

Section One

The case for Circle Time

Ever since personal and social education became recognised as an important part of a school's educational purpose, researchers, trainers and practitioners have agreed that active, participatory groupwork is a key element in engaging young people in their own personal and social development. More recently, in 1999, Citizenship was added to the National Curriculum as a foundation subject. At the heart of the Citizenship programme of study lies skills for developing inquiry, communication, participation and responsible action. Here, as in PSHE, is a focus on dynamic groupwork, which requires students to meet face to face so that they have to interact directly with one another.

In conventional classrooms, students put up their hands to show that they have an answer to a question, or a view on an issue and the teacher chooses who will speak. Quieter or less confident students rarely volunteer their view in these lessons and unwanted views can be 'screened out' by a teacher according to which students they choose and do not choose.

"I never get to say my view because the teacher knows that I don't agree with her." (Girl aged 15)

When groupwork is used, however, tasks are presented so that students work in pairs, small groups or as a whole-class group. In these lessons, the ability to work with other people is as much a learning outcome as completing the activity itself. Students are expected to use skills such as co-operation, listening, communication and accommodation so that they can work together to complete the activities. However, any one of us who has done much groupwork will know that this is not always straightforward. It is likely that we

can all recall times when groupwork has been successful and other times when it has been a dismal failure. Sometimes the more able or vocal students 'take over'. They may organise the others, produce the ideas and distribute the resources. The quieter or more reflective students are often not heard and many a good idea is consequently lost. Unless students are taught how to work in a group, they do not develop the relevant skills. At best they work independently, only bringing the work together to present it at the end. At worst they become overtly angry or make it impossible for the rest of the group to complete the task. Time needs to be given to learning the skills of groupwork. Sadly, the development of an effective group does not happen just because the people are put together (as any of us who have been on committees know only too well!).

Group processes certainly begin when a mix of people are put in a room together, but being able to work co-operatively with other people requires the acquisition of a set of skills and a journey in self-awareness. Only as a teacher intervenes to promote group development does the collection of individual students begin to form the effective functioning unit that is called a group. Group development follows a set of stages and at each stage, students must learn to cope with new problems and develop new skills and attitudes. As the group develops, so the group members:

- ▶ find more productive ways of working together
- ▶ develop trust in one another
- ▶ become open to new experience
- ▶ improve their communication
- ▶ feel freer to participate actively in classroom activities and learning.

In order to promote effective group functioning, some secondary schools are building on the work started by their partner primary schools, and are using Circle Time as the main approach to teaching and learning in PSHE and Citizenship lessons.

The power of a circle

Circle Time is a group process that involves the whole class sitting on chairs in a circle so that every member of the group can see and

be seen by every other group member. It has the advantage that no member of the group can hide; each one has to take his place as part of the group in order for the class to become a productive and fully functioning unit that can consider issues, solve problems, reach conclusions and plan for action. The geometric configuration of the circle makes it possible for each member of the group to interact with any other. The teacher ceases to be the only focal point of discussion and students look at one another, responding directly to contributions and suggestions made by their peers. As the class group members become more skilled at speaking, listening, waiting for their turn, considering the impact of their words and finding more helpful ways of voicing their opinion, so the quality of the dialogue improves and the teacher takes a less prominent role. It is possible to eventually arrive at a place where a class member leads the circle and the teacher becomes part of the group.

Circles have been used when schools want to improve the quality of interaction and engagement in PSHE and Citizenship lessons. This has often been because students find it harder to acquire factual information about curriculum topics, without being challenged or having to consider how the issues under discussion impact on personal choices and decision making. Circle Time also provides continuity for students as they move from primary to secondary school. Many primary schools use Circle Time and the students have regular opportunities to discuss issues in the circle for at least some part of their primary schooling. For some children Circle Time has been a weekly feature of school life throughout primary school. Indeed, Circle Time is recommended by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme as an ideal vehicle for active student participation and school improvement. When these students come to secondary school, they look for the same opportunities to speak, to be heard, to discuss and to problem solve.

The benefits of Circle Time

The experience of secondary schools that have adopted Circle Time for PSHE and Citizenship lessons is that it is surprisingly successful. Teachers who were unsure about adopting a new approach with more

challenging classes have been pleasantly surprised at the positive response of the students and the beneficial impact of working in a circle.

