Understanding Circle Time Practices in Montessori Early Childhood Settings

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Keywords: *circle time, line time, large group, whole group, Montessori education, Early Childhood education, literacy, language development*

Abstract: Circle time is commonplace in traditional preschools, yet there are few references to the practice in Montessori's writings or in major Montessori organizations' teacher education standards. This article investigates whether circle time is frequent in Montessori 3–6-year-old classrooms using data from a widely distributed Qualtrics survey. The results, from 276 respondents spanning all 50 states, provide insight into the circle time practices of United States-based preschool Montessori teachers, also known in Montessori classrooms as guides. We present novel information regarding circle time duration and frequency, types of circle time activities, Montessori guides' circle time training and planning, whether children's circle time attendance is free choice or compulsory, and the nature of circle time in programs associated with Association Montessori Internationale versus American Montessori Society. Results revealed that 92% of survey participants have circle time every day or most days; most participants hold circle time for 20 minutes or less; the most common circle time events were show-and-tell, calendar work, vocabulary lessons, Grace and Courtesy lessons, read aloud discussions, dancing and movement, snack time, general conversation, read aloud (stories), and birthday celebrations. We found that many of the most frequent circle time activities do not align with children's preferences, teacher preferences, or Early Childhood best practices. Our work invites Montessorians to engage in the work of reconstructing the traditional practice of circle time to better align with Montessori hallmarks of choice, development of the will, and joyfulness.

An Overview of Circle Time

Most preschoolers around the world participate in circle time (Leach & Lewis, 2013). They gather as a group and engage in activities ranging from singing and stories to birthday celebrations and fingerplays. While these meetings are typically identified as circle time, they have other names such as gathering time, community time, or line time. Many Montessorians adopt the phrase line time in reference to the colored tape (line) placed on the floor in an elliptical shape where the children sit during large group gatherings. The children also use this ellipse for Walking on the Line activities, which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Friedrich Froebel, known as the "father of kindergarten," proposed circle activities in his publication of *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* (as cited in Platz & Arellano, 2011) to develop children's sense of identity as individuals and members of a community. Circle time theory grew through the humanist ideas of psychologists such as Alfred Adler, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and William Glasser in the middle of the twentieth century (Housego & Burns, 1994).

In current educational settings, circle time has grown beyond the realms of philosophy into a practice that is identified as "one of the most ordinary events in preschool" (Kantor et al., 1989, p. 434) and widely implemented (Bustamante et al., 2018). Circle practices are documented in countries throughout the world, including the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, England, China, and Japan (Lang, 1998; Zhang & Quinn, 2018).

Yet despite its widespread adoption, minimal research has been conducted on the efficacy and nature of circle time. *The Elementary School Journal* notes this as recently as 2018, stating "little research has examined circle time, making it difficult to generalize about its routines and components" (Bustamante et al., 2018, p. 612). Furthermore, scholarly support for the practice is not overwhelming. A 2002 study published in *Educational Psychology in Practice* reviewed available literature on circle time efficacy and summarized it as "flimsy" and full of "assumption, anecdote and circular argument" (Lown, 2002, p. 95). Other scholars cite the paucity of research about circle time and its effects (Leach & Lewis, 2013). There is no clear consensus on the effectiveness of circle time, no strong understanding of what circle time entails, nor even a consistent definition of its purpose.

Examining Circle Time Literature

In this paper, we will evaluate many aspects of circle time, giving particular attention to the question of duration: how much classroom time should be dedicated to the practice? Research indicates that lengthy circle gatherings result in adverse outcomes. In a study of 122 four- and five-year-old children, the long duration of circle time (sometimes up to 30–40 minutes) was directly associated with negative reactions in children (Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Another study (Bustamante et al., 2018) found that circle time engagement decreased if it lasted more than 20 minutes; at the beginning of circle time, child engagement was generally high, but it declined in all classrooms as time progressed. Half of the classrooms had significant disengagement, with over 30% of students off-task.

Unsurprisingly, the same study noted that in classrooms with lower rates of student engagement, teacher's behavior management comments were twice as high. This finding is supported by other studies documenting high incidences of disruptive behavior during circle time, particularly during more routine, structured activities (Qi & Kaiser, 2006). Researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign conducted 24 observations in eight different Head Start classrooms. They noted challenging behaviors during 30% of their observation intervals and specifically noted that "circle time, as a teacher-directed structured activity, can be a prime context for challenging behaviors" (Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011, p. 8). Such behavior issues can undermine the effectiveness of circle time and overall morale of the teacher and the students (Bustamante et al., 2018). They are also associated with a 22% increase in the rate of negative interactions between teachers and students (Ling & Barnett, 2013).

Clearly it is vital to maximize student engagement, and circle time activities must be planned with care. While the components of circle time vary from school to school and from teacher to teacher (Zhang & Quinn, 2018), researchers agree that the most common elements of preschool circle times include greetings, calendar work, weather discussions, classroom responsibility assignments, attendance keeping, sharing time, read alouds, general conversation, songs/fingerplays, and closing activities (Bustamante et al., 2018; Harris & Fuqua, 2000; Wald et al., 1994).

Of these activities, calendar work is one of circle time's most common events (Zhang & Quinn, 2018). Bustamante et al. observed circle time calendar activities in 77% of the classrooms they studied (p. 621).

While specific teachers may approach calendar work differently, there is reason to reevaluate the suitability of calendar-based activities altogether. Child development research shows that children in preschool and kindergarten settings have little understanding of time periods such as weeks and months (Eliot, 2001). Three-year-olds often have a sense of past and future events but have not yet related these ideas to units of time (Beneke et al., 2008). In a series of four studies conducted on 261 children from 3–10 years of age, researchers found that children were unable to use a calendar to understand the relationship between past and future events until somewhere between ages 7 and 10 (Friedman, 2000). This inability is rooted in children's brain development and their sense of chronology rather than lack of education.

Reading books to children is a quintessential literacy activity and a common circle time event. Yet even this practice must be optimized to meet children's literacy needs by including activities such as dialogical reading, rhyming, and poetry. Researchers have found that children learn best when they engage deeply with the text—apart from pictures—and mentally manipulate the words to develop abstract thought (Healy, 1994). Dialogic reading, in which a child and adult have a prolonged discussion about a book, enhances this intellectual process and develops the child's literacy skills (Eliot, 2001). Research indicates that adults should clearly explain new vocabulary to children as well as initiate discussions about the words (Wasik et al., 2016). Nursery rhymes and poetry may be especially valuable as they provide opportunities for dialogic reading while also teaching rhythm and patterning. Indeed, rhyming aptitude is associated with early reading as well as numeracy skills (Bettmann, 2016; Healy, 1994; Majsterek et al., 2000).

Although listed as a typical circle time activity, few researchers specifically investigated show-and-tell activities. Yet Bustamante et al. (2018) named a similar activity, sharing time, as one of the most "promising" activities in circle time because of the potential for open-ended questions and "back-and-forth exchanges between teachers and children" (p. 626). Arguably, show-and-tell shares the same potential for dynamic language engagement; the benefits of rich language interactions are well documented (Eliot, 2001; Healy, 1994).

The appropriateness of show-and-tell for 3–6-year-olds may hinge on the quality of language interactions during this activity. Since some researchers found that circle-based discussion time was actually the source of "a high incidence of challenging behaviors" (Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011, p. 445), we should ask: Do children engage in rich conversations with their teacher and peers? Or do children simply present an object and answer perfunctory questions? Does show-and-tell provide all children with an opportunity to interact, or does it risk disengagement as one child engages with the guide and the others remain silent? The research on discussion-based activities points to the fact that a child's engagement depends upon a teacher's finesse and execution.

