

# Putting the Circle back into Circle of Friends: A grounded theory study

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*Circle of Friends (CoF) was originally developed in Canada as a social tool for including vulnerable children and adults within their mainstream schools or communities (Pearpoint et al., 1992). It has subsequently been adopted by schools in the UK as a strategy for including pupils, with a range of challenging needs or behaviours, who have become rejected by or isolated from their peers.*

*This paper examines the contribution of CoF towards achieving positive outcomes for socially isolated children in schools. It reviews evidence from current qualitative and quantitative studies and a Grounded Theory (GT) research study undertaken by the lead author. The design involved interviews with 25 facilitators of CoF within mainstream schools in a large Shire County and an outer London suburb. The children comprising the CoF groups ranged in age from 7 to 12 years.*

*The psycho-social processes emerging from the analysis provide theoretical insights into the part played by the Circle group in providing social feedback and support for the focus child and promoting more positive relationships with the wider class group.*

*At its highest level of conceptualisation the final theory describes how a CoF is perceived to facilitate the movement of a pupil from a 'closed' or isolated, social field towards more 'open', peer based networks of social support.*

*Implications for future research are discussed. It is argued that complex humanist interventions need to be evaluated and developed using ecologically sensitive methods.*

## **Introduction: Circle of Friends and social and emotional well-being**

**C**IRCLE OF FRIENDS (CoF) developed in Canada and North America in the late 1980s as a social tool to support adults with disabilities and was adapted to support children with social, emotional and/or behaviour difficulties in schools (Pearpoint & Forest, 1992). It was subsequently adopted in the UK in the mid 1990s (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996) and is now a widely promoted approach, endorsed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfES, 2003). This in part reflected growing emphasis on the social and emotional aspects of school life (DfES, 2002, 2005) and the belief that poor interpersonal relationships and social isolation are associated with a variety of negative outcomes, including truancy, poor academic performance and mental health problems (Bagwell et al., 1998).

In its UK applications CoF has generally been conceptualised as a two-stage process (Frederickson et al., 2005). The first part involves a Set-Up meeting to address and reframe negative peer perceptions of a socially isolated child or young person (see James & Leyden, 2008). The second stage is the creation of a Circle group for the focus child. This serves a number of functions in terms of social influence, support and peer group connections. The current paper focuses on the psycho-social processes underpinning the development of this Circle group.

## **What and how does the Circle contribute to 'Circle of Friends' interventions?**

Early practitioner reflections and an accumulating body of qualitative research suggests that Circle membership may significantly influence the focus child's attitudes and behaviour. For example, Pearpoint and

Forest (1992) found that, by using the approach with two children showing challenging behaviour, teachers reported that the children became happier and more socially included, with a reduction in their previously aggressive behaviour.

Newton and Wilson (1996) described setting up 20 Circles of Friends in UK schools. The children were aged between 4 and 14 years and experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties. A variety of improvements in the focus child's behaviour and social skills were identified, along with greater peer group acceptance.

Whitaker et al. (1998) reported an evaluation of CoF with seven children on the autistic spectrum, aged between 3 and 10 years. They described the effects on Circle members in terms of increased empathy and understanding. The authors commented that 'experiences in the Circle seemed to help members to understand the focus child and to reduce the extent to which his or her behaviour was taken personally' (p.62). Forty of the 52 pupils wanted to continue with the Circle, suggesting high motivation and commitment to the group. Feedback from all participants suggested that improved social relationships and interpersonal behaviour extended beyond the Circle meeting.

Taylor and Burden's (2000) research, based on four case studies, described how the Circle provides a setting for children to foster their understanding of their own and others' feelings. They concluded that 'the Circle of Friends technique can have an extremely powerful influence on the development of pro-social behaviour in both individual and groups of children across the whole of the school age range' (p.55). However, they judged that it would be unreasonable to expect the intervention to be successful under all circumstances and underlined the importance of factors such as teacher attitudes, classroom climate and whole school ethos.

