are considered to be a vulnerable research group and as such it was imperative to consider the various issues that may have been encountered over the course of this action research project.

Minimizing Risk*:* To minimize any potential risk, I began each circle by asking the children if they were happy to participate. I also reminded them that they were free to withdraw at any time. To further reduce any potential risk, participation guidelines were drawn up in collaboration with the children and the adults taking part. This set of agreed guidelines for expected behaviour within the circle were drawn up as a class contract. It was signed by all participants and displayed in the classroom.

***Principled Sensitivity**:* Throughout my research, I prioritized participant safety due to the sensitive nature of the work, adhering to the school's child safeguarding guidelines to address any unexpected outcomes or disclosures by referring them to the designated liaison officer. I was prepared to access the school's support network and counselling services for serious challenges and to inform my supervisor of any incidents.

Ethical consent was sought and granted through Maynooth University, the School Principal, the Board of Management, the children, and their parents/guardians (see appendices 1-7).

3.4.1 Research Site

This research project was carried out in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) primary school setting. The research took place in a mixed, vertical, urban based school in the East of the Republic of Ireland. There are one to two of each class level, as well as one mainstream and two pre-school Autism classes. It is a Catholic ethos school which values inclusivity, community, care and participation. The primary research site was my mainstream 6th class classroom of 14 children aged between 11-12 years of age and one SNA. The children came from a mix of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

3.4.2 Research Participants

I carried out this research with 12 out of the 14 children in my 6th class. These children engaged in circle work aimed at fostering a sense of belonging. The findings in this research are based on my interaction with these 12 children during this specific moment in time. Other participants included the class SNA, critical friends and my colleagues as a validation group for the purpose of triangulation to add validity and rigor to my claims to new knowledge

(Ahmed, 2024). The children's parents/guardians and the Board of Management acted as gatekeepers throughout the research, reserving the right to withdraw their consent at any time throughout the process (appendices 5-7).

3.4.3 Informed consent and assent

Alotaibi (2024) stresses the importance that "All informed consent forms must include complete and accurate information regarding the nature of the study and the nature of subject participation, (and) the ability to read and understand by potential participants" (p.66). It was therefore of great concern to me that the children and parents/guardians taking part in my action research project did so freely and without compunction of any kind. As there were low literacy levels amongst some of the parents and guardians attached to my class, I sought, through informal conversations at the classroom door and parent teacher meetings, to fully explain the nature of my research and what it was I was trying to achieve. I endeavoured to ensure that it was informed consent that was being given through both dialogue and written information (appendices 5,6). The children gave their assent through a child-friendly version of the adult consent form (appendix 7).

All of the children in the class gave their assent, however because I did not have parental consent for two of the children, I did not collect any data from their individual participation in the class circles.

3.4.4 Managing Power dynamics

This aspect of the research needed to be given special consideration for true, meaningful research to take place. With the balance of power so clearly tipped in my favour, how could I

create a space through the circle in which we could all meet on a democratic footing? (Brookfield, 2017). I put the following four safeguards in place to create that space.

Between Researcher and Participants: The power dynamic between children and adults involved in any form of research must be considered as the greatest obstacle to true, meaningful research taking place (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Alderson, (2020) suggests that researchers' authority can intimidate children, affecting their willingness to participate or express disagreement. To counteract this dynamic, I repeatedly informed the children that there are no wrong answers or any need to agree with me or the other adults in the circle. I reminded the children that they were my co-researchers and that rather than working for me, they were working with me. I drew attention to the imbalance of power in our relationship and therefore in the circle and encouraged a discussion on how to address it.

Between the participants themselves: there were many different personalities and characters within the class, and it was imperative that all voices be heard and given space and a respectful audience. A small teddy bear was used as a talking piece, this was passed around in one direction only, to ensure that every child had an opportunity to speak, should they wish to. This was informed by Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic education whereby true meaning emerges from equitable exchanges. I used the class contract to remind children of the rules around the speaking piece, that only the person holding it could speak and that everyone would be given a chance to hold it and speak - if they so wished. We eventually got to the point where the children openly discussed the very real power dynamics amongst themselves as a group, especially around who would be actively listened to, rather than just heard, illustrating Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the benefits of the co-construction of knowledge. This point will be explored further in the chapter on 'Findings'.

Insider-research: Another power dynamic that I needed to consider was between myself and the parents involved. As a long-standing member of the school community with twenty-five years' service, I had built deep and lasting ties within the community with parents and guardians, thus embodying what Goundar (2025) refers to as insider positionality. Therefore, I was concerned that some parents may have felt compelled to allow their children to participate even if they were not comfortable with their child participating in any form of research. I addressed this power imbalance by empowering the parents and guardians through my reassurance of their right to both refuse consent and to withdraw it at any time during the project (Htong Kham, 2024).

The Class SNA (Special Needs Assistant) The disparity of power between myself and the class SNA was also taken into consideration when receiving critical feedback from them throughout the project. We had a frank and open discussion in which I reassured them how much I valued their honesty and critical feedback and that by working together, we could improve the lives of the children we work with. This approach reflects Goundar's (2025) positionality theory on balancing power differences to promote fair teamwork.

3.5 Overview of the Research Design of this Study

The research procedure for this study was broken down into two action research cycles represented below in Figure 3.6.

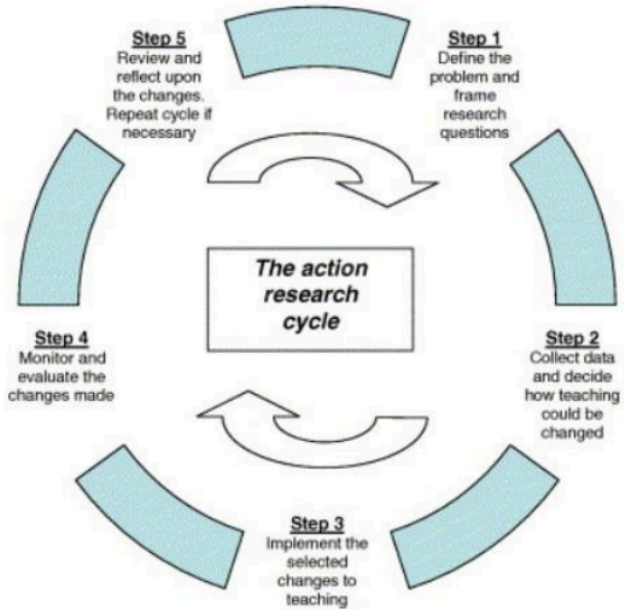

Figure 3.6 The Action Research Cycle

The data collected in cycle one was reflected upon and used to track how my practice was improving and whether it was becoming more in line with my values-or not (Glenn, et al., 2023). The findings raised in cycle one were used to inform my practice for cycle two, enabling me to "move in a new direction" (McNiff, 2017, p.12).

3.5.1 Action Research Cycle One

Below is a table of contents outlining the teaching interventions, data collection tools and the sub questions relevant to Cycle One of my action research studies. The plan of action covers a four-week period. The running and format of the circle was modelled on the circle practices of tribes from ancient Irish and first nation communities which emphasized inclusion and fostered belonging by creating culturally safe spaces where all voices were valued and heard (Berryman, Rameka and Togo, 2022; Cozolino, 2014). A talking piece ensured uninterrupted

speech, a concept adapted by Jenny Mosley (1993) into modern Circle Time formats and used in the running of my class circles.

Table of Contents-Cycle One

Dates	Teaching Interventions and Methods	Data Collection Tools	Sub Questions
13th – 17th January	• Discussion with the class on the nature of the research project and their possible involvement as co-researchers. • Letters seeking consent from parents/guardians and assent from students sent home.	• Reflections from my personal journal • Meeting with critical friends to discuss the nature of an action research project and what I am attempting to achieve through the process.	• What aspects of circle work contributed to a deeper sense of belonging?
20th-24th January	• Individual Diamond-9 activity to establish baseline understanding of **belonging** *without* collaboration with other students. • Class contract activity to co-create guidelines for safe and inclusive connection circles.	• Class contract • Teacher observation • SNA observation • Pupil view templates from Diamond-9 activities • Reflections from my personal journal • Anonymous individual student questionnaires based on what belonging in school means to them	• What indicators of belonging did or did not become evident?
3rd.-7th February	• Formation of a connection circle within the classroom. • Students work collaboratively in groups of 3-4 to complete the same Diamond-9 Activity used in week two, in order to establish baseline *collective* understanding of **belonging**. • Connection circles to hear and discuss feedback from the groups on their collaborative Diamond-9 activity on **belonging.**	• Teacher observation • SNA observation • Pupil view templates from Diamond-9 activities • Reflections from my personal journal	• What aspects of circle work contributed to a deeper sense of belonging?
10th.-14th February	• Reading the book "Every Kindness" by Jacqueline Woodson (deals with exclusion) • Connection Circle to talk about the book "Every Kindness" • Drama Lesson- Conscience Alley based on the characters from "Every Kindness"	• Teacher observation • SNA observation • Reflections from my personal journal • Meeting with critical friends to insights after first four weeks.	• What are the impediments to fostering belonging within the context of circle work?

Figure 3.7 Overview of Action Research Cycle One

The steps in cycle one created focal points for discussion around the right to belong and the effects of exclusion. The sub-questions were used to focus teaching actions and data collection. Figure 3.8 below gives an overview of my research question and sub questions.

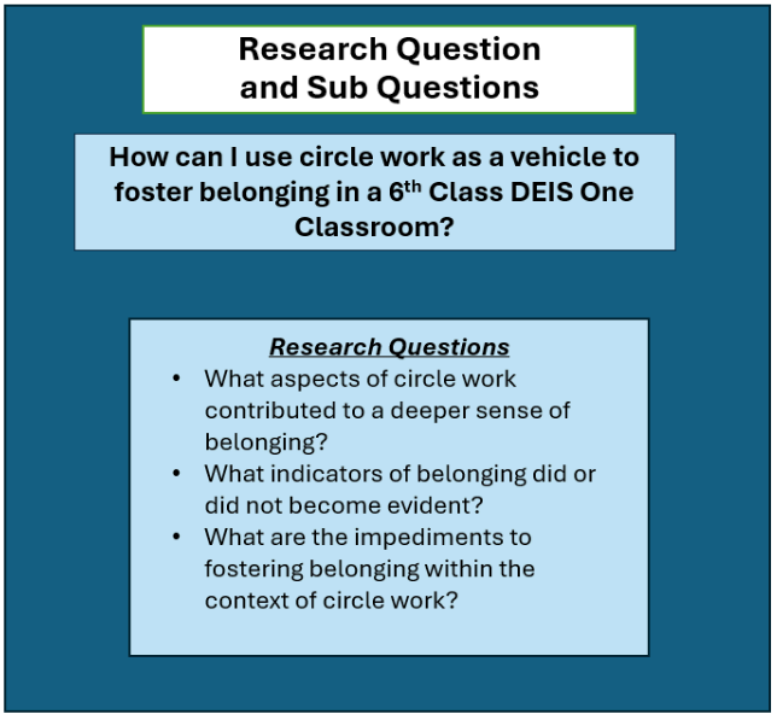

Figure 3.8 Research Question and Sub Questions

Mapping learning activities to their corresponding data collection tools enabled me to address the 'dual nature' of action research which is to balance action with systematic inquiry (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). The data collected during Action Cycle One directly shaped the next stage, embodying the 'reflective and iterative' process integral to this research approach (Whitehead, 2018).

3.5.2 Action Research Cycle Two

Table of Contents-Action Cycle Two

Dates	Teaching Interventions and Methods	Data Collection Tools	Sub Questions
24th-28th February	• * Circle on grief and how it affects us emotionally, mentally and physically.	• Reflections from my personal journal • Participant observation method (Teacher/SNA)	• What are the impediments to fostering belonging within the context of circle work? **Checklist Indicators: connection/improved metal health/intersectional*
3rd-7th March	• Introduction to the story; "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and the Horse" by Charlie Mackesy • Discussion of the themes of the book and how they are interpreted by the students. • Introducing food as part of the circle.	• Reflections from my personal journal • Participant observation method (Teacher/SNA) • Discussion with critical friends.	• What aspects of circle work contributed to a deeper sense of belonging? **Checklist Indicators: Intersectional/Placed Based*
10th-14th March	• Identifying the values held by the characters in the book "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and the Horse" by Charlie Mackesy • Identifying the values held by the characters in the novel "Goodnight, Mister Tom" by Michelle Magorian, that the class are reading in English • Students identify their own values	• Reflections from my personal journal • Participant observation method (Teacher/SNA)	• What aspects of circle work contributed to a deeper sense of belonging? • What are the impediments to fostering belonging within the context of circle work? **Checklist Indicators: Intersectional/Agentic/Improved behaviour*
17th-21st March	• Discussion of values v's actions...are we living contradictions? • Constructing concentric circles and discussing where to place different aspects of school life that foster a sense of belonging. • Discussion on the dimensions of belonging with the class using a check-list	• Reflections from my personal journal • Meeting with critical friends to insights after four weeks. • Participant observation method (Teacher/SNA) • Structured Observation Checklist	• What aspects of circle work contributed to a deeper sense of belonging? • What are the impediments to fostering belonging within the context of circle work? **Checklist Indicators: Agentic/Political/Intersectional/Improved behaviour*

Figure 3.9 Action Research Cycle Two

Cycle two ran over a four-week period and incorporated new learning and adjustments to my practice following critical reflection on Action Cycle One. The data from both cycles was then analysed using thematic analysis (appendix 9).

