

Musical Circle Time for Pre-schoolers: Musical Perspective and Functions

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Children exploit everything they can; their voices, their bodies, the playthings around them, friends, family members, music they hear on TV, at the temple, all present different opportunities for music.

(Suzan Young, *Music 3-5*, 2009, p. 13)

Introduction

An educational approach towards free time in school settings called “Circle Time” appeared in the late-twentieth century. “Circle Time (shown as Circle Time from now on)” is now in widespread use in schools across the UK.

Circle Time is a group time. It was originally implemented mainly in primary schools, though it is now in use in nursery schools. In Scotland, it is even practised in secondary schools. Before giving any commentary on this special class time activity, it will be helpful to explain the concept of Circle Time.

So, what is Circle Time? One of the leading educators in the field of Circle Time, Jenny Mosley describes it as follows:

Teaching and learning strategy that offers all Early Years practitioners well-structured and purposeful lesson plans that will enable you to deliver the curriculum for personal, social and emotional development while, at the same time, helping children to understand universal moral values and practice problem-solving skills.¹

Collins explains circle time in a more symbolic manner:

Circle time is a structured, regular occasion when a group meets in a circle to speak, listen, interact and share concerns. The circle is a symbol of unity and co-operation, indicating that the group is working together to support one another and to take equal responsibility for addressing issues.²

Seen from those descriptions, the key feature of Circle Time is educational strategy with a group meeting held on a regular basis. The purpose of Circle Time seems to be to develop children’s humanity and help them learn how to form relationships with others.

For younger children, it may be difficult in a practical sense to teach moral issues in an informal sit-

ting and talking style classroom arrangement. However, this approach is widely considered to be beneficial in other ways. There are many publications regarding the effectiveness of Circle Time for primary school pupils, for example, *Turn Your School Round* (1993) by Mosley, and *Effective IEPs through Circle Time* (1998) by Goldthorpe and Mosley. However, there is less research regarding the Circle Time for pre-schoolers in school settings. Therefore, in this essay, the perspective and functions of Circle Time in nursery schools in UK will be examined and discussed. The research interest of the author is music education for pre-schoolers, and the effectiveness of music in preschools has been studied following various approaches, for example, Campbell (2009), Curtis (2009) and Hills (2003). However, the role of music in the education of early year children has not been investigated to any significant degree. Young notes:

Music's place in early years justified because 'it is fun' or 'they love it', which I take to mean this understanding that music's value is because it is pleasurable and uplifting.³

Scholars are a little concerned about the low musical accomplishment of very young children within the educational setting. Young warns:

Time and time again these areas of research [early childhood music education] show that we expect too little of children in the versions of practice, carried in curriculum guidance and activity books.⁴

How about Circle Time? A detailed description of the approach will be discussed in the next section. However, although music is clearly a key element of Circle Time for pre-schoolers, there is little actual published description of musical Circle Time. Therefore, in this essay, the musical Circle Time which uses music as a core tool of the session, will be examined.

What a Musical Circle Time is: Role of Circle Time in Pre-school

Primary schools now follow the National Curriculum, although the UK had no national policy for the education of under-5s until September 2008. Pascal describes the early childhood education at that time as follows:

...educational provision for the under-5s in the UK remains patchy, diverse and, in comparison with other European countries, at a low level.⁵

The diversity means "children under the age of 5 years in the UK are learning in a vast array of different settings",⁶ from local authority nurseries and day nurseries to playgroups set by volunteer groups.

