

Social and emotional learning: From individual skills to class cohesion

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Aim: To evaluate the impact and process of introducing Circle Solutions (Circles) in six primary schools.

Rationale: Many frameworks for social and emotional learning (SEL) aim to develop individual skills. Circle Solutions is based on a collective approach with a specific pedagogy. This paper explores the impact that Circle Solutions have on belonging and inclusion.

Method: Teachers in six primary schools were trained in Circle Solutions and asked to run the intervention once a week for up to six months, with three additional schools providing a waitlist control condition. A mixed-method approach was used to evaluate changes in pupils social-emotional skills, behaviour and connectedness. Five teachers completed the Teacher Attitudes to Social Emotional Learning survey (TASEL) prior to and following the intervention. 157 pupils completed a modified version of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) plus two open-ended questions.

Findings: Although quantitative findings did not indicate statistically significant differences, qualitative responses suggested that the introduction of Circle Solutions increased inclusiveness and valuing of others, developed students' emotional awareness, enhanced a positive sense of self and stimulated student engagement. Teachers increased their sense of efficacy for teaching social emotional skills and identified improvements in teacher-student relationships as well as in student confidence, peer relationships, empathy, kindness, and student engagement.

Limitations: Issues with systemic implementation were identified.

Conclusion: Circle Solutions appears to have the potential to improve relationships, contributing to more connected and inclusive classrooms where children feel valued and appreciate others. Consideration needs to be given to sustainability and methodology in the evaluation of such programmes. There is a role for educational psychologists in establishing and supporting this intervention as happened throughout this study.

Keywords: Circle Solutions; ASPIRE; social and emotional learning; inclusion; kindness; relationships.

Introduction

MENTAL HEALTH concerns for young people in the UK are rising, and the government is planning on spending considerable sums of money on supporting those identified (Depts of Health & Education, 2018). This post-diagnosis approach, although clearly needed, does not promote the protective factors that may help at an earlier stage. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is one way of addressing these issues pro-actively (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). SEL was identified by Noble et al. (2008) as one of the seven pathways to student wellbeing. Others included physical and emotional

safety, pro-social values, a supportive and caring community and a strengths approach, all of which are actively addressed in the Circle Solutions framework.

Systematic evaluation in the United States of SEL programmes based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2015) framework has provided evidence for its effectiveness in improving not only social and emotional skills but also attitudes, behaviour and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). The primary focus of the CASEL model is on individual skill development

in five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making and relationship skills. The social and emotional competencies of teachers have been identified as a significant factor in quality implementation of SEL programmes in schools (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In UK secondary schools an evaluation of secondary Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (Wigelsworth et al., 2015) showed little evidence of positive outcomes and implementation factors, including teachers' 'will and skill', were raised as a potential reason for this finding (Lendrum et al., 2013).

The use of 'circles', as a framework for interaction, has a long history in both community and education settings. This includes: yarning circles in Australian Aboriginal communities (Robertson et al., 2005), learning circles (Swaminathan et al., 2014), magic circles (Moskowitz et al., 1982), and Circle Time (Mosely, 1993). The latter was introduced by Jenny Mosley in the UK as part of the personal, social and health education curriculum, and later used extensively to support the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, introduced in 2005. Although there are overlaps between Circle Solutions, Circle Time and the CASEL model, Circle Solutions differs in key ways. Unlike the CASEL model, it does not focus primarily on individual skills but on learning collectively, addressing feelings and perspectives that influence social behaviour, while building a positive and inclusive classroom climate that promotes both effective learning and student wellbeing (Roffey, 2014). This approach aims to directly enhance belonging through participation as a valued member of the group – a factor which enhances resilience (Werner, 2005; Roffey, 2017a). Further, the Circle Solutions approach is underpinned by the following set of principles that guide effective facilitation of SEL as a social process: agency, safety, positivity, inclusion, respect and equity – giving the acronym ASPIRE – that together determine the pedagogy and process underpinning the intervention. The

rationale, research base and practice for ASPIRE is elaborated in Table 1. This conceptual framework has developed as an outcome of evidence and practice, drawing from the fields of educational and positive psychology. Circle Solutions takes a strengths-based approach that emphasises the importance of creating a safe classroom environment for SEL for both teachers and children (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Dobia & Roffey, 2017; Roffey, 2017b).

