

## **Introducing Circle Time in a Chinese Middle School: A Response to the Current Needs of Education in China?**

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This article is concerned with a research undertaken in a middle school on the Chinese mainland and the implications of its findings. The research involved the introduction of an experiential pedagogy usually described as circle time. The article describes the contribution of circle time to affective education and its pedagogical nature. The historical and broader cultural context in which the research was undertaken and the significance of these are discussed. Aspects of the research and its findings are then presented. Though the impact of the intervention (i.e., circle time) on students' self-esteem was limited, it appeared to have some positive effects on their academic achievement. Data was collected using a range of methods. Both the students involved in the circle time and the teachers showing an interest responded positively. There were at least three important implications from the research: (a) an experiential approach developed in a Western context could be effectively transposed to an Eastern one; (b) based on the positive response from the students, it could have potential value for other students on the Chinese mainland; (c) young people have an affective need to which education in China is

currently failing to respond. Finally, the limitations of the research are highlighted and the directions for future research are suggested.

*Keywords:* affective education; circle time; pedagogy; *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education); personal and social development

This article is concerned with a research undertaken in a middle school on the Chinese mainland. The research involved the introduction of an experiential pedagogy usually described as circle time. First, the conceptual area to which circle time contributes and its pedagogical nature are briefly discussed. Following this, the historical and broader cultural context in which the research was undertaken is considered along with the practical issues raised by transposing an approach developed in a Western context to an Eastern one. Finally, the research findings and some of its key implications are described.

The dangers of transposing educational policy and practice from one cultural setting to another are manifested in Fuller and Clarke's (1994) warning that it is unwise to assume that the same instructional materials and pedagogical practice hold constant meaning in the eyes of teachers and students. Thus, one of the aims of this research is to respond to this issue by testing whether an approach developed in one culture (Western) could be effectively transposed to another (Eastern). The nature of the conceptual area, *affective education*, to which circle time is believed to make the most significant contribution, will be introduced in the following section.

### **Affective Dimension of Education**

In the West, there exists a tradition of emphasizing the affective dimension of education (Best, 1998; Bloom, 1982; Gysbers, 1994; Lang,

1994, 1998). Affective education, according to Lang (1995), is manifested in different ways throughout the world. Lang (1995), drawing on a working definition agreed by the European Affective Education Network (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/neothemi/sneill/eaen>), defined affective education as part of the educational process that concerns itself with the “attitudes, feelings, beliefs and emotions of students; it is concerned with personal and social development of the individual’s self-esteem and relationships with others” (p. 276). Researchers in an international research project described affective education as a significant dimension of teaching and the educational process “concerned with the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of students, with their emotional literacy, interpersonal relationships and social skills, i.e., with the non-cognitive aspects of students’ development” (Puurula et al., 2001, p. 165). Lang (2006), when talking of the education in the United Kingdom (U.K.), raised a central issue in relation to its delivery:

To what extent must affective education engage pupils actively? Does the idea of affective education which is simply taught to pupils, through didactic methods, videos and worksheets make sense? (p. 86)

This can also be seen as an issue of education in China, with its continuous emphasis on theory as opposed to practice that should actually happen in the classroom. Circle time, it can be argued, is one among a number of approaches or techniques that can contribute to a more active and less didactic approach to delivering affective education.

When talking about affective education, we must first understand several things: (a) it is not encouraged to show affection in public in the traditional Chinese culture; (b) there is no such a term as “affective education” under the umbrella of moral education in China; (c) even the Chinese translation of “affective education” is not totally the same in

meaning as in the West. In fact, affective education in China is almost totally oriented toward values and moral education in school (Katz, Romi, & Qui, 2005) rather than toward the personal and social development of students. In China, moral education is considered the soul of education (Qi & Tang, 2004). In the Chinese education system, *sixiang pinde jiaoyu* (ideology and moral education) is the nearest equivalent to affective education in a Western context. X. Zhu and Liu (2004) defined moral education on the Chinese mainland as an umbrella concept that consists of education within the communist ideologies of politics, law, morality, and mental health. Strictly speaking, “moral education” in the Chinese context is not the same as moral education in English.

Along with rapid economic development, there are changes in society. These changes challenged the traditional teacher-student relationship and the pursuit of correct ways for striking the balance between diversification and centralization. This has led to a reconsideration of the relationship between the individual’s values and the core values of moral education (Yang, 2004). Tan (1999) argued that there is a “belief vacuum” when traditional moral criteria are no longer accepted and new values and morals have not yet developed. This is one of the reasons why there are social and moral issues and why moral education in schools remains ineffective and inefficient. There is no clear vision of a representative value and moral system.

