The International Journal of Emotional Education
ISSN: 2073-7629

Volume 5, Number 1, April 2013 pp 36-55
www.um.edu.mt/edres/ijee

Circle Solutions, a philosophy and pedagogy for learning positive relationships: What promotes and inhibits sustainable outcomes?

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Educators are increasingly aware that the efficacy of social and emotional learning (SEL) is dependent on implementation factors, not just program content. These include the philosophy underpinning an intervention, the beliefs as well as the skills of facilitators, and the classroom/whole school context in which the intervention takes place. This article outlines the philosophy and pedagogy of Circle Solutions and presents findings from research where 18 undergraduate students supported and developed 'Circle Time' in 8 Greater Western Sydney primary schools for a university module on community service. The study indicates that when there is full teacher participation within the principles of the Circle philosophy, together with active school support that promotes relational values, the learning outcomes for positive relationship building are more sustainable.

Key Words: relationships, pedagogy, resilience, Circle Solutions, social and emotional learning

First submission July 26th, 2012; Accepted for publication December 11th, 2012.

The promise of social and emotional learning

Where the overriding focus is on academic curricula, schools may fall short in preparing children and young people to meet the challenges of increasingly complex social environments (eg Cohen, 2006; Elias, 1997; Grumet, 2006; McCarthy and Vickers, 2008). In 1996, UNESCO published their seminal report on *Education for the 21st Century, the Treasure Within*. Delors and his colleagues identified four pillars of education: "*learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together*" (Delors, 1996).

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These last two pillars are the foundation for social and emotional learning - enabling young students to develop into citizens capable of negotiating the complex terrain of life in the 21st century, make good decisions, be resilient, establish and maintain fulfilling relationships and be responsible members of their communities.

There is evidence that, with provisos, social and emotional learning can raise academic attainment, improve mental health, and reduce behavioural concerns in children and young people (Salovey and Sluyter, 2002). Actively promoting the knowledge and skills underpinning positive relationships can reduce bullying (Roland and Galloway, 2002; Cross et al, 2003), improve academic outcomes (Zins et al, 2004), mental health and wellbeing (Wells et al, 2003), pro-social behaviour (Roffey, 2011), resilience and coping skills (Noble et al, 2008). A meta-analysis from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) of 213 school-based, universal, SEL programs involving 270,034 students from kindergarten to high school age found significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance compared to controls (Durlak et al, 2011). They also found, however, that implementation factors impacted on outcomes. This mirrors earlier findings from Durlak and Dupre (2008). This research provides a strong rationale for pre-service teachers to understand what SEL means for their future practice and ways to implement this in their classroom.

A critique of social and emotional learning

Despite the increasing adoption of social and emotional learning programs in the UK, US and Australia, there has been a concern expressed about the dangers of 'therapeutic education'. The most notable detractors in this debate are Eccleston (2007) and Craig (2007). Eccleston's main concern can be summarised as promoting a 'victim' mentality, where individual students are seen as vulnerable with a 'diminished self'. She says that to address this deficit, they are given compulsory 'therapeutic' opportunities, often by unskilled teachers, who may make things worse rather than better. She questions the value of what she sees as wholesale therapeutic intervention. Although these criticisms have some validity, Eccleston goes further in dismissing the critical importance of emotions and relationships within the learning process, thereby putting aside a raft of evidence to the contrary (eg Horsch et al, 2002; Hattie, 2009).

Craig (2007) questions the evidence base of the SEAL program (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and cites Twenge (2006) who shows that since the 1960s young people in America have increased their level of self-esteem, but that narcissism, blame and feelings of powerlessness have also risen. Craig expresses concern that the social and emotional aspects of life for many students are highly complex and that it is not appropriate for their coping skills to be evaluated in the same way as other aspects of the curriculum. Craig fears this may be used to control students rather than enable them to develop insight and make informed choices. There would appear to be an underlying unease with both commentators that an individual focus on social and emotional learning may undermine the importance of community. The author concurs with these

criticisms but consider that it does not make sense to jettison this valid and valuable area of teaching and learning. Her response is to address concerns by developing the implementation factors promoted by the Circle Solutions approach.

