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The value of circle time as an intervention strategy

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Abstract

Literature on circle time emphasises benefits such as improved self-esteem, improvements in speaking and listening skills and social skills. However, evidence-based research is more limited and much of the available research is anecdotal. Whilst this paper does not offer a systematic evaluation of the impact of circle time on specific groups of children it does synthesise the key arguments in the literature. This paper concludes that there is a need for more systematic research on the effects of circle time; particularly research that takes quantitative measures of gains in self-esteem.

Key words

Circle time
Intervention
Circle of Friends
Behavioural

Introduction

This paper discusses the role that circle time can play in helping children with social and emotional difficulties. It has been argued that circle time is a useful intervention strategy because it can help to develop pupils' social skills, improves self-esteem and can address the needs of pupils with behavioural difficulties (Canney and Byrne, 2006; Lown, 2002). Specifically, it has been argued that circle time can help pupils to cooperate with one another and leads to improvements in pupils' speaking and listening skills (Housego and Burns, 1994). Researchers have also found a link between the use of circle time and more effective group work in the classroom (Lown, 2002). Some writers have claimed that circle time can encourage pupils to extend their social networks and foster new friendships (Lown, 2002). In addition, it has been argued that through the use of circle time, pupils develop more positive relationships with one another, thus creating a climate where pupils learn to treat each other with respect (Curry, 1997). Some

writers have argued that in the light of these benefits, circle time should be used throughout both primary and secondary school (Tew, 1998). A variation of circle time known as 'Circle of Friends' (Frederickson *et al*, 2005) is a programme designed to help pupils with a range of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and this intervention will be discussed in this paper. However, some writers have criticised circle time activities in schools, arguing that the content is often superficial (Housego and Burns, 1994). It has been argued that circle time in the UK is not theoretically underpinned (Lang, 1998) and some academics have argued that there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the benefits of this approach (Lown, 2002). This paper will consider the role that circle time can play in helping children with social and emotional difficulties.

Rationale for the Use of Circle Time

Circle time is theoretically underpinned by the principles of humanistic psychology. According to Tew (1998) 'it is rooted in the notion that each individual has worth, individuality and the right to control their own direction' (p.21). Tew (1998) stresses the need for the teacher to create a supportive classroom environment which is 'conducive to helping pupils realise their innate self-potential. Circle time creates an emotionally 'safe' place for pupils to explore what they think and feel' (p.22).

The enhancement of self-esteem is central to the learning process (Lawrence, 1996; Mosley, 1993, Margerison, 1996). Despite this, enhanced emphasis on subject teaching in primary schools in recent years has reduced the time available for personal and social education (Lown, 2002). It has been argued that circle time should be part of pupils' entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum, given its potential for enhancing pupils' self-esteem (Lang and Mosley, 1993; Margerison, 1996).

According to Miller and Moran (2005) 'the desire to encourage positive self-esteem among pupils remains well-embedded in primary practice' (p.25). However, a study by Miller and Parker (2005) concluded that even teachers who know their pupils very well may still not be good at identifying those pupils who are most in need of help in terms of their developing self-esteem. This is a very interesting finding and suggests that there is a need for teachers to explicitly focus on this within their practice. Circle time offers a useful tool through which teachers can discuss issues related to self-esteem with pupils. It also provides a forum in

which pupils can openly share their own feelings with others. This will allow the teacher to make more accurate assessments about individual pupils' levels of self-esteem. This is supported by Housego and Burns (1994) who have argued that circle time can help teachers to engage in more effective formative assessment.

Lown (2002) has argued that circle time can be seen as 'special or desirable, because it is time off from the academic curriculum' (p.94). This view devalues the importance of non-academic subjects and their role in the curriculum. Circle time should be very much part of a broad curriculum, which includes an entitlement to personal and social education. It has been given approval as an effective means of addressing the emotional and behavioural needs of children in a variety of government publications (DfEE, 1997; DfEE, 2000).

Several authors share the view that circle time offers a tool for improving the self-esteem and ultimately the learning of all pupils (White, 1989; Lang and Mosley, 1993, Margerison, 1996). This seems logical given the role of self-esteem in enhancing learning. White (1989) has also argued that circle time can cultivate group identity and cohesion. Wooster and Carson (1982) found that circle time activities led to improved self-concept and social interaction amongst a group of eight year olds.