Just as the types of circle time activities vary from classroom to classroom, so too does the quality of these activities. Further research is needed to determine whether the criticisms of circle time are due to widespread practices or to imperfect implementation in a handful of settings. After observing numerous nonoptimal circle times, one study directly advocates improved professional development and teacher training for circle time (Bustamante et al., 2018, p. 628). Other researchers support this notion, finding that positive outcomes in circle time were directly linked to a teacher's circle time experience and training (Canney & Byrne, 2006). Finally, Ling and Barnett (2013) discovered that training teachers in intervention strategies decreased negative behaviors at circle time and increased student engagement (p. 190–191). A teacher's training and circle time preparation may be a critical factor in whether this activity is a source of joy and learning for students or a cause of disengagement and challenging behaviors.

Circle Time and Montessori Practice

Given the consistency of circle time in preschools worldwide, one might expect that it would also be a part of Montessori programs. However, well-regarded authors on Montessori's pedagogy and her legacy are largely silent on the subject. A clear reference to circle time does not seem to exist in Montessori's writings, lectures, or classroom photographs.

In a review of Montessori's writings and lectures, circle time-like gatherings do not appear except in lessons such as Walking on the Line or the Silence Game. Platz and Arellano (2011) analyzed the work of distinguished child development theorists ranging from the 18th to 20th centuries and found that circle-like activities only existed in the ideas of Locke, Rousseau, and Froebel but *not* Montessori. Similarly, researchers Lillard and McHugh (2019) examined Montessori's extensive writings, lectures, and records to define authentic Montessori practice at the time of Montessori's death. In their synopsis, they make no mention of circle time or other large group gath-

Figure 1
Walking on the Line

An early image of Montessori students walking on the line. Reproduced with permission of VS America, Inc. (https://vsamerica.com).

erings except as something inexperienced teachers may adopt if they do not understand the natural work cycle of a child (p. 8).

Montessori presents the activity of Walking on the Line as framed within the Practical Life exercises specifically related to control of movement, which develops coordination, cross lateral movement, and equilibrium (Montessori, 1914, p. 20; 1967, p. 89). She observed the children's desire to walk on narrow ledges and responded by creating Walking on the Line activities (as depicted in Figure 1), which increase in difficulty as a child gains mastery over fine and gross motor skills.

Montessori does make one reference to circle-like activities if a teacher, also known in Montessori classrooms as a guide, is establishing a class with new students. She writes that at the very outset of this process—the "collective stage of the class"—a teacher may tell stories or sing songs with the group (Montessori, 1998, p. 182). However, the conditional nature of this approval implies that these actions are not otherwise ideal. Montessori makes it very clear that these are transitional activities before "the school begins to function" (p. 182).

A classic Montessori lesson, the Silence Game, does have elements akin to circle time. The entire class participates, and it generally occurs at the teacher's invitation. In some cases that Montessori herself recounts, the whole class comes together for the lesson. In others, "silence" is written on a chalkboard and the children can participate spontaneously. Reviewing Montessori's descriptions of organized versions of the Silence Game gives us insight into how she approached large group lessons; she made several invitations and ensured that each child was asked individually (Montessori, 1998, p. 78). Montessori emphasizes that a child's participation in making silence comes from their own will and is not forced on them by another (Standing, 1998, p. 227). The success of the Silence Game depends upon the active choice of all participants.

The question of choice and voluntary participation, while important in Montessori theory, does not appear in existing circle time research. This gap is understandable as in traditional school settings, children's circle time attendance seems mandatory (Kantor et al., 1989, p. 435). Researchers Zaghlawan and Ostrosky (2011) do not directly address the issue, but list roll call as a common circle time activity (p. 443). Another study made a passing comment that every teacher worked with their whole group during circle time gatherings (Bustamante et al., 2018). These studies indicate that in traditional preschools, a child's participation in circle time is not a matter of choice. Yet as previously discussed, Montessori (1998) herself prioritized personal, authentic invitations for every child in large group gatherings (p. 78).

Leading Montessori organizations do not include circle time in their lists of essential practices. The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector makes no mention of circle time (or its synonyms) in its "Essential Elements for Montessori in the Public Sector" document, its "Essential Elements Rubric," (2019b) or its "Essential Elements Guidelines" (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2019a). Similarly, the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE; 2019) does not include circle time in its description of Early Childhood academic requirements or teacher education (p. 22). There is, however, a reference to line activities in the American Montessori Society (AMS) Teacher Education Program (TEP) Handbook. The reference (6.2.5.11) to line activities does not appear under a course component identified as "Core" or "Foundational," but rather under the "Other" category and within the content of "Art, Music, Movement Curriculum" (American Montessori Society, 2018, p. 101). Line activities, which may be broadly interpreted to mean lessons such as Walking on the Line or circle gatherings, have no minimum

required hours and the extent of their inclusion is left to the discretion of the TEP.

Neither the U.S. branch of Association Montessori Internationale (AMI/USA) nor AMS mention circle time or its synonyms on their websites when describing school standards (American Montessori Society, n.d.; Association Montessori Internationale, n.d.). AMI/USA recognition and AMS accreditation requirements seem to suggest that while circle time is not prohibited, neither is it a fundamental part of the method.

The absence of circle time in Montessori writings, TEP standards, school recognition (AMI), and accreditation (AMS) criteria is itself a statement: circle time is, at best, unimportant and, at worst, irrelevant in Montessori preschool (3–6-year-old) classrooms. A clear contrast exists between theoretical Montessori practice, where circle time is hardly featured, and traditional education, where researchers agree that circle time is a fixture of preschool. However, we know anecdotally that circle time occurs in many Montessori preschool classrooms despite its absence in the Montessori canon. How can we understand this disconnect?

Researchers have noted that Nancy McCormick Rambusch founded AMS to integrate traditional Montessori philosophy with the educational culture of the United States (Daoust, 2004, p. 28; Lillard, 2012). Indeed, Lillard observed that the AMS's willingness to adapt may be what has allowed it to thrive while the number of "strict and traditional program(s)" is more limited (Lillard, 2012, p. 381). Although little research examines the differences between AMI and AMS schools, some researchers have noted differences between traditional and contemporary Montessori programs (Daoust, 2004) and high-fidelity and supplemented Montessori programs (Lillard, 2012). The traditional and high-fidelity programs (often more associated with AMI) were less likely to adopt outside educational ideas and practices. The contemporary and supplemented programs (often more associated with AMS) were more likely to incorporate non-Montessori materials and approaches. Considering the ubiquity of circle time in conventional preschools and kindergartens, is it possible that some Montessori schools have sought cultural relevance by incorporating circle time as an educational norm?

To date, circle time research specifically in a Montessori context is lacking. This void prompts the following questions: Are Montessori schools an exception in circle time practices, or do they hold circle time gatherings? If circle time does exist in Montessori classrooms, what are its features and characteristics? Finally, is there a difference in circle time practice between schools associated with AMI and AMS?

Our research documents circle time practices in U.S. Montessori schools with data gathered from Montessori teachers on the following four areas: circle time duration and frequency, types of circle time activities, the Montessori guide's circle time training and planning, and the children's attendance and option to participate. We report on this data generally, and we analyze it across our two largest participant groups: respondents teaching at AMI-associated schools and respondents teaching at AMS-associated schools.

Study Design

This article builds upon an internal review board-approved graduate research project conducted in 2021 and provides stronger analysis and clarity to the initial findings. We distributed a 30-question survey (see Appendix A) to Montessori guides across the United States (Koczela, 2021). The survey instrument utilized the term "circle time" rather than the common Montessori alternative "line time" to be more consistent with existing scholarly literature.

Initially, we sought survey participants through social media invitations. Yet a low response rate—measured by low social media engagement and fewer than a dozen survey responses—necessitated a new circulation strategy. AMI/USA and AMS are the two most widespread accreditation/recognition organizations in our home base, the Upper Midwest, and their public email databases seemed like the logical next step for survey distribution. We emailed our survey invitation (Appendix B) to all listed schools but noticed that certain states were unrepresented or underrepresented in the directories. Hoping to gain nationwide participation, we vetted Montessori schools in these states and sent survey invitations directly to schools that met baseline criteria (a trained Montessori guide, use of a broad range of Montessori materials, mixed age classrooms, and an extended morning work cycle). In total, we sent 806 email invitations. The schools that accepted our invitation distributed the survey among their teachers.