The process and context of social and emotional learning

The implementation factors identified by Durlak and his colleagues in effective SEL are summarised in the acronym SAFE - sequenced, active, focused and explicit (Durlak et al, 2011). This, however, refers to curriculum issues and program quality rather than specific features of delivery and context. Other studies look further at what needs to be taken into consideration in developing social and emotional competence (Bird & Sultmann, 2010; Zins & Elias, 2007), including addressing beliefs of teachers about their role. There is increasing evidence that short-term, 'add-on' interventions have short-term outcomes (Elias et al, 2006), and that social and emotional learning needs to be embedded in the life of the school community (Payton et al 2000; Slee et al, 2009). There is also acknowledgement that whole-school and whole-class preventative interventions are more valuable than reactive and individual ones (Stirtzinger et al, 2001). A meta-analysis by Greenberg et al (2003) suggests that initiatives need to be systemic, so that an emotionally literate environment sustains the development and maintenance of essential individual skills and positive relationships. Harnessing the power of the group to support and influence individual social and emotional learning and encourage pro-social behaviour would appear to be a feature of such an effective intervention. Connectedness is increasingly acknowledged as a factor for resilience and wellbeing, and when inclusive belonging is promoted, this can inhibit negative behaviours such as bullying (Osterman, 2000, Wilson, 2004). Breaking down barriers between individuals and finding what they share promotes understanding, empathy and pro-social behaviour.

Circles

The Circle Solutions framework adopted here has been developed to address some of the problems that have been identified by research. It promotes a pedagogy for social and emotional learning built on an evidence-based philosophy for healthy relationships (Roffey, 2012a) and put into practice through a specific set of principles. Although in this study the more traditional term 'Circle Time' (eg Mosley, 1996) is used, the intervention incorporates the features described below.

The theoretical underpinnings of Circle Solutions are based in social constructionism, positive psychology and ecological systems theory. Frederickson (1991 pointed out that 'social skills training' in small groups out of context did not have a sustainable impact, as other children reinforced prior behaviours. Circles aim to develop skills and to change perspectives by changing classroom discourse. This means that the learning is universal, context based, and promotes pupil agency in defining and constructing 'solutions' rather than addressing deficits and problems. This promotes an understanding of how we need to behave towards

each other for the common good. It is not the purpose of this article to explore these theoretical underpinnings in depth but to give an indication of the factors associated with positive and sustainable outcomes.

The Circle philosophy and principles

The principles and their forms of representation can be summarised as:

- *Equality and Democracy*: Everyone, including the facilitator, sits in a Circle and each person is offered a turn to speak and participate. No one person may dominate - including the facilitator. Many activities are structured to enable students to discover what they have in common - their shared humanity. This is essential if social skills are not to be primarily self-serving. Pupils interact with a wide variety of classmates, including those they do not know well.

- *Safety:* No-one has to speak if they choose not to. The third person is used in some activities to reduce opportunities for personal disclosure that may be inappropriate in a group forum. Issues may be discussed, but not incidents. Activities are collaborative, not individually competitive.

- *Respect:* When one person is speaking, everyone else listens. There are no put-downs either in words, expressions or gestures. No naming or blaming also promotes safety.

- *Inclusion and choice*: It is the right of each participant to be included in the Circle. Participants are expected to abide by the principles, but the emphasis is on pupil choice rather than adult control. Should someone be asked to leave the Circle they are invited to re-join as soon as they are willing to abide by the guidelines. Activities usually take place within small cooperative groups and are rarely dependent on a high level of academic skills. Although children with English as a second language and those with special educational needs tend to take longer than others to participate, the framework promotes their eventual inclusion. "*We had this girl (with learning difficulties) and it is obvious she's not tuned in … but she'd contribute to Circle Time and all the kids accepted her" (teacher).*

- *Positivity:* Participants are focused on the identification and development of strengths and solutions - both for themselves and their class. This brings the class together in defining shared goals. An additional aim is to promote positive feelings, including shared laughter.

- *Agency:* Pupils are not told what to think or do but given structured opportunities to discuss and address important issues with others. This makes it more likely they will take group responsibility for abiding by decisions.

The facilitator of the Circle is a full participant in all activities and models expected behaviour. Although in charge of proceedings the facilitator avoids controlling pupils.

The Circle pedagogy

Circle sessions for social and emotional learning are most effective when they are seen as an integral part of class development. Sessions take about 15-20 minutes for younger children and 30-40 minutes for older students. Participants sit in a circle, preferably on chairs. This enables everyone to see and hear each other and helps participants move around easily. At the beginning of each Circle there is a reminder of the following brief guidelines: When it is your turn to speak everyone will listen to you - so you need to listen to others; there are no put-downs; you do not have to say anything - you may "pass". During each Circle session participants are mixed up so they sit with those outside their usual social groupings. This is critical to promoting shared understanding and inclusion.

The Framework

The framework is flexible and activities need to be age appropriate. There are many resources now available for Circle activities. A typical Circle session may be structured to begin with an introductory activity, then a sentence completion or silent statement which enables pupils to understand that many share similar experiences but does not single out individuals. Mixing up happens at least once during a session and this is especially important for pair shares or small group work so everyone works with everyone else. Whole group games are popular, especially those that are energetic or creative. The Circle ends with a calming activity such as a relaxation exercise, reflection or visualisation. This supports a range of emotional regulation strategies.