“I think Circle Time is excellent as a way of delivering PSE. I would not like to teach PSE [now] in any other way – the discussions seem more involved and it is more difficult for dominant members of the tutor group to ‘hijack’ a discussion. I find it easier to create new groups and split up cliques”.
(PSHE teacher)

“Prior to Circle Time training, I would have described myself as a teacher who was ‘uncomfortable’ with open forum discussions and role play. The Circle Time way of delivering PSE has altered my views and as a former sceptic I am now very positive about this teaching method.” (History teacher)

As we have listened to the students in response to Circle Time lessons, we have discovered that it can help the individual student grow and develop in self-awareness and awareness of other people. Students develop more positive behaviour because they are provided with a place to recognise that their emotions and reactions are affected by others and that other people’s emotions and reactions affect them. Students improve the quality of their speaking and listening. The confidence of quieter members of the group increases and better relationships are established student to student and between teacher and students. *‘In a circle you can say what you actually feel’* (Student aged 13). The circle becomes a place of acceptance and support in secondary school life and over time, a supportive group develops from a disparate class of students. *‘It’s like getting closer when we are sat in a circle’* (Student aged 12).

Once the group is supportive, this becomes a place to examine attitudes, values and issues relating to personal, social and health education. *‘At the beginning we didn’t say what we actually thought but now we do’* (Student aged 13). Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their views, opinions, responses and actions. *‘It doesn’t matter what your opinion is. It is your opinion’* (Student aged 13). In other words the circle contributes to a more internal locus of control. These lessons make a significant contribution to developing and sustaining a high level of self-esteem in students.

Reasons for introducing Circle Time

Whenever we go into other schools to talk about using Circle Time for PSHE and Citizenship, we get asked to identify what it is that motivates a secondary school to take on this approach to teaching and learning. This is not an easy task as every school is unique. We have, however, tried to pull together information from schools that have successfully implemented circles as an established way of working. We are not saying that each factor is equally important or that all have to be present if Circle Time is to succeed. Rather they are pointers to the sort of issues and conditions that might act as levers for change. The first impetus for introducing Circle Time quite often comes from senior management. They may recognise an imbalance between the academic and pastoral life of the school with a weighting on the side of achievement and standards. The imbalance might well have resulted in a cut in PSHE teaching time. Reduced time makes it even more imperative to ensure that teaching and learning are as effective as possible in this area of the curriculum. Senior management may also recognise that school structures make it difficult for tutors to maintain a consistent relationship with their groups. Split-site schools present particular challenges when tutors are not always available to register their own groups. Sometimes, the pressure for change comes from the students themselves, when a survey or questionnaire reveals inequality of experience in PSHE. Some teachers or tutors are outstanding and some quietly choose to avoid the curriculum, so some students do not receive a positive experience in their PSHE entitlement. Similarly, students in their first year of secondary school can arrive with experience of circles in primary school and an expectation that they will have similar opportunities to talk and share their views.

The pressure for change might also come from teaching staff with a request for training in groupwork skills and different classroom management techniques. Someone might have been on an external course and come back to the school enthused with a need to change. The introduction of Circle Time needs a core number of people who

have a vision to introduce and implement this kind of groupwork. It can start with a single enthusiast such as a Head of Year who is able to persuade a tutor team to 'give it a go'. Or the pressure from teaching staff may arise from an increase in more challenging student behaviour which causes teachers to look for tools and techniques to support holding classroom dialogue and discussion of any quality.

On the other hand, the pressure for change might come from outside the school, from government initiatives that require schools to develop in this area. Recent initiatives have placed particular emphasis on student participation and hearing student voices (Every Child Matters and the new Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection framework). Another relevant initiative is the recent work on social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) in primary schools, which is being extended and developed for secondary schools. External pressure can also take the form of financial support for training which can come in various forms such as the 'inclusion budget' or PSHE accreditation.

Blocks and constraints to change

The introduction of any new initiative in schools inevitably has to overcome a number of obstacles, particularly in an era of initiative overload and teacher exhaustion. One of the most significant blocks to investing time and money in introducing Circle Time has been the perception that it is a luxury compared to other pressing needs in the school. Schools have had to address some or all of the blocks and constraints listed below in order to get the support and resources needed to introduce Circle Time as a way of working in PSHE and Citizenship.