While 324 individuals began the survey, our participant group includes only the 276 who completed the entire question set. Our survey participants represent all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia. Most participants (85%) worked in a private or independent/nonprofit school setting, and the majority were either

lead classroom guides or co-leads (84%). All participants agreed that they were "a current or former Montessori lead, co-lead, intern, or student teacher in a 3–6-year-old classroom" (Appendix A). In addition, we asked a total of seven demographic questions about the participants and their schools. We inquired about participants' years of experience, the number of children in their classroom, the ages of children in their classroom, and the AMI or AMS association of their school. Survey question four asked, "What best describes your Montessori program?" Possible answers were: AMI; AMS; A mix of AMI and AMS; Neither AMI nor AMS; Other; Prefer not to answer (Appendix A). This was the only survey question asking about AMI or AMS association. We asked a variety of demographic questions hoping to find patterns in our survey results. We did not specifically intend to study AMI/AMS associations, and thus did not inquire about a participant's Montessori credential or diploma.

Ninety-five percent of respondents perceive their school as associated with AMI, AMS, or a mixture of the two. This article uses the term *perceived association* to refer to the participants' perception of their school's leaning even though the school may or may not actually hold school recognition with AMI or accreditation with AMS. For example, a participant who reports their school is best described as AMI can mean either (a) their school is a recognized AMI school, or (b) most of the teachers have AMI diplomas. Likewise for participants who report that their school is best described as AMS or a mix of AMS and AMI. The survey did not inquire about the participants' individual Montessori credential, diploma, or teacher education program; instead, it asked about only the association of the school as perceived by the participant.

In looking for patterns in the data, many of the differences between AMI-associated schools and AMS-associated schools were statistically significant and therefore merited attention. We chose to broaden our results section to share and analyze these outcomes while acknowledging that it would have been helpful to seek participants from other TEP affiliations, and additional research with this as a primary question is needed.

Results

We present our data in four sections. First, we explore our results pertaining to time: the frequency and duration of circle time. Second, we share the most common and popular circle time activities. Third, we discuss preparation: ranging from participants' teacher education experiences to their circle time planning approaches. Fourth, we review the question of attendance: who joins circle time and for how long.

In testing for statistical significance, we chose to run Fisher's exact test instead of Pearson's Chi-Square because many cells had expected values less than five and our overall sample size was small. We also report Cramer's V for effect size, although we acknowledge that the results of these effect sizes may be somewhat inflated due to the nature of our data set.

Circle Time Scheduling

The study begins with an investigation of our primary inquiry: How frequently does circle time occur in Montessori Early Childhood programs? Next, we explore the logistics of circle time in greater detail: How long does it typically last?

Figure 2 presents an overview of circle time frequency ("How often does your classroom have circle time?") for all participants and groups the responses by AMI and AMS associations. It is clear from our results that circle time is commonplace in Montessori 3–6-year-old classrooms. Three fourths of participants report having circle time every day in their classrooms and almost all report having circle time either every day or most days. Only a small fraction of respondents never has circle time.

When we review survey responses according to AMI and AMS school associations, it is apparent that the frequency of circle time is somewhat lower in AMI settings, yet it is still very common. More than half of AMI-associated respondents have circle time every day (although higher for AMS-associated respondents), and over three fourths of AMI-associated respondents have circle time every day or most days (versus almost all AMS-associated respondents). Therefore, while circle time is not quite as regular among AMI-associated participants, it still occurs every day or most days for a large majority. Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .53, suggesting a large effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

In Figure 3, we share all responses related to circle time duration ("On average, how long does circle time generally last?"). This chart illustrates the results for all participants and breaks them out according to AMI and AMS associations. In Figure 4, we correlate responses to participants' years of teaching experience, showing that more experienced guides have shorter circle times.