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator of the Circle is a full participant who sits in the Circle with the students and introduces activities by demonstrating what is expected. They orchestrate the process and provide feedback on the links between the games and the learning that is taking place. They encourage reflection on what is happening and how this applies to everyday situations in school. It is critical that teachers are full participants in Circle sessions in order to embed the learning in everyday classroom interactions.

What do we know about the effectiveness of Circles?

The most significant study, carried out for the National Foundation for Educational Research in the UK (Taylor, 2003), investigated the aims, uses and perceptions of effectiveness of Circle Time via 57 interviews and 14 case study schools. This research found that enjoyable and effective Circles need thoughtful preparation so the teacher can tune into the needs and concerns of students, both individually and as a group.

The skills of the teacher as an 'enabler of communication and interaction' are crucial. The process fails where teachers intervene to control and dominate. Teachers need training, especially experiential training, in which they learn to understand what it means to be a participant. How teachers respond to excessively shy or dominant students gives messages to the whole group and a consistent approach to participation and inclusion is important. Self-esteem can be damaged for some individuals when attention is focused on them. Pairing students to support participation can be helpful. Students need to relate to and build upon each other's contributions so that both individual and group learning is enhanced. "The sense of belonging to and trust in the group are essential to the underlying ethos of the Circle Time experience" (Taylor, 2003, p145). This means that sensitive issues need careful introduction and rules of anonymity, co-operation and non-disclosure beyond the group are constantly reinforced.

In groups larger than 20, circles within the circle are advised so everyone gets an opportunity to participate. Teachers find insight gained during Circles is helpful at other times in the school day. They derive satisfaction from children's enjoyment and find an opportunity for positive shared interactions with colleagues. Taylor (2003) also found that being open with parents about personal and social curricula is helpful.

Although Miller and Moran (2006) say that the Circle Time methodology, focusing on the creation of a climate in which individuals are respected and valued, is more likely to help children to develop a sense of self-worth Circles may not be not always implemented effectively. This happens when teachers do not believe social and emotional learning is part of their role or lack confidence in addressing issues; when Circles are used as a problem-solving tool for specific school based incidents; or when there has been insufficient training on the principles on which Circles are based. The involvement of the whole school also makes a significant difference. The following study expands on this anecdotal evidence

Methodology

The research context for the study

Circle Time was one cohort in the multi-strand Learning through Community Service (LCS), an undergraduate service-learning unit offered at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. The purpose of LCS is to provide students with an opportunity to reflect and apply what they are learning through service in the wider community. Students participate in the activities of their chosen agency, school, or organization for at least 100 hours during one semester. Through assessments and teamwork, service-learning enables students to gain insight into the application of their knowledge in meeting the needs of community groups such as schools. A week's intensive orientation is followed by on-line via web-based discussions, email, and two face-to-face meetings during the semester. Assessment is via three written assignments and a combined final portfolio. This includes a final reflection assessing the experiences students have had. This study is based on

an independent analysis of these portfolios, originally written for the Department of Education and Training, New South Wales (McCarthy, 2009).

Eighteen undergraduate students enrolled in the Circle Time cohort of LCS. They were given training as Circle facilitators and then assigned in teams to work with local primary schools in implementing Circles in selected classrooms. Few of these 18 students had any prior experience working with children or in schools although about half were considering teaching as a profession. Two facilitators were male, 16 were female and several were of non-English-speaking backgrounds. Eight schools, including one private school, agreed to participate. These schools are located in Greater Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, in areas of social disadvantage. Schools varied in size from 200-300 students to 1000 students. Facilitators, as the university students were known, were sent in pairs to seven schools, with one team of 4 going to the largest school. The facilitators' activities and involvement in planning and implementing Circles varied by school and the suggestions of staff. In most schools, facilitators were at the school for at least two, if not three, days a week. They ran Circle sessions at least one day a week totalling between 18-25 Circle sessions each over a three-month period. Some facilitators were given their own classroom to work with one teacher; others worked in pairs and had sessions with three or four different classrooms. Initially they were encouraged to observe classes and do a needs analysis before leading their own sessions. This gave pupils and teachers a chance to become familiar with the presence of the facilitators and also provided facilitators with exposure to the children and classroom activities.

Participating schools had different degrees of experience with Circles. One very large school had all staff trained; another had all junior staff trained. In the other schools at least two teachers had received some prior training. Part of the intent of placing UWS facilitators in these schools was to assist in the further implementation of Circles.