How children learn about the social and emotional aspects of their lives is as important as what they learn. Since 2009 over 3,500 teachers in both primary and secondary education have undertaken professional development in Circle Solutions. Most are in Australia, but others are based in the UK, Singapore, New Zealand, Mauritius, Egypt, Hong Kong, South Africa, China and Japan. While strong uptake and positive responses indicate broad satisfaction with the methodology, there has been a need for more specific and direct evaluation. The study by McCarthy & Roffey (2013) explored third party views, and Dobia et al. (2013) focused on specific outcomes for Aboriginal girls. Both studies indicated evidence of changed behaviour and increased connectedness in pupils, but pre-post studies have not previously been undertaken, nor any research in the UK context. This study addresses this gap. In particular we explored issues of friendship, empathy, belonging and class climate. As the terms 'Circles' and 'Circle Solutions' are both used by pupils and teachers, we will follow this practice and employ both terms interchangeably in this paper. NB. The research was undertaken independently from the trainer to maintain ethical integrity.

Method

Using a mixed methodology, the research investigated the impact of the Circle Solutions pedagogy for social and emotional learning for the wellbeing of pupils in years 5 and 6 in six UK primary schools. For the purpose of the study, 'wellbeing' was defined

Table 1: ASPIRE principles and application

PRINCIPLE	RATIONALE/EVIDENCE	PRACTICE in SEL
AGENCY	There is now a body of evidence on the value of self-determination for wellbeing, motivation and optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1994; Kumpulainen et al., 2014; Guay et al., 2008).	Active engagement in learning encourages pupils to have a stake in their own learning, a voice in what concerns them, make decisions and take responsibility. Where activities generate discussion and reflection, the role of the teacher is to guide and facilitate rather than direct.
SAFETY	Young people are less likely to engage or take risks in learning when they do not feel safe in school – either physically or emotionally (Cohen, 2006; Morrison, 2007).	Safety is actively addressed by discussing issues, not incidents, giving the right to stay silent, the use of the third person, using a solution focused approach and promoting collaborative rather than individual activities.
POSITIVITY	Fredrickson (2001) has highlighted the benefit of positive emotions for creativity and problem-solving. Playfulness is also valuable within social and emotional learning (Hromek & Roffey, 2009).	Many activities in Circles are presented as games. Evaluations report how motivating having fun was for both engagement and connecting with others (McCarthy & Roffey, 2013; Dobia et al., 2013). Positivity is also generated by having a solution focus on issues rather than focusing on deficits, and exploring and identifying strengths.
INCLUSION	A sense of belonging is critical for psychological wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This needs to be inclusive belonging that does not dehumanise those outside the group (Roffey, 2013).	Pupils are mixed up regularly, so they work with – and get to know – others in their class. Nearly all activities are paired, small or large group and none are individually competitive.
RESPECT	Three studies exploring the development of constructive relationships in schools highlighted the importance and meaning of respect (Roffey, 2005). Dobia & Roffey (2017), writing about Aboriginal communities, extend this to respect for culture, and show the overarching importance of relational over competency-based dimensions of SEL.	Respect is encapsulated in the following expectations and behaviours: Listening when one person is speaking; not putting others down either verbally or non-verbally; not pre-judging others; showing consideration; acknowledgement; contextual awareness; cultural awareness.
EQUITY	The literature indicates that equality is a factor underpinning societal wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). However, treating everyone the same does not respect diversity nor lead to what is essentially fair. This requires flexibility and adaptation. The construct of equity reflects this.	The aim of Circles is for everyone to have their turn and opportunities to contribute. This means that support may be needed for some individuals. The teacher/facilitator has oversight of the process but engages in all activities alongside students. Feedback indicates this enhances the quality of relationships between staff and pupils as well as between pupils.

as a positive attitude towards self, school and fellow pupils together with a feeling of support and belonging (Noble et al., 2008; Werner, 2005). The impacts for teachers

who delivered the intervention were also explored.

Six experimental and three wait-list primary schools were identified in Essex by

the educational psychologist (EP) working in the area, who was already trained in Circle Solutions. She ascertained their interest and the schools were invited to take part. The one-day training for teachers took place at the end of term 1. At the beginning of term 2, following ethical protocols, pupils completed an amended online version of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), including the Personal, Social and Emotional Appendix. Teachers took the Teacher Attitudes to Social and Emotional Learning (TASEL) survey, also online. This included a qualitative component which allowed for gathering data on reasons for responses. Teachers then facilitated Circles for a minimum of once a week for 30 to 45 minutes.