However, now two policies implemented by the government and LEA: Early Years Foundation Stage and Every Child Matters. The reason why these frameworks have been implemented is "there is general agreement that it should be planned to foster all round development of individual children – emotionally, intellectually, morally, socially, physically and spiritually."⁷ Young praised Early Years

Foundation Stage curriculum for ensuring learning through play for example. However, she also notes that music education practice still holds on to some conservative ideas and procedures.⁸ The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was implemented in all Early Years settings in England in September 2008, in order to improve the quality of the provision, care and education for children aged 0-5 years.⁹ For Every Child Matters (ECM), the government's aim as stated in ECM is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to be healthy, stay safe, to enjoy life and be active, and to make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.¹⁰ Collins cites the words of Palaiogou, an EYFS inspector: "the personal, social and emotional development of young children is becoming a key issue and a priority in the government's agenda."¹¹ The importance of early childhood education is revised by these government policies. Pascal notes:

The high quality early childhood education can have a significant and long-term effect on children's learning, can lead to gains in educational achievement throughout schooling, and can lead to better social behaviour and more productive citizenship.¹²

Thanks to these policies, the education and environment of pre-schools were revised and have been changed effectively. Regarding music, the changes are proving to be slow to put into practice. Young states:

Approaches to early childhood music education are slow to change. Methods conceived in the first half of the last century still have a strong influence on practice now.¹³

However, the role of Circle Time became more approved thanks to these government policies.

The original purposes of Circle Time are as follows:¹⁴

- Fitting in with the curriculum by promoting personal, social and emotional development
- Enabling children to develop universal moral skills
- Developing young children's Emotional Intelligence
- Helping them to practice problem-solving skills

Mosley identifies another benefit of Circle Time:

Circle Time also fascinates language development, confidence building and the five vital skills of looking, listening, speaking, thinking and concentrating.¹⁵

As seen above, the purposes and benefits are linkable to EYFS and ECM. Collins states that: "in terms of PSHE [Personal, Social and Health Education], Circle time treats all issues of Every Child Matters."¹⁶ Mosley also states:

The prescribed curriculum for personal, social, and emotional development can easily be adapted to the Circle Time approach and other elements of the curriculum are often incorporated into meetings with great success.¹⁷

Concerning the size of the group in circle time, for younger children, small, easily managed groups

give plenty of opportunity for all children who find it easy to talk but hard to listen. Collins talks of no more than ten children in a group.¹⁸

Scholars also admit the effectiveness of Circle Time. Collins describes how “Circle Time is being used more and more in schools, nurseries and playschools”¹⁹ because “Circle Time is the perfect venue for extending emotional literacy skills, knowledge, attitudes and values in PSHCE [Physical, Social, Health and Citizenship Education].”²⁰ Mosley emphasizes:

All the Circle Time meetings are planned to meet the Early Learning Goals listed in the QCA document *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*.²¹

How about the impressions of the children themselves? Mosley claims: “Children find Circle Time very motivating because it is fast-paced, multi-sensory and very good fun.”²²

Example of Musical Circle Time

To make Circle Time more attractive to younger children, Circle Time activities should always be presented in a planned, structured way. Mosley adds that: “teachers are encouraged to be flexible and find their own creative approach to their delivery.”²³ Music can be used by teachers to follow their own creative approach. Young finds two ways in which music is planned and provided for: one is adult-led, and the other is children-led.²⁴ For younger children, Circle Time should follow the adult-led approach. For a general nursery setting, Collins writes how younger children do not have the language skills to talk about and share their knowledge and experiences.²⁵ Also, the attention span of younger children is short, as pointed out by Mosley:

Nursery children may need shorter meetings more frequently than once a week, begin with at least about 10 minutes. Teacher then needs to increase this time to 15-20 minutes as children become more accustomed to what happens.²⁶

Collins describes how Circle Time needs to be a regular occurrence, at least once a week, and the recommended length of circle time is about 30 minutes, but for younger children, 10-15 minutes a day may be best.²⁷ In order to prevent boredom, Mosley suggests:

Puppets, cloaks, ...other props can then be used to ensure that meetings are never dull and that children come to each meeting with a sense of joyful anticipation and to help you to be sure that their attention will be held throughout the meeting.²⁸

Under these conditions, music (e.g. songs, clapping rhythms, action songs) can be seen to be one of the most effective tools with regard to communicating with children as every child is involved and nobody feels excluded or pressurised. Many children benefit from sitting calmly in an emotionally safe place with people whom they know. They need opportunities to learn how to listen to and respect other

people and express how they feel.²⁹ Mosley also comments that:

