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Children's experiences during circle time: a call for research-informed debate

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Abstract

The concept of pupil voice is widely employed in research from across the world when claiming children and young people have a genuine, legitimate right to be heard on matters they consider important, and when considering ways of engaging them as important 'influencers' of policy and decision making. This article is concerned with problematic issues around power and pupil voice during circle-time. It is argued that the space in which children and young people are 'allowed' a voice is prescribed by adults and is frequently located within interventions for improving schools, pupil behaviour and promoting their social and emotional development. Based on a rigorous analysis of the findings from a small case study about children's experiences during circle-time, and using the concepts of social identity and social representation, this article highlights the dangers of inadvertently creating a climate within which children can feel isolated and threatened, and bullying can thrive. Increasingly, it would seem children are being invited and expected to reveal things in circle-time that will need careful and experienced handling from the point of safeguarding the child's well-being, offering the required support, and ensuring the child's protection and confidentiality. It is argued these findings highlight the need for a robust research-informed

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debate about children's lived experiences during circle-time, and the impact of those experiences in terms of children's identities and self-esteem.

Keywords: Circle-time, pupil voice, therapeutic education, behaviour, restorative practice.

Background and rationale for the research

The concept of pupil voice is widely employed in international discourse when claiming children and young people have a genuine, legitimate right to be heard on matters they consider important, and when considering ways of engaging them as important 'influencers' of policy and decision making (Rudduck *et. al*, 1996; Kessler, 2000; DfES, 2004; Riley & Docking, 2004; Guajardo *et al*, 2006; UNICEF, 2008). However, critics argue that the focus on voice is predicated on maintaining a power relationship in which privilege is assigned to the adult's rather than the child's voice (Thomson & Gunter, 2006; Cruddas, 2007). The space in which children and young people are 'allowed' a voice is prescribed by adults and is frequently located within interventions as a means of achieving school improvement, improving pupil behaviour and promoting their social and emotional development (Arnot, M & Reay, 2007; O'Brien & Moules, 2007; Whitty & Wisby, 2007).

Visit a nursery or a primary school on any day of the week and you will most likely observe groups of children from age three upwards forming a circle in which they will be invited to share their most personal experiences with the teacher, possibly a teaching assistant, and with one another. In these sessions, as well as in other areas of the curriculum, children will be engaged in activities that are heavily influenced by the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, and which are designed to ensure their social and emotional well-being (Goldman, 1996; Coppock, 2007; Calvert, 2009).

The literature on circle-time and its use is largely positive. Jenny Mosley (1996) is the most well known and influential advocate of the use of circle-time as a way of addressing

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children's social and emotional needs. She describes circle-time as a carefully structured activity, a strategy that can enhance self-esteem and encourage positive relationships through the sharing of thoughts and feelings. It is also argued that circle-time is an emotionally safe environment within which practitioners can work with children to help them with the Social, Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (Best, 2007; DfES, 2007;Wright, 2009, p 284).

This use of circle-time is not without its critics. The evidence-base to support the claims that are made concerning the effectiveness of circle-time is flimsy, and, according to Lown (2002, p. 95), is characterised by 'assumption, anecdote and circular argument.' Moreover, it is argued that practice is embedded in populist therapeutic orthodoxies that portray children as 'emotionally vulnerable' and in 'need of scripted forms of nurturing and support' (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009, p.45; Craig, 2007, cited in Mowat, 2010, p.166). According to this pessimistic perspective, people are emotionally fragile, 'vulnerable learners', 'disaffected and disengaged', 'hard to reach' and in need of 'therapeutic education.' Questioning this perspective on the human condition, and the rise of therapeutic education, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) claim it is dangerous for both children and adults. Moreover, Revell *et al*. 2004, p.55) claim there is little research on the effects of circle-time, or evidence of any relationship between circle-time and the enhancement of children's self-esteem.

Supporters of therapeutic education reject these criticisms, claiming that they are 'not proven' (Hyland, 2005, cited in Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009, p. 146). However, Ecclestone and Hayes claim there are examples to support their criticisms of the rise of therapeutic education, which, they suggest, should be the subject of further research (p.147).