Towards the end of term 3 the teachers and pupils were invited to re-take the surveys. One in-depth interview was held with one teacher and four focus group interviews were completed with pupils. The survey results were analysed using IBM SPSS 25 (IBM Corp, 2017), and the qualitative data was analysed thematically.

The role of the Educational Psychologist

The involvement of the EP was critical at the outset of this study. She had established a relationship with all the schools involved and was able to offer them this supported opportunity. As findings indicate that on-going support for teachers engaged with Circle Solutions makes a significant difference to sustainability, her role was also important in ensuring that Circles continued to run for the duration of the study. This included email communication with teachers to flag up any issues with implementation and meeting with senior leadership teams in schools to ensure teachers were provided with the necessary time to plan and run their Circles. Solution-focused consultations were also provided by the EP when requested by teachers. Four out of the six teachers met individually with the EP as they were the only teacher in their school running the intervention. In one school where two teachers were running the intervention, both teachers

attended the same consultation. The number of consultations given to teachers ranged from 1 to 4 and lasted approximately 1 hour. As the EP was also the link for the schools, it was possible to arrange consultations on days when the EP was already in the school, thus reducing the time commitment of this work for the EP Service. Themes raised during consultations included advice on lesson planning and reflections on teacher practice and pupil behaviour.

Findings

Teacher results

Only four teachers from the experimental schools responded in the post-Circles survey plus one deputy head from a waitlist school whose communications with the researchers indicated enthusiasm about SEL. Although this number was not sufficient for any statistical analysis, the data did show some notable trends. Teachers clearly indicated that they felt more confident and comfortable teaching social and emotional skills and endorsed the need for all teachers to receive training in SEL. However, two teachers were concerned with a lack of school leadership support for SEL. In a separate scale teachers were asked to indicate the extent of changes observed in pupil behaviour as a result of teaching Circles. The strongest positive change observed was in student-teacher relationships. Other improvements included student confidence, empathy and kindness, and peer relationships. Student engagement with learning was also positively endorsed by all participants. One teacher commented on the changes observed as follows.

- *'Children remember and use the phrase "No put downs".'*
- *'Children seem to include special needs children more in classroom life.'*
- *'Children appear to think more before saying something they shouldn't.'*

When asked what issues they would like addressed in any further training opportunities, teachers identified that access to model Circle lessons and ready-to-use templates, as

well as further activities and resources would be helpful. One teacher wanted more guidance on dealing with behavioural issues, and another was interested in how they could ensure that a school prioritised social and emotional learning.

Pupil quantitative results

Exploratory Factor Analysis of the California Healthy Kids survey data yielded six factors which explained 50 per cent of the variance. Based on item loadings the factors were identified as: School Connectedness (e.g. *'I look forward to most of my lessons'*), Social and Emotional Learning (e.g. *'I try to understand how other people feel'*), Responsible Behaviour (e.g. *'Are pupils at this school well behaved?'*), Self-efficacy (e.g. *'I can do most things if I try'*), Bullying (e.g. *'How often have you seen pupils bullying others at this school?'*) and School Engagement/Participation (e.g. *'Do the grown-ups at school ask you about your ideas?'*). Cross factor correlations were low (Mean =

.02, Min = .17 Max = .37). The reliability of the scales was fair, with a mean Cronbach's alpha of .75 across the six factors (Min = .67, Max = .84).

Figure 1 plots pre- and post-mean scale scores for both waitlist and experimental schools. As can be seen, there was very little difference between pre and post in either the experimental schools or the waitlist (control) schools. None of the differences between scores were found to be statistically significant. Accordingly, no further analysis was conducted.