We have listed the blocks and constraints so that you can decide which, if any, apply in your situation. You will then be better placed to work out a plan for collecting the evidence, or to put together a proposal that will give you the best chance of obtaining the resources you will need. The major constraints we have found are:

- ▶ There is always a range of different subject areas, faculties and school initiatives looking for developmental time and money.
- ▶ There may be specialist school targets to be met such as Technology College, Expressive and Performing Arts, Sports, Languages, and Circle Time is not seen to readily fit in.

- ▶ There may be serious questions about whether we should be investing training in behaviour management when the standards agenda is more pressing.
- ▶ This area of the curriculum often has a dearth of hard data to support the idea of Circle Time. The Circle Time initiative runs the risk of appearing somewhat like an 'act of faith'. You could be asked to provide a risk assessment on its implementation.

Needless to say it is unlikely that everyone will be in favour, no matter what kind of initiative you want to introduce. If Circle Time is to succeed in your school, it needs to have a cogent argument in its favour, preferably supported by some hard evidence (Taylor, 2003). It is best presented from faculty level with recognition and support from someone at senior leadership level.

Current levers for change in education

- ▶ PSHE and Citizenship curricula (National Curriculum Framework 2000)
- ▶ Every Child Matters (Children Act 2004)
- ▶ Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development in the new Ofsted inspection framework
- ▶ Hearing pupil voices
- ▶ SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning)
- ▶ Healthy Schools (particularly emotional health and wellbeing)
- ▶ Anti-bullying policy and practice
- ▶ Investors In People accreditation
- ▶ Chartermark.

Case study of Circle Time - Hayesfield school, Bath

Hayesfield comprehensive school in Bath introduced Circle Time as part of a whole-school approach to PSHE and Citizenship. The pressure of increasing demands for higher academic grades had squeezed the time for PSHE in the school. At the same time, Citizenship was introduced as a new foundation subject in the National Curriculum. The result was a conflict of interests that created a real sense of urgency among staff to find ways of making

the allotted curriculum time count. They wanted to stimulate meaningful debate about issues and engage the students in examining their values and attitudes. It seemed important to involve them in decision making that might impact on their lives inside and outside school, rather than merely covering the curriculum content and presenting factual information. Challenging and changing values and attitudes are difficult tasks for any of us. If the school was to help the students to look at their thinking, feelings and behaviour in a meaningful way, teaching and learning methods that both permitted and promoted open and honest discussion were of paramount importance. In the quest for more appropriate ways of delivering the PSHE curriculum, the school began to explore the role of groups, group dynamics and classroom interactions, both student-student and teacher-student, that might support the personal and social development of its students.

As the debate about effective PSHE took place at Hayesfield, a similar debate was taking place at the national level. Between 1996 and 2005, a large number of publications was produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the DfES and Ofsted to support schools in their implementation of aspects of values development in schools, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, personal, social and health education and Citizenship. A recurrent theme in all these documents, including the National Curriculum schemes of work for Citizenship was a focus on teaching approaches. In particular, they advocated experiential learning and active participation in groups. "Teaching should ensure that knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens are acquired and applied when developing skills of enquiry and communication and participation and responsible action" (QCA, 1999, p. 184). Senior leadership teams in schools constantly face the dilemma of how to keep the staff sane while facing and implementing multiple new initiatives. They have to deliver statutory requirements, but they need to bear in mind 'What matters?', 'What is important for our school?', 'What will make a difference?'

Alongside all other senior management teams, those at Hayesfield considered the way forward for their school in relation to these new initiatives. One of the important factors for them was engaging the values and opinions of young people. The effective use of groupwork

emerged as a key to the kind of lessons they wanted to see. Teachers who are familiar with the principles that underpin the forming and functioning of a group are able to confidently plan and facilitate such lessons. Teaching in PSHE and Citizenship called for the skills of reflection, enquiry, communication and active participation. Lessons that develop these skills require teachers who are:

- ▶ able to give attention to the way the group is working as well as noticing how individual students are managing the learning tasks
- ▶ adept at enabling a group to function effectively and know when to intervene and when to leave the group to sort itself out without adult involvement
- ▶ familiar with the processes and principles of group dynamics and have practised the skills of groupwork
- ▶ willing to make the emotional and intellectual investments needed to understand group processes because they have discovered that when a group of individuals can function as a unit, learning increases, behavioural problems decrease and personal and social development takes place for all members of the group.