Figure 2
Circle Time Frequency

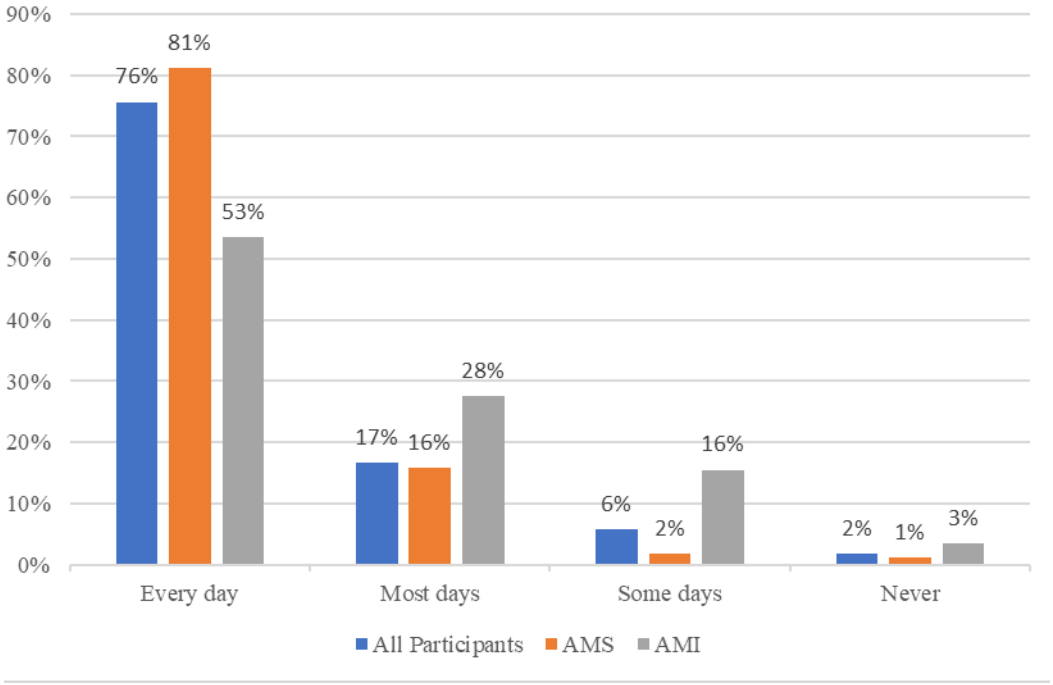


Figure 3
Circle Time Duration

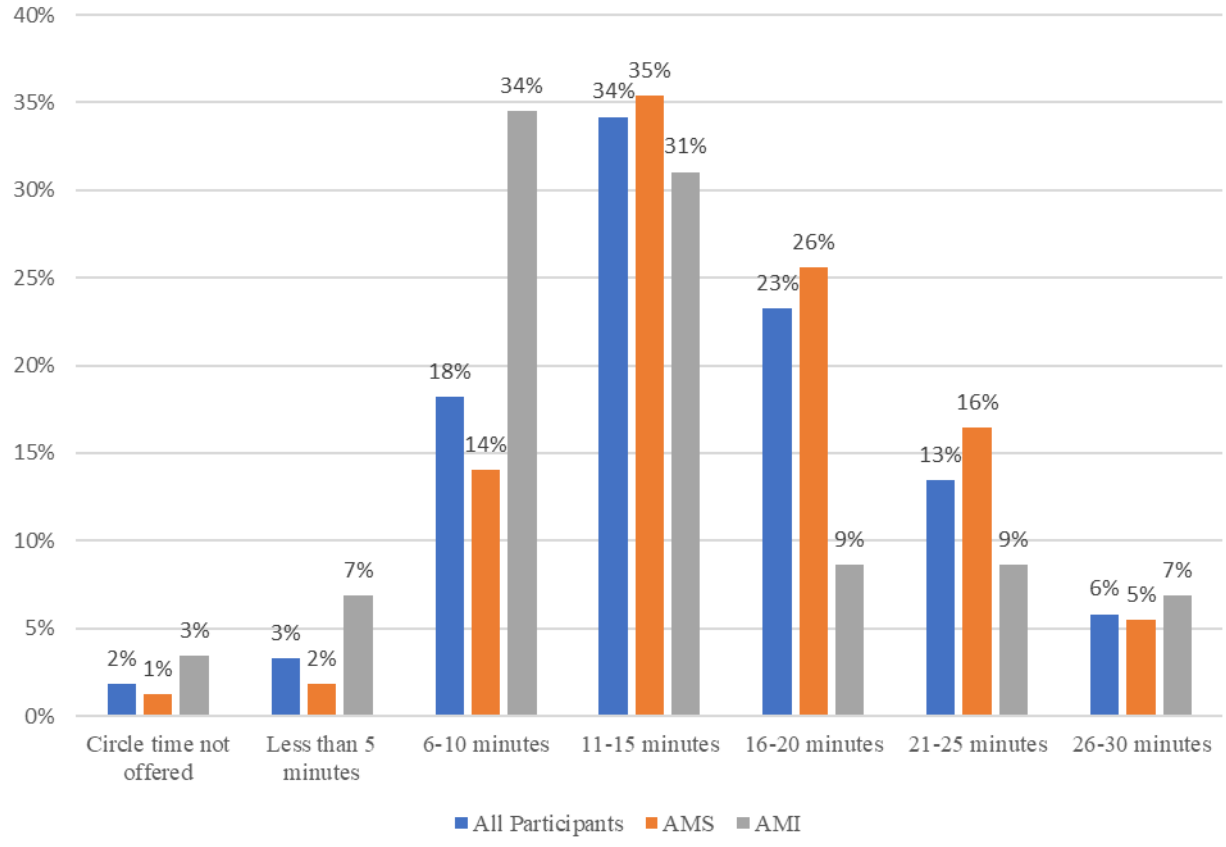
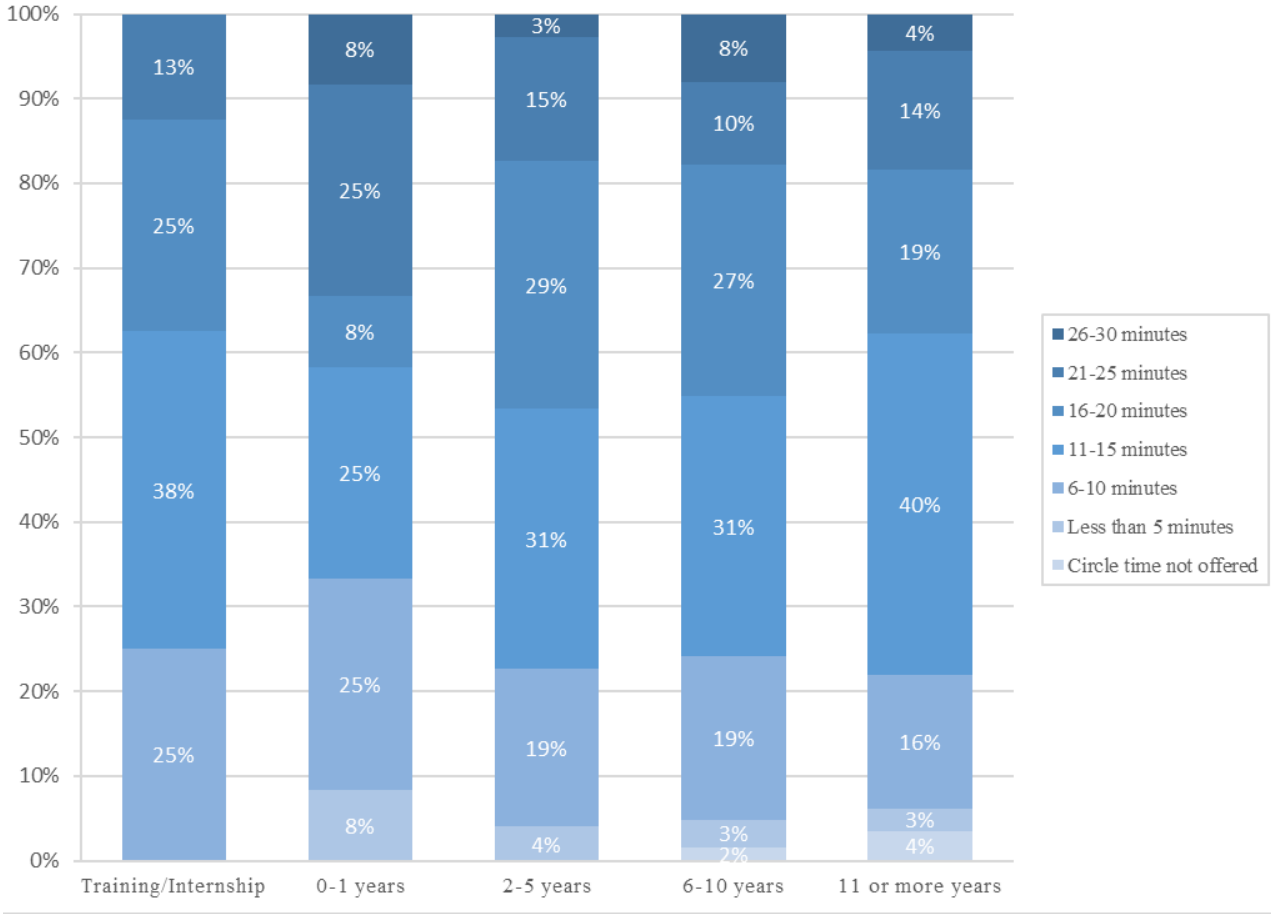


Figure 4
Circle Time Duration by Teaching Experience



Participants were able to report their typical circle time duration by choosing one of six responses ranging from less than five minutes to up to 30 minutes. Figure 3 illustrates that a large majority of participants held circle time for 20 minutes or less. Only a small number of respondents held circle time for 25 minutes or 26 to 30 minutes. The largest segment of respondents has circle time lasting between 11–15 minutes, corresponding to the recommendations of Bustamante et al. (2018), who advocated decreasing the length of circle time gatherings from their study's average time of 20 minutes. Interestingly, the composition of the 11–15-minute group included the participants with the most teaching experience, suggesting an area for further research regarding teacher experience and circle time practices.

Circle Time Activities

In this section, we detail the frequency of specific circle time activities and then discuss the most popular circle time activities for children and survey participants. Questions 15 through 17 of our survey provided a list of activities and asked participants whether these activities usually, sometimes, or never occurred during circle time. Figure 5 shows our results.

The most frequently occurring circle time activities, according to survey responses, received the same or nearly the same number of results. They are: show-and-tell (196 responses), discussion of day/month/season (calendar work; 196 responses), vocabulary lessons (194 responses), and Grace and Courtesy lessons (194 responses).