The aims of the study were to explore the lived experiences of the facilitators within the framework of their learning service work in schools. For the purposes of this paper, this included their understanding of the role of social and emotional learning within an educational environment and the factors that contributed to or inhibited the success of the Circle work and its impact on individuals, whole classroom climate and the facilitators themselves.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this research came from a qualitative analysis of the facilitator's portfolios submitted as part of requirements in LCS. No attempt was made to interview teachers or pupils directly as ethics permission did not include this. However, statements and written comments from teachers and young students that were included by the facilitators in their portfolios were included after ensuring they were anonymous.

The methodological approach in analysing the portfolios was constructivist (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), seeking to learn from the Circle facilitators the meanings they attributed to their experiences and their reflections on the nature and value of Circles as a way of implementing social and emotional learning. The

portfolios included examples of the activities they did with pupils, photos, informal written comments from teachers or students about Circles as well as facilitator's written reports. Expectations for the overall structure of the portfolios were given, but how the facilitators chose to illustrate their experiences varied a great deal.

Each facilitator portfolio was read numerous times by each researcher. The purpose was to ascertain main themes that emerged from the written reports of the facilitators. In the initial analysis of each portfolio, the two researchers noted a possible theme on the side of the portfolio page as it emerged. These initial themes then were discussed by the researchers to ascertain the kinds of themes that were emerging, and a consensus was reached on these themes. Portfolios were subsequently analysed in a reiterative process to ascertain similar or related themes.

After further discussions among the researchers, sub-themes or related ideas were combined into main themes in order categorise related sub-themes. Each researcher then used the list of major themes to check the portfolios for consistency and coherence in the applicability of the main themes. In incidents where differences existed about the applicability of a main theme, the researchers discussed the differences, and reached consensus on usage and then the portfolios were rechecked to make sure comparability was achieved.

Findings

A total of seventeen major themes emerged. It is the intention of this paper to report on the following only:

- The school context
- The initial observations about students and classrooms shaping Circle approaches
- The effect of Circles on students and classrooms
- The impact of Circles on the facilitators.

The school context

Among the participating schools there were different degrees of support and commitment for Circle Time implementation. Two schools had adopted a whole-school approach, with most teachers actively integrating Circle sessions into the regular routine of their classrooms: other schools were less committed. This impacted on how Circles were run and in the different experiences and reflections of the facilitators. Regardless of limitations and difficulties the classroom students all appeared to enjoy and benefit from their Circle experiences. This may be attributed to the efforts and enthusiasm of the Circle facilitators.

In the two most supportive schools, distinctive factors contributing to this positive environment were:

- A generally supportive and friendly environment where teachers were enthusiastic and spoke well of students and colleagues.

- School values were prominently displayed on posters in the school corridors and classrooms. They were incorporated into operations such as the school bulletin, making it clear what parents could expect from the school.
- Values such as Respect, Learning and Responsibility were linked, where appropriate, to the themes in Circle sessions so children learned and practiced the values and ethos the school was promoting.
- Circle facilitators were given tasks beyond running sessions that contributed to the whole school sustaining an interest in Circle Time. In both schools, the facilitators were asked to develop resource kits that other teachers could use to run Circles in their classes. In one school, the facilitators were asked to talk with teachers and students about their experiences and views on Circles and to pass information on to the Vice Principal. In the other school, several teachers approached the Circle facilitators for suggestions or help in establishing Circles in their classrooms so the involvement of the facilitators expanded to other classrooms.

While certain elements of the above were present in other schools, the main difference was involving the whole school in the approach to Circles. School executives promoting Circles as a valuable input to the school was particularly important.

Four schools had mixed forms of support for Circles. Certain elements were in place such as executive support, but other things were lacking, so in reading the portfolios, the extent of support for this initiative was unclear. In one school, the two teachers trained in Circles were enthusiastic, but other teachers dismissed it as “an airy-fairy exercise”. In another school, some staff thought Circles were okay for younger children, but that the older children would find it “childish and boring.” In other instances, the executives were supportive of Circles, but in one case, the Principal hadn’t briefed the entire staff nor prepared them for implementing Circles in the school. In another situation, Circle Time was confined to a few classrooms and there appeared to be little commitment beyond the enthusiasm of the trained teachers. Staff were unclear about the purpose, thinking Circle Time was an anti-bullying program or a form of therapeutic game. In these schools it was unclear how Circles would continue once the facilitators left.

In two schools, problems included the classroom teachers involved in Circles as well as other school staff. One school had attempted Circles but it had been discontinued. The two facilitators attributed this to a lack of staff motivation. In another instance, teachers “shouted” at the students during Circles, using the same authoritarian methods of control as during regular classroom sessions. In the other school, one teacher used Circle time to do other work.