Introducing a new way of working is never that easy, however. The decision was taken to introduce Circle Time at Key Stage 3. Once it was established in the first three years, for students aged 11–14, a review was planned to look at how to extend its use into the fourth and fifth years and then into the sixth form. In order to get even the first phase of the plan underway the school had to overcome a number of obstacles: convincing enough people on the Senior Management Team (SMT); finding the money; and finding the right time to undertake the training. Once the initial phase of implementation was over, the next obstacles were how to maintain the training and funding over a period of several years so that Circle Time could become properly embedded. A further practical issue was how to find enough rooms where the furniture could be rearranged into a circle to accommodate a class of 30. Once this was addressed, there were the issues of how to overcome complaints from some staff in adjoining classes about the noise of furniture being moved and games being played and how to accommodate the staff who actively found ways to be timetabled away from the Lower School site so that they could avoid taking part in Circle Time in their role as a tutor!

If you have been teaching for a length of time, you will appreciate that trends in education tend to be circular. The debate as to who would be best placed to deliver PSHE and active Citizenship is one such circular debate. The content a student needs in PSHE is constantly changing, as are the staff who teach it. Consequently, schools need to regularly monitor and review its impact and success. Circle Time was introduced into PSHE in the first year, taught by form tutors. An evaluation at the end of the year made it clear that, while Circle Time was mostly successful when facilitated by tutors, a move to specialist PSHE teams would be even better.

In a staff survey it was apparent that many tutors did not have the confidence or interest to deliver the PSHE or Citizenship curriculum well. As a result, some creative thinking took place and gave birth to a new faculty that encompassed Citizenship, PSHE and physical education (PE), with a brief to extend extra-curricular activities and to raise the profile of healthy living for all students and even staff. The new faculty was called SHE (Self, Health and Exercise) and it enabled students to have a holistic experience of healthy living, from theory to practice; an important message for life. The new faculty became the specialist team which used Circle Time work to deliver this part of the curriculum.

When the new faculty was launched it aimed to:

- ▶ Teach PSHE and Citizenship every week.
- ▶ Teach PSHE using staff who wanted to teach it. This resulted in all Heads of Year, Assistant Heads of Year, the PE Department and enthusiasts who wanted to be part of the team becoming members of the new SHE faculty. The majority of them had already had circle training as part of the ongoing programme.
- ▶ Rewrite the whole of the PSHE and Citizenship curriculum, a task shared among the team, and to deliver as much of the curriculum as possible through circles from the first to the fifth years (ages 11–16).

The way ahead for Hayesfield

Often in schools good ideas come and go. How often have you experienced inspirational training for it to be lost within weeks?

Challenges lay ahead to keep the philosophy of circles at the heart of the curriculum designed to promote students' personal and social development. An evaluation at the end of the first year of implementation showed that a team of 15 staff had been trained in the use of circles. All had prepared and shared PSHE and Citizenship lessons based on a Circle Time format. They had delivered the curriculum from the first to the fifth years, with some staff teaching in every year group. Their commitment and professionalism was, and still is, phenomenal. Yet to embed Circle Time in the ethos of PSHE at Hayesfield school, we would have to:

- ▶ maintain the quality of delivery and enthusiasm of staff and students
- ▶ become independent in training ourselves so that we could keep our skill levels high and introduce new staff to this way of working
- ▶ refresh ideas and encourage staff who felt less successful
- ▶ continue to write circle lessons for each other and be open to feedback about successes and failures
- ▶ review the lesson pro-forma for circles
- ▶ ensure that Circle Time lessons kept student participation as a priority
- ▶ modify Circle Time for older students
- ▶ become more confident in designing circles to meet our school's needs as they arose
- ▶ extend the training to include other agencies working with our students in school
- ▶ continue to monitor and evaluate the work including observing colleagues as they ran circles and inviting other people in so that we maintained consistent quality across the team
- ▶ acknowledge and appreciate the efforts and achievements of the teaching team and students involved.

"It has been a delight to watch the staff become confident to use Circle Time in PSHE and other lessons. The relationships with students have visibly improved and both staff and students enjoy the lessons much more."
(Deputy Head Teacher)