According to survey participants' perceptions (see Figure 6), children most enjoy the following circle time activities: singing, read aloud (stories), dancing and movement, music/rhythm work, and birthday celebrations. This list is closely aligned to the participants' most enjoyed activities (see Figure 6): singing, read aloud (stories), general conversation, dancing and movement, and music/rhythm work. These preferences are nearly identical in content and order, apart from birthday celebrations and general conversation. Curiously, they do not match the most frequent circle time activities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Frequency of Top Ten Circle Time Activities

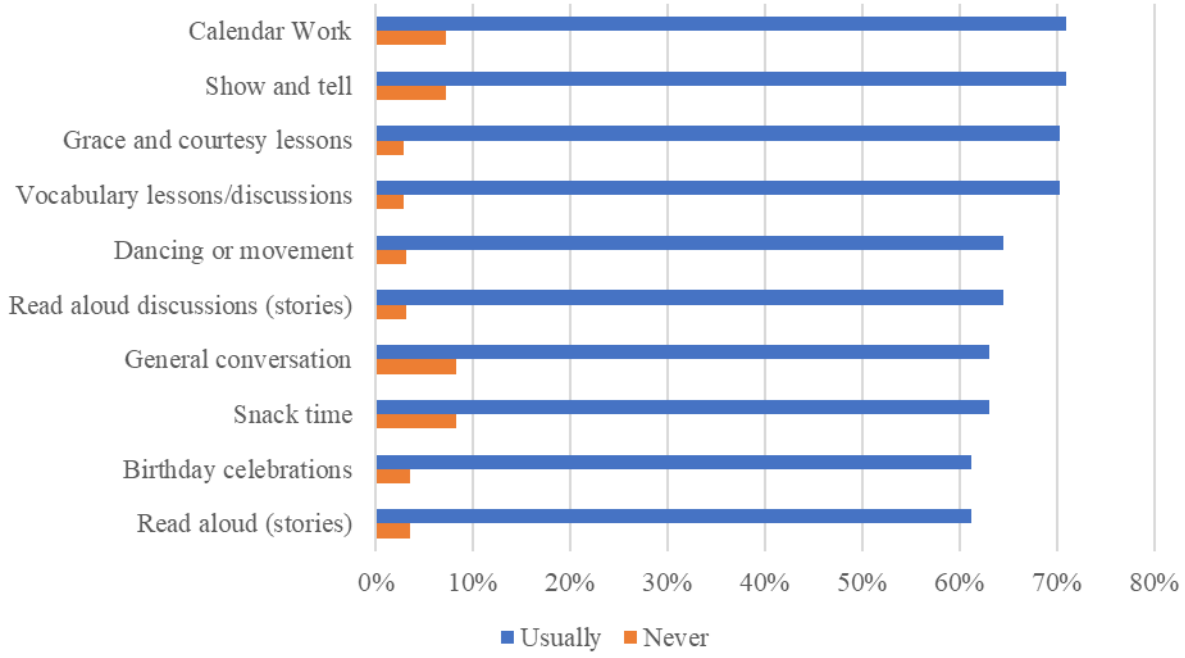


Figure 6
Children's Ten Most Preferred Circle Time Activities with Participant Preferences

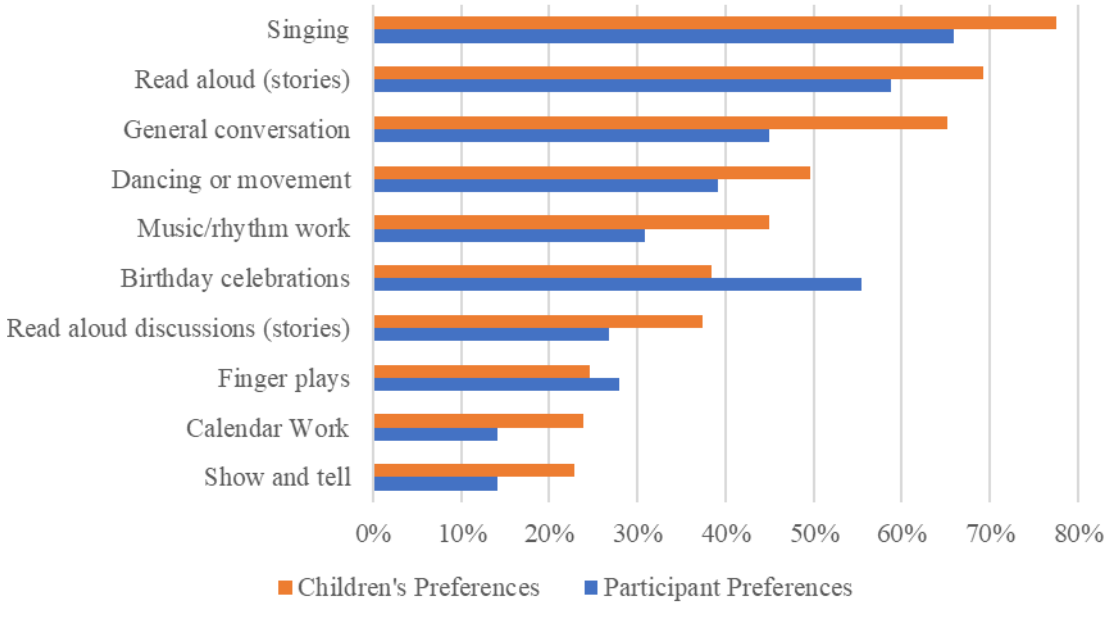
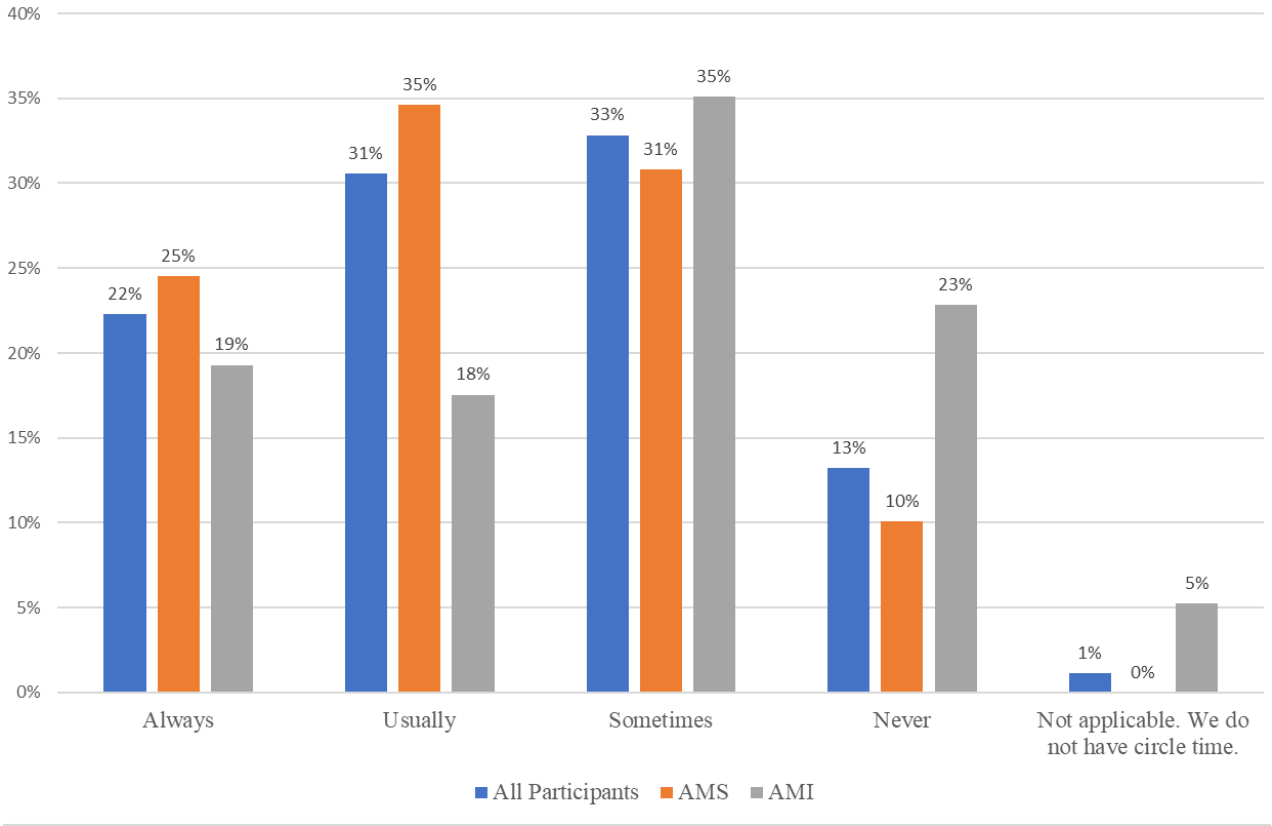