In addition, it has been argued that circle time can improve pupils' social skills (Wooster, 1988; Kantor, 1989) and extend 'social networks...introducing children to the pressures and demands of large group living' (Lown, 2002: 94). Canney and Byrne (2006) have argued that social skills are rarely explicitly taught. This suggests that there is a need for schools to focus more explicitly on these skills and circle time would be a useful intervention through which this could take place.

Cadiz (1994) contends that the activity of circle time provides an opportunity for self-expression and also allows the teacher to assess levels of stress or conflict within a group. Curry and Bromfield (1994) argue that circle time aims to develop 'the unique potential of each individual, of looking at their social and emotional growth and nurturing this within a caring group environment' (cited in Curry, 1997: 126).

Curry and Bromfield (1998) assert that circle time allows children to explore feelings and encourages them to believe that they are worthwhile people, thus developing self-esteem. Mosley (1993) shares this view, although she also emphasises the value of circle time in fostering skills of group problem solving and group-decision making. This is an important point in the context of schools and classrooms, where groups of children may have an issue to solve, which is affecting their daily lives. Solutions can be shared amongst the group before a consensus is made regarding the best way to address the issue.

Rothlein *et al* (1988) argue that circle time can improve intellectual development and social development of pupils. They also argue that it is fun. However, these writers also argue that circle time can improve the physical motor development of pupils. Many circle time games are practical and involve movement. This will develop the pupils physically as well as socially and intellectually. Kelly (1999) also found that circle time brought about a marked positive change in behaviour of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Lown (2002) cites two ways in which circle time is used in schools; firstly, as a tool for covering specific curriculum areas and secondly to offer therapeutic input to groups of people who are dealing with issues such as bullying. However, she argues:

Evidence for the effectiveness of circle time in enhancing the psychological processes it sets out to reach is, to say the least, flimsy. Much of what is referred to in the literature as ‘evidence’ is in fact assumption, anecdote and circular argument.

(Lown, 2002: 95)

Lown (2002) is rightly critical of authors who note the supposed benefits of circle time without referencing these to sources of evidence. She writes:

The benefits mentioned often include reference to self-esteem; from evidence that associates self-esteem improvement with learning and behavioural improvement, the assumption is made that circle time is a legitimate tool to improve all three. The association with behavioural and learning gains thereby becomes a ‘third-party’ association, not directly linked to the research base.

(Lown, 2002: 95/96)

Lown (2002) investigated the perceptions of teachers and pupils about the use of circle time. For her study she used schools that had been using the approach for at least one term. She based her findings on questionnaires which were completed by nine teachers and eighteen pupils. In addition, three interviews

were conducted with primary school teachers. It can be argued that the sample from which the findings were drawn was very small and in this respect the data is not generalisable. Lown (2002) also does not specify whether the respondents (teachers or pupils) were male or female. This makes it difficult to assess whether her data was representative.

Lown's findings suggested that the teachers were consistently positive about the use of circle time and intended to continue using it. The teachers generally felt that the use of circle time improved pupils' personal and social behaviour as well as their listening skills. The teachers reported that circle time had developed pupils' cooperative skills and their ability to express their feelings. Improvements in pupils' self-esteem and turn-taking skills were also mentioned. Perhaps more significantly, the teachers felt that circle time gave them a better understanding of the children themselves and the problems they faced. There was no over-riding support for the view that circle time had improved classroom behaviour in this research. However, Lown did find that teachers who had the most experience of using circle time were the most positive about it. Pupil perceptions of circle time were consistent with the views of their teachers. The pupils also felt that circle time was valuable because it encouraged them to talk to other people in the class who they would not normally talk to and it gave them an opportunity to work with others outside of their friendship groups. The pupils gave clear messages that they regarded circle time as a fun activity and that they enjoyed the sessions.