Pupil qualitative results

The online post survey administered to the experimental group had three open ended questions: *'What have you enjoyed most about Circles lessons?'*, *'What, if anything, do you think could be improved about Circles lessons?'*, and *'Please tell us one thing you have learnt about yourself through doing Circles lessons'*. There were responses from 157 pupils from the

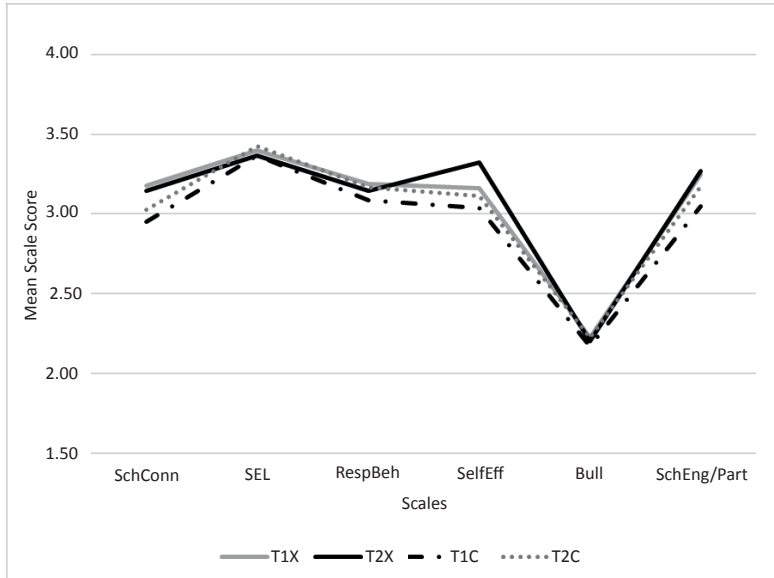


Figure 1: Mean scores for experimental and control groups

SchConn = School Connectedness; SEL = Social Emotional Learning;
RespBeh = Responsible Behaviour; SelfEff = Self Efficacy; Bull = Bullying; SchEng/Part = School Engagement/Participation.
Scores range from 1 to 4.

six experimental schools, 71 males and 85 females. A content analysis was carried out looking at the text within each question using a process of emergent coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Stemler, 2015). The responses were first read and separated into individual statements expressing a singular idea/response. On a second reading, similar ideas were clustered, and each cluster was given a code. The statements were read again in an iterative manner until all statements had been assigned to create the fewest number of themes that encompassed all of the responses.

Table 2 summarises the themes extracted from the question: *‘What have you enjoyed most about Circles lessons?’*. 154 pupils provided a total of 185 responses to this question. These 185 responses were clustered into 12 themes. These were: activities/games/

having fun; personal insights, knowing/care about others; playing/working with others; confidence/try/problem solve; empathy/listening/caring; everything/most; express feelings/ideas; talking/explaining; nothing/OK; other; help others.

Figure 2 provides a gender breakdown of findings for what pupils enjoyed.

It can be seen from Table 2, that pupils’ self-reported experiences in Circles were generally very positive. Pupil responses indicated strong engagement within the group and appreciation of doing things together. Having fun together and finding out about each other appeared to enhance both understanding of others and having a more positive view of self. This is consistent with the teacher feedback of raised confidence and improved class relationships. Figure 2 shows that having fun together was engaging for

Table 2: What students enjoyed most about Circle lessons

Themes	Sample Responses	Count	Per cent
Activities/Games/Fun	'we can play fun games and have lots of fun each week'	53	28.6
Personal insight	'I can be independent more than I thought that I can'	26	14.1
Knowing/Care about others	'finding out more about people to make us better friends'	24	13.0
Play/Work with others	'I mostly enjoyed when we were working in partners to achieve a thing with a whole class'	16	8.6
Confidence/Try/Problem Solve	'I have learned that I can do more stuff if I try'	15	8.1
Empathy/Listening/Caring	'I've learnt that if I try to listen to other people maybe I will understand more'	13	7.0
Everything/Most	'I have enjoyed all of the different activities'	9	4.9
Express feelings/ideas	'we can shere our idears with others' [sic]	9	4.9
Talking/Explaining	'that we all get to talk to each other'	8	4.3
Nothing/DK	'Nothing' 'not sure'	7	3.8
Other	'They don't take very long'	4	2.2
Help others	'help others figure out the answer/problem'	1	0.5
Total		185	100.0

Note: A total of 185 responses were made by 154 pupils.