Figure 7
Participants' Assessment of Their Circle Time Training



Circle Time Training and Preparation

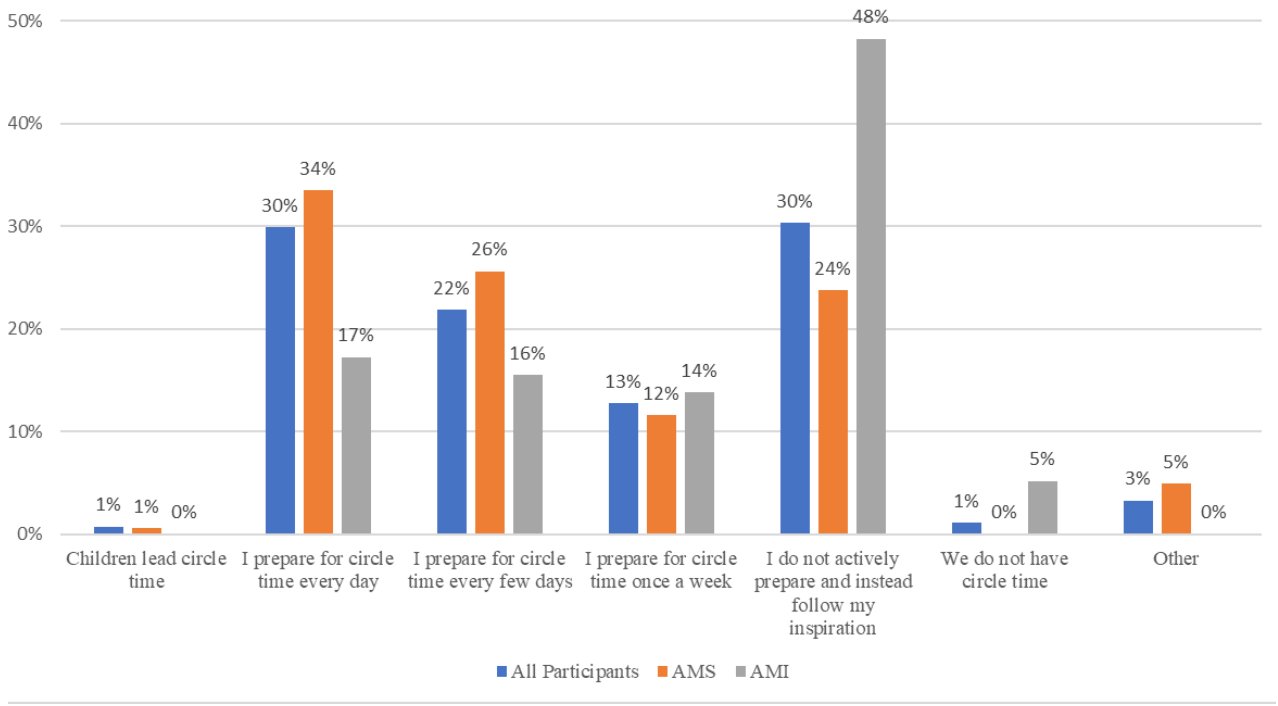
Our third data section investigates aspects of circle time preparation. First, we explore whether participants feel prepared for circle time by their TEP. Then, we examine how often participants themselves prepare for circle time.

Figure 7 provides an overview of all participant responses to the question, "Do you feel that your training/teacher education program prepared you for circle time?" It also compares participant responses based on their AMI or AMS perceived school association. We are including this comparison because the results demonstrated significant differences. A slight majority of respondents felt that their TEP always or usually prepared them for circle time. A large segment felt that their TEP prepared them sometimes. Only a small group never felt prepared by their TEP. However, these numbers took on new significance when we analyzed responses by the participants' school association. Over half of AMS-associated respondents always or usually felt their TEP had prepared them for circle time versus about a third of AMI-associated respondents. Over twice as many AMI-associated participants felt their TEP had never prepared them for circle time versus AMS-associated participants. Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p = .01$, Cramer's $V = .20$, suggesting a small effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

Figure 8 illustrates all participant responses to the question "How often do you prepare for circle time?" as well as participant responses by AMI or AMS school association. Again, we emphasize that survey respondents' association refers to their current workplace and not their teacher training.

The largest segment of participants reported that they do not actively prepare for circle time and instead follow their inspiration. A nearly equal number responded that they prepare for circle time daily. Smaller groups of respondents prepare every few days or once a week. According to our data, children almost never lead circle time in these Early Childhood classrooms. Our results become more interesting when we review participants' approaches to circle time preparation according to their perceived AMI or AMS association. Almost twice as many AMS-associated respondents prepare every day versus

Figure 8
Frequency of Circle Time Preparation



AMI-associated respondents. Twice as many AMI-associated participants do not actively prepare for circle time versus AMS-associated participants. Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .37, suggesting a medium effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

Circle Time Attendance and Choice

Our final results section investigates questions of freedom and obligation as they relate to circle time. We discuss whether children must attend circle time, how long they must stay, whether they are eager to attend, and whether guides are required to have circle time gatherings in their classrooms.

More than half of participants require that children attend circle time except when children have behavior issues or special needs (see Figure 9). Children may choose whether to attend the circle times in about a third of respondents' classrooms. However, we see a large shift in these percentages when we view the data by participants' school association. AMS-associated respondents require that children attend circle time almost three fourths of the time (except when there are behavioral issues); less than a third of AMI-associated respondents require that children attend circle time (again, except when there are behavioral issues) and instead, most allow children to choose whether to attend. Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .49, suggesting a medium to large effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

Next, we explore whether children must remain at circle time or are free to leave. We see in Figure 10 that all or most participants say children stay for the duration of circle time and only about one quarter of participants say that children may choose to leave circle time before it ends. Yet when we correlate responses based on respondents' perceived school association, we see a substantial difference. Half of AMI-associated participants say children must stay at the circle for its duration (unless there are behavior issues) while over three fourths of AMS-associated participants say children must stay at the circle (unless there are behavior issues). Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p = .008$, Cramer's V = .46, suggesting a medium effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