3.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as it "offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. The six stages of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach are illustrated in Figure 3.8 below.

Figure 3.10 Six-Phrase Framework of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Aligning with the idea of flexibility of thematic analysis, Saldana in his book *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, states that "coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act" (Salañda, 2021, p.4). Initially, I developed a distinct set of codes that were specific enough to prevent overlap and broad enough to hold significance. This resulted in the identification of eleven basic themes (Attridge-Stirling, 2001).

Once this collection of basic themes was derived, they were then classified according to the 'underlying story they are telling' and these become the 'Organising Themes' (Attridge-Stirling, 2001, p388). The organising themes are illustrated in figure 3.9 below.

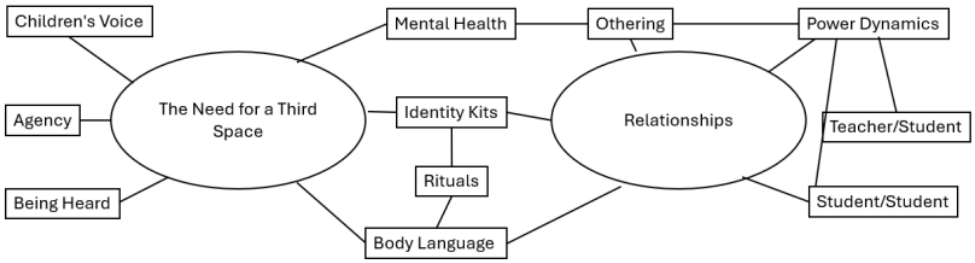

Figure 3.11 Initial Thematic Map

Next, I subsequently honed my themes further, leaving me with two 'Organising Themes'. These included three sub-themes. I endeavored to give concise, descriptive names to provide clarity and understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These are laid out in Figure 3.10 below.

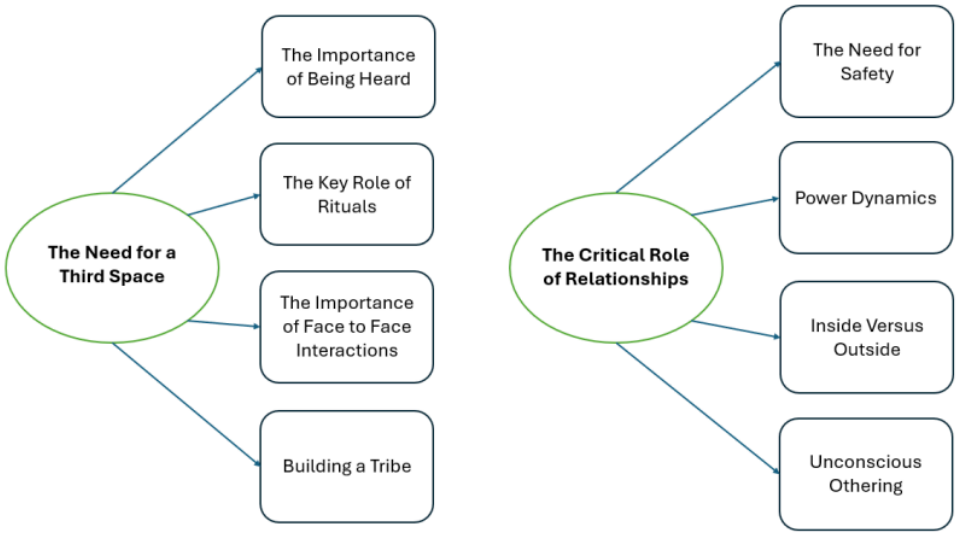

Figure 3.12 *Final Themes & Sub-Themes*

Figure 3.5's 'neat and formal linearity' lies in stark contrast to the 'messiness and unwieldiness' of the research itself (Glenn, et al., 2023, p.137). To provide a well-structured and logical account as suggested by Clarke & Braun (2006), the above themes and subthemes were further divided within the findings chapter and given clear headings to help explain the narrative behind the data. By doing so I hoped to provide a coherent and accurate account of the findings for the reader to "guide them through the report" (Glenn, et al., 2023, p.136).

3.7 Validity and Authenticity

Establishing the validity and reliability of any research is fundamental to it being a source of genuine and reliable data (Glenn et al., 2023; Sullivan et. al. 2016; Whitehead, 1994).

Herr and Anderson (2015) propose five validity criteria for action research. They present outcome, process, democratic, catalytic, and dialogic validity as offering a framework for ensuring both validity and authenticity. Linking these criteria to the broad goals of action

research as outlined by Glenn et al. (2023), Sullivan et al., (2016), Whitehead, (1994) and McNiff (2016) ensured the validity and authenticity of my claim to new knowledge.

3.8. Conclusion

Greene's philosophy of the idea of 'wide awakeness' encourages teachers to critically examine their own perspectives and practices (Greene, 1973). Action research was chosen for this research project as it offered an opportunity to achieve the 'awakeness' that Greene alluded to. My engagement with this process generated new perspectives on previously taken for granted situations (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). These newly generated perspectives, instead of 'solving' the research question, often redefined it in a more nuanced and complex manner (Herr and Anderson, 2015). Taking all ethical considerations into account, data was collected over two research cycles. This qualitative data was then examined using thematic analysis. Validity and authenticity were established through the alignment of my practice with my values of care, belonging, and social justice, and the goals of action research thus allowing me to make a claim to new knowledge with conviction. In the following chapter I examine my findings, laying out the story of the data and themes that emerged as a result of my research.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The story of the data and subsequent findings generated by my research question "How can I use circle work to foster belonging in a DEIS 1 Sixth class" are analysed in the following chapter. As highlighted by Baumeister and Leary, (1995) - belonging is a primary, fundamental, pervasive motivation, which can have many long-lasting effects on health, cognitive processes and emotional patterns. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, due to severe divisions within the class as result of 'othering' and exclusion that had remained unresolved from the year before, it was necessary to introduce circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging from early September.

The main themes that emerged from the data, *The Need for a Third Space* and *The Critical Role of Relationships,* along with the sub-themes, helped make sense of what Mellor (2001) refers to as the 'messiness' of action research. The chosen themes explicitly addressed my research question, enabling me to present a "convincing and compelling story about the data" (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121).

The story of using the circles to build belonging with marginalised children and the role that relationships played in fostering that sense of belonging is narrated below.

4.2 The Need for a Third Space - Fostering Belonging Through Being Heard

Thorsborne and Vinegrad, (2004) suggest that being included, valued and having their voice heard is of vital importance to a student's sense of belonging, but what was happening in the circle that was specifically building belonging?

To foster a sense of belonging within the class, it was important for the circle to be viewed as a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994), a *new* space where my world and the children's world could

come together and create a space where we all belonged. This meant that within the circle, everyone was provided with a protected space to intersect and be heard (Wu, 2024).

Signing the class contract on expected behaviour within the circle, helped protect this space and guarantee everyone's right to belong (Kuttner, 2023). There were no hierarchical seating arrangements, symbolising everyone's equal right to be heard, which was vital for fostering belonging.

The signing of the class contract and the non-hierarchal arrangement of the seats were instrumental in protecting everyone's right to be heard within the circle. These were key tools in fostering belonging.

4.2.1 Early Challenges

In our first attempt at circles, something as simple as eye-contact felt, like an insurmountable challenge,

"The first challenge with the circle is how uncomfortable the children are. Just sitting catching each other's eyes is a challenge!

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 30th January 2025)

Instead of being a 'third space' where we all could come together, those first circles threatened to divide us further, with many students refusing to sit next to each other. Some students persisted in leaving large gaps between themselves and certain children and then kicking each other's legs when asked to move closer.

"They smirked, kicked other people's chairs, switched off when others were talking and made the circle unworkable for others"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 28th January 2025)

To help the children feel more comfortable with sitting near one another and to increase their connectedness within the circle, activities such as 'morning greetings' and 'mind the gap' were introduced. These activities were chosen to counteract the negative behaviours reflected on above. Reflecting on observations from Cycle One, during a critically reflective conversation with my supervisor, I realised that these newly introduced activities could more correctly be described as rituals. The talking piece in the 'Get Fred' activity evolved into more than just a teddy, the children recognised it as their symbol of belonging and connection. The critical role that these rituals and symbol played in fostering belonging within the circle are examined next.

4.2.2 The Evolution of the Circle Through Ritual

Rituals can be defined as 'a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time' (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). Durkheim, (1995 [orig. 1912]) suggests that rituals and symbols reinforce group solidarity. This view is shared by Cozolino, (2014) who argues that rituals have always played a major role in fostering belonging and cooperation amongst humans.

The rituals that developed in the class circle did so organically, that is, they were not consciously thought of as rituals but rather they became part of the process of our circles unconsciously. The talking piece became a symbol of uninterrupted speech; this will be looked at in detail in Ritual Two.

The Importance of Ritual

The rituals that developed within the circle are illustrated in Figure 4.1 below. Following on from that, the individual rituals are explained in detail.

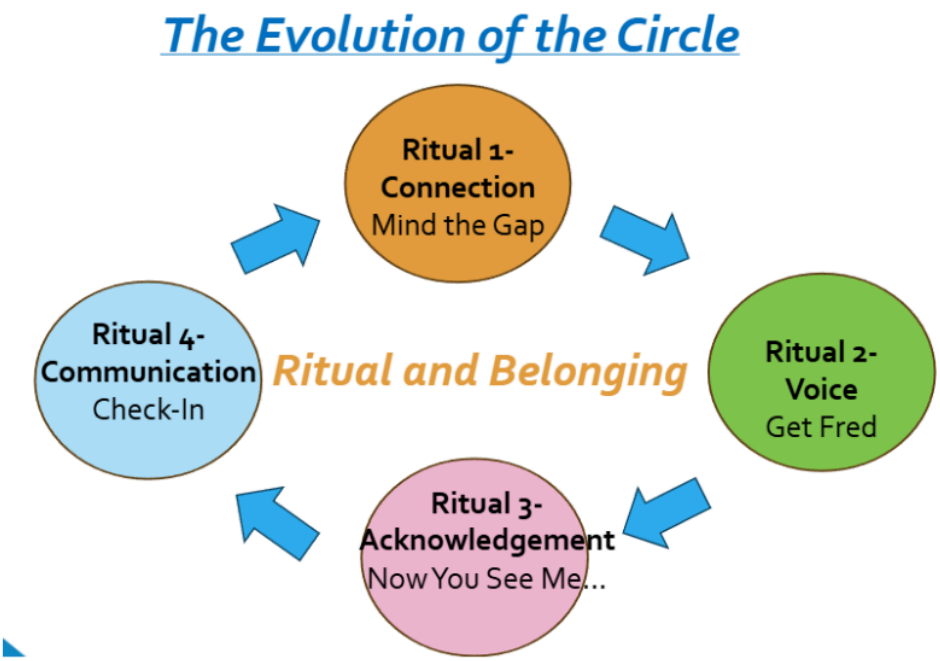

Figure 4.1 The Evolution of the Circle (Magee, 2025)

Ritual One: Connection

Mind the Gap!

At the start of each session the children were asked to 'close the circle', this involved drawing chairs in until there were no gaps. The class ritual of closing the circle helped create a feeling of connection. In Irish and First Nation traditions, the circle symbolizes interconnectedness among community members (Nic an Bhaird & Ní Chléirigh, 2025; Berryman, Rameka and Togo, 2022). Connectedness is an indicator of belonging (Alink et al., 2023) and this feeling of connectedness was expressed by a child when responding to "What made you feel like you most belong in 6th class?"

"The circle makes me feel connected, 'cos we tell each other stuff"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 14th March 2025)

Another student noted that,

> "*I like when we pull the circle in, otherwise it separates us. People are less likely to listen to us*"
>
> (Magee, 'Student Survey': 26th March 2025)

Closing the gaps in the circle had two objectives. Firstly, it prevented a gap being intentionally left by children as a way of excluding others. Secondly, negotiating the reluctance that children in a mixed setting can have of sitting closely beside one another. Stenberg and Boström (2025) note that this particularly affects girls, with many stating that they "long to sit beside female companions" (p.11). I noted that,

> *"The boys sit beside the boys, and the girls inevitably sit with the girls, despite, the fact that many of them socialise together in mixed groups outside of school. They often leave a large gap between the groups. I have insisted that no gaps be left, as belonging is built through connection"*
>
> (Magee, 'Reflective Journal':19th January 2025)

Research on seating assignments in primary school by Kim *et al*., (2020) demonstrates that by the teacher intentionally controlling seating positions "children who did not like each other at the beginning of the school year showed higher likability with each other as a result of close proximity" (p.14). This proved to be the case within the circle, as the following students' observation demonstrates,

> *"I don't think we'd have as big of a relationship as we do if we didn't do circles, because we get into really deep talks about how we see other things and different opinions and eye contact and saying good morning every day because you get to know*

people's personalities, even if you're not that close to them and you can be like 'oh!' we have the same personality and maybe you'd start trying to talk to them".

(Student Response in Circle, 20th March 2025)

The benefit of connection that the children experienced through the close seating arrangement in the circle was also observed by the class special needs assistant (SNA) who noted that,

"They're more included now, than at the start of the year. I think they've come together as a class and as people because at the start of the year they were so individual".

(SNA Observation, 11th February 2025)

Connection and inclusion, both deemed indicators of belonging by Alink et al., (2023), and Goodenow (1993), are clearly present in the above data and demonstrate the effectiveness of the circle in fostering belonging.

Ritual Two: Voice

Get Fred!

The use of a teddy as a talking piece ensured uninterrupted speech, a practice adopted from Māori circles and incorporated into modern circle time by Jenny Mosley (1993). Being given an opportunity to speak uninterrupted was highly valued by the children who commented that,

"I feel like I'm able to be heard and to express myself".

(Circle Survey, 26th March 2025)

The teddy became such an integral part of the circle that the children insisted on including it in their confirmation as a symbol of belonging in their class, as seen in the picture below.

Confirmation is a religious practice and a liturgical sacrament practised as part of the Catholic faith.

Figure 4.2: Fred at the Class Confirmation (Photograph by author, 2025).

Blaylock *et al*. (2021), highlight that "a sense of unity can be created by common reactions to a symbol" (p.94) creating a shared identity and fostering belonging. Fred became a symbol of uninterrupted speech by guaranteeing the children's right to be heard. As one student noted,

"If teacher had Fred, she's talking and if you have him, you're talking".

(Student Response in Circle, 20th March 2025)

The children prized the talking piece as it was a symbol of *their* voices. It protected their right to be heard.

The right to uninterrupted speech is of special relevance to children from marginalised communities who have not traditionally been given a platform from which their voice can be heard (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Using the circle as that platform created what Greene (1995) refers to as a 'public space' within our classroom, a space for all voices to come together and share opinions and values, a place to belong.

As the circles developed, it became obvious that it was not enough for the children to just be heard, being listened to proved equally important (Freire, 1970), as a child's comment illustrates,

> *"Check in circles make me feel relieved when we sort something out and happy because we get a break and* ***my voice gets heard****".*
>
> (Student Survey on Circles, 26th February 2025)

This echoes Lundy's (2007) model of participation which highlights not only the importance of providing a platform for children's voices but also the crucial role that an audience plays as it is not just about being heard, it is being listened to that foster's belonging. Cozolino, reminds us "our brains have evolved to be activated through the positive regard and focused attention of other people and being regarded as important" (Damon, 2020, 09:29). This need is summed up by Desautels, (2020) as "the aching desire to feel heard, seen and felt" (p.11). It is the need to belong.

Ritual 3-Acknowledgement

Now You See Me

Every circle opened with a 'Good Morning' greeting. This started off as an icebreaker in early circles and quickly evolved into a vital moment of being seen for the children. The ritual consisted of passing the talking piece from one person to another, while making eye contact and saying 'good morning' followed by the person's name. Making eye contact proved incredibly difficult for many children in the beginning, as noted in my reflective journal,

"Sitting and having to look at people in the circle was a huge thing for children in this class, many seem to find it overwhelming. This often leads to disruption of the circle due to laughing, often as a result of embarrassment or generally feeling uncomfortable".

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 28th January 2025)

The children acknowledged this uncomfortableness,

"If felt kinda weird, we're not used to saying good morning to our friends"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 28th January 2025)

Giving the children time to practice eye contact through the good morning ritual, proved an effective way of increasing their sense of belonging, by providing them with the bio-chemical feedback documented by Cozolino (2014), as being vital to building feelings of belonging between humans. One student commented that,

"I think it built up because at the start we'd just look down and be like 'good morning' but now like we all look at each other".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

The children expressed the importance of eye-contact as,

"I think it shows that you're paying your full attention to that person, instead of half listening".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

Another child suggested that,

"If you're using eye contact you make the person feel a lot better".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

This was further expanded on by a student who highlighted that,

"If people aren't looking at you, you're not being acknowledged".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

When asked in a circle why was it important that we make eye contact when we are saying something, one student's response was,

"So that you know that they're listening"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

This echoes Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic education which emphasises active listening as essential for empowering marginalised groups. He argues that true listening involves understanding the speaker's context and emotions, not just hearing words, to foster critical consciousness. A critical friend's observation of the circle reflected this ideal in action,

"When someone is talking, everyone is looking at them, everyone felt heard and listened to".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

Ritual Four: Communication

Check-In

'Checking-in' was an opportunity for the children in the circle to indicate their overall readiness to engage with the day. Each person in the circle gave a number between one and ten to indicate how they were feeling. A check-in of 'one' indicated that the person was really struggling as opposed to a check-in of 'ten' that would indicate that they were feeling fully engaged. The ritual of checking in became an integral part of the children's day, one that they cherished, as indicated by one child's comment,

"*That's the only time that I like because I get to tell you how I feel about school".*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes', 20th January 2025)

There was always the option for each person to pass when handed the talking piece. Watzlawick (2014) observed all behaviour as communication, so I would make particular note of any child who passed on checking-in. Reflecting on this form of communication, I noted that,

"People who are shy, often copied the number of the person ahead of them. I thought it was very brave of kids who didn't check in. It was their opportunity to communicate and say 'I'm not ok, I'm really struggling here".

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal':20th January 2025)

Choosing not to check-in as a form of communication was also noted during a circle observation by a critical friend,

"Even when they pass on the talking piece and don't want to check in, it's a big indicator to know that that child isn't great today".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation by Critical Friend':20th February 2025)

Desautels (2020) reminds us that 'a sense of safety' is central to children's ability to thrive and learn, "unless we feel safe, we cannot move forward with connecting and developing the relationships we need to regulate, learn and thrive" (p.17), this is of particular relevance when fostering belonging with students from marginalised DEIS communities. As the above observations demonstrate, checking-in provided an opportunity for agentic belonging as suggested by Kuttner (2023), where a child uses the agency provided by the moment of check-in to communicate their feelings through either their words or actions. Providing this opportunity to communicate their internal state of mind was key to fostering belonging. Those

children often needed more one to one time, with either me or another trusted adult to become regulated enough to re-engage with the class. The importance of the teacher/student relationship and its role in fostering belonging is explored in the second part of these findings.

The Importance of Empathy

While the rituals helped children feel physically connected within the circle, it was important to also foster belonging through emotional connection. To build this connection I focused on empathy. I focused on what we had in common, rather than what divided us. Reading the book "Every Kindness" by Jacqueline Woodson, which deals with exclusion, proved to be a turning point for combating negative behaviour within the circles. It led to circle discussions about the concept of 'walking in another person's shoes' and how *everyone* both wanted and had a right to belong (Kuttner, 2023; Cozolino, 2014). This led to further discussions on the role that the motivation to belong plays in everyone's lives and how the circle itself helped foster a sense of belonging. One child noted that,

"We started doing circles and we started listening to each other and then it brang (brought) us together more as a class".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': January 28th 2025)

This demonstrates Demanet and Van Houtte, (2012) assertion that belonging has been shown to reduce negative behaviours and enhance school engagement.

The sense of belonging that the circle fostered was illustrated by a pupil's comment in a survey,

"They make me happy because I feel welcomed and I feel like I'm able to be heard and to express myself".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

This sentiment was expressed several times by children who felt that without the circles, some students would have struggled to have their voices heard, inevitably reducing their sense of belonging,

"*Well some people are a bit shy and it's their only chance to speak and it's helpful".*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

The importance of being heard was also highlighted in observations of the circle by a critical friend who noted that,

"What I love is that everyone gets heard and that the talking piece is passed around to everybody".

(Magee, 'Circle Observations by Critical Friend': 22nd January 2025)

The importance of providing a space for everyone's voice to be heard is also referred to in 'The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making' which emphasises the importance of treating young people's views with legitimacy and providing them with platforms to have their voices heard (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). The circle provided this platform. It also provided students with a sense of "purpose, connection and belonging" identified by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES) as an indicator of success within the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019, p1.).

4.2.3 The Children's View of the Circle's Role in Fostering Belonging

To gauge the children's view of the role that the circle itself played in fostering belonging, I asked,

"*Would it have worked just as well if we'd had the same discussions with me up the top (of the room) like in Maths?*"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

The answer was an emphatic "*NO*!" (Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025).

I pushed deeper for an answer as to why the circle itself was important "*Why the circle? Why does the circle work?"*

Child A: "*So we can see each other more*".

Child B: "*So that you know that people are listening to you*".

Child C: "*Eye contact*".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

One child summed it up by stating,

"*Facial expressions and body language helps you feel like you belong or are part of something*"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

Cozolino's (2013) research on the social neuroscience of teaching, sheds light on what the children were attempting to articulate. He suggests that the 'biochemical feedback' - the chemical dialogue that runs beneath spoken conversation created by eye contact and positive body language - that humans experience from being face to face with one another, played a pivotal role in our evolution and is still of vital importance for our development and overall sense of belonging (Damon, 2020, 04.47). The above data suggests that the circle was providing the children with this essential feedback. The importance of this biochemical feedback in fostering belonging is explored in the following section.

4.2.4 Building a Tribe

The biochemical feedback that the children described as part of the circle, helped it evolve from simply being a formation created by our chairs, to a tribal-like space. Belonging was fostered through the non-hierarchal seating arrangement, the guarantee of being heard and shared activities. Cozolino (2014) describes a tribe as "a group of individuals that are tied together by shared time, familiarity, affection and common purpose" (p.25). He suggests that "we evolved to being sustained and thrive, by being energised by other people and by connection" (Damon, 2020, 11:59). Reading "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and the Horse" by Charlie Mackesy, led to discussions on shared values, which helped foster belonging through shared connection. Our activity on values is illustrated in the image below.

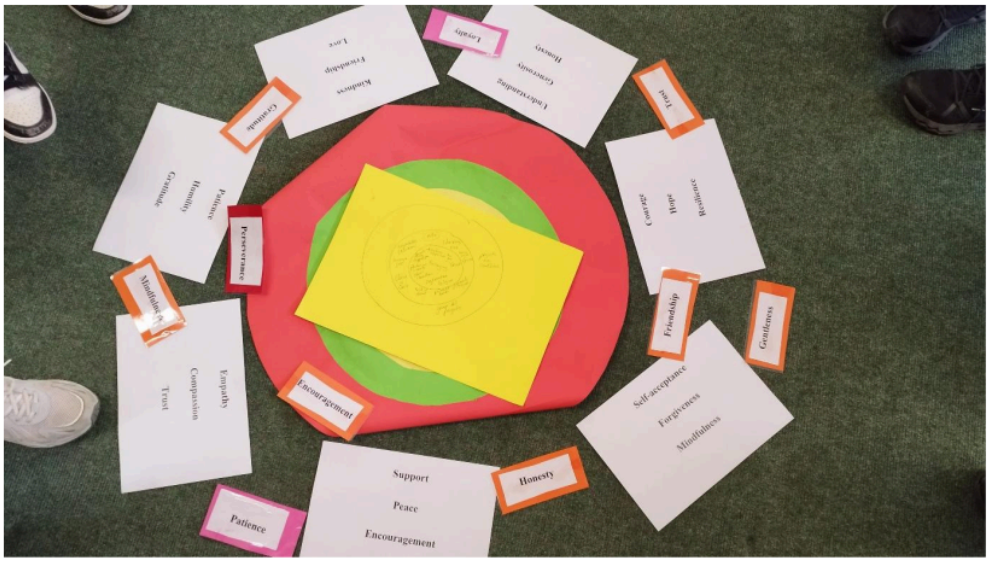

Figure 4.3 Activity on Values (Photographed by Author, 2025)

Spending time in the circle, planning Hallowe'en and Christmas activities gave us a common purpose, fostering belonging. Shy, quiet children who, before engaging in circles had never

attempted to join class discussions or give opinions in debates, slowly, after many circles of passing the talking piece without comment, found their voice. This was noted by a critical friend,

"I've noticed how certain children's confidence has grown. I like that they feel safe enough to show their vulnerable side"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

The classes special needs assistant (SNA), who was present at almost every circle echoed this observation,

"*You look at a certain person and think that they've no voice but out of nowhere they have the courage to go and say "I'm actually going to say something here"*

(Magee, 'SNA Feedback': 11th February 2025)

This illustrated what Erwin et al. (2022) observed - that a sense of belonging enhances confidence and encourages students to express themselves. Facilitating this expression through the running of the circles brought its own challenges of balancing children's voices versus teachers' voice. The challenges of leading the circle are discussed next.

4.2.5 The Role of a Tribal Leader

Every tribe needs a leader Cozolino (2014). In tribes where there was not an immediate outside enemy, those who assumed leadership roles, did so, as they were apt at amplifying people's strengths and working around their weaknesses (Damon, 2020, 10:30).

Engaging with the process of action research and reflecting on my practice, unearthed that I had slipped into a more didactic pedagogy. Freire (1970) critiques pedagogies where teachers dominate discourse. Consciously wanting to promote student voice in the circle and incorporate a more dialogic pedagogy I noted however,

> "*I did way too much talking in the circle today! The pupils barely got a word in at all*!"
>
> (Magee. 'Reflective Journal': 16th January 2025)

Despite this awareness, as the circles progressed, a student complained that I was bringing too much into the circles,

> *"They're like a black hole! You're bringing too much into the circle…books, feelings, fractions, family!"*
>
> (Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes', 11th February 2025)

Reflecting on this observation revealed a denial of my stated value of student voice as it was still my voice and agenda dominating the circle. I had become what Jack Whitehead (2009) would describe as 'a living contradiction'. This was highlighted by the children's observations in response to "Whose voice is most heard in the circle?". The children all immediately called out my name. I endeavoured to return to a constructivist pedagogy to ensure that under my leadership, the circle would more closely align with democratic classroom practices (Dewey, 1966) and be, at its core, a child-centred space.

In cycle two, to re-align with my stated values of children's voice, and to foster 'agentic belonging' - where students actively shape their own inclusion (Kuttner, 2023), I suggested that a child might like to assume the role of leader and run a circle. The student's responses were mixed,

Child A, "*I don't think the circle should be run by children*",

Child B, "*It might get out of hand*".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 14th February 2025)

I was initially taken aback as I had thought that the children would enjoy being in control. It did not change the fact however, that my voice was most often heard in the circle. This was perhaps necessary though, as the children agreed that someone did ultimately, need to control the circle,

"It would be all over the place. One person is talking about one topic, and another side of the circle is talking about something different"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 14th February 2025)

It became clear that agentic belonging for the children did not mean needing to be in control of the circle. This led to a decision in Cycle Two to complete the observation checklist with the children in a circle, rather than at my desk afterwards. Reflecting in and on my practice (Schön, 1983) led to this change which resulted in a much deeper understanding of what the children viewed as agentic belonging (Kuttner, 2023). They listed choosing roles for classroom jobs, organising and planning the Young Scientists project as areas they felt they had agency over, all of which had been planned collaboratively within the circle. The increased engagement by the children in school activities and the subsequent reduction in negative behaviours within the circle were evidence of what Demanet and Van Houtte (2012) and Van Ryzin, (2009) equated to feelings of belonging.

The circle provided the space for the children to express their opinions on what helped foster belonging for them in school. It provided them with a platform to be heard. Working collaboratively with a leader, seeing that others were listening to them, (Boxall and Lucas, 2010) that their voices had influence (Lundy, 2007), fostered belonging. However, this all took time to develop with early circles often taking 45 minutes to complete. An observation from my reflective journal notes that,

"They (circles) are slow and awkward in the beginning. Lots of modelling and patience are needed but the benefits are a much deeper bond/connection between the children themselves and with myself and (SNA)"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 28th January 2025)

Both Desautels (2020) and Cozolino (2014) attest to the impact that both peer and teacher relationships have on health, wellbeing, learning and our overall sense of belonging. These relationships took time and patience to develop within the circle. However, as circle work progressed, tensions emerged that became possible barriers to authentic engagement and therefore belonging. These barriers included teacher/student and student/student power dynamics. The crucial role that the circle played in resolving some of these dynamics and fostering belonging through the establishment of robust relationships, is examined next.

4.3 The Critical Role of Relationships – The Role of the Circle

The circle incorporated the Froebelian principle that relationships matter and that they play a central role in the lives of children (Bruce, 2021) .Underpinned by the Froebelian principles (Froebel Hailmann, 2012) of unity and connectedness, viewing the children as autonomous learners and through its rituals and symbols, the circle nurtured relationships between the children and me, and their relationships with one another. I noted in my reflective journal that,

"The circles are the foundational bedrock on which the relationships in the class are firmly established. They are a way of connecting with every child"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 27th February 2025)

I realised that in my past practice, I had mainly focused on the children who appeared the most in need of my attention. The circle provided a means to connect with each child and establish a relationship with them.

4.3.1 The Need for Safety

Creating a safe space to nurture relationships within the circle was key to fostering belonging. Cozolino (2014) surmises that for 100,000 years people lived in small groups of related individuals, therefore, humans learned from people who they were related to, and who loved them. Cozolino (2014) further expands on the necessity of feeling safe in order to learn, stating that "the neurochemistry of love and attachment stimulates the neuroplasticity of learning" (p.128). The safe space created within the circle allowed for the nurturing of caring attachments, fostering a sense of safety and belonging through shared experiences and ritual.

The results from a Diamond-9 ranking activity on belonging, completed first by the children individually and then in groups of three, aligns with the need for children to feel safe before they can feel a sense of belonging. The Diamond-9 activity consisted of the children ranking statements on belonging on diamond shaped grid.

> "*I feel safe and respected by adults and other students in school*" ranked highest with "*Having teachers who care and listen to me"* a close second.
>
> (Magee, 'Diamond-9 Ranking Activities': 20th January 2025, 7th February 2025).

In a separate activity, the children described their own personal indicators of school belonging. These reflected their ranking choices in the Diamond-9 activities, with a strong emphasis on the teacher/student relationship.

Relationships matter. Teacher/student relationships are recognised by Froebel and Hailmann, (2012), Cozolino, (2014), Noddings, (1992) and Boxhall, (2006) as central to the development of the child. Hughes (2011) reminds us that "children who perceive their

teachers as offering warmth, acceptance, and self-esteem validation are more likely to perceive themselves as academically capable and as belonging to school" (p. 289). The circle provided the space to nurture the relationships that the children identified as equating with belonging. It also provided the safety identified by Desautels (2020) as central to developing connection and relationships.

Reflections from my journal mirrored the children's main indicators for school belonging,

"At times I feel that for many students the school environment and the carers in it are providing the main source of stability, nurture and belonging for marginalised children"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 8th February 2025)

The circles provided me with a space to connect with every child in my class, allowing me live more closely towards my values of care, social justice, children's voice and belonging.

Tensions arose however when children questioned the authenticity of responses that I was receiving from certain students in the circle. In my eagerness to believe in the power of the circle to foster belonging, I had neglected to properly consider the power dynamics between myself and the students. Brookfield, (2017) states that "Critical reflection is all about hunting assumptions that frame our judgements and actions as teachers" (p.21). Had the children simply been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear?

4.3.2 Student/Teacher Power Dynamics

The scepticism of some children of how authentic or not engagement within the circle was, prompted me to ask the children themselves about their circle engagement. The answers showed surprising honesty and self-awareness,

"*You have a face on in school…what I mean like that you have a face on like you're a different person, like you have a different character".*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

Another child suggested that,

"*Like you only say what you think teacher wants to hear and you only do what you think teacher wants to see, and then when you go outside of school…you're completely different*".

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

The children were expressing what Gee (1990) defines as identity kits - a way of behaving in certain settings to belong and fit in. In the case of the children's behaviour within the circle, they clearly felt the need to 'perform' a certain way, to succeed. Identifying this type of behaviour within the circle was a blow to my belief that I was genuinely fostering belonging, by using the circle as a third space where children's various identity kits could be given full expression. I resolved to actively encourage the children to express their thoughts, with the objective of ensuring that discussions in the circle accurately reflected their perspectives. This is detailed next.

4.3.3 Inside Versus Outside

I asked the children who they felt the real person was. Was it the person in the circle telling teacher what she wanted to hear or was it the person outside of school?

Child : *"I think there could be people trying to change for themselves, that's why they're trying to be nice in here. They're actually trying their best to change and they're doing it in school. I think they just lose the run of themselves when they're outside".*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

This insight highlights the important opportunity the circle provided for children to express the real divide between their lived experiences outside of school and their lives in school.

While the circle provided a space for those 'trying to change', as the observation emphasised, it was limited in transferring this way of belonging to life outside the circle.

Another child voiced his frustration at the circle's inability to influence certain children's behaviour outside of school,

"Social stuff doesn't work...It doesn't change behaviour"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

This observation was challenged by another child who pointed out that children whose behaviour outside of school was considered anti-social, were in fact also trying to belong and 'fit in' within a very different value system,

"People lighting fires out in the alcoves are also just trying to fit in"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

Another child suggested that,

"I think it really depends on the person. They could just act like both (nice in the circle/anti-social outside) but they just need to find the right people to be a whole other different person. We might find the right people and we might change completely and have our own personalities"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

This was an acknowledgement by the children of how the motivation to belong can affect people's behaviour. Children wanted to fit in and belong in school; therefore, they told teacher what she wanted to hear in the circle. Their comments very clearly articulated what Morrow and Richards (1996) identified as the greatest obstacle to true, meaningful research taking place - the power dynamics at play between adults and children.

The Sound of Authenticity

Reflecting on these observations brought the realisation that through their acknowledgment of assuming certain identity kits within school to get,

"*good looks, from teachers and other students and maybe the principal*",

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025.

I was finally hearing and listening to their authentic voices,

"Rollercoaster of emotions today while rereading my observations from yesterday's circle. I went from feelings of genuine disillusionment, to being struck by what I had been listening to- the children's actual authentic voices"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal', 4th April 2025)

At the outset of this action research project, I had stated that, to foster a sense of belonging within the class, it was important for the circle to be viewed as a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) – a space for all cultures, values and identities within the class to intersect and be heard (Wu, 2024). Hearing the children's authentic voices within the circle as they talked about 'having a face on at school' and then going outside and being 'completely different' was evidence of the trust that they put in our relationships; that they felt they could safely articulate the tensions between the 'face' they wore in school versus their real 'face' outside of school.

The children's authentic voices within the circle were evidence that the children felt that they could be themselves, that their values would be accepted and respected, that they truly belonged.

Critically reflecting on my practice throughout this action research study enabled me to generate new ways of thinking, on previously taken for granted situations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The circle had provided the space needed to foster belonging through the

building up of solid, genuine relationships between myself and the children. It had taken time, patience and perseverance as I struggled to temper my own voice and promote the children's ones. Hearing them express the tension between their lives inside and outside of school, was evidence that I had re-aligned my practice and was living more fully in the direction of my values (Glenn et al., 2023) of belonging, children's voice and nurture.

Tension, however, in relationships between the children themselves proved more difficult and complex to resolve. These tensions will be examined in the following section.

4.3.2 Student/Student Power Dynamics

Othering- Fear and Safety

Power dynamics between the children themselves, caused tension within the circle as children engaged with what Johansson, et. al (2024) describes as the 'constant negotiation' of who belongs and who will be excluded. This behaviour often manifested as 'othering'. Othering is the social process of defining a person or group as fundamentally different and inferior to the dominant 'in' group (Rodriguez et al., 2025). Consciously othering children was openly acknowledged within the circle by a student who commented that,

"*It's human nature to go up to and tell a kid from another country 'you're not one of us'*"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 14th March 2025)

In response to an observation check-list indicator of systemic belonging - belonging shaped by institutional structures, power relations, and questions of rights. (Kuttner, 2023), the children were asked whether the circle was a safe space for *all* voices, one student commented that,

"Depends on what you say…if people agree, its safe but if nobody agrees it doesn't feel safe"

(Magee, 'Observation Checklist': 27th March 2025)

The children themselves were keenly aware of the power dynamics at play. This was brought to light during the conversation around the possibility of a child running the circle,

"*It depends on who runs it. People might listen to the popular kids but not to the less popular kids"*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 3rd April 2025)

The children judged the levels of someone's right to belong on the level of attention they were given within the circle. Therefore, the social cues and body language feedback provided by the circle was of particular importance to the children,

"*It (the circle) makes me feel happy and sad. You can't really talk. If you say somethin' and they can laugh that's good. Don't think that's normal but for us it is normal"*

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 14th March 2025)

Some children clearly gauged their level of belonging within the class on whether they were being laughed *at* or laughed *with.* This remained as a source of stress and a barrier to the authentic voice of some children in the circle. Not everyone felt like they belonged.

These power dynamics between the children were analysed during the following critically reflective conversation, between the class Special Needs Assistant and I:

Researcher: "I think the main thing that has come out of the circle for me is the power dynamics at play in the circle",

Special Needs Assistant: "Who controls it?"

Researcher: "Yeah, who gets listened to"

Special Needs Assistant: "Everybody should get listened to, but that doesn't always happen, and who actually has any weight (within the circle) because the rules that they have for themselves, it's very strict social stuff"

(Magee, 'Conversation with critical friend': 11th April 2025)

The above data highlights how for some children, the circle had not become a safe place where they felt they belonged. This echoes Leach and Lewis (2013) suggestion that "voicing" children may not always have the intended positive outcomes that might be expected and may not be an "all empowering" procedure.

The strict social rules that the children lived by proved a consistent barrier to belonging for some students. Although the circle created the opportunity to acknowledge these rules, it did not succeed in changing them.

4.4 Unconscious Othering

The data also revealed that I was also unconsciously involved in the othering of children, despite my declared values of care and social justice,

"Trying to show (named student) that I recognised his self-motivation and intelligence, but I ended up making him more other than before. I deducted serious social points from him when I suggested in front of the whole class that he must be a great reader"

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 30th January 2025)

The children often referred to 'aura points' which I've referred to in the above comment as social points. Aura points were how they measured someone's social standing within a group. In this child's case he struggled with being 'othered', being made feel outside of the social norms of the class group due to his impressive vocabulary and ability to recall facts. Coming

towards the end of using circles with the class, this same child commented that the circles had provided children with different perspectives on one another,

"When we're just sitting doing English all day, all you see is that maybe, they're really smart in just that subject and that's it. The circle helped people see other sides to people"

(Magee, 'Circle Observation Notes': 21st March 2025)

This aligns with the circle being a 'third space' where intersectional ways of being (Wu, 2024) could come together to foster belonging. It also echoes Drolet and Arcand, (2013) assertion that for students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, a sense of belonging can reduce feelings of marginalisation with peer support playing a critical role.