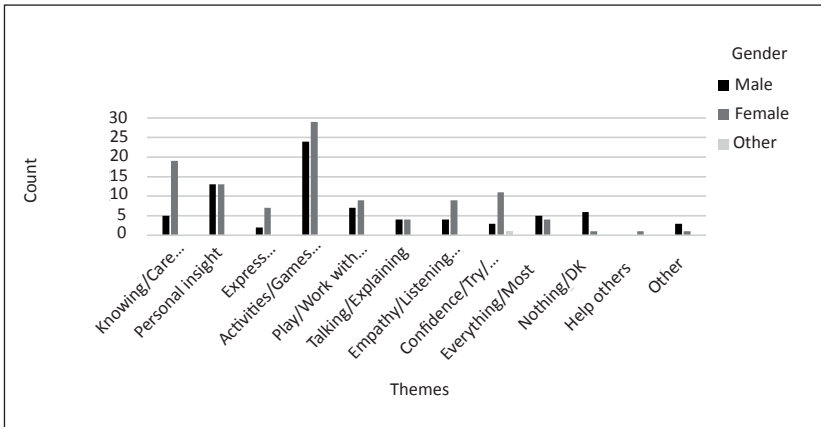


Figure 2: Gender breakdown of Circles enjoyment

Only one pupil identified as 'other' (i.e. neither male nor female).

both boys and girls and that gaining personal insight was also the same for both. Responses related to social and emotional issues were considerably stronger for girls.

Table 3 summarises the themes identified for the question: "What, if anything, do you think could be improved about Circles lessons?". 146 pupils provided a total of 146 responses to this question, which were clustered into 10 themes as presented in Table 3.

Figure 3 provides a gender breakdown for what pupils thought could be improved.

Table 3 shows that many students appreciated the Circle lessons in their existing format, and several wanted more of them.

Figure 3 illustrates some particularly interesting gender related responses. Girls wanted more student participation, which suggested that teachers may not have been following the ASPIRE principle of agency, where students are active rather than passive learners. Some boys wanted a wider range of activities, which may also reflect the teacher response of needing access to more resources.

Table 4 summarises the themes found for the question: 'Please tell us one thing you have learnt about yourself through doing Circles lessons'. 146 pupils provided a total of 146 responses which were clustered into 14 themes as illustrated in the Table.

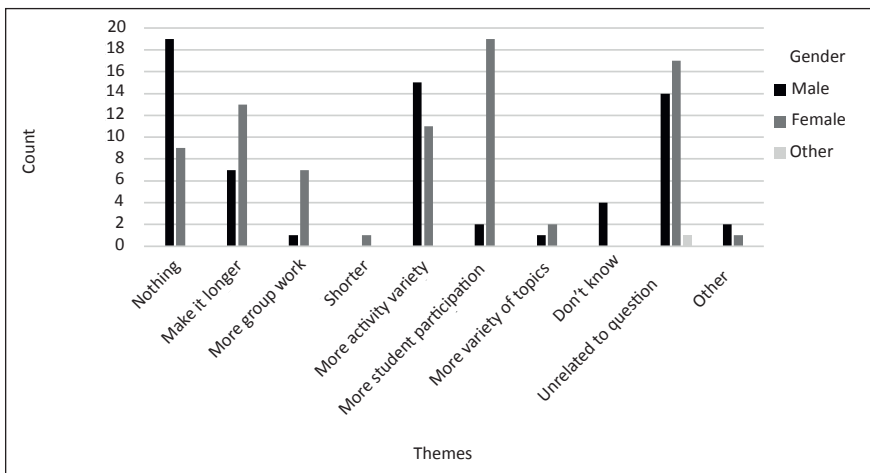


Figure 3: Gender breakdown of suggested improvements

Table 3: Pupils' suggestions for improving Circles lessons

Themes	Sample Responses	Count	Per cent
Unrelated to question	'the pupils are kind to each other most of the time'	32	21.9
Nothing	'nothing its brilliant'	28	19.2
More activity variety	'More different activities'	26	17.8
More student participation	'Less people say pass'	21	14.4
Make it longer	'do it more often like once of twice a week' [sic]	20	13.7
More group work	'To do more activities in groups'	8	5.5
Don't know	'I'm not really sure'	4	2.7
Other	'the rules'	3	2.1
More variety of topics	'I would like to talk about a few more different subjects'	3	2.1
Shorter	'they could be a little bit shorter'	1	0.7
Total		146	100

Figure 4 illustrates the gender distribution in what pupils said they learned.

These results indicate that Circles have the potential to support both student connection and individual wellbeing. The strong finding for kindness is of particular note, and may be associated with the emphasis

in Circle Solutions on getting to know and appreciate others. Finding out and talking with others about what you have in common are frequent components of Circle Solutions, intended to support resilience and mental health.