Design and conduct of the study

With the intention of stimulating new research into circle-time and its use in schools, this article contains an account of a case study during which the views of a focus group of 8 year

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six primary school children were obtained concerning their experiences during circle-time and the meanings they ascribe to them. Following Rutter & Flutter (2004), we were keen to encourage the children to "speak out", and to tap into their unofficial voices regarding circle-time and what it means to them.

A case study approach is advised when the aim is to generate new insights into a contemporary phenomenon or experiences (Yin, 2009, p.20), and to stimulate new research (Searle, 1999). On the other hand, there are expressed concerns over the *researcher effect* in case research, and particularly when, as in this instance, the practitioner gathering the data is well known to the children and enjoys a position of power over them (Denscombe, 2008, p.46). Working as a teaching assistant and supporting their learning, the practitioner is well known by and had also observed the children on many occasions during circle time. Commenting on the criticism that case study findings are potentially affected by the researcher's positionality, subjective attitudes and judgments, Hayes (1997) asserts that it is naïve, and impractical, for researchers to claim they have no impact on what they are studying when working in real organisations. Moreover, it is argued that it is both morally, and scientifically valid, to inform, and involve, subjects in the research (Heron, 1996, Reason, 1994).

An opportunist and purposive approach was used when selecting the sample for this investigation. There are practical factors to be considered when inviting children to take part in research. Consequently, care was taken to ensure the data was gathered by a practitioner who is well known to and trusted by the children. This was considered important because the quality of the investigation was seen to be dependent on the children being willing to freely share their views and opinions. Care was also taken to ensure the selected group included equal numbers of boys and girls, and that they were of mixed ability, social background and personalities.

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Complying with the requirements of the University Ethics Committee, prior to the investigation, permission to interview the children was sought and obtained from their parents and the school, and all were fully informed of the purpose and nature of the investigation. Another concern was to ensure that the children could give their informed consent. When inviting them to take part in the study, the children were informed of the reason for the research and how it would be used. Thompson and Gunter (2006) support this approach, claiming research undertaken with children should be clearly explained to them, including why you are interested in that specific area and how they will be helping you. The children were also reassured that they did not have to take part in the research and that it was safe for them to be completely honest in their responses. Most seemed genuinely pleased to have an opportunity to share their views and opinions. One child, who had initially agreed to take part, later decided not to because he felt uneasy about sharing his experiences and opinions with other children.

The children were interviewed as a group. Rudduck (2003) acknowledges that children find group interviews easier to take part in and that this approach can lead to an engaging discussion. However, she also suggests that care must be taken to ensure no particular child dominates the group. As recommended by Hopkins (2008), the children were asked a small number of questions, the aim being that they would elaborate and choose for themselves the issues that they wanted to discuss in detail. The questions were:

- What sort of things do you do in circle-time?
- What do you like about circle-time?
- What don't you like about circle-time?
- If you could have three choices of what to do in circle-time what would they be?

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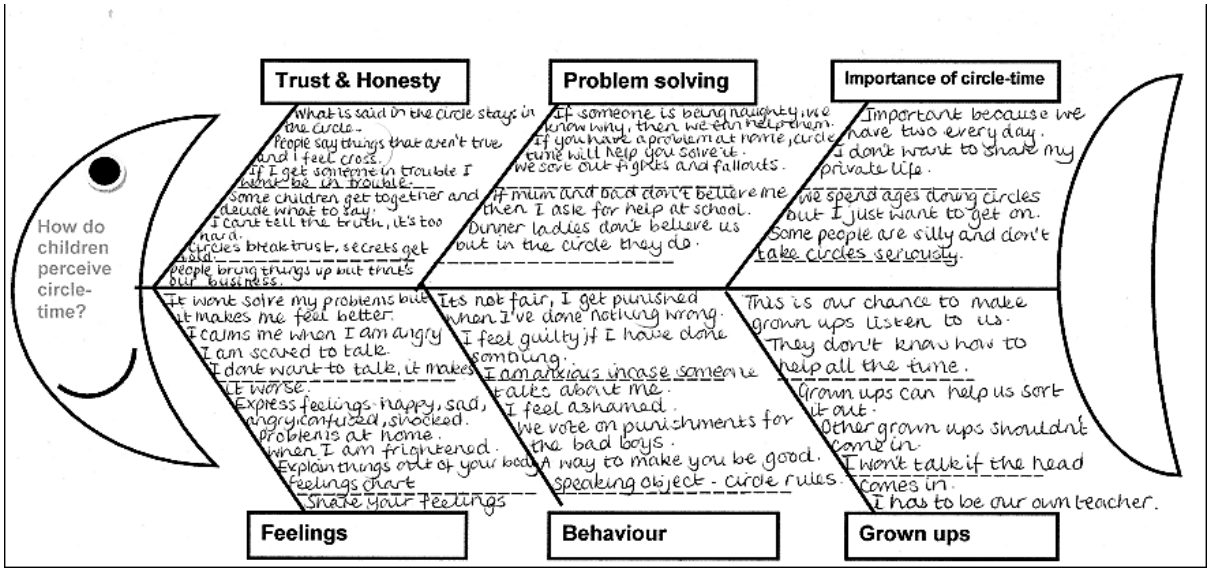
From the beginning, and adopting the recommendations of Turner (2002) and Hopkins, (2008), we wanted the children to feel they were involved in the research, including the process of identifying, analysing and recording the themes as they emerged during the group discussion. The children sat around a table with the interviewer who initially began by adding their responses to the questions on to a large mind map. Then, as the discussion unfolded, a blank fishbone was introduced and the children were shown how it could be used to record and present deeper, underlying higher-order themes and some supporting lower order themes. When working in this way, a potential disadvantage is a possible misunderstanding between what a respondent says and how an interviewer interprets this. Consequently, the children were asked to verify the authenticity of the themes as they were recorded onto the fishbone by the interviewer, and some of the children's quotes were also added to explain the themes.

Figure 1: Fishbone Diagram



Findings

The findings are presented here in two sections. The first section considers the problematic use of circle-time when eliciting children's social and emotional development. The presentation of the findings from the analysis in the second section considers the problematic

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use of circle time when managing children's behaviour, and particularly when it involves ideas of restorative practice.

Circle-time and children's social and emotional development

When listening to the children, it is apparent how, on most days, they are involved in one or more rounds of circle-time activity, causing them on some occasions to resent having to do this, and particularly when they are happily engaged in other activities:

> 'we spend ages doing circles in our class'
> 'Yeah, ages, but I just want to get on.'

Moreover, a rigorous analysis of the children's expressed views suggests circle-time is often devoted to group counselling sessions in which matters relating to their social and emotional development are raised and discussed. The children's comments highlight the problems that can arise when doing this, and particularly when adult positional power is used in the classroom to address adult agendas about children's social and emotional development, including encouraging children to share personal feelings and emotions, about which they can feel uncomfortable and would prefer not to be discussed among peers.

In conversation, the children spoke about a 'feelings wall' in the classroom, on which there are written the statements: 'happy', 'sad', 'angry', 'shocked' and 'confused'. They explained how, when they entered the classroom, they could put their name under the word that described how they were feeling at the time, and then, in circle-time, how some of them would be asked to talk about how they felt and why. Commenting on being part of this experience, one boy claimed 'it calms me when I feel angry'. Others talked about how problems at home would sometimes be mentioned, and one boy explained that sometimes circle-time didn't make his problems go away but it made him feel better when he was frightened about things. On the other hand, and perhaps most revealing of some children's inner-most feelings, one girl explained how, when she was 'too scared to talk', she would put her name under 'happy' rather than 'sad' or 'angry' on the feelings wall so that she wouldn't

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be asked to talk about it. Another child said 'I don't want to share my private life. It's just not what I want to do.' Others stated that 'what's said in the circle should stay in the circle', and voiced their concerns over occasions when 'secrets' mentioned during circle-time are repeated outside the circle and the classroom. Amongst the children there is an implicit expectation that 'what's said in the circle stays in the circle.'