In both these schools, the interaction of Circle teachers and school staff with the facilitators was minimal. In one school, the teacher didn’t work with the facilitators to complete a needs analysis of her class, but left the planning up to them. Facilitators in one school were sent emails from the class teacher suggesting

that when the children are restless the facilitators should "point at the person talking so that they can reform". Also the facilitators should use more care in interacting with students especially X who is having "trouble relating to other children." Moreover, they shouldn't let the same children sit by them all the time, as "it isn't healthy for children." In the same email, the teacher asked the students to shorten their Circle sessions because "we have more work to get through this term", and could they please organize their sessions around themes of family and community as these would be addressed in the next term. The teacher also wanted to know how much longer they would be doing Circles.

While all of this appears reasonable, the effect on the facilitators was discouraging. There was no face-to-face communication with the teacher; they felt they were being told how to interact with students according to the teacher's ideas of discipline and not according to the Circle principles and the question about timing made them feel the teacher couldn't wait to get rid of them. This communication together with the teacher's lack of participation had such a negative effect on the facilitator she was no longer sure she wanted to work in education.

Initial observations of students and classrooms shaping Circle approaches

Facilitators spent their initial weeks in schools observing the classrooms where they would be leading the Circle sessions. They were asked to observe the interactions of students and, with the teacher, do a needs analysis in order to plan Circle sessions to address specific issues. A frequently cited problem was bullying, whether subtle or direct, and all schools wanted this addressed. Facilitators chose solution-focused activities that encompassed themes of belonging, or friendship in the younger classes, together with conflict resolution, awareness of others, and emotions in the upper classes. In one school, children identified continual name-calling, teasing and spreading of rumours, all of which caused hostility and unpleasant feelings.

Facilitators noticed that students tended to mix only with their own group and would avoid other students in their class, in games or in classroom activities. Often these groups were gender specific, and in many instances after Year 3, groups tended to be all male or all female with little or no cross-over activity between genders. Across the schools, children in some classrooms appeared aggressive and were unfriendly towards others; they seemed to lack the knowledge and skills needed to establish and maintain good relationships. They often engaged in put-downs of their classmates during lessons, were rude and talked over the teacher, and didn't pay attention. As one facilitator described her students: "Children knew little about their feelings and how to regulate emotions. They acted on impulse rather than logic, and lacked assertive skills. There were deficiencies in communication and little awareness of or relationships with others. Children lacked skills in relating to others."

Children in Kindergarten classes often seemed very shy and, while well behaved, were fidgety and restless. This was their first term, and many of the young students had yet to adjust to the routine and rules of school. The facilitators saw opportunities to encourage teamwork, cooperation, active listening and

consideration of others. In Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms, issues revolved around some disruptive behaviour. While most students tended to be well behaved and responsive, some laughed loudly and boisterously, engaged in put downs, and generally interrupted lessons. Students could leave classmates out of games during break time. In the classrooms, students didn't want to work with students outside their own group, and would make rude comments if assigned to someone else. Year 3 students were quite active, and some groups of boys were disruptive and troublesome. Some classrooms exhibited the behaviours noted above such as being unfriendly to others, standoffish, or unconcerned about the students who didn't fit in. Children with special needs were sometimes treated well by their fellow classmates, but in other situations were just ignored.

In addition to specific classroom needs, school Principals often had ideas of what needed to be done. For example, in one small school, the general interaction of students was often conflict prone and tended to carry over into negative classroom behaviour. The Principal wanted the facilitators to develop Circle sessions that would promote cooperation, connectedness, and positive social relationships among students.

Activities to promote social and emotion literacy: The facilitators were creative in designing sessions that would engage students on identified issues. Since Circles build on strengths and are a positively oriented pedagogy, activities featured upbeat, often serious, but never negative tasks for students. For example, to counteract bullying, some teams planned activities featuring cooperation and belonging, while others used a friendship tree to promote positive peer relationships.

The facilitators were aware of the need to adapt activities for the age level of their students. In Kindergarten classes, where children had a shorter attention span and were unfamiliar with school routines, activities had to be simple and quick so the children didn't become bored and restless. The different 'talking sticks' passed to each child as they had their turn in the Circle were helpful. For older students successful activities included mix-ups - where students had to find another student with the same colour pencil, pair share - discussing a topic or do tasks together-, statement completions, silent statements, and role plays. Sessions on friendship were helpful to counter bullying, and activities such as acrostic poems of the word 'friend' or social bingo, where people find out about each other and what they have in common. In other schools, listening and communication skills needed attention and the facilitators found group games with a discussion worked best. Activities included Chinese whispers, charades, social bingo and 'guess the leader.'