It is interesting to reflect critically on Lown's study. She criticised the writers who presented weak evidence for the benefits of circle time, yet it appears that she has also fallen into this trap. She collected perceptions of circle time from a small sample of teacher and pupils. It is interesting to note that she did not carry out any statistical measures of self-esteem using a self-esteem rating test. Her study could have been improved if she had measured the self-esteem of a sample of pupils prior to the circle time intervention being used. The intervention could have been implemented for a period of time, such as a term. The pupils' self-esteem could have then been measured at the end of the intervention. Given the fact that pupils' self-esteem is likely to be affected by other factors, the same self-esteem tests could have been carried out against a control sample that did not have access to the circle time intervention. The results could have been processed in order to find out if improvements in self-esteem, against the control group, were statistically

significant. Lown's findings also seem to be based on flimsy evidence. Perceptions of teachers and pupils are useful if they validate other data collected from psychological tests. It is interesting to note that the results of her questionnaire data have not been analysed using statistical tests in order to see if they are statistically significant. They are simply presented in simple numerical terms (numbers of people who gave a certain response out of the total number of responses). However, the study does add to the current body of literature which supports the use of circle time in schools.

Curry (1997) provides a case study which illustrates how circle time can be a powerful tool to modify and improve pupil's behaviour. The case study focuses on a child called 'Jo' who was frequently distressed and anxious. Jo was ten years old and found it difficult to cope with school. She had poor concentration, often failed to complete work and frequently hid under tables or in corners. Often she would run out of class and she was ridiculed and rejected by her peers. Her friendships were limited. At times Jo could be obstinate and failed to comply with her teachers' requests. The rest of the class were also unsettled and negative to one another. Therefore, group work was problematic. When Jo went into the year six class the school decided to introduce circle time. Gradually Jo became interested in circle time and started to make positive contributions to sessions. Through circle time the children learnt to work together more cooperatively and the quality of group work and relationships improved. The children became willing and confident to work with anyone rather than being selective. Jo developed a sense of belonging and acceptance and when it was her turn to be the 'special person', the class made genuinely positive comments about her. The self-esteem of all the pupils increased and the children gradually took increased ownership for the focus of the sessions. The circle became a forum for their issues and concerns. According to Curry:

Pupils with special educational needs are helped by the inclusivity element plus the experience and practice of social skills; it is often the absence of these and the rejection of certain children that can lead to persistent problems...circle time facilitates an increased ability to work together, based on understanding and awareness, and respect for the difference in others, their values and beliefs.
(Curry, 1997: 129)

The case study, which Curry provides us with, is encouraging but it is necessary to examine its limitations. It is a very small study related only to one pupil in one class. As such it is not generalisable. A similar critique to that applied to the work of Lown (2002) can also be applied in that measures of self-esteem were not taken prior to and after the intervention and a control group was not used. However, the study provides

educational psychologists with a useful source of reference which they can share with teachers in schools who are faced with children who display similar characteristics to those which Jo demonstrated.

Housego and Burns (1994) have argued that circle time can encourage pupils to resolve problems and agree with other writers that it can develop other important social skills such as turn-taking, careful listening and good eye contact during conversations. In addition, they argue that it can help pupils to become more reflective by developing their abilities to engage in deep thinking. They assert that circle time can help pupils to come to terms with emotions such as fears and they argue that it can develop in pupils a more positive self-image. However, these writers examine circle time from a critical perspective and these arguments will now be considered.

Criticisms of Circle Time

Some writers (Housego and Burns, 1994; Lang, 1998) have examined the use of circle time from a critical perspective. Housego and Burns (1994) argue that it is necessary to examine the rationale for the use of circle time more rigorously. Indeed, they raise the question as to ‘whether supporters and practitioners of circle time may be sitting a little *too* comfortably’ (p.23). This section will examine the important limitations in the rationale for the use of circle time and its practice in schools. In addition, suggestions will also be made in respect of possible directions for future research in the light of these criticisms.