Figure 9
Children's Circle Time Attendance

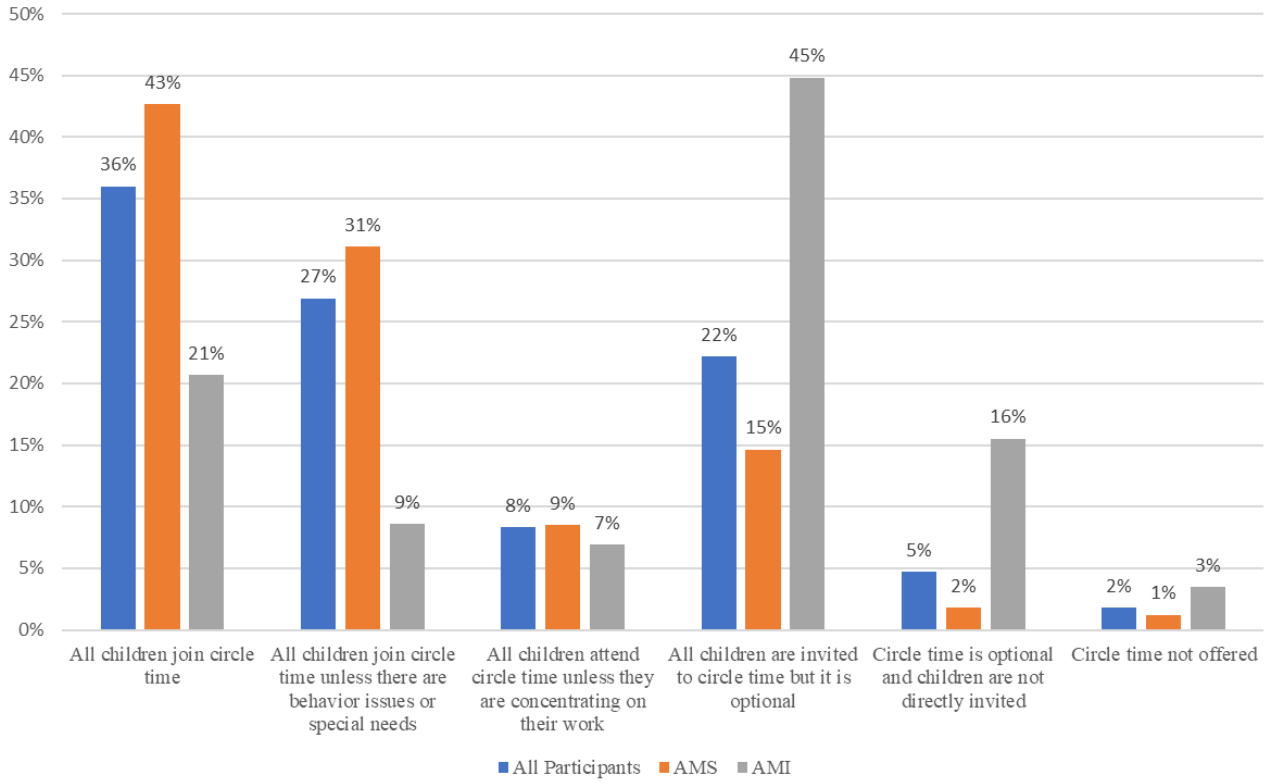


Figure 10
Duration of Children's Attendance

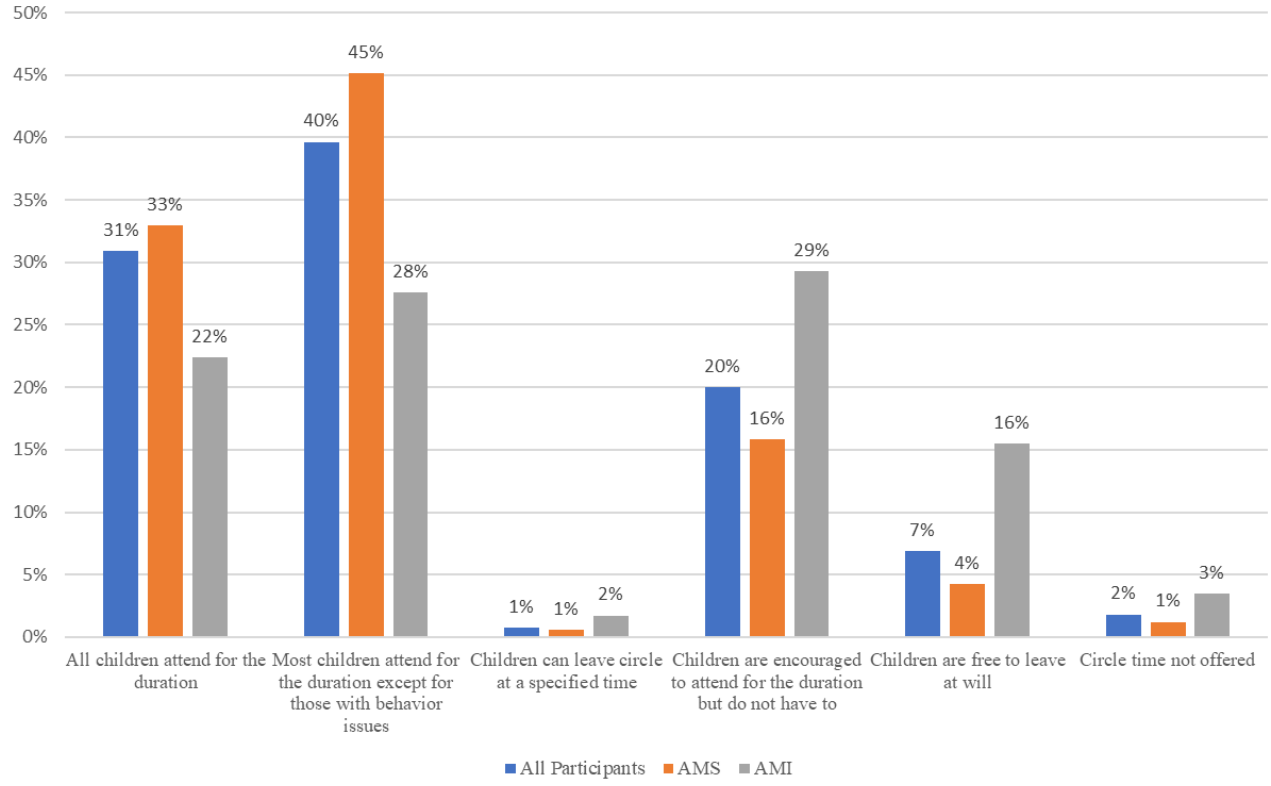
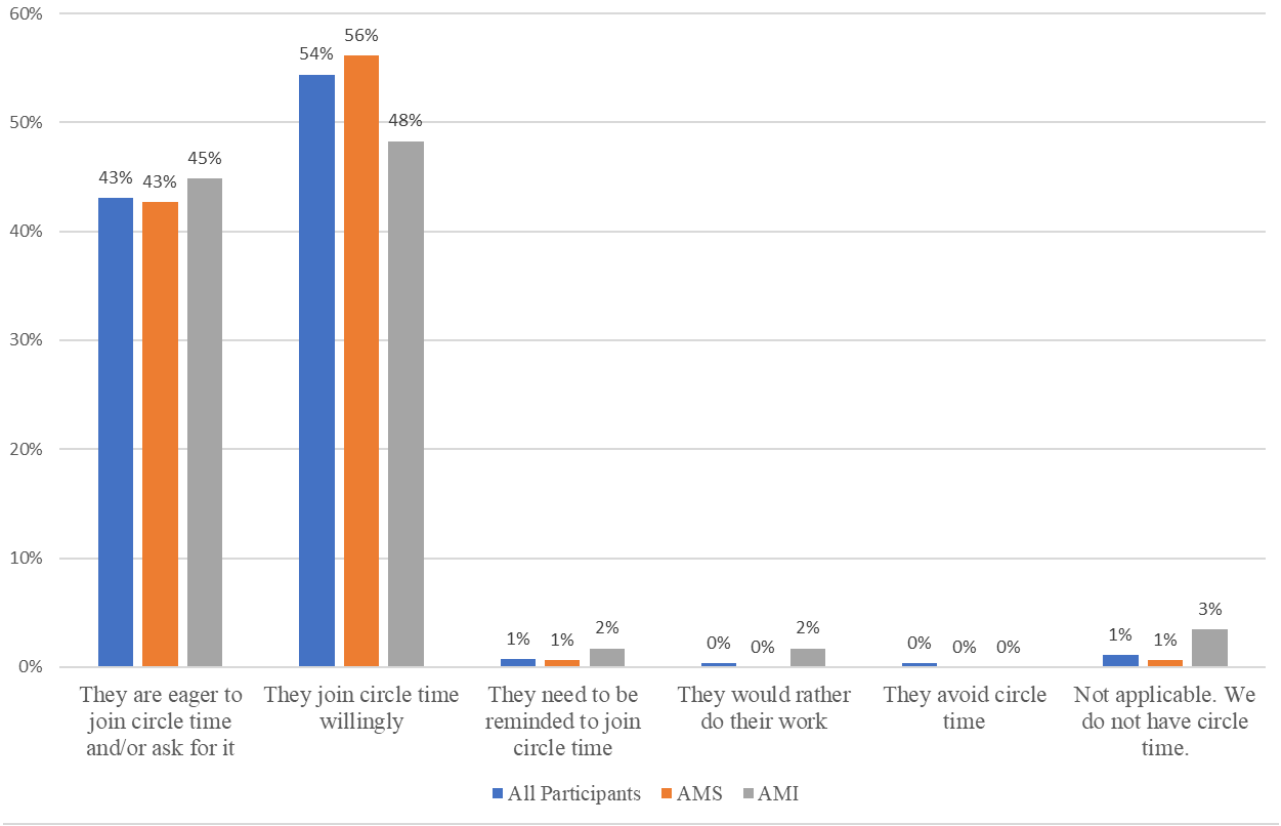