The effect of Circles on students and classrooms

With few exceptions, all facilitators had positive experiences with Circles. Factors influencing their degree of satisfaction were the involvement and support of the teacher; teamwork and support from other facilitators, their own confidence and ability to model wanted behaviour and their patience and insistence that the Circle guidelines be followed. A major factor contributing to the success of Circles was the regular and patient implementation of the Circle guidelines. While each session begins with an overview of these, repetition during the session, especially that "everyone has a turn and everyone listens while others have their

turn", when students were noisy or not paying attention was effective. Repeating the guidelines, rhythmic clapping or simply waiting until students were ready, encouraged patience among the facilitators and an appreciation of strategies that were not based on negative responses such as calling students by name; shaming or disciplining misbehaviour, or excluding students. The Circle principles create an atmosphere where pupils feel safe and comfortable. As one young student said, "I like Circle Time because you can say what you want to say." One facilitator commented: "In classrooms where the effort was made to link Circle Time elements to school values, the students saw the connection between what they learned in Circle Time and its relevance to the larger school community."

Change noticed by facilitators among all their students was their increasing participation in Circles as the sessions progressed. This mirrors earlier research (Lown, 2002). In the beginning, students were shy to speak and the right to 'pass' was widely chosen. As students became more comfortable with Circles they responded with longer sentences during various activities; they added their own rules to the Circle guidelines; and in some cases, interrupted the sessions if they thought others were not following the guidelines. Student behaviour towards others improved as well: they were more willing to work together; there was more mixing across friendship and gender groups, and more attention and concern paid to other students. For example, rather than use put-downs or rude noises in response to a student's comments, students began to listen more carefully and give positive feedback such as "that's a good idea". While this first occurred mainly within the context of Circles, over the course of the three months in which sessions were held, these kinds of behaviours increasingly generalised into the classroom environment.

Two facilitators were pleased when their classroom teacher told them that for the first time in her teaching career her students were silently sitting and waiting for her to take up the regular classes after the Circle. Other teachers let the facilitators know that they could see progress amongst their students, as they were more willing to ask questions if they didn't understand directions, they listened better and were supportive of each other, and their general courtesy improved. Some teachers noted children being more able to speak out, communicate more clearly, and feel more confident in participating in classroom activities. Teachers also noted that the class atmosphere had changed to a much warmer and caring environment.

Teachers also reported that a particular pupil's schoolwork had improved because of Circles. Another student was extremely shy and hesitant to speak at all. Over the course of the semester (10 weeks) these students both improved their participation in Circles and also began to participate in classroom lessons. In some classrooms it was noted that students who spoke the most in the beginning of Circles modulated their participation over time and became quieter and more observant. Other changes noticed by classroom teachers, the facilitators and even other staff in the schools was that teasing and name-calling between children on the playground significantly reduced. Two children who used to call each other names told their facilitators that: "Circle Time taught us that calling each other nasty names isn't a nice thing. It hurts people's feelings. So we decided to stop and be good friends. It's a nice feeling to be caring and kind."

School students' comments were overwhelmingly positive. For example:

- *Circle Time is about learning and cooperating*
- *Everyone is smiling, happy, caring, free, reliable and nice*
- *Circle Time is about good education. It teaches us how to behave and respect each other and to have good friends*
- *Circle Time is good communication. It teaches us teamwork*
- *I like knowing about other people more*
- *I like and enjoy Circle Time because the 3 Golden rules we have to use all the time helps the school to be respectful and helps us to not put people down only just to put people up. Also we can make friends and know each other better*
- *I love Circle Time because I learn more and I trust more*

In the two schools where least support was given, one facilitator thought that: "nothing was put in place that helped address social and emotional learning prior to us entering the school." Teachers in the classes to which these two students were assigned thought Circle Time was simply an 'anti-bullying program.' One factor in determining the outcome for this school was that the facilitators only worked with one class each, Year 3 and Year 4, and sessions were held only once a week. The teachers in both classes were thought to be generally 'uninterested' and did not participate in the Circle sessions. They made little effort to 'encourage the principals of Circles in other areas of the classroom.'

These two facilitators did not see much change in their classrooms, and only minimal changes in their students. While some changes were noticed during Circle sessions such as in belonging, friendship, cooperation and connection, these behaviours only lasted a few days and then the pupils reverted back to their old behaviour. Both facilitators thought the lack of interest on the part of the teachers, and the fact they didn't seem to value what the facilitators or Circles had to offer, contributed to the lack of progress among the students. The facilitators thought that with more consistent effort and continuing Circle sessions, the students would make more progress. All pupils, however, enjoyed Circles and were always very excited when it was time for a session. While they were enthusiastic and cooperated during the Circle, the children didn't seem to make connections between what was done in Circles and how it related to them or their classmates.

In the second unsupportive school, the experience of the facilitators was much the same. The facilitators worked in two classes, a Kindergarten class and a Year 5 class. Neither teacher participated in any of the Circle sessions in their classrooms. One teacher watched and monitored the sessions, but would rarely participate herself. Again, the students themselves seemed to enjoy and benefit from the Circle sessions. As one facilitator wrote: "It was remarkable (word changed) to see the children that I had been working with since March working together as a team and creating friendships and bonds … No longer were they being disruptive and not talking to one another …" The other facilitator noted that one teacher said she had noticed

how much her class enjoys the Circle sessions, and she could see that students who required some extra attention and confidence were benefiting. She also said that the two facilitators had built up a strong trust with the pupils, who were "getting a lot out of the respect the facilitators were showing them." In spite of these comments, however, this teacher remained aloof from participating and made little effort to integrate the learning from Circles into her general classroom. The other teacher at this school said that she noticed how much her students enjoyed Circles but had little else to offer by way of suggestions or input to the facilitator's efforts. "She is usually unenthused about the session and tends to carry on with her own work while we run it." Communication with other staff in both schools was also difficult, and the facilitators often felt generally unsupported.

The school context in both schools influenced the implementation and success of Circle Time. In one school in particular, it was common practice for teachers to yell at Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2 students during assemblies; and at least one teacher in the upper classes felt her students were 'being bullied by other teachers in the playground.' One Circle Time teacher organized to have a Circle suggestion box for her Year 5 students. This was helpful to the facilitators as it provided feedback about how the students liked Circles as it made students feel 'good and important." Additionally, their comments indicated that many students were bullied, or were bullies themselves, and that still other students lacked the social skills for communicating with teachers or other students. These comments became a strong motivator for these facilitators to make their Circle sessions as successful as possible.

The impact of Circles on the facilitators

As reflection is a critically important aspect of service-learning, it was instructive to see how experiences with Circles carried over into the facilitator's awareness of what they had learned.

The role of teachers and facilitators: Facilitators had universal agreement on the importance of teachers and facilitators in making Circles a success. Where teachers were positive and enthusiastic, the results in the classroom were readily apparent. The general feeling was best expressed by one facilitator who wrote: "For Circle Time to be effective, facilitators must have positive and professional regard in all aspects of their classroom engagement. I need to be able to evaluate my own emotional literacy and the inter- and intra-personal skills needed such as empathy, listening, attention, and praise when implementing Circle Time within the classroom."

Other facilitators thought the experience gave them insight into what working in a school environment is like, and the opportunity to "practice professionalism and positive qualities". Another facilitator cited the need for consistency when implementing Circles in classrooms, and thought it should be generalised to the usual teaching setting. Still other facilitators mentioned the skills they thought they developed during the process of being in the classrooms: forbearance, optimism, patience, flexibility, reliability and uprightness. For a number of them, the experience of not knowing about Circle Time in the

beginning, but learning about it, applying it successfully in different classrooms, and seeing the outcomes with students was a 'huge reward'; often unanticipated and therefore doubly meaningful. All of the facilitators appreciated the teamwork involved and even if they were assigned individual classrooms, they valued the presence of their co-facilitator at the school to help out. Working together in finding resources, planning and implementing sessions, provided facilitators with opportunities to work on intra-personal skills. Whatever difficulties may have arisen, these never led to negative comments about teammates.

Personal and professional skills learned: Being involved with Circles provided facilitators with insight into themselves, their abilities, and interests. Many wanted to become teachers, and this experience provided them with useful insight into the skills and abilities they would need. People thought they had become more confident, more knowledgeable about children and how to handle them, more comfortable with being firm as opposed to negative. Other facilitators became aware of the shortcomings of authoritarian methods of command and punishment, and thought guidance and control worked well with their students during Circles. Many of them saw the effects of teachers naming and blaming children and the negative effect it had on the students and the Circle. At least one team of facilitators had an experience with a teacher in which the power relations made them feel that "our issues weren't addressed and pushed aside".

Almost all of the participants mentioned their personal learning while being involved in teaching social and emotional skills to others. One mentioned that Circle Time had: "changed my attitude to teaching and to life," and another: "I've become more positive toward others, and will try to incorporate emotional literacy in my teaching." Another facilitator noted being: "more honest and open in conversations with family, friends, and work colleagues." Two or three of the facilitators ran impromptu Circle sessions with their family and friends, as they realized that almost everybody could benefit from increased emotional literacy. For one facilitator, Circles helped her: *"work on acceptance, patience, and becoming a better listener."* Circles had improved the relationships in which numerous facilitators were involved, and it was commonly stated that they had personally improved their own emotional literacy.