Empirical support for the proposition that Circle membership influences levels of acceptance comes from phase one of the

Frederickson et al. (2003) study. They found that Circle members were more accepting of the focus child than were the class peer group. In phase two, both peer group and Circle members showed higher levels of acceptance. One possible explanation being that Circle members continued to influence class views of the child. This found support in the author's observation that a number of teachers adopted feedback sessions from the Circle to the whole class, also involving them in collaborative activities.

A second study by Frederickson et al. (2005) confirmed that Circle membership tended to reduce rejection, although this did not reach levels of statistical significance ( $p=0.16$ ). The follow-up, a term later, reported a 50 per cent drop-out rate, with a trend towards reduced peer acceptance. The authors concluded 'the results of this study overall suggest that the changes achieved by the whole class meeting are usually not maintained over time in the absence of further focused intervention and the small group meetings are ineffective in most cases' (p.214). Attention was drawn to a number of methodological limitations which included small sample size, limited measures, minimum intervention time, and an external as opposed to an internal facilitator, all of which potentially influenced the findings. Caution is required before prematurely dismissing, or minimising, the role of the Circle group.

While researchers continue attempts to quantify the effects of inclusive approaches, including person centred planning (Holburn, 2002), O'Brien (2002) challenges the adequacy of such methodologies for sensitively capturing the range of potential outcomes in such complex humanist interventions.

### **Provisional Theoretical Framework**

Two general theories have been proposed as underpinning CoF interventions. Frederickson and colleagues (2003) adapted Dodge et al.'s (1986) model of social competence, which incorporates both cognitive-

behavioural approaches and interactionist thinking. Thus it identifies the interactions between the focus child and peers in terms of their behaviours towards one another and the attributions or meanings that they ascribe to these contacts. The Circle, therefore, provides opportunities for changing the child's and peer group's perceptions of each other through their inter-personal group experiences, thus modifying their respective attributions, levels of empathy, and social behaviour.

In contrast, Newton and Wilson (2003), following Mallory and New (1994), argue that social constructionism, the theory that meanings are constructed through social interactions and shared agreement, underpins CoF processes. The intervention therefore provides an opportunity for the peer group to renegotiate their understanding of the child's behaviour and for the child to reconstruct her or his own self-perceptions. Thus 'when a circle of friends is formed the child is given a forum within which he or she can be supported in re-authoring the dominant narrative of their lives. Members of the circle support this by contributing their knowledge of the 'less noticed' focus child and be acting in ways that help bring new bits of the narrative to life' (p.48). From this perspective, attitudes, behaviour and relationships are viewed not as a constant, but as complex phenomena, naturally fluctuating over time in response to the child's changing personal, home, school and social circumstances. Thus there may never be a point when it is possible to say that behaviour has been 'modified', but that the social system develops the capacity to include the child (Newton & Wilson, 2003).

### **Aims of the current study**

Both of the theories outlined above offer useful theoretical insights into CoF, but are not necessarily grounded in data, and consequently lack detail and depth. The current study aims to produce a 'richer picture' and greater theoretical appreciation of the processes underpinning Circles, grounded in a detailed analysis of interview data and

contextualised within other social-psychological research studies.

Haig (1995) comments on how often traditional science involves the premature empirical testing of low content theories, to the detriment of theory development.

### **Methodology: Grounded theory**

Grounded theory (GT) was the chosen research method for this study as it facilitates the emergence of theory arising from complex social situations in real world settings that evolve over time (Miller, 1995). Our aim was to achieve a better theoretical understanding (Hughes, 2000) rather than test hypotheses.

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology, involving a number of rigorous, logical and transparent techniques for analysing qualitative data. It is concerned with developing 'local' theory through which to identify conditions favouring certain action/interactions and consequences within a given context (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Its tentative hypotheses may be more relevant and context sensitive than the 'universal' theories of traditional positivist science.

The methodology, first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has continued to be developed and the current analysis uses a revised 'constructionist' format as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2000, 2006).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe the process of theory generation as deriving from inductive reasoning and the continuous 'flip flop' or interplay between the data and the ideas of the researcher – who acknowledges awareness of her/his own beliefs and experiences. Bias cannot be eliminated, but is made explicit and subject to challenge from the researcher and others through the transparency of the process. For more background on the development and epistemological position of GT see: Haig, 1995; Pidgeon, 1996; Pidgeon & Henwood 1996; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2000, 2006; James 2006.