Educational reform and innovation in China has started emphasizing individual development (W. O. Lee, 1997), which is essentially affective in nature and to some extent parallel to Western developments. As W. O. Lee (1997) summarized, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has paid attention to youth-centered and pedagogical principles. However, Marxism and Socialist spiritual conceptualization are still stressed as the guiding principles. A. C. M.

Lee (2004) pointed out that after the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism was once again utilized as a means of rationalizing communist politics. Li (2001) also pointed out that on the Chinese mainland, moral policy is centered within the state apparatus and divorced from reality, thus not able to meet the need of individuals for independence, freedom and personality development. As a result, school moral education does not tally with social and family values. Personal needs are neglected and ignored. In fact, the current moral educational approaches to affective education in China tend to be based on theory rather than actual pedagogy. As Zhan and Ning (2004) indicated, there are many inconsistencies between teachers' theoretical knowledge and their actual teaching methods in moral education. One of the most widespread problems is that moral education teachers are familiar with teaching facts and information, but lack experience in facilitating students' learning through practice. This presents a major difficulty for the advance of moral education reform and raises questions about the Ministry of Education's (1999) recommendation that the techniques of moral education should be more widely adopted.

With the above situations and some other recent developments in China, such as increased individualism, the possibly less constraint on personal and social development, the lack of an appropriate ideology to replace the redundant communist one, coupled with changing family structure and the quality education policy, there is a potential for a more "affective" approach to education. However, other aspects such as the examination-orientated schooling, the reliance on abstract theory rather than practical approaches, and the misunderstanding of the nature of quality education suggest that there will be much constraint over any real changes toward more affective practice in the classroom.

## **Circle Time**

Circle time is a technique used to help children understand and

express themselves, to promote children's self-esteem, and to develop their interpersonal relationships. It is also seen as an appropriate pedagogy for promoting other areas of the curriculum. Circle time involves activities that aim at developing participants' awareness of themselves and others, promoting mutual trust, and developing listening skills and positive interpersonal behavior. A basic principal of circle time is that all participants are equal and each one's contribution is equally valued. Currently in England, many primary schools and some secondary schools use circle time. In English schools, little empirical research has been undertaken in relation to its effectiveness and outcomes. Nevertheless, where circle time is well run, there is evidence that the vast majority of students of all ages enjoy it. Although there has been limited research focusing on circle time, some evidence shows that where it is undertaken effectively, it can encourage better interpersonal relations and behavior in a class and can be highly motivational.

Though there are many other potentially valuable experiential pedagogies, a particular strength of circle time is its rule-bound and structured nature. This means that it has the potential to be more controlled than many other techniques but still provides those participants the opportunity to participate in a process that is essentially experiential and affective but unthreatening.

### ***Circle Time in Practice***

As with most pedagogies, there is no universally agreed version of how circle time should be undertaken. What follows represents what the authors of this article believe it should typically involve. The starting point for all the activities is everyone sitting in a circle. Wherever possible, the teacher adheres to the same rules as students. As a general principle, the teacher should act as a facilitator and ultimately an equal partner during the actual practice. There may be some formal way in which the circle session is opened and closed. This may not be the same

way every time: for example, this time a smile may be passed round the circle, another time a handshake. In initial stages, a special object will be passed round the circle; only the person holding the object will speak. Everyone gets a chance to speak, but no one has to if they don't want to (they can say pass). Everyone not holding the object will listen; there will be no put-downs or negative statements about others in the circle. Later as circle time sessions develop, constructive criticism may be allowed under certain circumstances. For example, one approach used in this case is that if you are going to make a critical point about someone in the circle, you must also make a positive one. In advanced circles, students may ask someone else to comment on the way they behave. Normally at the start of circle time work, the group agrees a set of rules which they are regularly reminded of. Typically these will include:

- Only one person talks;
- Everyone else listens;
- You don't have to speak;
- There will be no put-downs;
- What happens in the group belongs to the group alone (i.e., confidentiality).

Along with passing the object, changing places is a key aspect of circle time. It energizes the group and ensures that everyone eventually sits next to all other members of the group (and ultimately works with them). The reasons for changing places can vary depending on the age of the group (e.g., if you have a pet at home, or if you have been to a disco recently). Changing places can also be an unthreatening way of acknowledging something more serious (e.g., if you think that some bullying happens in the group).

The first step toward a less formally structured approach to discussion (an aim of circle time) will be students working in pairs in

the circle discussing something and then reporting back to the circle. Students will be encouraged to talk clearly, speak to the circle as a whole and not just to the teacher, and also speak slowly with no rush. Circle work will start where individuals and pairs respond to sentence completion exercises in rounds, and then respond to more open stimulus. Circle time should be enjoyable and can involve a number of games and fun activities. It should take place regularly and typically start with an enjoyable warm-up activity followed by more serious discussion and concluded with another less serious activity. Circle time work can be undertaken with any age group from nursery to adults.

The comments from the Chinese students presented in a later section of this article testify to the potential of the approach and the way feelings and emotions can be discussed in a secure manner. Clearly circle time has developed within the parameters of a strong Western tradition, but how would it fare when transposed to a context where the parameters are essentially of an Eastern one? This is of course the question that the research described in this article set out to answer.

### **The Social Context in Which the Research Was Undertaken**

Over the last 30 years, China's economy has experienced a growth rate of 8% per annum (Hu, 2007). K. Liu (2004) analyzed the globalization and cultural trends in China, and pointed out that under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China abandoned Mao's revolutionary idealism and adopted an economic developmentalism in order to build a modern, market-oriented post-socialist nation. This developmentalism strategy was to integrate China into the capitalist world-system only in the economic and technological sectors. Since 1978 when economic reforms were instituted, the government's role in the economy has been lessened significantly (X. Chen, 2004; Goldstein, 1996; Nolan, 2004), while in political, social, and cultural spheres, there was never a clearly articulated acceptance of the norms and values of global capitalism.

Integration into globalization, therefore, was never conceived as a total submission to capitalism in a strategic sense. This dichotomy can be seen as a key cause of the tensions that exist in current society and as a result in education.

Economic development has raised Chinese living standards. An individual's personal interest and goals have come to be more attainable than before. Thus the opening-up policy not only resulted in economic development but also brought the opportunity for the Chinese to assimilate Western ideology and culture. Again since the one-child policy was implemented, family structure and values have changed and the weight of expectation on each child increased. There is little chance for any family to risk the failure of their only child; therefore, they put more pressure on their child to be successful in education to secure a bright future.

Along with the rising “living standards” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009), “individual-oriented social values” and “individualism” have been increasing (X. Chen, 2004). Individual personality development is now being encouraged up to a point which also brings the need to seek new ideologies appropriate for individualism. Education in China has not been prepared for these new individual demands as the current examination-oriented education systems, based on the traditional Chinese educational perspectives and attitudes and compounded by parents' high expectation for their only child to have a secure future, still remains dominant. This situation creates problems for the development of a more affective approach. To some extent, this more affective approach is embodied at the policy level in *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education). The term “quality education” first appeared in the article “Quality Education Is the New Target of the Junior High School” (Yanshi, 1988, cited in Y. Zhu, 2004). Since then, “quality education” has been argued about, debated and questioned in China.

In 1994, the National Educational Council (renamed as the Ministry of Education in 1998) announced at a press conference that reform was the only way to reduce Chinese students' learning burden. They urged schools to change examination-oriented educational patterns, strict teaching hours and controlled examinations. The aim of quality education is to focus on students' well-rounded development rather than only on "memorization and examination scores" (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). However, Dello-Iacovo also pointed out that the purpose of cultivating these "high quality" people was not for their own personal fulfillment but to meet the needs of the nation. This is a significant point of difference when considering affective education in a Chinese context because in a Western context, the key aims of affective education tend to be concerned with individual development and personal fulfillment. In 1999, the central government published the report *Decisions of the Central People's Government on Deepening Educational Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education* (Ministry of Education, 1999). The main theme of this was the motivation of all CCP party members and all citizens for an extensive education system reform, with the goal of advanced quality education conducted comprehensively in order to raise the nation's quality and creativity, and to develop its scientific and educational standards. It was also stressed that the aim of quality education was to raise the nation's quality of education, and to produce cultivated students possessing creativity and practical ability. In particular, the report stresses the teaching methods of moral education, and encourage teachers to combine moral education with subject teaching that is relevant to student's everyday life and social practices and that overcomes formalism by paying attention to practical effectiveness. This report was the first occasion that the nation was officially mobilized to implement quality education. The aim of quality education is to cater for all students, fully develop their character, tap the potential ability of the educated person, and promote the whole

moral, intellectual and physical development of students in all its aspects (Li, 2001; B. Liu, 1997, 2000; Wang, 2002; Zhao, 2003). Zhao (2003) argued that quality education should be based on the nature of humans and the character development of individuals. Z. Chen (2001) suggested that the sense of equality should be considered as the primary element in quality education. Students should be treated on an equal basis with teachers, a type of relationship which is important in circle time work. Although the ideas of quality education are whole-person development and reducing students' learning burden, putting the ideas into practice in schools has not been as successful as was anticipated by policymakers and politicians. Although the State Council has advocated the promotion of quality education as the core of educational reform, some issues have emerged which cast doubt on the practicality of quality education in the current Chinese education system (Mu, 2007).

The main issue in developing quality education is that it is understood and interpreted in different ways. Cao (2001) argued that quality education has not been accurately defined and understood by educationalists and teachers. According to Cao, the following are needed in order to promote education: (a) educational theories; (b) a new, democratic teacher-student relationship; (c) relevant educational resources and curriculum change; (d) reform of the examination system.

Gong (2001) criticized the belief that quality education is considered to be in opposition to examination-oriented education. He suggested that quality education should embrace both the examination sector and the non-examination areas. If examination-oriented education cannot be removed completely, then the idea is simply to restore the balance in favor of quality education.

Another significant issue is that researchers do not, in the main, investigate or write articles on quality education. Journalists, officials

and non-researchers have played an important role in talking about quality education. It is hard to find research about quality education in practice.

This study started by introducing a Western pedagogy to a school in China, aiming to generate an affective theory with practical basis for addressing the issue of laying particular emphasis on theory but not action in China's affective education. It sought to induce from practical pedagogy an affective theory in Chinese context.

### **Research Questions**

The study investigated the potential contribution of a Western pedagogy, circle time, to China's affective education. Circle time was introduced to a Chinese secondary school, seeking to test the hypothesis that it is an effective method for students' personal and social development. At the same time, the perceptions of students and teachers about the affective dimension of education were generated from their experience and opinions of the experiment. Teacher-student relationships were a particular concern of the study. The Chinese have long been experiencing the call for centralization and conformity rather than individuality, but the study tried to demonstrate the possibility of equality and democracy between teachers and students. As a result, the individual's point of view was highly valued in the study. The study adopted a mixed design, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the perceptions of students and teachers in greater detail.

The research questions operated at two levels:

- Firstly, can circle time, an experiential approach developed in a Western cultural environment, work effectively in an Eastern one? The hypotheses were: Circle time can develop students' listening, speaking and interpersonal skills, and develop positive relationships in Chinese schools.

- Secondly, what are the different opinions and experiences about circle time between Chinese and U.K. students?

The literature of circle time from the U.K. and other Western countries provides evidence that it can enhance children's confidence in speaking and listening, and also promote children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (Canney & Byrne, 2006; Kelly, 1999; Weatherhead, 2008). Will the Western seed of the circle time pedagogy flourish in the Eastern soil of the Chinese education system? An experiment was constructed to test the function of circle time in a secondary school on the Chinese mainland. Tests, questionnaires, documentation and interviews of both students and teachers were employed to triangulate the experiment's outcomes. As this was an introductory study, a preliminary study was carried out in a U.K. secondary school to provide comparative aspects for the experiment, but the research was not a true comparative study in itself.

The second objective of this study was to investigate affective education in the Chinese educational context and, thereby, to offer appropriate suggestions for teachers and education practitioners to support students in their development of personal and social skills, based on insights from the study. Circle time was considered as a starting point in Chinese schools to promote the idea of affective education and to develop a positive teacher-student relationship that encourages equality and democratic strategies in contrast to the existing traditional hierarchical patterns.

## **Participants**

The research was undertaken in a school specializing in foreign language study, mainly English (hereafter referred to as School X). School X is one of the 17 foreign language schools in China. It is considered a key school for cultivating foreign language specialists for

the country. The reason for choosing School X was its small class size of 26 students in English teaching. This made circle time more feasible. In addition, the head teacher was interested in having the experiment in her school.

After a week of negotiations with different departments in School X, the circle time sessions started from September 2005 to January 2006. Four of the 12 classes in Grade 7 were randomly chosen as the experimental group and 4 other classes as the control group. The experimental group was divided into two subgroups as two classes in the group were boarding classes and the other two day pupils. Students in the boarding classes were from rural areas. To study in this school, they not only needed to pass the entrance examination, but also paid extra tuition fees.

Although this grouping of participants resulted in more difficulties in data collection and analysis, the findings revealed significant differences between the two types of students in terms of academic achievement and self-esteem. In School X, originally each class had 52 students but was divided into two classes for the English lesson. The idea was to offer students better opportunities to improve their English studies. This class setting was then taken as the circle time group. The experimental group was divided into two subgroups, E1 (boarding classes) and E2 (day pupils). Each subgroup had two classes with 52 students in total. The researcher led circle time sessions once a week for each subgroup. Teachers were encouraged to join in.

## **Procedures**

Experimental subgroups E1 and E2 started their circle time sessions from Week 2. Each session was based on one topic mainly related to their daily life. Before the mid-term examination, all topics were decided by the researcher. Later on, when students got used to circle

time procedure, some topics, such as *idols*, *generation gap*, *boys and girls*, were chosen by students on the basis of their interests (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Session Plan and Content of Circle Time Experiment Schedule**

Week	Time	Circle time session
1	5–9 September	Time arrangement
2	12–16 September	Coming to a new place (first session)
3	19–23 September	Hosting national educational conference for student-centered education
4	26–30 September	Making friends
5	3–7 October	National holiday
6	10–14 October	Holiday and Internet friendship
7	17–21 October	Death and life
8	24–28 October	You are the best
9	31 October–4 November	How do you feel about examinations
10	7–11 November	School mid-term examination
11	14–18 November	Idols
12	21–25 November	Generation gap
13	28 November–2 December	Boys and girls
14	5–9 December	Moral conflict
15	12–16 December	Ideals
16	19–23 December	Merry Christmas and Happy New Year party
17	26–30 December	Making a tower together without verbal language (a whole-class session)
18	3–7 January	Conclusion and questionnaires

## Data Analysis

This was the first time that circle time was introduced to a school on the Chinese mainland, and a mixed design based on a pragmatic stance was employed. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and students' dairies, field notes and photographs during fieldwork. SPSS 15 and NVivo 7 were used for data analysis. This study triangulates different data sources of information to conduct a coherent analysis (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Data Collected in This Research**

Data type	Data name	Quantity	Analysis
Questionnaire	• Circle time opinion questionnaires	207	SPSS
	• Self-esteem test questionnaires	1131	SPSS
Interview	• Teacher interview	18	NVivo
	• Student interview	33	NVivo
Record	• Circle time session record	16	NVivo
Document	• Chinese students' academic results	2	SPSS
	• Chinese students' summaries of circle time	64	NVivo
	• Students' diaries, compositions and letters	12	NVivo
Photograph	• Students' pictures during circle time	201	Interpretation

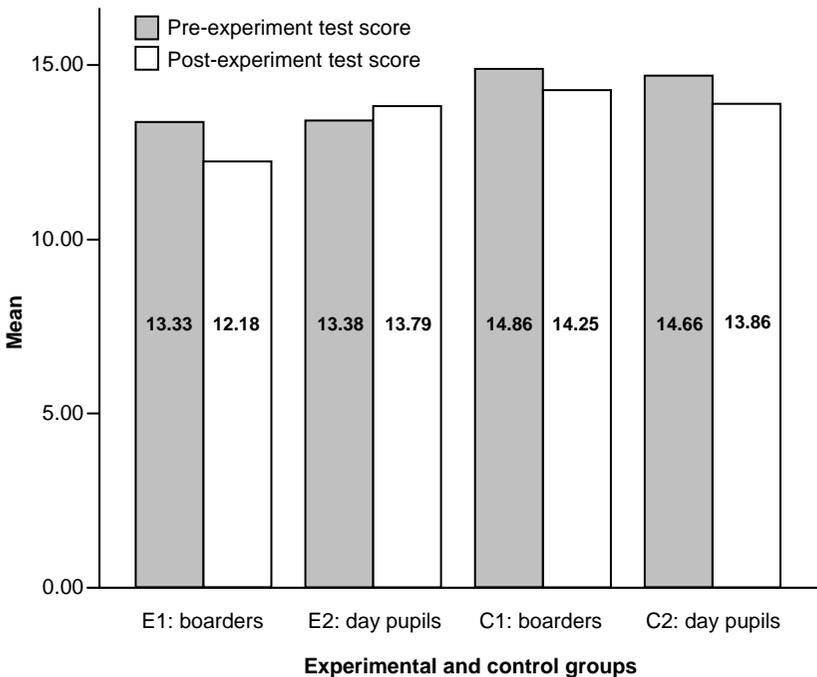
## Results

As this was essentially a short-term intervention, it was not anticipated that it would have a significant impact on both the self-esteem and academic achievement of students as measured before and after the circle time sessions. However, students expressed extremely positive feelings about circle time. This in itself can be seen as a very significant finding. In particular, the way these young people responded to circle time suggests that cultural difference is not an issue in adopting this new pedagogy and that it has the potential to meet their affective need which is currently often ignored by Chinese schools. The authors believe that although the generalizability of the findings are limited, the circle time approach that produced these positive reactions has a potentially valuable contribution to make as Chinese education moves toward a more holistic and affective pedagogy in the classroom. They also believe that these responses not only demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach but also identify a currently unmet need of the development of these high-achieving students.

Data collected through questionnaires, interviews and students' dairies and field notes confirm how much they have enjoyed circle time and felt benefited from it.

Figure 1 shows that generally, most Chinese students' self-esteem decreased slightly after receiving secondary education half a year. This may be because as they moved up from primary school to secondary school, they had to face keen competition and most were not able to achieve the very high scores they had been used to in primary school.

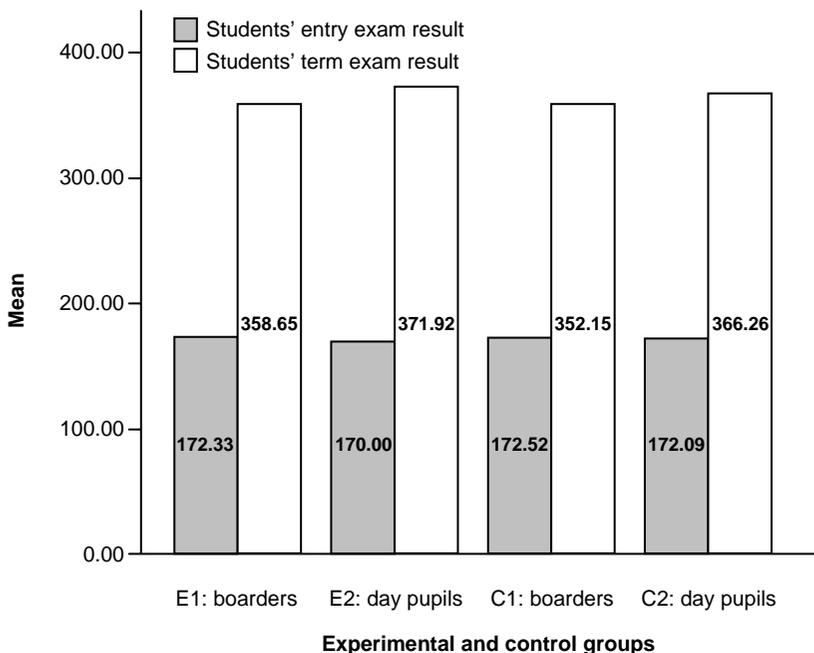
**Figure 1. Students' Self-esteem During Circle Time Experiment**



As shown in Figure 2, the average entrance examination scores of all classes were about the same. After half a year, the average term

examination score of E1 was 6.5 higher than that of C1, and the score of E2 was 5.66 higher than that of C2. This higher score on the part of the experimental group as opposed to the control group might be attributed to the circle time intervention.

**Figure 2. Students' Academic Progress During Circle Time Experiment**



According to the students' circle time opinion questionnaire, more than 80% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that "circle time is an opportunity for me to express myself"; 72% shared the idea that "others can understand me more after circle time"; 68.2% thought that "I understand myself better after circle time"; and 62.2% believed that "my group gets on better with each other as a result of circle time" (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Chinese Students' Feelings About Circle Time**

Students' opinions of circle time	Strongly agree	Agree
1. Circle time is an opportunity for me to express myself.	33.3%	46.9%
2. Others can understand me more after circle time.	26.1%	45.9%
3. I understand myself better after circle time.	25.2%	43.0%
4. My group gets on better with each other as a result of circle time.	23.2%	39.0%

### *Why Students Liked Circle Time*

There are various reasons why Chinese students were in favor of circle time. For example:

- I like to talk with others, because I can know more about other classmates.
- I like to talk about some interesting topics, because it can help us to reduce unfriendly things within us.
- I can express my thoughts and opinions and can talk about everything. It makes me feel easy and relaxed.
- I like mostly to talk together. We can relax and speak out our thoughts from the heart.
- Talk about the topics which everybody likes. (Speak out personal ideas, understand self and others.)
- I like to express my ideas with others around a topic, because everyone can talk freely. We can communicate, understand [each other], and boost friendship.

Overall, most Chinese students felt that circle time was an opportunity for them to “express” themselves and “talk” about issues or some fundamental questions with others. They were confident that circle

time helped them understand themselves and others better. They also felt strongly that circle time can encourage better teacher-student relationships.

A student describes circle time sessions as follows:

The way she [the researcher] is delivering the lesson is special: a group of students and a teacher sit together to talk about one topic each time. She has a little bear; only the person with the bear can talk. We talk one by one and during this time, we speak out our mind. Once you talk about your mind, it's a release. The topics are more interesting to us, for example, the generation gap, my idols, boys and girls, the good points of each one, etc. ... We can talk about things we normally are afraid of talking about or don't have the opportunity to talk about. (Student 1)

### *Students' Feelings About Circle Time in Diaries*

Some students expressed their feelings about circle time in their diaries and compositions. For example:

I don't like any other lesson except the circle time. I feel unspeakable comfort and am hoping I can retain my joy in this session. It never fails to provide a feeling of comfort and relaxation. In this session, I can lay down my burden and go to the session with relaxation. No, it's not a lesson; it is play, the natural gift of a kid. I have, at least, an expectation for a certain thing [in this school]. I am so afraid if I won't have it anymore: what am I going to be or do? Hate the school? I don't know, maybe it won't be that serious. I like it [circle time], no burdens, not feeling tired; never dislike it and never ... as kids, does anyone dislike a subject that gives no worries and burden? (Student 2)

Two sessions are our favorites each week: one is the sport, the other one is circle time. I can stretch and be active at PE [Physical Education], and I can express myself and release pressure during circle time. If PE is the

class for body exercise, then circle time is the time for opening your hearts ... Each time when we have circle time, I am excited and agitated. Everyone sits in a quiet classroom, to express our ideas, share our happiness, and open our hearts to each other. It is so wonderful to know about other classmates who are going to be with you in the next three years ... When I have something sad, I can speak out here, and then the sadness will go away. I can concentrate on my studies after releasing these kinds of burdens ... Each circle time session is a time to discover something. There is always something I can remember forever. (Student 3)

Firstly, I feel lucky to be one of the students in this subject because only 4 classes are having this subject ... it's funny, relaxing and happy. We talk about things freely and speak our minds and thoughts. We get to know each other better and exchange feelings. On the whole, I think this subject is very good. (Student 4)

I have many benefits after having this subject. For example, previously we always had barriers between boys and girls. But now, we are best friends to each other. But there are still new things to explore. (Student 5)

I think, between classmates, communication is the most important aspect. Circle time provides us the best communication opportunities. Some topics in the circle time are the ones we normally don't talk about. From circle time, I learnt how to solve problems from my classmates. Sometimes, different classmates have different views toward the same question. It is good to have different views because we can have a more complete view toward things and also we can know all the classmates better. (Student 6)

These quotes illustrate that these intelligent and potentially articulate students appreciate the range of opportunities circle time

provided them while at the same time drawing attention to an important dimension of their education generally appearing to be lacking.

### ***Students' Comments on Circle Time***

The participating students also stated what they have learnt and how they have changed because of circle time. For example:

- It changed me and the way I communicate with people.
- I also learnt to respect girls ... and that the way to communicate with others is very important. You should understand others, and not take extreme positions to others.
- I have learnt skills to communicate with people.
- Now I have more ideas about different things, and talk with people with a decent manner. I don't know why; it might be because people understand each other more. It makes our relationships close.
- Also communication with parents improves; some students don't have many common topics with their parents either because of the age gap or because of other conditions. This session focused on understanding different ways of communicating with parents.

### ***Chinese Teachers' Understandings***

The number of teachers who actually participated in the project was small but for those who did, it was clear that circle time made a significant impression that it encouraged reflection and some change in attitude on their part:

At the beginning, I wasn't interested in it. I am sorry about it. I did not understand what the point to talk again and again was. I don't think problems can be solved just by talking. As a result, I did not cooperate in the research. I did not attend any sessions. However, later on, when

the students told me that they like it [circle time], and they can relax themselves by doing it, I started to change my ideas. (Teacher 1)

I was very surprised about that session. Lots of students cried, and so did teachers as well. Before that session, I had discovered some issues in our class. I was seeking a point of contact to solve the problems. That session gave me the chance to talk with them more openly. They became more cheerful. It was really helpful to my work ... Because of that session, I got some inspiration from circle time. I think we should not pay too much attention to students' shortcomings but should rather stress their strengths. I stopped criticizing students in public and only did so privately. I just point out their shortcomings on a one-to-one basis, and also suggest changes at that time. I am changing the way of communicating with students. (Teacher 2)

It brought me a deep impression when we did circle time the second time. It released lots of things about my students which I didn't find before. These were things I had always wanted to discover. After that session, some quiet girls became active. They had smiles on their faces, and started communicating with others. This was something I wanted to do already which has now developed in our class. I can't tell what exactly it is, but something has changed in our class, perhaps the atmosphere. I think since the [academic] term started, I kept too tight a control of the class. I didn't give them enough space; but that circle time session brought them enough space to communicate themselves. (Teacher 3)

## **Discussion**

In this article, we have briefly discussed the nature of the affective dimension of education and introduced the pedagogic approach known as circle time, which we believe can contribute to the promotion of this affective dimension. We have also discussed some aspects of the recent

development of Chinese society and the education system in relation to this. We have found that economic change has impacted on society which in its turn has started to change. This has placed the education system in a new situation and made new demands on it. To some extent at the policy level, there have been moves to respond to the changing situation and new demands but as yet these have had a limited effect on schools and the practice within them. One of the responses at the policy level has been the encouragement of a more holistic and affective approach to schooling and we believe that one reason for the limited success of this policy has been the failure to identify how this policy should be implemented in practice. It was our view that circle time could contribute to bridge this gap between policy aims and actual practice. This research was designed to confirm this belief in practice and two specific research questions informed it:

- Can circle time, an experiential approach developed in a Western cultural environment, work effectively in an Eastern one?
- If it can, what are the main benefits?

In relation to the first research question, this research has shown that a Western approach can be successfully transferred to an Eastern setting. The students involved were able to participate fully and enthusiastically. The researcher was able to run the sessions as effectively and productively as they had been able to with a class in an English school who experienced circle time regularly. The students responded to the key strategies of the circle time approach without difficulty. As for the second question, it has also shown that this has benefited the students involved and has the potential to benefit students far more widely in China. It is clear from the data collected that not only the majority of students have appreciated and valued circle time, but those younger teachers who showed an interest in circle time have also noticed a number of benefits to their classes as a result of their circle time sessions.

### ***Limitations***

Clearly, some issues need to be taken into consideration. Although the research has confirmed that an experiential approach developed in a Western cultural context could be transferred to an Eastern one in terms of student responses, and these responses suggest that circle time might meet some unmet needs of these students, the research has not shown how the approach might best be promoted in other Chinese schools where class size are much larger and the ability range of students wider. Second, these circle time sessions were run over a relatively short time span. Normally where circle time takes place in schools in the U.K., it is likely to run regularly for at least a year and often for several. Thus, it is likely that the findings from this research were more limited than they might have been if it had been possible to run the experiment for longer. Third, a particular problem that has emerged in this research was the attitude of many teachers. Although a small number of teachers did involve themselves and had positive feelings about circle time, most teachers showed little interest in circle time and took little trouble to find out about it, not even taking the opportunity to attend sessions.

### ***Directions for Further Research***

The above limitations suggest some directions for future research. A similar experiment to the one undertaken in this research but in a school with a broader range of ability and over a longer period of time would be likely the most productive next step. An important dimension of this would be to conduct the experiment in a school where the staff have been fully prepared for the introduction of circle time, feel positive about this, and is willing to be directly involved in the process. Certainly, if circle time and other experiential techniques are to be encouraged in China, further research and trials will be essential. This research has shown that to proceed along these lines will be very worthwhile.

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在中國內地的中學引進「圍圈活動時間」：  
回應中國當前的教育需求

本文介紹了在中國內地一所中學所進行的一次實驗性教育研究及研究結果的啟示。研究嘗試把「圍圈活動時間」(circle time)這一西方教學方法融入亞洲的學校教育當中。本文敘述了圍圈活動時間對情感教育的貢獻及其教學法本質，並從歷史和文化角度探討了研究的背景及其重要性。接着，文章描述了研究的各個層面及其結果。據研究結果所示，雖然圍圈活動時間對增加學生自尊心的效果不大，但卻能提高實驗組學生的學科成績。研究以多種方法收集數據，結果顯示，參與實驗的學生及對圍圈活動時間有興趣的老師都有十分正面的反應。研究結果至少有三個重要啟示：(1) 西方的經驗學習法可以有效轉移到亞洲的教育實踐當中；(2) 從實驗學生的積極回響，可見此教學法對中國內地的其他學生都有潛在價值；(3) 當前的中國教育實踐未能回應年青人情感教育的需求。最後，本文分析了研究的局限，並建議未來的研究方向。

關鍵詞：情感教育；圍圈活動時間；教學法；素質教育；個人及群性發展