When engaged in Circle Times activities, they lose their self-consciousness and make developmental strides that can be difficult to achieve in more formal settings.³⁰

Young writes of the connection between music and children: “Their [children’s] music arises from engaging with the people and things around them.”³¹ This means that younger children are so greatly influenced by their class teachers. If teachers naturally introduce and use music during Circle Time, children learn music naturally and it becomes part of who they are. Young describes how to plan an effective musical experience:³²

- Provide many opportunities for children to make their own musical choices
- Activities should be structured and interactive across a continuum of adult and child involvement, ranging from independent, free play to adult-led, from individual to largish group, from active and exploratory to focused and thoughtful
- Focus on his/her interests, experiences and the processes of learning in music

Here, a couple of examples of musical Circle Time are shown. Generally, there are five stages for one Circle Time session:³³

- Meeting up – help children relax, release tension and feel the joy of being together with each other
- Warming up – encourage children to listen to each other
- Opening up – key stage of circle time meeting, and opportunity for activities
- Cheering up – celebrate the group’s success and to give praise and thanks to one another
- Calming down – quiet and calm time which ensures that a proper feeling of closure is achieved

The structure of each session is slightly different depending on the individual educator. Collins suggests the following routine as an example:³⁴

- Welcome – say hello to each child by name
- Teacher time – set the theme
- Children time – ask children if there is anything they want to talk about
- Main theme of the session
- Fun endings (e.g. songs, games)

Using music casually, for example, at the beginning opening, the teacher can sing “Are you ready?” whilst clapping and the children answer “Yes, we are”. Others may use a bell or gong as a starting signal.³⁵

To use music for shorter session, here is an example of “Tommy Thumb”. The Early Learning

Goal (ELG) of this activity is “for disposition and attitudes”.³⁶

E.g. 1. “Tommy Thumb”³⁷

- Introductory Stage – mime simple actions for children to follow (e.g. stamp feet, wave elbows)
- Middle Stage – using the traditional nursery rhyme “Tommy Thumb”. Substitute words with ‘hello _____ (name of child), hello _____, where are you?’ and sing. The child replies “*Here I am, here I am*”. Teacher responds “*How do you do!*”. Continue around the circle until all the children have had a turn. Asking children to help you sing. All the children in the circle shake hands when “*How do you do!*” is sung.
- Closing Stage – use the traditional rhyme “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” with substituted words:
*Now it's time to say goodbye _____ (child's name),
 _____ (child's name), wave goodbye.*

Encourage children to wave goodbye when their names are sung, and congratulate the children for doing so well.

For a full session with music, here is an example using traditional nursery rhymes “Old King Cole”. The theme is “we listen, we do not interrupt”.

Ex. 2 “Old King Cole”³⁸ (A musical device by the author has been added in ‘opening up’)

- Meeting up – teacher is the conductor, and children pretend to play in the orchestra
- Warming up – Ask children to complete the sentence, ‘The music I like best is ____.’
- Opening up – Singing traditional nursery rhymes, and a child is chosen to be King Cole who was working hard for his kingdom and needs a good rest. Children in the circle bring objects to King Cole. After all children have finished, they ask how King Cole must be feeling now as his rest has been interrupted so many times.

Ask children if they ever annoyed their parents or have been annoyed by a little brother or sister, and let them describe how the family members feel when this happens.

- Cheering up – Thank children for their wonderful acting, and wonderful behaviour during the session
- Calming down – Play quiet music

There is a revised style of circle time called “Quality Circle Time (QCT)” which has been introduced recently. QCT is advocated by Jenny Mosley who is the leading educator regarding Circle Time. QCT procedure involves carrying out activities, games and the practice of speaking and listening skills in a circle. The sessions for children are linked to the PSHE curriculum, and often consist of weekly meetings of about half an hour sessions in a circle. Mosley describes the benefits of QCT:

We cannot ‘teach’ children moral values, they have to experience them. All the games and exer-

cises that are recommended by QCT are designed to build up a sense of class community.³⁹ This also shows the significance of games in which music can be included.