**Design**

Table 1 below sets out the design for the study through a series of broad stages, which, in reality involved more interaction of processes than it is possible to depict diagrammatically.

**Selection of sample**

The data derived from adult facilitators' accounts of the Set-Up meeting and the development of the Circle groups. The facilitator was ideally placed to comment on many aspects of the group, its functioning and the wider school context.

The pupil sample was identified by inviting educational psychologists and advisory support teachers to nominate schools where the Circles intervention had been used, and which met the following criteria:

- The Circle groups had run for at least six weeks.
- The Circle occurred within the last two years.
- 'Positive outcomes' had resulted.

- Interventions were set up within the Newton and Wilson (1999, 2003) guidelines for setting up and running a Circle of Friends.

The aim here was not to select a statistically representative sample of a population, but a varied sample within a 'local context' (Silverman, 2000).

**Description of sample**

Twenty facilitators, who had facilitated 17 CoF groups within schools in one Shire County were interviewed. A further five interviews were conducted with facilitators who worked as part of an Outreach Service to mainstream schools in outer London. This provided data from 22 separate, school based interventions.

The sample comprised a range of city, suburban and rural schools. There was a spread of educational psychologists, assistant educational psychologists and Advisory Support Teachers who had been involved with facilitating the Set-Up meeting.

**Table 1: A diagram outlining the methodological design and analysis.**

Acknowledging Theoretical Sensitivities/Bias Circles of Friends Literature Review
Interviews 1–5 with Facilitators L1: OPEN CODING
Interviews 6–10 with Facilitators L1: OPEN CODING L2: AXIAL CODING
Interviews 11–15 with Facilitators L1: OPEN CODING L2: AXIAL CODING L3: HIGHER ORDER CONCEPTUAL CODING
DRAFT GROUNDED THEORY
Literature Review
Interviews 16–24 with Facilitators THEORETICAL SAMPLING THEORY CHALLENGE AND REFINEMENT
FINAL GROUNDED THEORY

The majority of facilitators were members of school staff either as classteacher, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator or Teaching Assistant. All facilitators were female. The interventions ranged from six to 116 weeks, with the median being 18 weeks.

The pupil sample covered Years 2 to Year 7, with the majority being children towards the end of primary phase in Years 4, 5 and 6. All had experienced difficulties in social interactions with peers. The sample included children with a range of 'underlying' difficulties such as ADHD, Asperger's syndrome and Down's syndrome.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

A semi-structured interview was used to track the sequence of events within the Circles process (Robson, 1999). Initially, open questions were used with later questions being influenced by emerging theoretical ideas recorded via personal 'memos'. The semi-structured interviews enabled researcher and respondent to 'co-construct' meanings or interpretation of events as the group evolved (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews, lasting between 35 and 75 minutes, were recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and further analysis.

### *Analysis*

The main tool of analysis applied to the first 15 of the interview transcripts was that of 'constant comparison.' This involved the constant comparison of units of data (single ideas within the text) for similarities and differences and the testing of emerging questions or hypotheses against in-coming data, in order to categorise and order it.

The analysis moved from the observation and interpretation of data (Level 1 codes) in the early transcripts, to definitions of concepts, their dimensions and relationships (Level 2 codes) as the analysis proceeded. Level 3 codes describing 'a Core Psychological Process' that provided an overarching theoretical link between the coding hierarchies, were then developed.

A further literature review was completed to explore the links between the coding scheme and existing theory and research. Finally, data from the remaining 10 interviews were selectively coded to challenge and refine the draft theory.

### **Results of analysis: Emergent themes**

A summary of key ideas and emergent themes which comprise the final grounded theory follow (see James, 2006, for complete version). These will be described starting with the Level 3 Coding; 'Core Psychological Process'. Fresh links will be made with related theoretical studies from the literature that deepen our understanding.