Insight into the nature of children and their needs: Regardless of whether or not facilitators planned on becoming teachers, all felt they had learned substantively about the nature of children and their needs. Some became conscious of the vulnerability of children and how often this appeared to be overlooked. For others, the realization that how children feel about themselves impacts how they learn was revealing. Several became aware of how critically important schools are in promoting social and emotional literacy as an offset to difficult or insecure family settings and weakened community structures. In one portfolio, a facilitator wrote: "Children have given me the insight not to take things for granted, not to expect children to just deal with issues, because they don't know how." There was a general feeling that Circles had a powerful and positive effect on children, and "can teach them the skills and knowledge they need to have a happy life." Another facilitator wrote that: "children who feel a sense of belonging and acceptance are much happier children who develop into happy controlled adults."

Many facilitators mentioned the value of Circles as a useful, enjoyable and effective pedagogy. They were aware of the difference Circles made to children over time, and for many facilitators their initial doubts about the effectiveness of Circle Time rapidly disappeared. Circle Time was credited with changing attitudes about being a teacher, and with "being persistent and believing in what I'm doing." Numerous facilitators wrote of becoming more confident in interacting with children, in being in classrooms, of developing personal skills in organization, planning and implementing activities. "I understand the value of social and emotional development of children and the effects this has on their wellbeing," a facilitator wrote, as she observed the positive changes in her classroom. Another person noted that: "We must model and foster good communication, acceptance, belonging and healthy relationships in order to carefully guide the emotional wellbeing of our students."

For other facilitators, a challenge was that of "not underestimating children's abilities," while at the same time planning activities appropriate for their age level. In a few cases, facilitators assigned classes of mixed-ability students below grade-level found it particularly difficult to plan activities for them. In other situations, challenges were to get children to listen, pay attention and bring order to a room without shouting or calling children by name, and to "become more sensitive to situations and how to prevent disruption from becoming a crisis."

Conclusion

The Hunter Institute for Mental Health distribute a publication entitled Education Connect which promotes understanding of social and emotional learning for pre-service teachers and their educators (www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=134504). This study supports their rationale. All facilitators who planned to teach saw social and emotional literacy as important in their future classrooms. They came away from their experiences deeply impressed with the effectiveness of Circles in helping students be aware of their own emotions and those of others; to feel comfortable and safe in environments that are supportive and caring, and the importance of caring and enthusiastic teachers to make this happen. Given that none of these facilitators had any experience in classrooms before this LCS module, it is clear that they gained important insights into the nature of teaching and the relevance of emotional literacy to academic learning.

This study supports and extends earlier research findings on factors affecting the implementation of social and emotional learning and adds to this by highlighting the impact on pre-service teachers, their understanding of the need for SEL in classrooms and how they might use the Circle pedagogy to promote this. Implementation factors appeared to include the beliefs of teachers about their role and their view of the relevance of relationship development in the classroom. This was often embedded in whole school culture. The study is limited in that it reports indirectly the impact on pupils and does not provide any measurement of changes. A more extensive evaluation of Circle Solutions would be valuable in adding to the literature on individual differences, whole school intervention and sustainability of impact.

SEL programs that are most effective focus on the acquisition of positive attitudes, values and behaviour as well as emphasise the development of skills (Catalano et al, 2002). Successful interventions ensure that students know what these skills are and provide opportunities for regular practice, especially in real life situations. This means that the teacher who is with the children every day negotiating these situations must be an integral part of the whole process, not only for generalising values and skills but also for developing their own understanding of what the children are learning.

The culture of the whole school determines the conversations that underpin whether social and emotional dynamics, wellbeing and learning are taken seriously and whether value is given to active intervention. The 'soft' systems of the classroom, especially the quality of relationships, may need to be repositioned as core business, not only for the quality of the learning environment but for the future resilience and relationships of all who participate in such learning. Schools focused on preparing students as socially and emotionally adept learners must undertake to transform their educational environments in ways that embed these forms of learning into the fabric of their educational endeavours. This requires that schools be perceived by both students and teachers as places of safety, where they are valued and respected, and where they can express who they are (Roffey, 2010; 2012b).

Murray (2004) looks at what is needed to make schools resilient and promote wellbeing in Australia. Amongst other things she talks about respectful relationships, valuing each other, identifying and celebrating success, building on strengths and attending to the important elements of change without adding to teacher workload. She says we need to build resilience into what is happening every day in our schools, not just in specified program times. The effectiveness of Circles depends on the context in which they are embedded but the process itself can itself become a significant contributor to the development of an emotionally literate and resilient environment.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the NSW Department of Education and Training for sponsoring this research and the UWS students who participated with such enthusiasm.

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