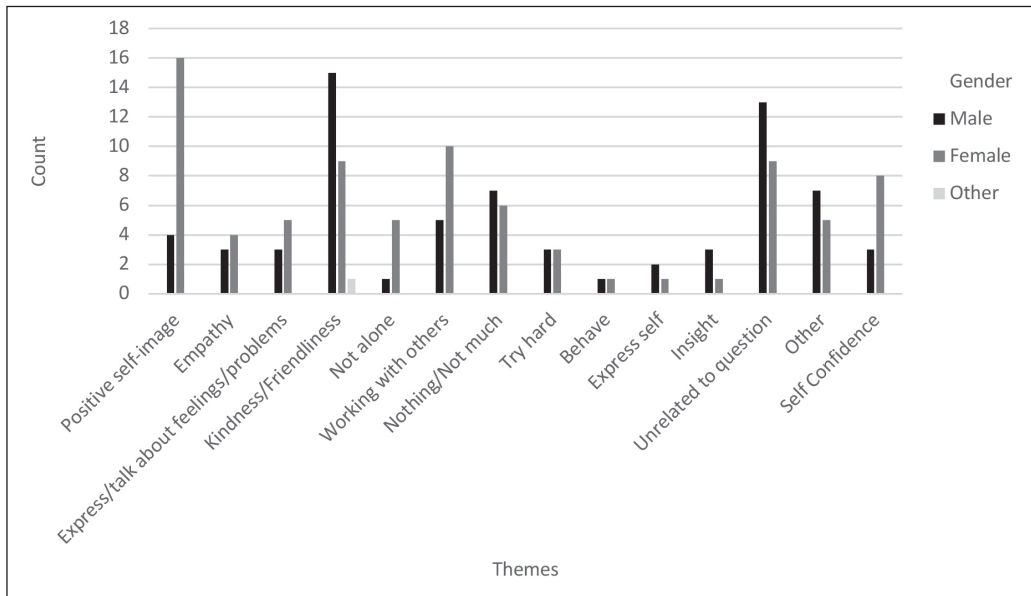


Figure 4: Gender breakdown of what pupils learned about themselves

Table 4: What pupils learned about themselves through Circles

Themes	Sample Responses	Count	Per cent
Kindness/Friendliness	'Kindness is its own reward! Try and be fun and friendly'	25	16.2
Unrelated to question	'The silliness when everyone else is trying to work'	22	14.3
Positive self-image	'I learnt that I am patient and I get along with most people'	20	13
Working with others	'that I enjoy working with pupils that I don't really work with all the time'	15	9.7
Nothing/Not much	'Nothing because I can't think of anything'	13	8.4
Other	'more equipment in class'	12	7.8
Self Confidence	'I have learnt to be more confident with myself and not to put myself down'	11	7.1
Express/talk about feelings/problems	'to talk to people when you are sad'	8	5.2
Empathy	'I have things in common with other people'	7	4.5
Try hard	'I can work harder if I put my mind to it'	6	3.9
Not alone	'I have more friends than I thought'	6	3.9
Insight	'that im not patient' [sic]	4	2.6
Express self	'How to communicate better'	3	1.9
Behave	'stop talking in class'	2	1.3
Total		154	100

When broken down by gender it is evident that boys in particular identified learning about kindness, while girls learnt about the kind of person they were.

Discussion

In general, it appears that the Circle Solutions intervention was well received by teachers and pupils. Despite the absence of statistically significant pupil outcomes based on the CHKS survey, the qualitative data provides indications that pupils felt that they benefited from the intervention, both at an individual level and in generating a more positive class climate.

The findings reflect the Circle Solutions focus on learning about relationships through building relationships. As long ago as 1991, Fredrickson reported that indi-

vidual or small group social skills training with targeted pupils may lead to an increase in skills but that these were not sustainable when those pupils returned to their class. She determined that this was because perceptions of peers had not changed and they reinforced earlier behaviours according to their expectations. By contrast, the contextualised approach to SEL of Circle Solutions provided structured opportunities for teachers and pupils to build positive and productive connections alongside skills. As active participants in shaping the trajectory of their SEL, pupils worked together with peers in ways that nurtured mutual acceptance and growth. These kinds of benefits may not be well supported by other, teacher-led frameworks of SEL instruction.

The gender differences in responses are of particular interest as they seem to suggest the potential to positively influence some of the negative impacts typically associated with gender at this age. An increase for girls in positive self-image is potentially protective as they enter early adolescence (Impett et al., 2008). For boys the opportunity to engage and affirm kindness and friendliness may provide an alternative to aggressive masculinity (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2012). Further research to explore the impacts of Circle Solutions on gender identity development is identified as an interesting area for further investigation.

Teacher responses indicated that they felt that Circles had impacted positively on teacher-student relationships and enhanced student engagement in learning. However, the low rate of teacher responses and requests for further examples and templates suggest that more time and support was needed for teachers to become proficient with the intervention. Implementation research indicates that assessable benefits for students are likely only after consistent high-quality implementation over a more extended period (Durlak, 2016).

Resourcing and school engagement are also critical factors for effective implementation. As this was an unfunded pilot project, both resources and time commitment were limited. This resulted in differential levels of engagement across the experimental schools, with two of the six experimental schools showing low levels of engagement which may have impacted on implementation quality. By contrast, one of the control schools was highly engaged and proactive around SEL. These factors seem likely to have contributed to the lack of differentiation in experimental and control school outcomes.

Despite these limitations, it is apparent that the process of implementing Circle Solutions has changed the staff and students' perceptions of relational climate in the classroom in positive ways. Both students and teachers reported a greater sense of connectedness and greater appreciation of what others could bring to the class. Student

comments provided evidence of growing self- and social awareness.

To realise gains on a programmatic basis and at the same time ensure that teachers are able to plan and carry out relevant, well-targeted and developmentally sequenced Circles, opportunities for teachers to access additional support with lesson planning and behaviour management would be helpful. With their extensive knowledge and understanding of typical and atypical developmental trajectories of childhood and adolescent mental health, along with their skills in consultation, educational psychologists are well placed to deliver on this in schools.

Limitations

A key limitation of the study in relation to outcome measures was its short time frame of only six months. Limited resources to support the range of schools leave unanswered questions as to implementation quality. In addition, low numbers of post-test responses from teachers have precluded more detailed analysis of implementation factors. There is also focus group data to be finalised. This will contribute to a further paper.

Conclusion

Wellbeing in schools is now firmly on the UK agenda (DoHSC & DoE, 2018) as is the plan to mandate relationship and sexuality education (DoE, 2017). However, there is so far little clarity as to how these are being implemented. Mental health proposals are largely focused on individual support for those diagnosed with difficulties rather than the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing. Of critical benefit, both for supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties and reducing mental health risk factors, are universal interventions that develop an emotionally supportive school climate and positive relationships at all levels (Graetz et al., 2008). In this study the positive perceptions as reported by staff and students who participated in Circle Solu-

tions would suggest that there is potential for this approach to address significant protective factors for pupils' mental health. These include cultivating positive pupil-teacher relationships, fostering inclusiveness and enhancing engagement in learning. Further research is required to substantiate these findings.

Models of development that focus on the individual tend to overlook connection with others as a key driver of growth and a source of resilience (Condly, 2006). In seeking to promote positive connections that are characterised by mutual empathy, respect and empowerment Circle Solutions aims to build a positive environment for classroom learning, in which both pupils and teachers have a voice to make a difference.

For interventions to be safe and constructive, teachers need to feel confident with both content and pedagogy. This UK pilot of Circle Solutions, though limited in scope, has generated promising findings for teachers' sense of efficacy for SEL, through providing an engaging pedagogy and improving relationships and engagement at multiple levels.

The collective rather than individual focus of Circle Solutions makes it qualitatively different from other SEL interventions. As a consequence, the focus and trajectory of skill development are unlikely to follow the pattern assumed by CASEL and embedded

in the measures used in this study to measure outcomes. In light of gains suggested for student connectedness and class climate, an important direction for further research will be to evaluate the impact of class climate on the scope and pattern of social emotional skill development through Circle Solutions.

Educational psychologists are well placed to support wellbeing in schools, not only for identified individuals but for systemic development that promotes prevention, early intervention and a positive emotional climate for learning and behaviour. This study has found that Circle Solutions was well received by teachers and students. Implementation support where accredited professionals train cohorts of staff, support sustainability and assist schools in evaluating the impact of the intervention could increase its benefit.

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