### **Movement from a closed to an open social field: The Core Psychological Process**

The 'Core Psychological Process' identified through the analysis was the progression, as the intervention developed, from a 'closed' to a more 'open' social system. This provided conceptual links between the Level 2 codes and recurred frequently in the data. It also related to theoretical ideas described in other social contexts (Murstein, 1977; Luft, 1984; Erwin, 1993; Dowling & Osborne, 1994).

CoF is employed as an intervention when a 'social field', or significant peer network is effectively 'closed' for a child. 'Field' defines the range of potential opportunities to interact with peers or classmates and form new relationships (Murstein, 1977; Erwin, 1993). Children who are socially isolated because of their lack of social skills or challenging behaviour may experience significant difficulties in attempting to enter or re-open the rejecting social field.

Negative cycles of interaction may become self-perpetuating, either through attributional bias in the rejected child's view of peers (Patterson, 1990) or equally, in the peers' views of the child (Waas & Honer, 1990). Such changes, as Rholes and Ruble (1984) pointed out, will be influenced by the age and social awareness of the children

involved. A peer group, therefore, may develop a 'closed' view of the child based on negative experiences or attributions, fixed roles and limited information. The social dimension of the classroom may become a 'no go' area of relationships which the focus child, alone, is in no position to enter or transform.

Figure 1 illustrates the stages in CoF interventions, identifying key interactions and processes. The Circle represents a 'systemic' intervention (Dowling & Osborne, 1994), with the capacity to open up, or re-open, the social field for the focus child.

Within an 'open' social field attitudes may change, new relationships are forged and new behaviours emerge. The Set-Up meeting, critically, signposts the opportunities for this to occur and for the group to share fresh perspectives and re-construe their own understandings on the nature of the child's difficulties (James & Leyden, 2008).

The subsequent Circle meetings also provide the focus child with social support, feedback and the chance to share information with others, for instance through 'self-disclosure'. Such processes, taken together, facilitate further change within the group's social interactions which are covered in the following sections.

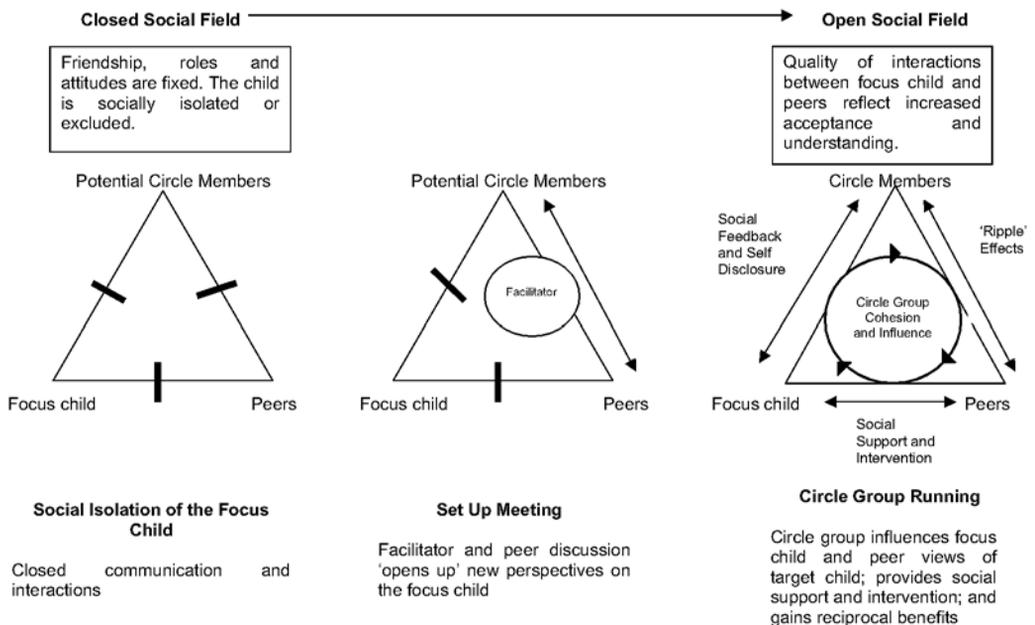
**Circle group processes**

A number of 'sub-processes' (described in Level 2 codes within the analysis) describe the theoretical development and influence of the Circle. The sub-processes are grouped below into three areas. Examples of coded data are included for illustration, with the interview number in brackets.

**(1) Processes associated with the formation, development and cohesion of the Circle**

In line with current findings from theories of group processes (Hogg, 1992), we also noted

Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of the Grounded Theory of the Circle of Friends process.



that the selection of group members, development of group cohesion and role of the facilitator emerged as important factors in the perceived effectiveness and influence of the group.

### **Selection of group members**

Circle members were selected who were thought likely to work well together and bring particular qualities to the group. Typically the gender of group members was mixed. Teachers generally took the lead in helping the focus child select group members, although the latter had the final say, including the right of veto. Characteristically those identified tended to be socially supportive (Frederickson et al., 2005), and, in our sample could be categorised into three groups.

Firstly, children regarded as popular and socially connected, with the skills to include the focus child in new friendship networks (see also Bierman & Furman, 1984). An illustrative example of coded comments included:

*You want ones that are going to channel things through the others to the wider group then the class because you don't want them to become an isolated group so you want some quite popular children who are going to include them with their other group of friends.' (15)*

Secondly, children with socially supportive qualities who are likely to provide 'core group' membership.

Thirdly, children who may relate more closely to the focus child, or encourage firmer friendships based on common interests and outlook (Argyle, 1998). An example of coded comments in this category included:

*I was looking for boys who he would feel were not goody goody, so that he would feel a bit of an ally perhaps.' (3)*

Other practitioners have pointed to the unexpected benefits of including a classmate whose own behaviour may be challenging or unconventional (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996).

### **Developing group cohesion**

In order to become influential, Circles need to become cohesive (Taylor & Burden, 2000). For some groups this may develop quickly. Others may need time. Within the group, 'rules', 'routines' and 'social games' help promote cohesion. Open communication, and indications of increased liking and pro-social behaviour towards each other provide indications that cohesion is developing (Hogg, 1992; Gillies, 2004).

An example of a coded comment describing this sense of belonging and 'attraction to the idea of the group', as Hogg (1992) defines group cohesion, included:

*'the group became rewarding in itself and they didn't want other people in and they didn't want to miss it at all.'* (21)

Our analysis revealed that barriers to group cohesion may be triggered by a number of factors, including absences, the attitudes and behaviour of other group members and the reaction of the focus child to feedback. In some instances attitudes and behaviour of the focus child outside the Circle meetings became problematic (Whitaker et al., 1998). These needed to be worked through and not ignored. They may represent aspects of group developmental processes (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) that require addressing within the Circle or, in some instances, the classroom.

### **Role of the facilitator**

Pearpoint and Forest (1992) emphasised the role of the facilitator in developing and maintaining group cohesion. Facilitative strategies include: keeping the group meetings purposeful, acting as advisor, motivating the group, promoting open and honest discussion, and allowing the group to take more responsibility. This was illustrated by the following:

*'I suppose to start with it was kind of my group, but it so much became their group... and they really took it on board.'* (22)

## (2) Processes of social influence *within* Circle meetings

### *Social feedback and self-disclosure*

Social feedback and self-disclosure emerged consistently as influences on the attitudes and behaviour of the focus child and group. Social comparison theory (Aboud, 1985), social constructionist theory (Newton & Wilson, 2003) and attribution theory (Bierman, 2004) provide plausible theoretical accounts of the process.

Circle meetings offer safe opportunities for social feedback and self-disclosure. This feedback process begins with insights from the Set-Up meeting that are shared with the focus child. Increasing trust in Circle members and the validity of their social feedback may encourage the focus child to reconsider how others may view him/her and his/her views of the class. Some children may feel more confident sharing this feedback with a trusted peer rather than an adult. Comments coded under this category included:

*'to listen to them telling him what they did and didn't like about him, that is just such a powerful technique compared to me explaining and telling him.'* (3)

Social comparison theory suggests children are more likely to make comparisons to others with similar attributes in order to gain information about the appropriateness of their own behaviour (Aboud, 1985). The special social rules operating within the Circle facilitate the giving and receiving of such feedback, providing additional comparative information to the child about his/her behaviour, and its effect on others. When strongly expressed and from children the focus child trusts, it creates a social incentive to conform to peer expectations (Newton, Taylor & Wilson 1996). An example of a facilitator's observations included the following:

*'One week (a Circle member) had said he was hurt because (the focus child) had run into him and hit him in the back for no reason and he was one of the main helpers ... (the focus child) was so ashamed.'* (2)

Social feedback also provides examples of how other children dealt with similar situations. Circle members share solutions that 'worked' for them, and are appropriate to their peer culture, level of social skills and understanding. An example of a comment in this category included:

*'they were coming up with these ideas and suggestions that I hadn't thought of ... I found it really exciting that they had clearly completely understood the problem for him.'* (22)

Self-disclosure also featured in the codes where it was linked to social comparison. Erwin (1993) defines self-disclosure as 'the child's voluntary revelation of personal information in the course of a relationship' (p.108). This definition fits well within the Circle, where disclosure can be part of the natural process of building relationships and developing trust among members. Typical examples ranged from sharing information about hobbies and interests to more personal worries and day to day concerns at home or school. Two illustrative examples follow:

(i) *'they would talk about what they collected and what they did when they got home.'* (2)

(ii) *'I think she may have told them that she was adopted, but I think they hadn't really taken on board how that can affect somebody, so I think it did give them an awareness that that gives you issues you have to deal with.'* (15)

The rule of group confidentiality confirms the trustworthiness of the group to the focus child, and the security of his or her place within it. This provides a safe environment for personal disclosure.

Appropriate self-disclosure is an important process in relationships. Berndt and Hanna (1995) propose that it becomes of increasing significance from about eight years of age as friendships become more reciprocal and deeper, while Gottman (1983), observed that children more confident at self-disclosure were also more adept at establishing social relationships.

While self-disclosure provides information on which social comparisons may be made, Erwin (1993) argues that it also helps validate the child's sense of social reality. Coded comments illustrating this included:

*'To be honest you often get another one who will say something 'Oh yes that happened to me' ... I think it is good for the children to know that they are not alone and there are other children who are having exactly the same problems as them.'* (20)

For the focus child, receiving positive feedback and becoming an accepted member of a group of peers with whom s/he can identify enhances self-perceptions and influences more positive attributions about others (Bierman, 2004).

#### ***The influence of social feedback and self-disclosure on other Circle members***

Social feedback and self-disclosure were both seen to encourage changes in the Circle group's attitudes by assisting them in 'renegotiating' their views about the focus child (Newton & Wilson, 2003), or their attributions about the sources of the child's behaviour (Bierman, 2004). It is through the Circle that each member becomes more aware of the focus child's difficulties and is able to see more of the latter's positive side. As one facilitator commented:

*'I think that once the Circle was formed that the network began to become much more aware of what was going on with (focus child) because she opened up to them.'* (14)

Such revised perceptions may influence the group as a whole, encouraging empathy and tolerance (Eisenberg et al., 1995). An example of coded comments in this category included:

*'the group probably allowed him to get away with more if he was not behaving nicely, they kind of made allowances for him.'* (7)

### **(3) Social support and influence beyond the Circle**

#### ***Social and psychological support from the Group***

In effective Circle interventions the group influence extends beyond the actual meetings, particularly in the context of a supportive school ethos. These influences may operate in a variety of ways, illustrated in the following codes and categories.

- Watchfulness  
*e.g. 'But equally noticing that he was being picked on by others, that he was being purposely wound up and so they would kind of notice when to intervene.'* (15)
- Verbal prompts  
*e.g. 'then one of them (Circle group) would say 'yeah that is because I had a quiet word with him and I said keep calm or remember to do this.'* (4)
- Non-verbal prompts  
*e.g. 'they had some sort of signal in order to say we're here and do you think it's about time you got back on track again.'* (14)
- Praise  
*e.g. 'They would praise him up and say 'you need to tell (classteacher) about that, that was excellent.'* (2)
- Signalling problems to adults  
*e.g. 'if there was a problem one of them would come and find me.'* (13)
- Social intervention with peers  
*e.g. 'The boy was being horrid and leaving a large space (in the line) and encouraging others to follow his example. She said that one of the group stood in the space that had been left and stood up for this child when this boy was being horrid and they did this all the time...'* (24).