Conclusion

Mosley concludes that Circle Time is a simple yet powerful strategy proven to be one of the most effective ways of promoting positive behaviour and respectful relationships in Early Years environments.⁴⁰ Circle Time helps children to understand and value themselves and others as well as forming positive relationships.⁴¹ Collins states:

Circle Time can be a platform for each child to be himself and say what he wishes and to know that he will be listened to with respect... Given the opportunity, they will learn to recognize and name their feelings and learn to deal with them in a positive way. In circle time, children will agree and follow rules for their group and classroom and come to understand how rules help them all.⁴²

For younger children, music is a very effective way of learning social rules and manners. However, the reason why music is used is also for enjoyment. Collins reminds us that it is important to make sure that the concept of Circle Time is interesting and fun as well as educational.⁴³

Using music in Circle Time is not aimed at teaching musical terms or knowledge. Music is used to encourage children to learn social skills and manners. However, if younger children learn how to change words to fit with a melody in these sessions, it promotes the learning of syllables in languages class and the learning of rhythm in music class in primary school Key Stage 1. This shows that musical Circle Time has considerable potential as an educational tool across the curriculum. Mosley maintains that “the aim of circle time is to nurture the social and emotional growth of each child.”⁴⁴ Music is clearly an important and integral part of children’s development as they participate in musical Circle Time.

Footnote

- 1 Jenny Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children* (London: Routledge, 2009; first published in 2005), Introduction, p. vii.
- 2 Margaret Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young* (3rd edition) (London: SAGE, 2011; first published in 2001), p. 1.
- 3 Susan Young, *Music 3-5* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 9.
- 4 Op. cit., p. 12.
- 5 Christine Pascal, “The Effective Early Learning project and the National Curriculum” in Theo Cox, ed. *The National Curriculum and the Early Years* (London: The Farmer Press, 1996) p. 140.
- 6 Op. cit., p. 140.

- 7 Op. cit., p. 45.
- 8 Young, *Music 3-5*, p. 9.
- 9 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 1
- 10 Op. cit., p. 1.
- 11 Op. cit., p. 1.
- 12 Pascal, "The Effective Early Learning project and the National Curriculum", p. 140.
- 13 Young, *Music 3-5*, p. 7.
- 14 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, Preface.
- 15 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, Introduction, p. vii.
- 16 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 1.
- 17 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, p. 44.
- 18 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 8, and p. 16. Collins adds, "three groups of ten children is best to have Circle Time."
- 19 Margaret Collins, *Enhancing Circle Time for the Very Young* (London: Paul Chapman, 2006; first published in 2003), p. 5.
- 20 Op. cit., p. 5.
- 21 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, p. 51.
- 22 Op.cit., p. vii.
- 23 Op. cit., p. 44.
- 24 Young, *Music 3-5*, p. 17.
- 25 Collins, *Enhancing Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 5.
- 26 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, pp. 46-7.
- 27 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 3.
- 28 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, p. 46.
- 29 www.circle-time.co.uk/site/what_is_quality_circle_time/what_is_it_for
- 30 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, Introduction, p. vii.
- 31 Young, *Music 3-5*, p. 13
- 32 Op. cit., p. 3.
- 33 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, pp. 45-6.
- 34 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 9.
- 35 Op. cit., p. 9.
- 36 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, p. 52.
- 37 Op. cit., pp. 52-3.
- 38 Op. cit., pp. 96-8.
- 39 www.circle-time.co.uk/site/what_is_quality_circle_time/the_benefits
- 40 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, Preface.
- 41 Collins, *Circle Time for the Very Young*, p. 2.
- 42 Op. cit., p. 3.
- 43 Op. cit., p. 13.
- 44 Mosley, *Circle Time for Young Children*, p. 44.

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