Figure 11
Children's Willingness to Join Circle Time



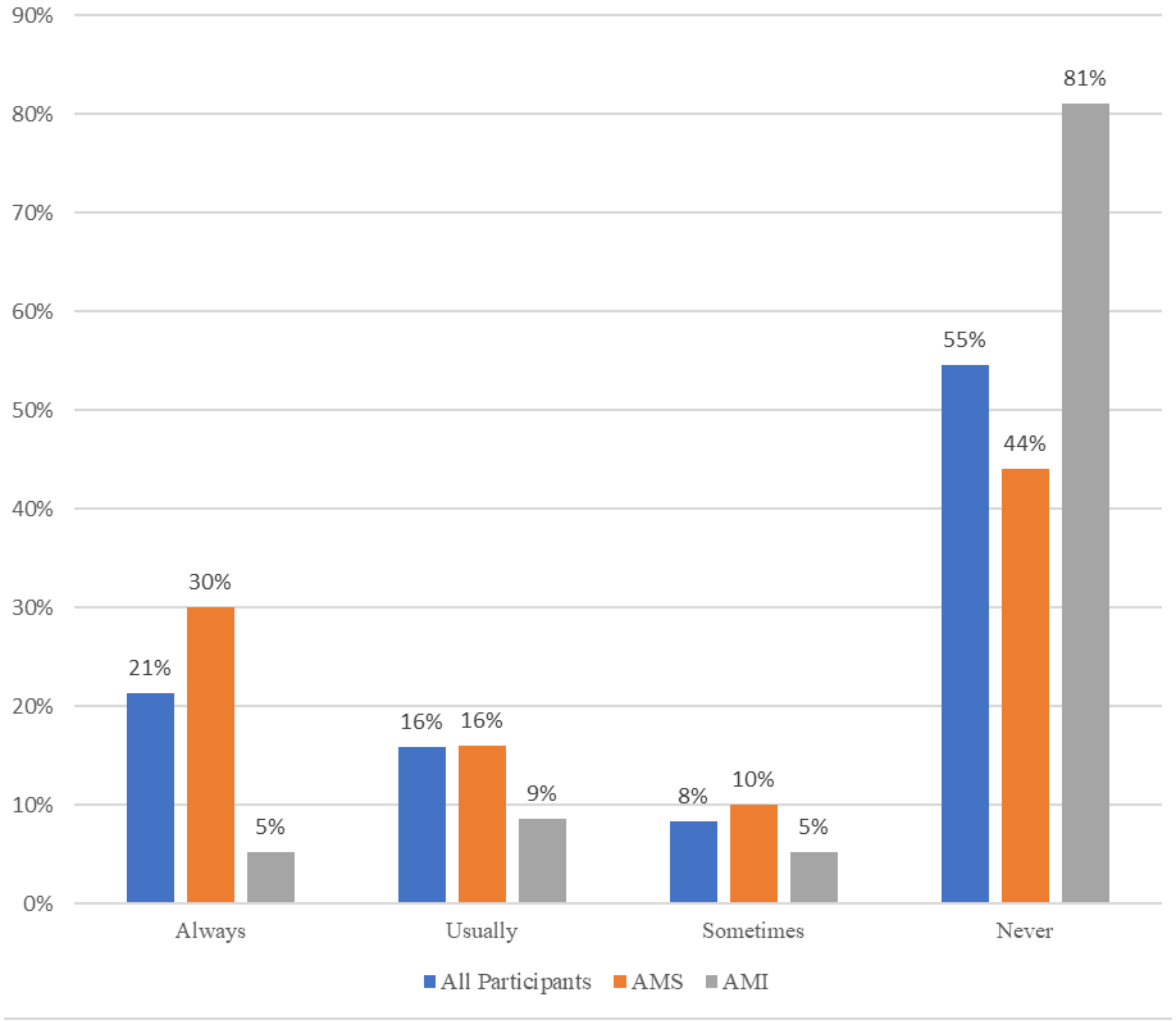
In evaluating questions of freedom and choice, Figure 11 provides an important perspective. Almost all participants across both AMI and AMS school associations report children are eager to attend circle time or at least participate willingly. Only a tiny percentage of participants perceive that children avoid circle time or are reluctant to join.

Finally, we report on whether guides are required to include circle time in the school day. Figure 12 demonstrates that for half of survey participants, circle time is never a school requirement. Yet there does appear to be some level of obligation for others: one third answered that circle time is always or usually required, and a smaller segment responded that it is sometimes required. This picture becomes clearer when we review the matter by AMI/AMS association. A small fraction of AMI-associated participants is always or usually required to offer circle time versus almost half of AMS-associated participants. Over three fourths of AMI-associated participants are never required to offer circle time versus over a third of AMS-associated participants. While the majority of participants across all perceived associations are not required to have circle time during the school day, we see that there is a significant element of obligation (perceived or otherwise) for AMS-associated survey participants; over half of AMS-associated respondents answered that they are always, usually, or sometimes required to offer circle time. Fisher's exact test found that our results are statistically significant, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .22$, suggesting a small effect (Kotrlik et al., 2011).

Discussion

The primary goal of our research was to determine the nature and frequency of circle time gatherings in Montessori environments. Our results reveal that circle time is widespread in Montessori classrooms. We identified several other trends in U.S. Montessori practice: most participants hold circle time as the last event of the morning; most participants require that children attend circle time; most children attend circle time for its duration; most participants hold circle time for 20 minutes or less;

Figure 12
Participants' Obligation to Offer Circle Time



half of participants feel that their TEP prepared them for circle time. Finally, we found differences in AMI- and AMS-associated schools with AMS-associated schools demonstrating more support for circle time activities as a regular part of their day.

Circle Time Scheduling

Research demonstrates the risks of lengthy circle time gatherings and points to resulting student disengagement and challenging classroom behavior with one study suggesting that it may be ideal to limit circle time to 20 minutes or less (Bustamante et al., 2018). Our results indicate that the majority of survey participants align with current best practice, holding circle time for 20 minutes or less regardless of AMI or AMS school association. Even so, circle time duration tends to be shorter among AMI-associated respondents. Interestingly, participants with the most teaching experience (regardless of perceived AMI or AMS association) tend to have shorter circle time durations, which may reflect increased awareness of children's needs in light of higher incidents of behavior issues and student disengagement during long circle times. The role of teacher experience in circle time practices remains a fertile area for further research.

Circle Time Activities

Among our survey participants, calendar work and show-and-tell are the two most common circle time activities, but there is ample evidence that calendar work may be inappropriate until after kindergarten (Beneke et al., 2008; Eliot, 2001; Friedman, 2000). The frequency of calendar activities among our survey participants, de-

spite the evidence contrary to its use, leads us to wonder whether increased TEP circle time instruction would help Montessori guides design and plan their lessons to most benefit children's development.

Although show-and-tell tied as the most frequent circle time activity for our survey participants, there were few specific references to show-and-tell in the work of other researchers. Montessori makes no reference to show-and-tell in her writings and lectures, though she does share at least one account of bringing a sleeping baby to class when she describes the Silence Game. Our survey gives little insight into how participants run show-and-tell during circle time and whether the activity leads to high quality language interactions with the entire group. We know that discussion-based activities have potential for value or risk depending on implementation (Bustamante et al., 2018; