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SCHOOLS IN CIRCLES AS A FORM OF SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN THE COMMUNITY – REFLECTIONS OF TEACHERS AND THERAPISTS*

Introduction: Schools in Circles is a proposal for informal support activities carried out in the family and school environment, involving students with intellectual disabilities and their families in the local community. It is based on the Circle of Support Model implemented in Poland since 2015 and the Canadian program “F-Words for Child Development” by the CanChild.

Research Aim: The aim of the study was to explore how teachers and therapists of individuals with intellectual disabilities evaluate the actions of Schools in Circles and what experiences, concerns, and methods they have for optimizing activities related to its development.

Research Method: Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to examine the opinions and experiences of the participants. A focus interview was conducted with nine people actively participating in the School in the Circles in various institutions from northern and southern Poland.

Results: The analysis allowed for the identification of four main themes: 1) the path to Schools in Circles – teachers’ and therapists’ own experiences in promoting and creating Circles of Support, 2) benefits of implementing the project for the student, family, school, and community, 3) concerns and threats to the project (issues with engagement from some staff and families, organizational problems), 4) methods for improving activities within Circles of Support.

Conclusions: The participants recognize the significant potential and value of activities aimed at building and supporting social relationships in the immediate environment of children with intellectual disabilities, with the goal of creating a safe and friendly future. The results can be utilized by professionals working in educational institutions to improve collaboration with families of students with intellectual disabilities and to further develop the concept of Circles of Support during the school education stage.

Keywords: teachers and therapists, students, intellectual disability, Schools in Circles, community, focus group research

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INTRODUCTION

Circles of Support consist of groups of people (both formal and informal) who voluntarily work together to support an individual through relationships based on trust and closeness (Macadam and Savitch, 2015; Bigby and Araten-Bergman, 2018). Sanderson (2015) defined a Circle of Support as “a small group of family, friends, and staff who come together to support a person, helping them identify what they would like to do or change in their life, and then supporting them to achieve it”. Circles help individuals with disabilities to achieve their life goals when they are unable to do so independently. The primary aim of a Circle is to assist people in planning new events in their lives (Wistow et al., 2016). Since the 1980s, Circles of Support have been operating to aid individuals with disabilities in countries such as Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Taggart et al., 2012; Bigby and Araten-Bergman, 2018), and since 2015, they have also been active in Poland (Żyta, 2020, 2022). In Poland, Circles of Support initially focused on supporting adults with intellectual disabilities (including participants of community support centers) and have gradually expanded to include children and adolescents, covering educational institutions as well.

The School in Circles, initiated in 2022 by the Gdańsk branch of the Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability (PSONI), represents an initiative to support the resources of students with disabilities and their families through a partnership-based collaboration between them, professionals, and the local community, in line with the principles of inclusion, empowerment, and community-based action. Its framework is based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF, 2001) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). It also draws on solutions developed by CanChild, a non-profit research and education center located in the School of Rehabilitation Science at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (www2). The guiding principles of the School in Circles place a particular emphasis on the concept of the F-words for Child Development and Family-Centred Services (Rosenbaum and Gorter, 2012; Świeczkowska et al., 2022; Świeczkowska and Żyta, 2024). Currently, the educational program of the School in Circles is implemented in five facilities located in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Jabłonka, and Elbląg (www1). The School in Circles model is holistic, person-centered, and biopsychosocial, and is built on four pillars: 1) a student-centered approach; 2) family-centered support; 3) a school within the local community; 4) a learning school (Świeczkowska and Żyta, 2024).

The School in Circles emphasises the importance of student subjectivity, works with family resources and actively collaborates with the community. Building on each student's individual experience, it is the result of the collaborative efforts of each member of the educational process.

It does not focus on the child's deficits, but draws on resources – student, family, school and community – to ensure the best possible development of the young person. It promotes independence and, through the planning process, prepares for adulthood. It creates personal networks, or circles of support, around the student and family, valuing the importance of relationships and connections. It is an open school, building a community of learning together with students, parents and the local community. (Świczowska et al., 2022, pp. 23–24)

PROBLEM AND AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the research is to find out the experiences and opinions of therapists and teachers in institutions implementing the School in Support Circles educational programme about the activities carried out as a new form of including families of children with disabilities in the local community.

The main research problems are as follows: 1) How are respondents involved in the establishment of School in Circles of Support? 2) What are the hopes and fears associated with efforts to develop the idea of School in Circles of Support? 3) What are the suggestions for developing the idea of a School in Circles of Support according to the therapists/teachers surveyed?

RESEARCH METHOD, SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS, AND DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

This qualitative study, grounded in an interpretive research paradigm (Husserl, 1989), used phenomenology, which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals within their surrounding world (Neubauer et al., 2019). A focus group interview was used as the research method, allowing for the analysis not only of statements and accounts related to experiences and events but also of the interactive context in which these statements and accounts were produced (Flick, 2011). Additionally, focus groups provide the researcher with access to interpretations and arguments that participants are more likely to reveal in a group setting – specifically, in a group of individuals involved in project activities (Barbour, 2011).

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the impossibility of direct access to the participant's experiences. The IPA process involved four stages of data analysis: 1) multiple readings and note-taking; 2) transforming notes into emergent themes; 3) searching for connections and grouping themes; and 4) writing the report (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

The study was conducted in March 2023 at a facility of the Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. It was a preliminary step preceding a series of cyclical meetings for therapists and teachers from schools involved in the development of the School in Circles of Support.

Nine individuals (seven women and two men) participated in the interview, all staff members from special education institutions in the Pomeranian, Warmian-Masurian, and Lesser Poland Voivodeships. Seven participants were teachers and therapists, two of whom also held managerial or directorial positions in institutions where the project is being implemented. In addition to educational staff, the interview included one psychologist and one social worker. All participants provided written consent to participate in the study.

The following selection criteria for the group were adopted:

- being an individual involved in the School in Circles of Support project,
- providing written consent to participate in the study, to be recorded, and to have their statements used for research purposes – consent was obtained following Rapley's (2010) consent framework.

The interview lasted 1.5 hours.

RESULTS

The analysis of the results allowed for the identification of four overarching themes (Table 1).

The first overarching theme is the personal experiences and attitudes represented by teachers and therapists towards promoting and creating support circles within the school setting. The analysis of the statements allows us to distinguish the actions undertaken by the studied therapists, which encompass several stages. These are: 1) actions promoting the project within the school environment, 2) selection of students and families for participation in the project, 3) development of profiles for students and families, and 4) "seeking allies" within the broader community.

The teachers and therapists surveyed began their work in creating the School in Circles in different ways – some are members of PSONI¹ institutions, while others learned about the project through participation in conferences, training sessions, or informal contacts. They attribute significant importance to the project's leaders – Katarzyna Świeczkowska (Vice-Chair of the PSONI branch in Gdańsk and initiator of Schools in Circles) and Paweł Jordan (President of the Board of the Boris Association, which has co-organized the Circles of Support project in Poland since 2015). All the surveyed teachers and therapists have been actively involved in building the School in Circles at their respective institutions for at least a year.

¹ The English translation of Polskie Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Osób z Niepełnosprawnością Intelktualną (PSONI) is the Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities.



They emphasize that the foundation of their work is focused on selected students and their families. Given the importance of full engagement from all members of the support circles, they recognize the necessity for a certain selection of families. They propose collaboration with those who are actively involved in the life of the institution and who have proven themselves in previous joint efforts:

Table 1.

Superordinate and constituent themes

Own experiences and attitudes represented by teachers and therapists in promoting and establishing Circles of Support in school
Actions for the establishment, promotion, and development of Circles of Support
Working with selected students and families
Engaging with the community (both immediate and extended)
Attitudes of participants involved in the project toward activities related to the School in Circles of Support
Committed optimism
Realistic positivity
Cautious skepticism
Advantages of implementing the project
Benefits for students
Benefits for the family of a child with a disability
Benefits for the institution (school, preschool, rehabilitation center)
Benefits for the local community
Benefits for individuals involved in the implementation of the School in Circles of Support
Concerns and risks associated with the establishment of the School in Circles of Support
Problems with involvement of families of children with disabilities
Reluctance on the part of the teaching staff to work in the Support Circles School approach
Organisational problems
Fear of being trapped in an institutional setting
The ways to improve activities to develop the idea of School in Support Circles
Grassroots work – working with families of young children with disabilities
Participation in supervision meetings
Organizing and supporting meetings and relationships among parents of children of various ages (experience sharing)

Source: Author's own study.

My experience so far, from what has been happening in our setting, is that we managed to select one student from each institution and invite a parent to collaborate. This followed a principle whereby teachers recommended students and parents who were already in a relationship with us – there was a higher likelihood that they would genuinely want to participate and, as a result, would be more engaged. (F4)²

² In coding the interview participants, the first letter indicating the gender of the respondent was used (F for female, M for male), followed by a sequential number.

In addition to working with families based on mutual support and a readiness to collaborate, an important aspect emerging from the respondents' statements is work within the community – both narrowly defined as the institution's staff and more broadly as neighbors, representatives of various institutions, organizations, and allies. Here too, they begin by seeking out individuals who are open, friendly, and willing to engage in new forms of activities. A key supportive factor is the involvement and goodwill of the administration/leadership, as well as an internal conviction regarding the purposefulness of their actions. According to the respondents, these factors enable them to “spread enthusiasm” to others and expand the circles:

What makes things much easier for us, what is our success, is that we maintain constant communication, even though our school has 130 teachers. I am pleasantly surprised, as a new staff member, by the motivation coming from the administration. It's fantastic, because it really allows you to take action, and you feel like you have solid “backup”. (F6)

It's crucial to attract willing people and our colleagues (...) We are doing this for a reason. We know why we are doing it, and we have become even more convinced that it's the right thing to do. Preparing the first profile, the questionnaire, which included questions and explained what F-words are (...) This made it easier to present it to colleagues, who became extremely enthusiastic. It worked for us! “I also want to try this because it's great. I'll know more about my student... I can meet with the parent. I look at my student in a positive light, and that's great”. It worked!. (K7)

The attitudes of the respondents involved in the project regarding activities related to the School in Circles allow for the identification of three groups of individuals: 1) committed optimists, 2) realistic positivists, and 3) cautious skeptics.

Committed optimists express that they feel their past efforts bring much joy and benefits not only to students, families, and other teachers, but also to themselves:

We are now riding this wave and are very happy because we feel it's really taking off. We were afraid of it. After sending an email, we suggested creating teacher profiles to convince them that this is not a big deal and to also encourage them to step outside and present themselves positively. To show that this is a two-way collaboration. The day after the email, 10 people came to me: “Hey, I want to do this. I'm just not good at graphics”. I said, “No, it's great! Open Word, write six sentences, and send them to me”. It was really positive! Something good!. (F7)

The School in Circles, both as a philosophy of action and a set of practical solutions, aligns with their approach to supporting families with children with disabilities, and brings considerable satisfaction in the search for new solutions. In this

group, the joy of action and even small successes outweighs any inconveniences or challenges.

In contrast, **realistic positivists** emphasize the need for ongoing work through successive stages, recognizing not only the necessity of thoroughly preparing all therapists and staff, but also the importance of continuously developing relationships with families:

At the beginning, we also reached out to those families where we already knew (...) we had previously experienced some success (...) We worked very hard to encourage parents to invite us, so that the initiative came from their side. And indeed, some families did just that – they invited us. This made it much easier to involve these families in the School in Circles project (...) The first profiles were created. The most memorable moment for me was when (...) the mothers came and thanked us for allowing them to see their sons in a completely different way. It was specifically two mothers of two sons. It was incredible. I think that was the most important thing I heard, and so did the people involved. It was a validation from both the parents and from ourselves. I had hoped that this would motivate other staff to take on this topic, to really feel it, rather than doing it because we told them to (...) So that they would see that it's truly worth it. However, it's varied. (F1)

This group appreciates small successes – such as a new perspective on students and their potential, a more person-centered approach to individuals with disabilities, and the development of new skills among the institution's staff. However, they are also aware of the “imperfections” in their efforts and the numerous challenges they face:

It's not that it worked perfectly. It wasn't a cure-all for everyone. Unfortunately, no (...) We see all the good things that await us in the end, the benefits (...) I also understand how difficult it is to sometimes organize time for teachers. It's even harder to coordinate space and time for all school staff – not just teachers, but also assistants, therapists, and physiotherapists – to have a proper amount of time to sit down and talk. You can't just hand out materials and exchange notes (...) It's not as if everyone is equally involved or that the workload is evenly distributed. I am aware, and I truly know which team members are bearing the brunt right now. But I hope and am convinced that this “contagion”, like the flu, will eventually spread to others. I think everyone needs time. This has been ongoing since September of this year, so I'm not discouraged; it's not a failure. We are still in the process. We set a two-year goal – if, after these two years, we see that the majority are on board, I think it will be a success. (F1)

Among the respondents, there are also **cautious skeptics**. Although they acknowledge the benefits of the core principles of the School in Circles, their experiences with promoting its ideas within their own context are more closely associated with challenges and difficulties:

Our environment is very small, and it's hard to find an ally (...) Why is that? I don't know. I think we did achieve some success in that we managed to create a profile for one child. But I don't know – if it's something mandated by the administration, does that mean it has to be done? That's not the right way. And if it's not mandated, then it won't be done. I don't know which option is better. Perhaps that's the reality everywhere? We devised a system where we divided the six F-words among the entire staff. We formed groups, and each group was tasked with developing questions for a specific word. It was mandated, and so it was done. Each group completed their task, and it was uploaded to the website and compiled. And that was it. What had to be done was done. I feel like it was more out of obligation than conviction (...) I don't know if we'll have the momentum to move this forward. I'm not sure why it's so difficult. I thought it would be easier. From my perspective, there's a significant sense of disappointment. (F3)

Another overarching theme involved the benefits of implementing the project for students, families, the school, the community, and those involved in its execution.

The respondents emphasized that the primary goal of the initiative is to enhance the autonomy of the student, while simultaneously providing support to the family, giving them peace of mind and hope for a positive future for their child. Circles offer an opportunity to foster a sense of community and extend outreach. At the same time, there is a notable emphasis on focusing on the child and responding to their expressed needs, which, according to some respondents, is not always a given in the everyday school context:

For the student, I see the benefit of increased autonomy, because if networking is done well, there will be many people available to provide support. Independence through support (...) It might seem contradictory, but that's how I understand it. The disability imposes certain limitations, but that doesn't mean the child has to remain isolated at home – there are people willing to offer support to the student. I think it's a relief for the family as well. There's an awareness that if I'm not there, others will step in to help, and you don't have to do everything alone. There are other families, other methods. For example, I currently have an eight-year-old with autism who is learning to go to the store by himself. His mother worries about him so much that she wouldn't normally allow it. But he has such a strong desire for independence that he insisted. And it turned out that, the first time, the shop assistant was shocked, but the second time she recognized him. By the third time, she smiled, and by the fourth, she already knew who he was and which building he came from (...) So, the family can experience relief, realizing they're not the only ones who know this child – others are familiar with his needs and can assist. (F4)

It's about being in a larger space – it's not just the student and the child anymore. It's not limited to a few environments, but extends further. For the family, it's about showing that there is a place for this child in the community and society. It's not just

a child for this one family, making them a closed environment, but rather the family has a chance to see that there are others around who can be there for the child. (F5)

I think it's important that someone begins to discuss what the child thinks, what they want, and how they see things. Who is important to them, who is not, what they like and dislike. Sometimes there isn't enough room for this in schools, and assumptions are made that a child enjoys something just because they seem to respond positively, or because I'm inspiring them and they follow along. The lower the child's functioning, the more significant this becomes. For the parent, it is important to realize that the child is growing, has their own needs (...) It's also crucial for the child to get to know other people. (M1)

Respondents observed that the School in Circles has a positive impact on the entire institution and the local community, primarily through the acquisition of new experiences, the emphasis on the importance of collaboration among all elements of the educational process, and the improvement of relationships, including between staff from different institutions within the region:

I think it's about additional experiences and the sense of success and agency when it works out. (F4)

A new tool, a new perspective (...) Systematizing everything. Because, to be honest, schools have been highlighting strengths for years (...) But sometimes it's just a bit theoretical (...) Thanks to the School in Circles with PSONI, we began to collaborate. Previously, we would only communicate by phone, just to find out that "no, we don't have any spaces available". That's the reality. Now, it's still "we don't have space", but at least I know who I'm talking to. (M1)

Certainly, promoting the institution is about demonstrating openness to new projects and ideas. At least at the level of these five teachers out of a hundred, it shows that the staff is indeed open. They serve as a role model. This gives the institution a certain reputation (...) A school that is eager for everything is, at least from a PR perspective, at the top. (F6)

In a context where the image in the media and public perception are becoming increasingly important, being a School in Circles is perceived by respondents as a positive distinction compared to other institutions. It indicates an openness to people and a desire to build a new quality aimed at enhancing the well-being of its participants. The developmental and motivational potential of the activities undertaken is strongly emphasized, which also improves the well-being and effectiveness of the professionals involved in creating the School in Circles:

I think it is developmental for me, internally. (F5)

Another experience, another set of skills, another motivation to read more, to avoid coming from a position of expertise (...) And it's also another question for me, because there's a new tool, new things, and I can ask parents, I can ask the children (...) It brings something to me as well, because I have a different perspective (...). (M1)

Another overarching theme involves **concerns and risks** related to the project. Active participants in Schools in Circles describe challenges in engaging the families of students with disabilities, some school staff, as well as organizational difficulties. Respondents noted, among other things, the reluctance of family members towards something new and unfamiliar, which disrupts their well-established daily routines:

I have older parents who no longer want to get involved. They are simply rural folks, the children are taken care of – that's enough. They don't want anything from us. "It's enough, leave me alone" (...) Even now, they are experiencing assistantship for the first time – they don't want anyone. They don't need it. They've managed for so many years (...) They don't need anyone now. They will get by. Maybe when it gets implemented, they'll see that it's worthwhile, and maybe it will work?. (F3)

Sometimes the contact with parents is average because when nothing is happening, they don't show up. When something is going on, they appear. They are not particularly interested in engaging. (M1)

The lack of family involvement can reduce the motivation of staff to promote the project. Just as mutual support and encouragement can be constructive and developmental, the negativity and apathy of one side can lead to discouragement. The "resistant" party can be either parents or school staff:

If there isn't engagement from parents, I think it might not take off. And I don't want it to be about forcing participation, but rather about motivating, a positive desire. (M2)

We have a problem with implementing this, with getting my colleagues on board (...) And then X. was with us, she came, and from what I know, there was a very positive response from parents. There was a meeting with parents. But the staff, not so much. Parents were more interested than the staff. After that meeting, there was a decision to hold a second meeting. The parents themselves set the date, and there was a second meeting. Parents met on their own. Whoever wanted to, of course. But the staff, somehow (...) I don't know why. But I don't think it's a lost cause. It's difficult (...). (F3)

There's definitely a division among teachers: an engaged group and one that is opposed. It's not as bad if there are people who simply say they're not interested, they don't care, because they have enough of their own work. But there are those who will actively discourage those who are undecided. That's what I don't like because it's demotivating. When someone is hesitant, there's potential to bring them on board. When

someone is neutral, it's manageable, but it's worse when someone is against it and tries to undermine it. (F6)

Another obstacle in the development of the School in Circles concept is organizational challenges, such as limited free time, workload, inadequate infrastructure, or difficulties in finding committed allies within the local community:

However, my disappointment with this school is that a considerable amount of time has passed, and we haven't managed to promote it widely among the entire staff and all parents. Many people, even among the staff, have heard the term, but they don't know what it's about (...) I'm trying to mobilize them. I would like it to progress faster, but for some reason, it's not happening, and that's my personal feeling. (F4)

The challenge is finding time to meet and coordinate things organizationally. That also complicates everything. (F5)

There simply isn't enough space, that's all. There's no opportunity to sit down and meet... What else makes it difficult? The workload is a barrier, because every teacher here is working at least one and a half full-time jobs (...) So, the legislative support is mediocre. Moreover, it's a public school, so we are accountable for fulfilling the core curriculum. There isn't any time during work hours for two or three people to just sit down and discuss things, or start planning and working together (...). (M1)

At this point, we probably don't have the manpower or the tools to make a significant impact here, and I fear we are alone in this – that we don't yet have enough allies to really make a difference (...). (F7)

I am afraid that these Circles will end up only as an institutional part. These concerns are related to parents (...) I worry that parents, in creating this, may realize they mainly have to rely on the institution, as they don't have the environment or close people to lean on. In my view, it's a very small group of people who have any family support. If someone from the family takes the child, goes for a walk, or to the cinema – aunt, uncle, it doesn't matter. And if they do have such people, they are from a generation that won't be there forever. Among peers, there is none; not even among siblings. I haven't studied this, but we have kids from large families who don't seem eager to engage (...). (M1)

The dilemmas related to running the project include concerns about being left within the Circle of the institution alone. The therapists interviewed express a desire for the creation and development of support circles to be initiated by staff and families, not just by the institution's management.

The fourth overarching theme is about **ways to enhance the activities within the support circles**. Interview participants see value in meetings with representatives of other institutions implementing the idea of the School in Circles. These provide opportunities to share experiences and best practices, to discuss concerns

and barriers. Such meetings can sometimes serve as a form of supervision, allowing one to observe their situation from an external perspective and receive support from other professionals:

It is important to continue such regular meetings or supervisions because they are a significant motivation to slowly, step by step, complete those tasks for which there is so little time – somehow time is found. And it's also because it's done in a communal way; we can share our impressions, and it's not a talent contest about who does better, who does more. We can discuss challenges and talk with the administration, support services, and specialists, knowing the environment is diverse and supportive. (F2)

When you talk, you realize that it's very similar everywhere, you get the sense that you're not different, that it's the same everywhere. (F1)

Supporting families/parents so that they take responsibility for building support circles seems crucial. One way to do this could be by facilitating relationships among parents and creating spaces for them to meet within their groups:

To extend these circles to include parents, somehow motivate them – I don't know how. To encourage parents to sit together and meet on their own. (M1)

If we sit down with a parent with such a questionnaire or during an interview – they tell us, “Yes, we have these challenges, we don't go out”, because there's a behavior issue, like the parent is embarrassed, the child behaves inappropriately. And we say, “Well, you know, there's another student in the class who behaves similarly. Could you meet with them?” And then the child doesn't only benefit from the relationship at school, directed by us (...) It's about encouraging them to see that there are opportunities, at least within their own environment, if they are hesitant to go outside (...) But at least do something extra to get that feeling that they are not alone. And besides, just sitting and complaining or something is one thing, but making them realize they do have resources, nevertheless (...) That person in the class, the one who understands them, another parent, is also their resource. They are in that room, in that class. (K6)

A greater openness to family and providing them with positive reinforcement to utilize their own resources seems essential. Respondents emphasize the particular need to work with parents of young children, to build in them a sense of agency and the ability to collaborate with others, as well as to encourage the building of positive relationships:

Support circles are not formed early enough, like when a child is born. If, at two years old, when signs of a spectrum disorder begin to show, someone should already start to act (...) Start with Early Development Support and similar things, counseling services. Begin from the very start. (M1)

DISCUSSION

All participants are actively involved in creating and developing the School in Circles within special education institutions, often serving as leaders of these initiatives. Although their attitudes towards the Circles may vary – from engaged optimists, through realistic positivists, to cautious skeptics – they all recognize numerous benefits for all members of the School in Circles as well as the immediate community. This observation is supported by other studies that highlight the advantages of support circles: they prepare for lifelong continuity of care and support for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Etmanski et al., 2019; Araten-Bergman and Bigby, 2021), promote supported decision-making, and provide material and emotional support to families (Lord and Hutchison, 2003; Etmanski et al., 2019; Lockman Turner, 2022; Żyta, 2022). Furthermore, they serve as a natural mechanism for ensuring continuous support without reliance on state funding (Wistow et al., 2016; Araten-Bergman and Bigby, 2021) and open communities to the idea of treating individuals with intellectual disabilities as respected and equal members (Wistow et al., 2016; Louw et al., 2020; Araten-Bergman and Bigby, 2021; Żyta, 2022).

Therapists and specialists particularly emphasize the importance of circles in enhancing the independence of students, which later translates into greater opportunities for social integration in adulthood, as well as an increased sense of security and well-being for both individuals with intellectual disabilities and their relatives. Both parents and specialists working in schools feel more at ease, perceiving that the responsibility is shared (Araten-Bergman and Bigby, 2021). Benefits are also noted in terms of improved functioning of the institution and the professionals working within it, as well as a positive impact on social attitudes and the openness of the local community.

Hayak et al. (2024) confirm that factors encouraging teachers to implement innovative solutions include organizational (institutional leadership and support), social, and professional factors (external training, administrative support, school climate, and positive relationships). Therapists interviewed in this study highlight organizational factors as potential barriers, similar to those noted by Hayak et al. (2024), such as lack of time, weak interpersonal relationships, and structural challenges (workload, lack of space for meetings).

Participants confirm that a series of actions is needed to enhance the functioning of the School in Circles, aiming at both the creation and development of new circles as well as the sustained engagement of students, their families, support staff within the institution, and representatives of the local community. These actions may take the form of meetings, training, supervision, assistance in initiating parent group meetings, and expanding the target group to include parents of young children with disabilities. Similar findings were reported by Araten-Bergman and Bigby (2021), who emphasize that building relationships and developing networks requires long-term commitment from those creating support circles. There is

a continuous need for specialists, who act as moderators and initiators of these activities, to adapt to changes in group dynamics as relationships evolve, in order to maintain group cohesion, activity, and purposeful engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

The School in Circles is a model that effectively supports families of students with intellectual disabilities, enhancing both their parenting skills and the integration of the child within the local community. Reflections from teachers and therapists indicate that supporting students with intellectual disabilities within the framework of School in Circles not only increases their chances for fuller development but also improves the overall quality of life for the entire family. This has a long-term positive impact on the local community and contributes to genuine inclusion. Research has allowed for the identification of both the advantages and the challenges associated with establishing support circles. This knowledge can assist those involved in seeking innovative ways to support students with intellectual disabilities and their families in further developing the School in Circles model and in creating effective support strategies.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study is qualitative in nature, which introduces certain limitations. It captures a specific segment of the experiences of individuals involved in the implementation of the School in Circles model in several institutions in Poland. Undoubtedly, including a larger group of participants – such as parents and students – in a quantitative study would provide a broader context for understanding the experiences, benefits, and challenges associated with the model. The School in Circles model itself is a relatively new educational initiative, still evolving, and further, more in-depth research could contribute to enhancing efforts toward social inclusion.

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SZKOŁY W KRĘGACH JAKO FORMA WSPIERANIA RODZIN UCZNIÓW Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ INTELEKTUALNĄ W ŚRODOWISKU LOKALNYM – REFLEKSJE NAUCZYCIELI I TERAPEUTÓW

Wprowadzenie: Szkoła w Kręgach jest propozycją działań wspierających o charakterze pozaformalnym realizowanych w środowisku rodzinnym i szkolnym, obejmujących uczniów z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną oraz ich rodziny w środowisku lokalnym. Opiera się na Modelu Kręgów Wsparcia realizowanym w Polsce od 2015 r. oraz kanadyjskim programie „F-Words for Child Development” autorstwa ośrodka badawczo-edukacyjnego CanChild.

Cel badań: Celem badania było poznanie, jak nauczyciele i terapeuci osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną oceniają działania Szkoły w Kręgach oraz jakie mają doświadczenia, obawy i sposoby na optymalizację działań związanych z jej rozwojem.

Metoda badań: Do zbadania opinii i doświadczeń badanych została wykorzystana interpretacyjna analiza fenomenologiczna. Przeprowadzono wywiad fokusowy z dziewięcioma osobami uczestniczącymi czynnie w Szkole w Kręgach w różnych placówkach z Polski północnej i południowej.

Wyniki: Analiza materiału pozwoliła na wyodrębnienie czterech tematów nadrzędnych: 1) droga ku Szkole w Kręgach – doświadczenia własne nauczycieli i terapeutów w propagowaniu i tworzeniu Kręgów Wsparcia, 2) korzyści z realizowania projektu dla ucznia, rodziny, szkoły i środowiska, 3) obawy i zagrożenia dla projektu (problemy z zaangażowaniem w działania części pracowników placówek oraz rodzin, problemy organizacyjne), 4) sposoby na usprawnianie działań w ramach Kręgów Wsparcia.

Wnioski: Badani dostrzegają duży potencjał i wartości działań na rzecz budowania i wspierania relacji społecznych w najbliższym środowisku życia dziecka z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, mających na celu budowanie bezpiecznej i przyjaznej przyszłości. Wyniki mogą być wykorzystane przez profesjonalistów pracujących w placówkach oświatowych w celu poprawy współpracy z rodzinami uczniów z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną oraz rozwijania idei Kręgów Wsparcia na etapie edukacji szkolnej.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciele i terapeuci, uczniowie, niepełnosprawność intelektualna, Szkoła w Kręgach, środowisko lokalne, badania fokusowe