Such positive activities fit well with the role of 'active bystanders' (or 'defenders') that feature in research into incidents of bullying amongst children (Salmivalli, 1995, 1999). Rigby and Johnson (2004) also found that bystanders are more likely to help a child for whom they show empathy, where there is a recognition they are a friend, or have previously helped the child. Our current theory predicts that being a Circle member enhances such capacity to intervene positively.

Groups may also *formally* agree on ways to support the focus pupil outside the Circle. Examples from our coding included play-time rotas, shared reading or simply sitting together in class or in the lunch hall. This often developed into *spontaneous* helping or sharing activities, in or out of school, including play and social pastimes, choosing to work as a partner in lessons or helping the focus child back into the class if they ran off. In many cases this form of help may be no different from that which one friend may offer to another (Cottrell, 1996).

Positive social feedback *within* the Circle and increased pro-social support *outside* facilitate the child's inclusion, with consequent benefits to their personal, social and emotional well-being. Writers, such as Kahn and Antonucci (1980), hypothesise that this works by peer support moderating any emotional challenges or personal disappointments encountered during the school day.

Leyden (1996), in a review of peer supports in school, concluded 'Inclusive and collaborative techniques write the peer back into the special needs script and the child with special needs back into the peer group.' (p.54)

#### ***Circle members' influence on the rest of the class***

From our analysis, the Circle group, through its evolving attitudes, words and deeds, may influence class perceptions of the child, increasing levels of acceptance towards the focus child and ways in which they can contribute. Miller (2003) uses the concept of a 'ripple effect' to describe such processes. Examples from our coding include the following:

*'So even the children who didn't come forward knew something was going on ... They see this Group as looking out for her but they were not blind to her faults. They were giving her a chance, gradually their friends were pulled in and thought she must be OK. I think it did have a little ripple effect in the classroom.'* (9)

This idea was elaborated in the following:

*'they kind of modelled more appropriate responses and ways of dealing with him and*

*other children have come and copied that, so whereas before somebody would probably join in to provoke him, now that there was eight children responding in a certain way more appropriate, other children seemed to tag onto that.'* (22)

Further, the influence of the Circle on the classroom permeated the conversations, interactions and in some cases interventions with peers. An example of data coded in this category included:

*'Because the children in the group were part of other groups in the classroom it meant ... they could turn round and say 'yes but you know actually he is trying really hard and he has managed to achieve that' ... that meant it was kind of spread out towards the rest of the class, so in that respect it had a big impact.'* (4)

The role of the facilitator and group in emphasising the contribution of the class as a wider support circle, and having a rolling group membership also minimised potential in-group/out-group effects which may occur as a consequence of creating any group (Nesdale et al., 2003; Taylor & Burden 2000).

#### **Conclusions**

Our analysis indicates ways in which the Circle, its roles and processes, represent complex and multilayered systems of relationships both within the group and across the wider community of the school. The 'Grounded Theory' analysis provides an overarching theoretical framework for understanding the core process based on the theory of 'open' and 'closed' systems. This contains further sub-processes, for example, group cohesion and social feedback, each with their own theoretical underpinning. Each of these contributes further insights into the social and psychological workings of the group, for instance, through processes such as self-disclosure, the nature of active social support and 'ripple effects'.

Critical evaluations of the research method adopted in this study can be found in James (2006) and James and Leyden (2008). The current, emergent theory is

coherent, detailed and grounded in an adequate sample of data. It is sensitive to the rich range of outcomes and complexity of processes and accommodates ideas from social constructionist theory as described by Newton and Wilson (2003) and the cognitive-behavioural and interactionist model of Frederickson et al. (2003), supported by related social psychological approaches.

Future evaluations need to take into account not only the changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the focus child, Circle members and wider peer group, but also the practical support provided by Circle members and the social and psychological benefits of this. Methodological considerations need to ensure an adequate time period for the intervention, and the development of ecologically sensitive measures to gauge relevant variables, such as incidents of helping or other spontaneous social interventions.

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