The question of othering within systemic and political belonging - belonging shaped by institutional structures and power relations, also came into focus. The right to belong in these contexts was of particular interest to children from non-dominant cultures. In relation to the elections to the school's student council, a child suggested that to disrupt the power dynamics of children from the 'in' group simply voting for their friends that,

"Student Council: make it fairer. There should be a campaign… "choose x because…"make them think of a valid reason"

(Magee, 'Check-list Completed with Children in the Circle': 10th March 2025)

This discussion within the circle led me to reflect upon my own practice and that of the schools,

"*While we had been congratulating ourselves (In-school management team) on fostering belonging, I now see how we missed what's right under our noses…I must look at the numbers of travellers, children from non-dominant cultures on the student council, football team, choir etc"*

(Magee, 'Reflective Journal': 11th March 2025)

This observation led to a re-examination of my practice to reflect my value of social justice and that of the school when forming committees with children. It underlines the need for educators to reflect upon and interrogate their practices to maintain a 'wide awakeness', as outlined by Greene (1973). Greene argues that educators should 'strive to become aware of the tacit understandings that shape their teaching, to bring them to consciousness, and to critically examine them' (p. 82).

The Right Not to Belong – Act of Agency or Self-Preservation?

Not all children however felt an increase in belonging from participation in the circle, nor did they appear to seek that connection,

"I think they help the class but not me, I don't think they help me but maybe they help other students in our class"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

The same student responded to the question "*Would you like check-in circles to continue?"* with,

"I don't mind if they continue, it helps others, I would only like them to continue so that I don't have to do work during that time of the day"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

Despite asking repeatedly 'was it circle time yet?', this same student often refused to join in the circle. This student had additional behavioural needs and often found the circle overwhelming. However, he often interjected during sessions and was always invited to join when he did so. Despite clearly wanting to connect with the conversation and have his voice heard, he more often than not, still refused to join. Choosing not to participate, according to Brown (2021), can often be framed by the individual as an act of agency or self-preservation. In the case of this student, I would view his non-participation as one of self-preservation. This assumption is based on his response in a survey to the question, *How do circles make you feel?*

"I don't like talking about my feelings, so I don't like them"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

He was not the only child who did not appear to enjoy the circle. Another child, despite willingly participating in the circle, felt frustrated as he felt that the circle had failed to make any real impact on the power dynamics between the children in the class. When asked in a survey if he felt the circles had helped the class in anyway, his response was,

"I didn't see any change"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

These views contrasted sharply with those of the rest of the class who felt that the circles had succeeded in bringing the class together, fostering a real sense of belonging,

"We can share our ideas and be heard. It is also good because we can connect more with each other"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

Another child commented that,

"They make my day so much easier, and I get to express my feelings"

(Magee, 'Survey on Circle': 26th March 2025)

The above observations effectively demonstrate that, despite the circle not meeting the needs of every child that participated, it did become a 'third space', where all these different views and values could be discussed. A space where everybody's voice had a right to belong, even if they were not in agreement with one another.

It validates Emilson & Eek-Karlsson's, (2021) argument that belonging plays a key role in the development of children's identity and its ability to shape how they view others and respond to diversity. This finding is of great significance in relation to working with marginalised DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) communities.

4.5 Conclusion

Using circles to foster belonging highlighted the value that children from marginalised communities place on having a safe space in which to be heard, and the critical role that relationships play in a child's sense of school belonging. Ritual and symbolism were found to transform the circle into a 'third space' where a tribe like bond was formed. Power dynamics between the teacher and students emerged initially as barriers to belonging but through time spent in the circle, barriers to understanding each other's worlds were removed, lessening the impact of those dynamics. The circle also provided a platform for the discussion of power dynamics between the students. While there was general consensus that the circles had brought the class together and had fostered an overall sense of belonging, some children remained frustrated at the limited ability of the circle to change power dynamics outside of school.

The circles created a safe space where relationships could be given the time and space to develop. Establishing these relationships transformed the circle into a space where the diverse cultures and values in the class could come together and have an equal right to belong.

In the next and final chapter, I will outline how engagement with this action research project transformed my practice enabling me to realign with my values – highlighting implications for not only my own future practice but also that of wider policy.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter provides an overview of my findings from a "practical, personal and theoretical level" (Sullivan et al, 2016, p. 121). It outlines how my engagement with action research enabled me to improve my practice, through critical reflection and expresses the reasons for, and potential importance of the research. It examines how critical reflection allowed me to explore the dominant ideologies within my practice and endeavoured to identify other areas of interest (Brookfield, 2017; Kitchenham, 2015; McNiff, 2016). It concludes with a look to the future – how my research will inform my practice going forward, its potential to influence others and its implications for future educational policy.

5.2 Findings Overview

The following chart provides an overview of the main findings of this action research study on "*How can I use circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging in my classroom?"* The findings that emerged helped answer my subsidiary research questions listed below. It also unearthed new, previously unknown issues, highlighting the importance of critical reflection in maintaining the 'wide awakeness' deemed necessary by Greene, (1984) in relation to an educator's understanding of their practice.

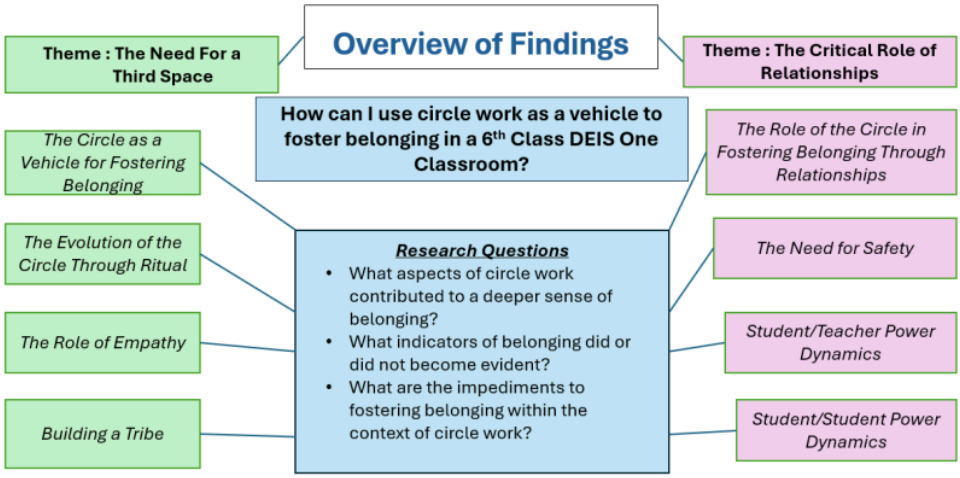

Figure 5.1 Overview of Findings

The above themes and subthemes helped make sense of the data, enabling me to provide a clear and concise account of the findings (Kemmis et al., 2014). The practical learning that I discerned from my research is detailed next.

5.3 Practical Learning - Creating a Safe Space

Practical learning is a key component of action research as it bridges the gap between theory and practice (Kolb, 2014). At a practical level, my research demonstrated that to foster belonging in a DEIS One (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) sixth class, it was necessary to first create a safe 'third space' using circle work - a space where the children's world and my world could exist together. The use of symbolism and ritual played a vital role establishing this space as unique and special to us as a class (Durkheim,1995 [orig. 1912]). Time and patience were needed to create feelings of safety within the circle to foster belonging. This illustrates what Cozolino (2014) describes as the necessity of feeling safe in order to learn. He reminds us that we evolved within tribes to learn from people who knew us and whom we were most likely related to (Damon, 2020, 11:59). Using ritual and symbolism

within the circle to create that safe, secure tribelike sense of belonging, was central to my practical learning.

5.3.1 Nurturing Relationships

The circle provided a forum for children's voices and a space to nurture relationships between myself and the students. Within this 'third space' the children's right to be heard was protected through the creation and signing of a class contract and use of a talking piece. As such, the circle itself can be viewed as a vital tool in the creation of this safe third space, facilitating the nurturing of the key teacher/student relationship, recognised as vital for a fostering school belonging (Boxall & Lucas, 2010).

The teaching of empathy was found to have a significant impact on the fostering of belonging, allowing for the building of tribe-like relationships and the recognition that "we evolved to be sustained and energised by other people and by being connected" (Damon, 2020: 11:59). Explicitly teaching empathy helped the children develop an understanding of everyone's need to belong. The building of these connections manifested in shy, previously excluded students finding their voice, demonstrating what Erwin et al. (2022) noted; that feeling a sense of belonging builds confidence and increases participation in school. As such, the teaching of empathy could be labelled as significant tool in the fostering of belonging within a DEIS setting.

One of the more difficult aspects of beginning circle work was how uneasy the children were sitting in the circle. However, this unexpectedly offered the most insightful moments of practical learning. I had assumed that the children would enjoy the novelty of circle work and was dismayed at how uncomfortable this close contact was for them. It is often overlooked that this age group's formative years were badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (Anna E. Casey Foundation, 2024; O'Brien, 2024). However, it was out of this uncomfortableness that

the circle rituals were born as it forced me to 'think outside the box' for activities that would ease their discomfort. It is worth noting the importance of teaching eye-contact (Haataja, 2021) and allowing time for students to adjust to being physically close to each other. Once they became accustomed to the positive biochemical feedback – the chemical dialogue that runs beneath spoken conversation created by eye contact and positive physical affirmations such as head nodding (Cozolino, 2014), they consistently referred to this feedback as a main indicator of feeling like they belonged. This aligns with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) assertion that humans are fundamentally motivated to seek belonging through a deep need for recognition, connection and the development of meaningful relationships with others.

The practical learning I gained from partaking in the circles and creating a safe 'third space' to foster belonging was considerable, however, it was my personal learning through engagement with critical reflection, that afforded the most significant learning opportunities. I detail that learning next.

5.4 Personal Learning-The Messiness of Action Research

Sullivan, et al. (2016) suggests that action research is a process of informed, purposeful action which begins with a need to do something, which then transforms into intent. My engagement with action research reflects this assertion, as it began as a result of a deeply felt commitment to make a difference in the lives of the most marginalised children that I work with. Losing two past pupils in their early twenties to suicide and hearing that another two had been placed in a juvenile detention centre, galvanised my decision to do something that would help improve the lives of my students. Titchen & Manley (2006), argue that engagement with the process of action research can be transformative in and of itself – this I found to be true, as action research allowed me to delve into the 'messiness'

of the space between theory and my lived practice (Cook, 2009). The reality of engaging with the process, however, led me face to face with the fact that I was, as Whitehead (2009) described, ‘a living contradiction’.

Guided by an examination of my values, I discovered that my assumption that I was living by my Froebelian principles of child-centred teaching (Bruce, 2021) did not align with my practice as I focused most of my attention on the most marginalised children in my class and had only surface level interaction with the rest. Brookfield, (1995) suggests that the hunting of our assumptions as educators allows us to weed out hegemony and realign our practice with our values. My findings indicated that the circle enabled me to connect and listen to every child in my class, thus realigning me with my values of belonging, care and children’s voice.

Palmer (2017) states that critical reflection, can potentially open up “a world of unexpected, connections” (p.4). In my research these ‘unexpected connections’ appeared in the form of hearing the children’s authentic voices in the circle for the first time, despite assuming that I had been listening to them from the start. This occurred during a discussion on teacher/student relationships in which the children told me that most children in the circle were telling me what I wanted to hear, because, as they explained, everyone has ‘a face on at school’. It came at a moment when I was in, what Schön, (1983) describes as the "swampy lowlands" of real-world teaching, feeling that maybe my hope to use the circle to foster belonging by creating a space for the children’s authentic voices to be heard, had been in vain. Reflecting on this circle discussion using my journal revealed that in that moment, I was actually hearing the children’s authentic voices. It had taken us weeks to get to this point of trust and understanding, illustrating Platz’s, (2021) suggestion that “Trust relationships do not arise out of nothing. They evolve over time and are based on ongoing personal exchange” (p.690). This personal learning highlighted the need for ongoing critical reflection to

continuously hunt for assumptions for my own future practice and that fostering belonging using circle work to create a safe third space and strengthen relationships, takes time, trust and perseverance.

Action research is a process full of highs and lows, with, as Brookfield, (2017) reminds us, "its chaos and its contradictions" (p. 235). The messiness and unpredictability of the process, particularly when dealing with the disparities between my stated values and the realities of my practice are discussed next through my experience of theoretical learning.

5.5 Theoretical Learning- Still A Living Contradiction?

Understanding the frameworks, models, and principles that explain phenomena is the goal of theoretical learning (Young, 2008). Whitehead's (2009) theory of being a 'living contradiction' guided my decision making and actions in relation to my intervention as I endeavoured to investigate if my values were truly present in my practice.

I claimed that my Froebelian identity had always guided me. Critically reflecting on my practice showed this to be only partly true. My practice endeavoured to be child-centred (Bruce, 2021) but, digging deeper revealed a preference for my own voice over theirs. It also revealed a contradiction of my epistemological view that knowledge was co-created and constructed together (Dewey, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978), as the data revealed that I often hijacked the circle, insisting on explaining everything, rather than allowing the children to draw their own conclusions. I had become what Skopinskaja (2019) refers to as 'dominant and controlling'. A child's observation of me as being 'a black hole', trying to pull everything into the circle, was a sharp, stinging wakeup call. My epistemological view was clearly held only in relation to how the children learned, as critical reflection of the data revealed that I held myself as the expert – the one with all the answers. I clearly did not apply that view of

knowledge creation to myself. This illustrates Lunn Brownlee et al's (2016) assertion that both reflection and action are needed for a change to a teacher's epistemological view.

Whitehead's theory had guided me towards re-alignment with my values. The process taught me the importance of returning to my epistemological belief in cognitive constructivism approaches. It reminded me that *I* was as much part of that approach as the children. They, after all, were experts on their own lives and lived experiences. Who was I to assume that I had the answers to their problems? But collectively, we found a way forward. Using the circles as a vehicle to foster belonging did not ultimately solve the serious divide between the children's motivation to belong in school, and what they needed to do to belong outside, in what they referred to as 'the real world'. It did, however, provide a safe third space for our worlds to meet and for relationships to develop. This untimely led to discussions on the different pressures people felt to fit in and belong, thus revealing the children's authentic voices.

Becoming a critically reflective practitioner through the process of action research, enabled me to re-align with my epistemological and personal values and live more fully in the direction of my values of belonging, children's voice, social justice and care (O'Sullivan, 2020; Whitehead, 2018).

5.6 Impact on Future Practice

The practical and personal learning outlined above, allowed me to re-align my practice with my personal, professional and epistemological values. As I am embarking on a role that will take me out of the classroom for the next five years, I will outline below how my new

learning will impact my future practice in the role of Home School Community Liaison (HSCL).

Home School Community Liaison is a role specific to DEIS schools. The HSCL provides a vital link between the school and home, working with the most vulnerable and marginalised families to improve the educational outcomes for their children (Department of Education and Skills, ,2019). This role will bring me in close contact with all class teachers, enabling me to share my new learning in a very real and immediate way.

5.6.1 Continuing to Foster Belonging

Embedded in the HSCL Scheme is the belief that parents are the first and most important educators of their child (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). This mirror's Froebelian philosophy on the vital role of parents as primary educators of their children (Bruce, 2021). My findings on fostering belonging through the creation of a safe third space, will be a significant tool when working with parents. This is especially relevant for parents from marginalised communities who often report feeling like they never truly belonged in educational settings (Robertson, et al. 2022). The parent's room – a room reserved for HSCL courses, will create a safe third space through comfortable, secure surroundings. Being listened to and acknowledged will also be a significant tool in fostering belonging with parents. The role of HSCL is one of advocacy and support to parents to improve educational outcomes for their children (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). Providing a safe space where parents can be listened to and building relationships within this space will be a key feature of my work going forward.

5.6.2 The Critical Role of Relationships

Establishing meaningful relationships with parents is at the heart of HSCL. I understand now that these relationships can only be established if people feel safe. Using circles to foster belonging has shown me that working together towards a common purpose, fosters belonging. Establishing groups with the parents to organise events and workshops will help create these goals.

To address power dynamics between myself and the parents, I will use the non-hierarchical seating arrangement of the circle and introduce a talking piece to protect everyone's right to belong and be heard when meeting groups of parents.

5.7 Potential to Influence Policy

Enhancing student belonging has been identified as a pivotal strategy for improving school climates (Smith et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2010; OECD, 2024; Kuttner, 2023). A 2023 OECD survey emphasised fostering a sense of belonging as essential (OECD, 2024). Creating a sense of school belonging has also been explicitly identified by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2019). However, with an allocation of only 30 minutes per week for social, personal and health education in primary schools under the 1999 curriculum, a teacher's ability to focus on belonging is limited. It is assumed within educational policy that belonging will be fostered as a by-product of our current wellbeing programmes. My research points to the necessity for a change in this policy, one that reflects the critical role played by belonging in counteracting post-COVID challenges, such as increased social anxiety and school refusal. There has never been a greater need for interventions that foster belonging (OECD, 2023; O'Brien, 2024).

I cannot claim that my intervention resulted in a clear-cut solution on how to foster school belonging as it is a concept that is highly contextual, but rather it has highlighted that belonging is a primary human motivator and should be viewed and protected as a right within schools. My research also highlights the link between belonging, feelings of safety and the ability to engage in learning. As Cozolino (2014) argues, we evolved to learn from people who care about us. To foster belonging we need to make time within our curriculum to nurture critical teacher/student relationships. This should be at the heart of our pedagogical approach.

5.8 Recommendations for Future Research

This study could be extended to examine belonging and its link to identity development and its ability to shape how students respond to diversity. This has become a growing area of interest in educational policy agendas worldwide. There is a clear need to provide

pedagogical frameworks for fostering inclusive belonging, particularly in Irish and European classrooms, where growing diversity presents challenges on navigating cultural tensions (Eek-Karlsson & Emilson, 2021).

I would be interested in extending this study to examine the link between students' sense of belonging and the 'school to prison pipeline', whereby children from marginalised communities who do not experience a sense of school belonging are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system (Prins et al. 2023). This is an area that has not been adequately researched within an Irish context.

5.9 Conclusion

Building belonging by using the circle as a safe 'third space' and providing the time to hear the children's voices and nurture relationships, were vital to fostering belonging in a DEIS context. Desautels (2020) reminds us that 'a sense of safety' is central to children's ability to thrive and learn, this is of particular relevance when fostering belonging with students from marginalised communities.

The practical learning gleaned from my research could almost be viewed as secondary to my personal one. With almost twenty-five years of experience working within a marginalised community, to be given the opportunity through action research to develop my own living theory, one that encapsulated my values of belonging, students' voice, nurture and social justice, was a transformative experience. I can now claim to know how to foster belonging through the creation of a safe third space, and the nurturing of relationships. Equally, I now know the value children put on having their voices heard and the important role that bio-chemical feedback plays in fostering belonging.

Importantly, I understand the need for authentic dialogue between myself and my students to truly align with my epistemological value of cognitive constructivism. Children's voice, after

all, is central to my values of belonging, nurture and social justice and by realigning my practice with these values, I have reclaimed my true Froebelian identity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Statement

Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Student name:	Sinead Magee
Student Number:	24253842
Supervisors:	Prof Marie McLoughlin
Programme:	Master of Education (Research in Practice)
Thesis title:	How can I use circles to foster belonging in a DEIS One 6th Class?
Research Question(s):	What environment needs to first be created in order for a sense of belonging to develop and how can I establish this with the children I teach?
Intended start date of data collection:	13th of January 2025
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	British Educational Research Association (BERA): Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (fifth edition) 2024

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research?

	TICK ALL THAT APPLY
Early years / pre-school	
Primary school pupils	X
Secondary school students	
Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)	
Adults	X

My research will take place in a mixed, vertical, urban based school in the East of the Republic of Ireland. There are one to two of each class level, as well as one mainstream and two pre-school Autism classes. It is a Catholic ethos school which values inclusivity, community, care and participation. The primary research site will be my mainstream 6th class classroom of 13 children and one SNA.

1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach:

I intend to verbally request permission from the school principal to carry out my research, followed by a letter to the Board of Management requesting permission to carry out the project with my students. The children will be active participants and will work collaboratively with me throughout the research and data gathering process. Parents will participate through their granting of consent. Due to low literacy levels amongst some of my parental group, I will

first informally meet them during parent teacher meetings to explain my plans to conduct an action research study with their children. A letter will then be sent home with a project description, an information sheet about their child's participation, and a parental consent form. Children will provide informed assent by completing a child-friendly letter and consent form describing their involvement in the study. There will be a clearly explained "opt-out" option and the right to withdraw at any stage of the study for children, their parents/guardians and all other parties involved.

I will foster belonging with my class through debate and discussion using circles on a daily basis. I will use strategies such as drama, artwork and written responses to further develop their learning in this area. My reflective journal will provide a means by which I can critically reflect on my practice and incorporate my new learning into my teaching going forward.
Other participants in the study will include the class SNA, and six critical friends who, through observation and discussion, will give critical feedback on how effective the circles are at fostering belonging in the class group. This will challenge me to reflect critically on my practice and implement change where necessary throughout the action research.

2. Summary of Planned Approach

I have chosen action research as my methodology as it allows me to ask the question “How do I improve what I’m doing? (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). Action research embraces methods and insights from other methodologies (McNiff, 2016) such as autoethnography, self-study and narrative research. This flexibility makes it a suitable tool for triangulation. The aim of my research question, “How can I use circles to foster belonging in a DEIS One 6th Class?” is to foster a sense of belonging in the children in 6th class through participation in circle work. My aim, through the use of action research, is to produce my own living theory that will ultimately

contribute to the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 2018). My methodology will be underpinned by both my epistemological and ontological values including care, belonging, social justice and children's voices.

The teaching methods and strategies to be used as part of this research project will include:

- Circle Work
- A class contract
- Walking debates
- Drama lessons-Conscience Alley/Cross the line
- Novel reading
- Art lessons based on belonging
- English and SPHE debates – based on people's rights to belong
- SPHE- Lessons on empathy
- Wellness Moments- drop everything and relax time/mindfulness

My methods of data collection will include:

- Teacher Observation
- SNA Observation
- Circle Work
- Pupil Surveys
- Pupil view templates-Diamond Nine
- Photographs of children's work
- Teacher's Reflective Journal

The above data collection tools have been selected for their usefulness in producing the data

needed to complete my research. It is my intention to begin data collection on the 13th of January 2025 and to submit my final thesis on the 12th of September 2025. I will ensure the anonymity of all participants, their data and the research site. I will also ensure that data remains confidential and is stored in a safe place in compliance with Maynooth University GDPR guidance.

2. **Ethical Issues**:

The main ethical issues that I envisage arising are around vulnerable children disclosing sensitive information during a circle. Other ethical issues are the need to ensure the circles remain a safe place for both the children and the staff taking part in them, and also the power dynamics at play.

No data collection will take place without the informed consent from the following participants / organisations:

- Maynooth University
- The Board of Management of my school
- The principal of my school
- The parents/guardians of the children
- The children in my 6th Class
- The SNA attached to my class

a. **Vulnerability**: Children are considered to be a vulnerable research group and as such it is imperative to consider the various issues that may be encountered over the

course of this action research project.

- **Minimizing Risk**: To minimize any potential risk, I will begin each check-in and check-out circle by asking the children if they are happy to participate. I will also remind them that they are free to withdraw at any time. The circles will potentially create vulnerable moments for both children and staff. To further reduce any potential risk, there will be participation guidelines drawn up in collaboration with the children and the adults taking part. This set of agreed guidelines for expected behaviour within the circle will be drawn up as a class contract. It will be signed by all participants and displayed in the classroom.

- **Minimizing Discomfort**: To minimize any potential discomfort, I will ensure that all participants are both physically and emotionally ready to participate at the beginning of each check-in and check-out circle by asking if there's anything that would make them more comfortable before we begin. As part of this research is focused on belonging, each circle will begin with a lighthearted fun exercise and end on a positive note. I will ensure, through written consent from parents and guardians and through the attainment of the children's own assent, that everyone is happy to procced in the research. I will remind the children and any adults present that there is never any pressure to make a verbal response during the circles, that they are free to pass the talking piece on.

- **Unforeseen circumstances**: Any unforeseen outcomes or sensitive

disclosures will be dealt with in accordance with the child safeguarding guidelines of the school and passed on to the designated liaison officer. Should a child become upset during a check-in or check-out circle, I will immediately stop the lesson and ask a member of the SET team to stand in while I talk to the child in a comfortable space where they feel safe, such as the parents' room. I will discuss the cause of their distress and remind them that they are free to withdraw at any stage from participating in the research project.

- **Harm**: although I am not expecting harm to arise to any of the participants or indeed to myself as the researcher, it remains an aspect that must be considered when carrying out any form of research, particularly where children are involved. Should harm of any form arise I will immediately withdraw the participants in question from the research group. If I am subjected to harm, I will cease the activity immediately and allow myself time to critically reflect on the activity and whether to revisit it using different criteria at a later stage. I will also use my support network within my school and the counselling services available to teachers should I encounter a serious challenge that I would need help processing. I will also inform my supervisors of any such incidents. I will endeavor to avoid activities that are likely to cause deep divisions or tensions.

b. **Power dynamics:** This aspect of the research needs to be given special consideration in order for true, meaningful research to take place. I will put the following safeguards in place to avoid this:

- **Between Researcher and Participants**: The power dynamic between children and the adults involved in any form of research has to be considered as the greatest obstacle to true, meaningful research taking place (Morrow and Richards, 1996). To counteract this dynamic I will repeatedly inform the children that there are no wrong answers or any need to agree with me or the other adults in the circle. I will reiterate that the adults are there simply to facilitate the discussion and to help maintain the circles as safe places for everyone. I have already mentioned the class contract that will be collaboratively created and signed by both the children and myself, the researcher and the class SNA. This will be used as a tool to remind everyone of the framework and expectations of behaviour within the circles. I will remind the children that they are my co-researchers and that rather than working for me, they are working with me.

- **Between the participants themselves**: there are many different personalities and characters within the class, and it is imperative that all voices be heard and given space and a respectful audience. In order for critical thinking skills such as the ability to think reflectively, to develop, children must first feel a sense of belonging and safety. I will use a small teddy bear as a talking piece that will be passed around in one direction only throughout check-in and check-out circles to ensure that every child has an opportunity to speak, should they wish to. I will use the class contract to remind children of the rules around the speaking piece, that only the person holding it may speak and that everyone will be given a chance to hold it and speak if they so wish.

- **Insider-research**: Another power dynamic that I need to consider is between myself and the parents involved. As a long-standing member of the school community with

23 year's service, I have built deep and lasting ties within the community with parents and guardians. I am concerned that some parents may feel compelled to allow their children to participate even if they aren't comfortable with their child participating in any form of research. I will endeavor to reassure parents and guardians of their right to refuse consent and to withdraw their consent at any time during the project. I will also inform them of how much I value their honest feedback.

The power-dynamic between myself and the class SNA will also have to be taken into consideration when receiving critical feedback from them throughout the project. I will reassure them how much I value honest, critical feedback and that by working together, we can endeavor to improve the lives of the children we work with.

- **Reflexivity**: I decided to engage in an action research project as I was concerned with the lack of critical thinking skills developed by the children in my classroom. I will, however, strive to remain unbiased in my methods through my value of children's voice, creating a space for them to discuss and engage with activities freely with minimum input from me, other than what is needed to keep everyone within the circle emotionally and physically safe.

- **Gatekeepers:** The Board of Management of the School will be the gatekeepers for this action research project. Once written consent to carry out my research has been obtained, I will ensure that they are kept informed of my progress through the school principal at their board of management meetings. The board will maintain the right to withdraw their consent at any time.

- **Colleagues**: I have asked three other members of staff to be part of my critical friend group. As my research will be solely focused on my own class group, I don't envisage any power dynamics coming into play.

- **Other Students**: Aside from my own student's involvement in the research, no other students within the school will take part in the study. There are no relevant power dynamics to deal with.

c. **Data storage** All data will be stored in accordance with GDPR guidelines with all personal identifiers removed before storage. Any digital data will be stored on my own personal laptop that is password protected. Physical documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the classroom. Any data that is collected will only be used for the purpose of my thesis with the Froebel Department of Education in Maynooth University and will be stored and then destroyed in accordance with university guidelines.

d. **Publication** In the event of this research project being published, stringent measures will be taken to ensure the continued anonymity of the school and the children involved. All references to the school and the children will be deliberately omitted to prevent them being identified.

e. **Informed consent and assent***:*

It is of great importance to me that the children and parents/guardians taking part in my action research project do so freely and without compunction of any kind. As there

are low literacy levels amongst some of the parents and guardians attached to my class, I will seek, through informal conversations at the classroom door and parent teacher meetings, to fully explain the nature of my research and what it is I'm trying to achieve. I will endeavour to ensure that it is informed consent that is being given through both dialogue and written information. I will gain consent from the following organisations and people:

1. Maynooth University (Ethical approval)
2. The principal of my school (Verbal request)
3. The Board of Management of my school (Letter of request)
4. The special needs assistant attached to my class (Verbal request)
5. The 13 children in my class (Child-friendly assent forms attached)
6. The parents and guardians of the children in my class (information letter and parent/guardian consent forms attached)

f. **Sensitivity**

I am highly alert to the sensitive nature of the research that I am hoping to carry out. In the aftermath of a disclosure or if a child were to become upset during a circle, the activity would be halted, and the children would be asked to return to their desks. A member of the auxiliary staff would be asked to supervise the class while I would remove the child in question to another more private area to offer comfort and decide what action to take next. If necessary, any disclosures of a sensitive nature would be referred to the designated liaison person (DLP).

Bibliography

McNiff, J. (2016) *You and your action research project*. Fourth. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY; Routledge.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2011) *All you need to know about action research*. 2nd edn. Los Angeles.

Morrow, V. and Richards, M. (1996) 'The Ethics of Social Research with Children: An Overview', *Children & society*, 10(2), pp. 90–105.

Whitehead, J. (2018) *Living Theory Research As a Way of Life*. Brown Dog Books.

Declaration

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: Sinead Magee

Date: 19/11/2024

Signature of supervisor:

Appendix 2: Letter to Board of Management

Maynooth University Froebel Department

of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath-Oideachas

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Fr Noel Coughlan

Chairperson – Board of Management,

Scoil Mhuire,

Glenmore Court,

Ballyboden,

Dublin 16

13/1/25

Dear Fr Coughlan,

I am currently undertaking a part time Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. I am seeking permission to do research in my current 6th Class.

As part of my degree, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on using circle work as a vehicle to foster belonging in my class.

The data will be collected using observations, surveys, Diamond-9 Activities, feedback from critical friends and my own reflective journal.

Parents/Guardians as well as the pupils will receive information about the research I intend to carry out. They will be asked to give their written consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially and identities will be anonymous.

Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this research. All information will remain confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research.

I hope to foster a true sense of belonging within the class through the building of empathetic relationships. My focus is entirely on my own practice.

To carry out the research, I need the Board of Management approval to proceed and I would be very grateful if you could agree to this request.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 3: Letter to Parents/ Guardians

Maynooth University Froebel

Department of Primary and Early

Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

As some of you may know, I have returned to college and am currently a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is on using circle work to foster a sense of belonging within the class.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by involving the children in circle work where they will have the opportunity to discuss and debate issues that they feel are important in their lives. Through their involvement in the project, I hope to increase their overall feelings of belonging in school.

The data will be collected using teacher observation, pupil view templates-Diamond Nine (child friendly response sheets), photographs of children's work (the children themselves will not be photographed), children's reflective journal (to record their thoughts and feelings)

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Your child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage. You also have the right to withdraw your consent at any point in the process.

All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at sineadbyrne@smballyboden.ie

Yours faithfully,

Sinead Byrne

Appendix 4: Information Sheet

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Information Sheet Parents and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers who are studying for the Master of Education at Maynooth University are asked to undertake a project examining their own teaching. The project looks at how I work and involves the collection of data using teacher observation, pupil friendly templates, teachers own reflective journal and photographs of the children's work. I will then write a report, called a thesis, about what I've learnt by doing the project.

What is the research question?

How can I use circle work to foster belonging in my 6th Class?

What sorts of methods will be used?

Circle Work

A class contract for behaviour within the circles

Teacher Observation

Teachers Reflective Journal

Child friendly templates (Diamond Nine)

Photographs of children's work

Debates and discussions around values, friendships and how the children view the world.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Suzanne O'Keeffe and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

I am asking for your permission to carry out this research project with the class. All information collected will be kept completely private and confidential and no names or identifying details will be used. The information collected will only be used for this project as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University. It will be destroyed in accordance with university guidelines.

Contact details: Student: Sinead Byrne E: sineadbyre@smballyboden.ie

Appendix 5: Board of Management Consent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood
Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus
Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT CONSENT FORM

The Board of Management has read the information provided in the attached letter and information sheet and all of our questions have been answered. We are happy for this research to go ahead.

Chairperson's Signature _____

Principal's Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department
of Primary and Early Childhood
Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Name

Parent / Guardian Signature

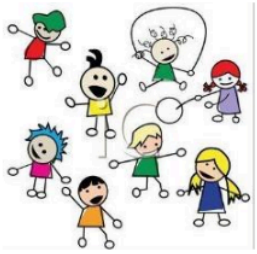
Date:

Name of Child

Child's signature:

Date:

Appendix 7: Children's Consent Form



Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Child's name …….

I am trying to find out if taking part in circle work helps students feel like they belong more in school.

Would you be ok with that? Circle one. YES NO

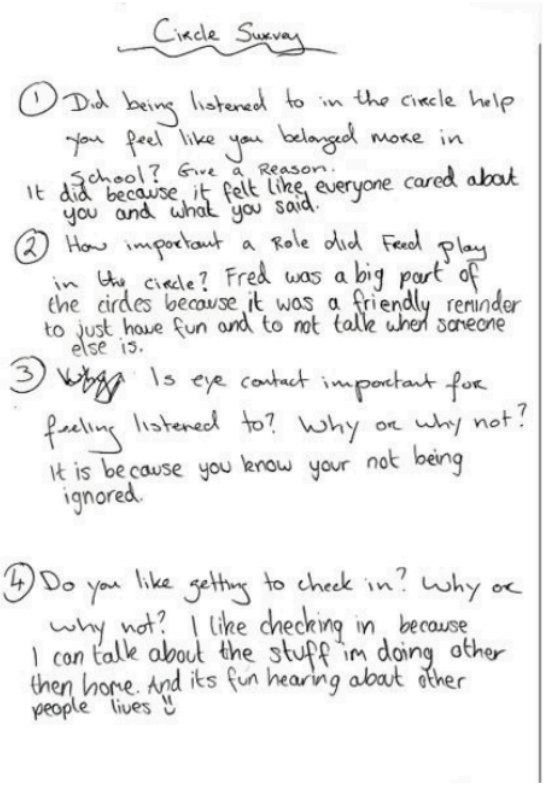
I have asked your parents and guardians to talk to you about this. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that, could you sign the form that I have sent home?

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.

Thanks

Appendix 8: Anonymous Circle Survey- Children

Appendix 8.1



Circle Survey

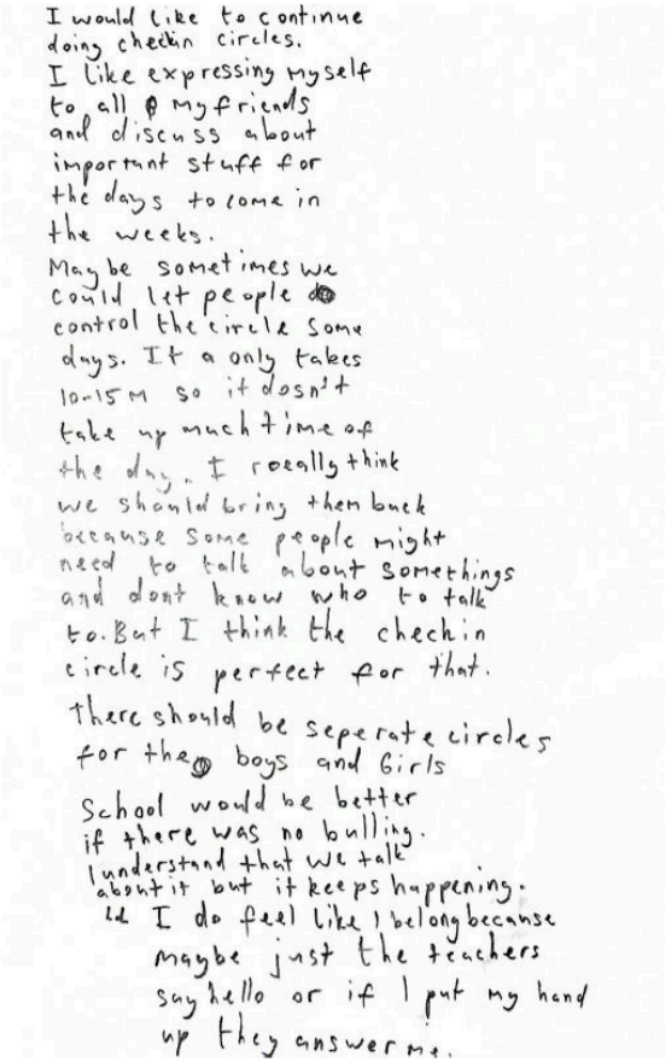
(1) Did being listened to in the circle help you feel like you belonged more in school? Give a Reason.
It did because it felt like everyone cared about you and what you said.

(2) How important a Role did Fred play in the circle? Fred was a big part of the circles because it was a friendly reminder to just have fun and to not talk when someone else is.

(3) Is eye contact important for feeling listened to? Why or why not?
It is because you know your not being ignored.

(4) Do you like getting to check in? Why or why not? I like checking in because I can talk about the stuff im doing other then home. And its fun hearing about other people lives :)

Appendix 8.2



I would like to continue doing checkin circles. I like expressing myself to all of my friends and discuss about important stuff for the days to come in the weeks.

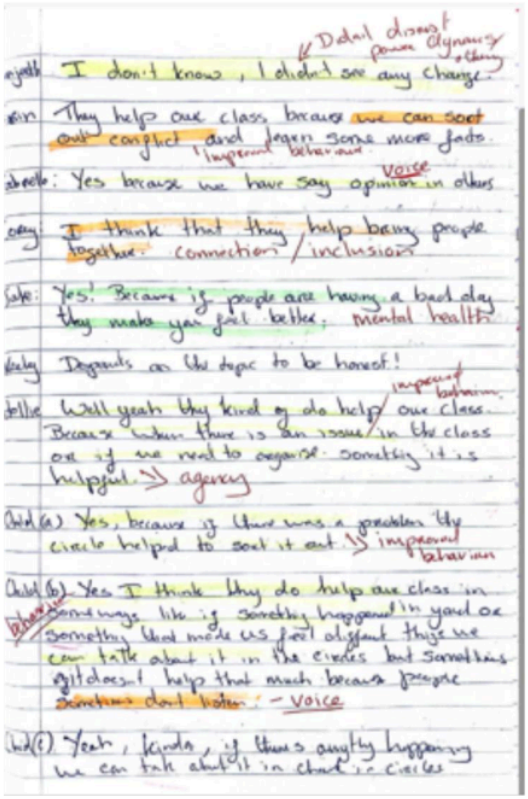
Maybe sometimes we could let people do control the circle some days. It a only takes 10-15 m so it dosn't take up much time of the day. I really think we should bring them back because some people might need to talk about somethings and dont know who to talk to. But I think the checkin circle is perfect for that.

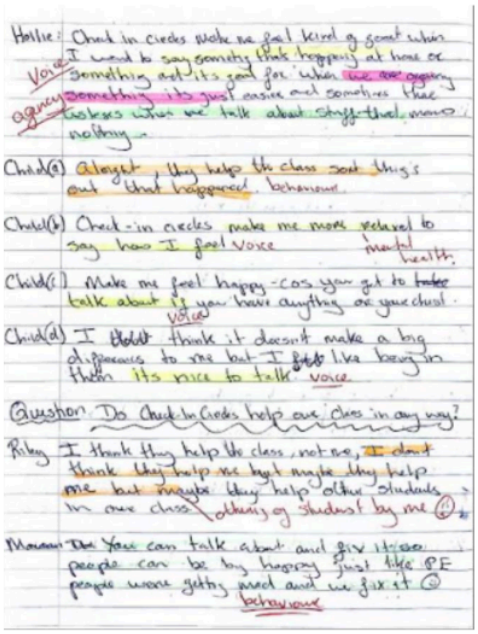
There should be seperate circles for the boys and Girls

School would be better if there was no bulling. I understand that we talk about it but it keeps happening.

Id I do feel like I belong because maybe just the teachers say hello or if I put my hand up they answer me.

Appendix 9: Example of Thematic Analysis Procedure





Appendix 10: Structured Checklist

Structured Weekly Checklist

This checklist is organized around six dimensions of belonging identified by Paul Kuttner in his article "The Right To Belong in School"; Agentic, Intersectional, Systemic, Political, Place-based, and Belonging as a Right (Kuttner, 2023). Indicators of belonging adapted from Kylie et al., (2023); inclusion, acceptance, connection, and respect, will be used to observe moments of belonging. Other indicators have also been included; improvement in mental health and wellbeing (Arslan et al., 2020: Jose et al., 2012), higher academic achievement ((Delgado *et al.*, 2016) and improved social behaviour (Demanet and Van Houtte, 2012). I will use this checklist at the end of every week to observe the impact that the connection circles have had on fostering belonging within a DEIS 1 6th Class.

1. **Agentic Belonging (**Student voice and empowerment)
   - **Inclusion**
   - **Acceptance**
   - **Connection**
   - **Respect**
   - **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
   - **Higher academic achievement**
   - **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

2. **Intersectional Belonging (**Recognition of diversity)

- **Inclusion**
- **Acceptance**
- **Connection**
- **Respect**
- **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
- **Higher academic achievement**
- **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

3. **Systemic Belonging (**School policy support and structures)

- **Inclusion**
- **Acceptance**
- **Connection**
- **Respect**
- **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
- **Higher academic achievement**
- **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

4. **Political Belonging (**Empowerment and advocacy)
   - **Inclusion**
   - **Acceptance**
   - **Connection**
   - **Respect**
   - **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
   - **Higher academic achievement**
   - **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

5. **Place-Based Belonging (**Connection to Classroom/School Building/Community)
   - **Inclusion**
   - **Acceptance**
   - **Connection**
   - **Respect**

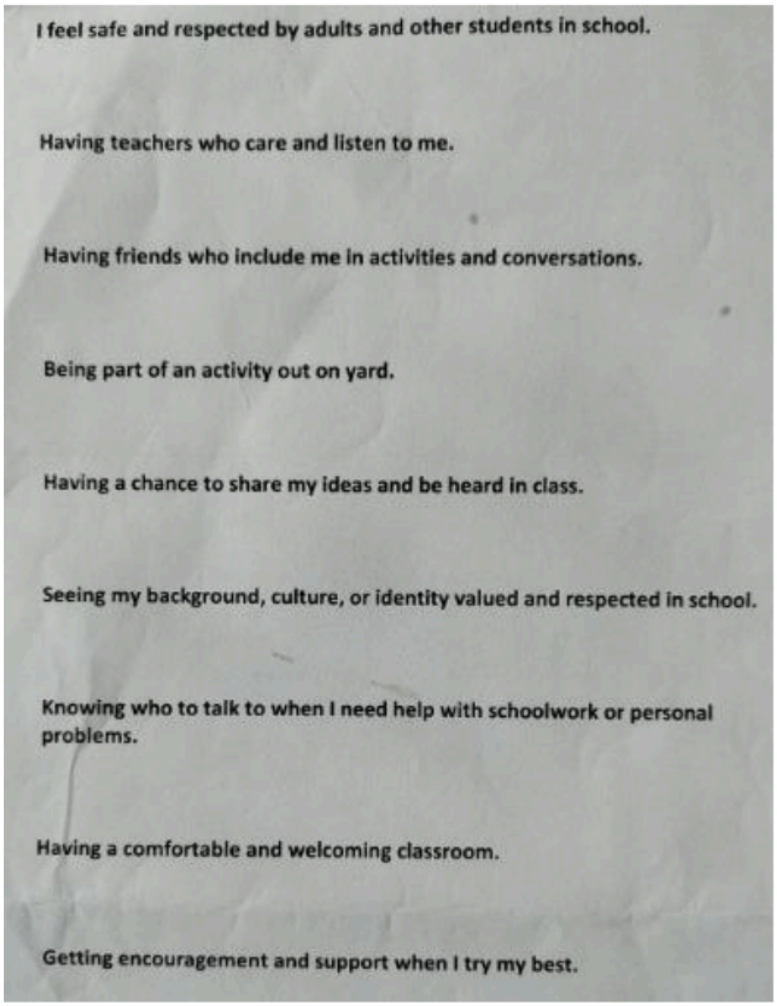
- **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
- **Higher academic achievement**
- **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

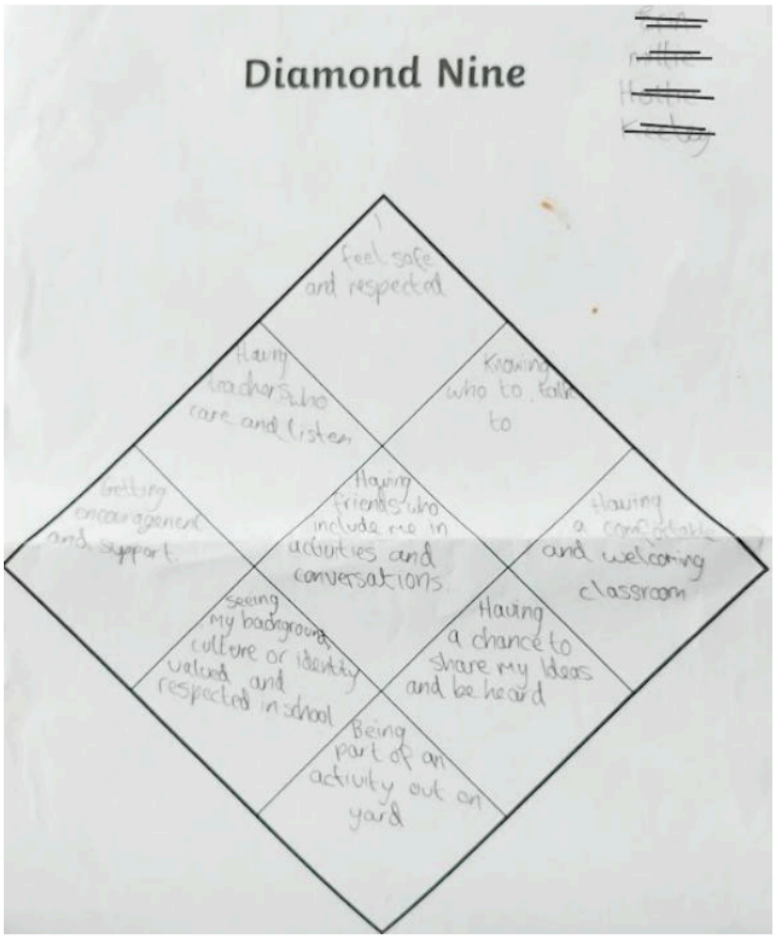
6. **Belonging as a Right (**Inclusion and acceptance for all students
   - **Inclusion**
   - **Acceptance**
   - **Connection**
   - **Respect**
   - **Improvement in mental health and wellbeing**
   - **Higher academic achievement**
   - **Improved social behaviour**

Examples of Indicators Observed: _____

Appendix 11: Statements on Belonging – Diamond Nine Activity

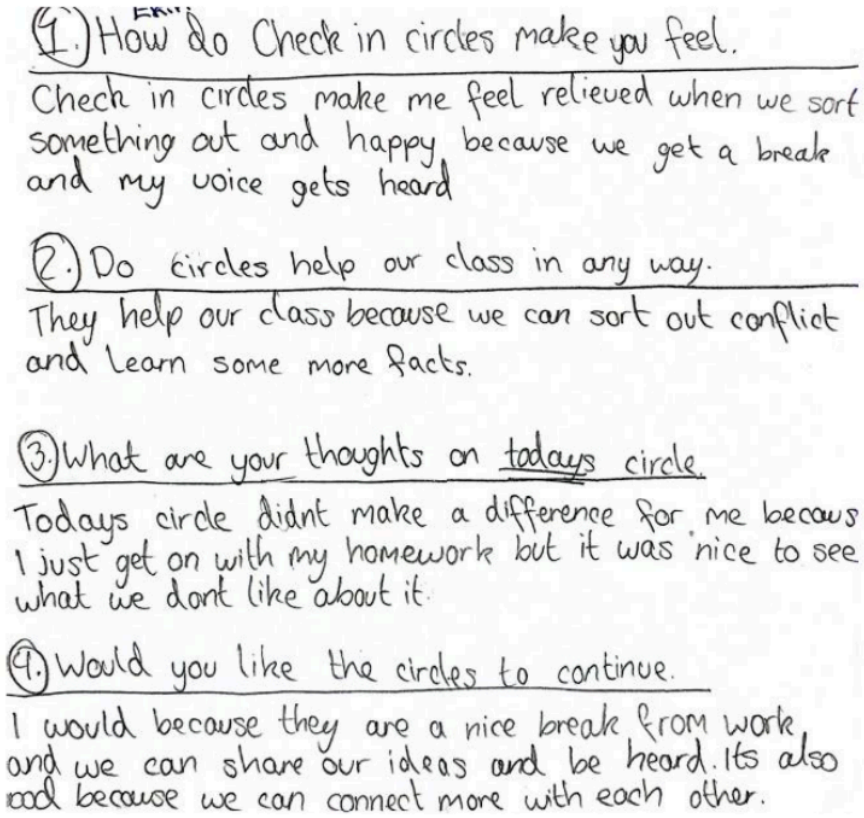


Appendix 12: Group Diamond Nine Activity



Appendix 13: Individual Diamond Nine Activity

Appendix 14: Circle Survey Example



1. How do Check in circles make you feel.

Check in circles make me feel relieved when we sort something out and happy because we get a break and my voice gets heard

2. Do circles help our class in any way.

They help our class because we can sort out conflict and learn some more facts.

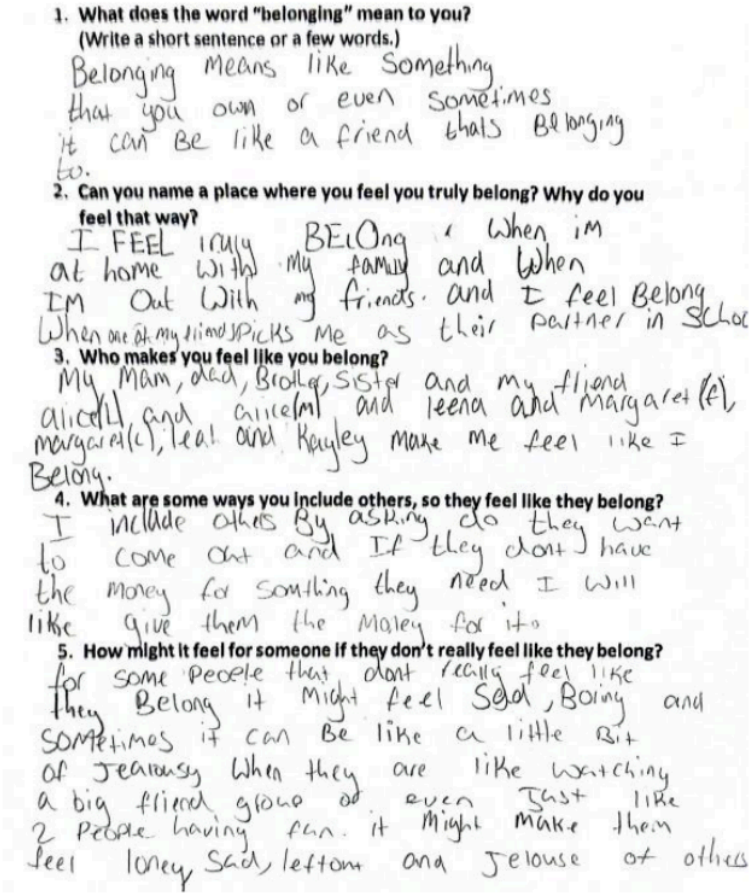
3. What are your thoughts on todays circle.

Todays circle didnt make a difference for me becaus I just get on with my homework but it was nice to see what we dont like about it.

4. Would you like the circles to continue.

I would because they are a nice break from work and we can share our ideas and be heard. Its also cool because we can connect more with each other.

Appendix 15: Anonymous Survey on Belonging



1. **What does the word "belonging" mean to you?**
   (Write a short sentence or a few words.)
   Belonging means like Something that you own or even sometimes it can Be like a friend thats Belonging to.
2. **Can you name a place where you feel you truly belong? Why do you feel that way?**
   I FEEL truly BELONG when im at home with my family and when IM Out With my friends. and I feel Belong When one of my friends Picks Me as their partner in Scho
3. **Who makes you feel like you belong?**
   My Mam, dad, Brother, Sister and my friend alice(L) and grace(M) and leena and Margaret(E), margaret(C), leah and Kayley make me feel like I Belong.
4. **What are some ways you include others, so they feel like they belong?**
   I include others By asking do they want to come out and If they dont have the money for somthing they need I will like give them the Maney for it.
5. **How might it feel for someone if they don't really feel like they belong?**
   for some people that dont really feel like they Belong it Might feel Sad, Boring and sometimes it can Be like a little Bit of Jearousy When they are like watching a big friend group or even Just like 2 People having fun. it Might make them feel loney Sad, leftout and Jelouse of others

Appendix 16: Survey on Student/Teacher Relationships