Circle-time, behaviour management and restorative justice

Circle-time is frequently portrayed as an occasion when activities can be used to promote positive behaviour and to improve children's social skills, including cooperative and turn-taking skills (Lang & Mosley, 1993, p. 11-15; Margerison 1996, p. 176-180; Lown, 2002, p. 99). On the other hand, the findings from the analysis highlight the problematic use of circle time when managing children's behaviour and developing their social skills, and particularly when examples of children's poor behaviour become a topic for discussion.

When explaining the use of the speaking object during circle-time, the children related it to ensuring there is 'no shouting out', and 'making their behaviour better', rather than ensuring everyone gets a turn. Moreover, failure to observe the rules is seen to result in them having to leave the circle and 'stand at the back of the room facing the wall.' Apparently, being invited back into the circle is then a group decision and dependent upon whether, or not, the child 'looks very sorry and promises to be good next time.'

Four of the children spoke of occasions when they had done something wrong and it was discussed during circle-time. Explaining their feelings on such occasions they spoke of 'feeling guilty', of 'feeling ashamed when it's me', of feeling anxious in case 'someone talks about me', and it being 'a horrible feeling when someone says your name.' At other times, children explained how they thought circle-time is unfair because they can be punished for things that they have not done. According to the children, the apparent likelihood of this happening is when there is a problem among children during playtime, and particularly when

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it is thought the incident will be discussed during circle-time and someone might 'get into trouble.' The children described how, on such occasions, the temptation to protect oneself can be so strong that 'some children get together first and decide what to say', and, in some instances, pass the blame on to someone else.

A particular concern, highlighted in the analysis, is when practice during circle-time links behaviour management with ideas of restorative practice, and when, for example, it is used to sort out fights and fallouts that happen between children during the day. According to Amstutz and Mullet (2005), there are two sides to restorative practice in schools. One side is associated with ill-discipline and behaviour and how to respond to it. The other side is associated with creating a caring climate to support a healthy community that may in turn reduce unwanted behaviour. These two sides to restorative practice could be described as the proactive and the reactive areas of restorative practice. Amstutz and Mullet claim that both sides can be addressed through the use of circle-time, but McClusky *et al*. (2008) and Wearmouth *et al*. (2007) argue that there is a close link between retribution and restoration, and that restoration is merely another form of punishment.

It would appear circle-time is treated as an opportunity to engage in the re-active side to restorative practice in this case study school, and that it sometimes involves children determining punishments for those who break rules. Recalling an example of when a boy in another class was repeatedly naughty, and when he was brought to their circle time, the children explained how they all said how 'sad and cross we were with him' and discussed what should happen to him, and how this experience caused the boy to 'look frightened' and to cry.

Discussion

This is a small case study involving a focus group of 8 children, which means the typicality of these findings can easily be questioned. On the other hand, because official policy and

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expert guidance normalises the practice of asking children to share their feelings and emotions with one another, and for matters regarding behaviour and its management to be discussed during circle-time, the children's accounts of their experiences seem to us to be highly plausible.

Using the concepts of 'space,' 'boundaries' and 'power,' in the critical literature it is argued that circle time is a socially created, 'cultural space' in which children are allowed a prescribed voice (Thomson & Gunter, 2006; Cruddas, 2007). The rhetoric is often about children having an 'authentic voice,' when, in reality, they are being manipulated into accepting and responding in prescribed ways to adult classifications of types of pupil and behaviour (Sellman, 2009). Practice is most problematic when children are encouraged to share personal feelings and emotions which others can easily use to make them feel uncomfortable, and particularly when unwanted behaviour is being discussed according to the principles of restorative justice. The study highlights the dangers of creating a culture within which children can inadvertently be made to feel uncomfortable, threatened and bullying can thrive when adult power is played out in the way described by the children.