Housego and Burns are critical about some practices in the use of circle time and suggest that the term ‘circle time’

...seems to embrace a wide range of practice, which is inevitably carried out with different degrees of enthusiasm, sensitivity and expertise.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: 25)

However, surely the same critique could equally be applied to any area of the curriculum. Individual teachers will always have different degrees of enthusiasm for different curriculum areas and some teachers will be more sensitive than others. It is interesting that these writers have failed to state the evidence on which this claim has been made. They have failed to identify a clear methodology on which their

conclusions have been drawn and it is unclear if they carried out any empirical research at all. Indeed, their views seem to be based on general impressions of practice rather than an empirical study based on a specific sample of schools. It is possible that schools could assign one member of staff to deliver circle time sessions across the school. This staff member could be one who is enthusiastic about the potential of circle time for promoting the social and emotional development of pupils. This person would have access to current training in order to develop his/ her expertise in the delivery of circle time sessions. Housego and Burns' critique of the range of expertise of staff simply suggests that there is a need for increased training in the effective delivery of circle time. However, the writers use this as an opportunity to question the value of circle time *per se*.

Lang expresses concerns that teachers may be ill equipped to deal with sensitive issues that children may raise within the circle. He quotes one educational psychologist who stated that:

If, as is quite likely, disclosure of a serious kind takes place in the circle, many teachers will not be equipped to handle it properly.

(Lang, 1998: 9)

Lang bases this concern not on empirical research, but on the 'gut feeling' of one educational psychologist. His concern is therefore unsubstantiated. It could also be argued that teachers will bring to circle time sessions different degrees of expertise in handling issues of a sensitive kind and therefore it is sensible to avoid generalisations in this respect.

Housego and Burns are critical about some of the activities and games that teachers use in circle time.

They argue that:

These games may be popular, but they are often discreet activities where skills are taught and practised, divorced from authentic contexts. How much better...to discuss and practice care and concern for other people when they are in real trouble or difficulty, rather than attempting to teach this through...specially devised games.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: 27)

However, on the basis of observed practice in schools, most teachers in classrooms will address issues of care and concern for others *as and when* they arise, thus promoting positive values amongst pupils.

Instances of bullying, for example, tend to be dealt with immediately with the pupils' concerned. Circle time can then be used to focus on specific issues at a whole-class level. This reinforces the positive messages, which have been transmitted at other times, and gives the issue greater significance. Also the

writers have failed to acknowledge that circle time can be used to address real issues of concern in classes and therefore the activities are not always decontextualised.

Housego and Burns claim that,

Although we have seen some excellent practice in schools, we have also witnessed some work during circle time that has little to commend it. On one occasion we saw a class of ten-year olds, seated in a circle, being asked to talk about their favourite activity. They called out, one after another, single words such as 'swimming', 'eating', and so on, after which the teacher announced that circle time was over. In part, superficial talk of this kind may be due to staff rigidly working around the circle when inviting contributions. This tends to elicit discreet utterances, rather than encouraging pupils to think carefully and build on what has been said before, either by themselves or others. It is through this interplay and negotiation of meanings that learning occurs and if this is lost, children's understanding will not grow as it otherwise might.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: 27)

The writers cite an example of one school to launch their critique of circle time. This is an isolated example of practice from which generalisations cannot be made. However, rather than 'damning' the practices observed in schools, it would be more useful for the authors to suggest ways forward for schools who are interested in developing and improving their practices. Increased opportunities for staff training are an obvious way of improving practice. The sharing of good practice amongst colleagues and amongst schools would also be extremely beneficial. The authors cite this as an example of poor practice. However, in the absence of knowing what the purpose of the activity was, it is impossible to make a claim that this example demonstrates either good or poor practice. It is possible that the pupils' skills in turn taking may have been particularly weak. If this was the case, then the session achieved its aims. Encouraging pupils to build on the comments of their peers by agreeing with them or challenging each other's views is a more challenging skill, which takes longer to develop. Pupils need a certain degree of maturity and confidence to be able to do this. It is possible that this class of ten year olds lacked the maturity and skills in turn taking needed to engage with discussion at higher level. The teacher may have been working towards this as part of a series of well-planned lessons with built-in progression of knowledge and skills. Also, the authors have failed to identify whether this session was the first in a series of sessions, which were planned to promote progression in the pupils' confidence in expressing their views.

According to Housego and Burns:

It may be useful for teachers to transcribe or video some circle time sessions and later share these with pupils, asking them to note who supported or disagreed with previous speakers and who developed embryonic ideas. Unless teachers actually verbalise and demonstrate these speaking and listening skills, some children may not come to realise that this is what more sophisticated language users do.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: 27)

The writers are right to place emphasis on the importance of these skills. However, this is not the only purpose of circle time. Other activities are equally as important and the choice of activity must match the purpose of the session. These skills are also complex higher-order skills and some children may not be at this developmental stage. Therefore, it is important that there is a whole school approach to progression since very young children will not be able to demonstrate competence in challenging the views of their peers. This is clearly a skill that demands maturity and confidence. There are also concerns with the use of video in sessions, since this could actually hamper pupils' contributions.

Housego and Burns (1994) argue that 'some teachers do not sufficiently challenge their pupils or plan for development and progression as the children become older' (p.28). In order to validate their argument, they draw on the work on Matthew Lipman and the development of his *Philosophy for Children* programme (Lipman, 1988). Lipman showed that young children were capable of logical thinking and was concerned that young children should be offered challenging and enriching opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills. Using specially written storybooks Lipman used these as starting points for the discussion of many abstract and complex issues with children. Pupils were asked questions such as '*what do you think causes us to grow older?*' and '*if it rains do there have to be puddles and if there are puddles does that mean it has rained?*' Housego and Burns (1994) argue that Lipman's approach 'could provide part of a worthwhile circle time programme' (p.28), in order to challenge pupil's thinking processes. However, the purpose of circle time is not to discuss abstract concepts such as these. The purpose of circle time is to discuss real issues that affect the pupils. An example of this would be 'bullying'. Lipman's approach, whilst not denying its value, needs to be part of a 'Community of Enquiry' session (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyon, 1980) where the pupils engage in philosophical talk stimulated by access to a shared text. Circle time has a different purpose and this is located in the development of pupil's personal, social and emotional development. It is not a tool for developing philosophical discussions. Fisher (2001) recommends the use of a 'thinking circle' for pupils to engage in deeper moral discussions rather than carrying this out in circle time. These allow for more in-depth group conversations at a more challenging, philosophical level.

Housego and Burns (1994) acknowledge that teachers may adopt a particular egalitarian stance in sessions, thus inhibiting the pupils' own views. However, they are critical of teachers who 'may accept every circle time utterance...as being of equal importance, and even feel inhibited about offering a comment, challenge or question' (p.27). They argue that:

Teachers and pupils are, from a liberal humanist stance and from a Christian perspective, of equal value as human beings. Teachers, however, are more experienced members of the culture. They know more about the world, how it is and how it might be. They have had access to the thinking of many more minds and have a responsibility to help children move on in their thinking. They can and should accept all children's contributions with interest and respect, but need to do more than this, if talk is to deepen children's thinking.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: 27)

This is a valid argument. Teachers do have a responsibility to ensure that all pupils develop *positive* values. It is therefore right that teachers actively challenge inappropriate comments such as those, which are racist, sexist, and homophobic, or other value-laden comments. Therefore, there is a role for teachers to adopt egalitarian standpoints in certain situations. However, their claim that some teachers may not actually do this is not based on empirical research and is therefore unsupported by evidence. These authors would be wise to avoid generalisations of this kind.

Housego and Burns (1994) are critical of circle time sessions where children are rushed or 'when they feel inhibited from contributing to a full class discussion because of temperament, gender, language disability or other reason' (p.27). However, surely circle time offers an opportunity to develop pupils' self-esteem over time so that all pupils will eventually feel able to participate and speak out. However, some children will take longer than others to develop the confidence to do this and children should not be pressurised into making contributions if they are not ready to do so. It is possible that children who lack the confidence to participate in whole-class sessions may benefit from small-group sessions where they may feel able to express themselves.

Barnes (1976) emphasised the value of working pupils in small groups in order to develop their confidence in generating talk. Research by Frederickson, Warren and Turner (2005) have shown that a small-group intervention strategy known as 'Circle of Friends' (CoF) can lead to increased social acceptance of children experiencing difficulties by their peers and increased global self-esteem of the focus child. In this

intervention, a group of volunteers form a support group (CoF) and the focus child joins the group. This group meets on a weekly basis. The meetings are managed carefully to ensure that they are a positive and supportive experience for the focus child. The group set the child targets and support the child in meeting them. Successes are celebrated in the group and new targets are set for the following week. Whitaker *et al* (1998) found that this strategy was successful in increasing the social acceptance of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream classes. The researchers found that there was a reduced tendency to blame *the child* for specific behavioural traits and an increased tendency to attribute the behaviour to the impairment. This led to a greater understanding of autism. This intervention is a variation of circle time, but would appear to be useful for children with persistent difficulties.

Housego and Burns (1994) argue that

Circle time activities are often designed to help pupils recognise their own and their children's special abilities...it is usually unwise to allow children to bask for too long in areas of tried and tested competence. Recognition of pupils' abilities needs to be accompanied by sensitive recognition of areas where growth is needed.

(Housego and Burns, 1994: p.28/29)

The authors are right to point out that pupils need to be aware of their weaknesses as well as their strengths. However, they are incorrect to suggest that circle time is the context in which this should take place. Circle time should be a positive affirming experience for pupils. It is an ideal opportunity to celebrate achievements and successes. Teachers can communicate areas for development outside of the circle. This is best done in response to pupil's work or when observing the pupils during their engagement with classroom tasks.

Lang (1998) argues that:

Most circle-time practice described in other countries is informed by a far clearer philosophical and theoretical position than is the case in the UK.

(Lang, 1998: 9)

However, the work of Mosley (1996) examines the theoretical basis of circle time and Lang would have been wise to consult her text before launching this attack. Mosley examines the relationship between the work of Mead (1934) and circle time. According to Mosley (*ibid*), Mead's work on the development of 'self' is crucial in terms of understanding how individuals construct their self-concept. Mead argued that

the behaviour of an individual is a reaction to other peoples' responses. Therefore, circle time is a powerful tool, since it is based on Mead's construction of 'self' i.e. that in order to change a child's behaviour, other children also need to change their behaviours towards that child (Mosley, 1996). Mosley (*ibid*) also draws on the work of Carl Rogers (1951) and his research on self-concept and Cooley's notion of the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1964). She skilfully applies this theory to the use of circle time in schools.

Lang (1998) also asserts

The American approach to circle time includes some idea of progression; at the moment this is something that is almost totally lacking in the UK. A situation in which circle time was used from Reception to 6th form without a clear idea of progression is likely to be both ineffective and demotivating.

(Lang, 1998: 9)

However, Lang (1998) fails to provide any empirical evidence to support this claim. Many schools are now adopting government schemes of work for personal, social, health and citizenship education and the National Curriculum maps out the progression in knowledge, skills and understanding through the various Key Stages. Therefore, Lang's claim is unfounded.

Lang (1998) argues that the use of circle-time in Italy has been systematically researched empirically in order to evaluate its success. However, Lang is critical that empirical evaluation of circle time is lacking in the UK context. He writes:

Though the outcomes have been researched in all the traditions described, it is the Italian approach which demonstrates the real possibility of systematic evaluation. So far there has been almost no evaluative research into circle time in the UK and its benefits are presented either as acts of faith or as common sense. It is not until such a research base exists that it will be possible to talk at anything beyond an anecdotal level about the precise outcomes of different variations of circle time which currently exist.

(Lang, 1998: 9)

In this respect, Lang makes a fair point. However, it is interesting to note that he has not carried out any empirical research himself, which could rectify this situation.

Conclusion

There appears to be wide agreement on the benefits of circle time. A range of writers have emphasised the role of circle time in developing pupils' social and emotional skills. In particular, they have emphasised the value of circle time in fostering attitudes of mutual respect amongst pupils. It has been argued that through circle time, pupils can learn to share, take turns and cooperate with one another. Some writers have drawn

attention to the role of circle time in developing pupils speaking and listening skills. These skills can help pupils to work together in groups better, thus leading to improvements across the curriculum. There is evidence to suggest that circle time can help pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, although there is a need for further research in this area. Despite these claims, critics have argued that many of these benefits are anecdotal and not supported by empirical evidence. Therefore, there is a need for more systematic research on the effects of circle time; particularly research that takes quantitative measures of gains in self-esteem.

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