According to Hayes, (1998) the origins of organisational cultures can be found in the social representations which people use to explain their everyday experiences in the world. As described by Moscovici (1984) social representations are forms of shared social knowledge, developed by people when interacting with one another and making sense of their experiences. Social representations are then structured in ways which enable people to explain the way things are in the world, and to account for, and legitimise, social action. It is this sense-making function of social representations which renders them so powerful in everyday situations.

If organisational cultures are social representations, then questions arise concerning the relationship between the individual and the representation, and the way that representation

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becomes known to individuals and affects them. Our sense of identity is located within our social habitats, and materialises in the practices of everyday social life. Social identification, as described by Moscovici (1984), stems from two basic psychological dispositions. The first disposition is to classify things such as 'types' of people and social groups. Described by Moscovici (1984, cited in Hayes, 1998) as a process of 'anchoring' and 'objectification', these processes of classification result in the labelling of 'types' of individual and social groups according to some pre-conceived idea (anchoring), and the use of symbolic artefacts (objectification) when making the social representation more concrete and tangible. An example would be the use of symbolic metaphors (anchors) when portraying children as 'emotionally vulnerable', 'disaffected' and 'hard to reach' learners (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009, p.45; Craig (2007, cited in Mowat, 2010, p.166), and the use of symbolic artefacts, such as a 'speaking object' and a 'feelings wall' (objectification), when presenting the social representation in a concrete and tangible way.

This brings us to a second disposition, a desire to feel positive about ourselves and our social standing. Considering ourselves to be part of a prestigious group adds to our overall sense of identity, how we see ourselves. In this case study, it would appear activities during circle-time caused children to reflect on their relationships with others, and the potential negative consequences when talking about their feelings and emotions, and having their failings discussed in public. Bonding with others in meaningful relationships becomes the basis on which we achieve a sense of identity and belonging. On the other hand, we are likely to be less motivated when associated with a group that provides us with few, or no, opportunities for positive social identification, i.e. being labelled as a 'bad boy', or seen as 'having a problem' and becoming the object of negative attention.

Far from being an emotionally safe environment within which teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) can work with children to help them with the social, emotional aspects of

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learning, circle-time is an occasion when children can all too easily be left feeling isolated, vulnerable, threatened and stigmatised. Nor is it the case that only children feel uncomfortable in these situations. Fox and Butler (2009), Jenkins and Polat (2006) and Harris (2008) comment on how teachers are often unprepared for the emotional demands placed on them when children disclose their feelings and emotions. Increasingly, it would seem children are being invited and expected to reveal and do things in circle-time that will need careful and experienced handling if the child's well-being is to be safeguarded.

Conclusions and recommendations

When planning this investigation, we wanted to know what the children really think about circle-time. Because the sample is small, the typicality of these findings could be questioned. When critiquing the investigation, one can also draw attention to the researcher's position of power over the children when eliciting their views and opinions, and the attendant possibility that the findings could be subject to bias. However, anecdotal evidence gathered during wider conversations with practitioners would appear to suggest the children's observations about their experiences during circle time have wider resonance. In the circumstances described, the children's accounts of their experiences seem to us to be highly plausible. This is a disturbing thought, because the findings illustrate how adult power can easily be played out during circle-time, and how it can be used to make children feel insecure and unhappy. Moreover, one wonders what adults would think if they too were asked to engage in similar types of activity in their workplace.

Many people across the world are concerned about 'pupil voice'. There have been many attempts to 'voice' pupils. This is a case study of one such example. It demonstrates that 'voicing' pupils is not always or necessarily an all empowering procedure, and that well-intentioned activities to 'voice' pupils can have unintended negative consequences. The example given is from a UK context, but there are implications for attempts throughout the

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world for activities intended to facilitate pupil voice. There needs to be a robust, research-informed, debate about children's lived experiences in classrooms, including during those times when schools are specifically trying to give them 'voice', such as during circle time.

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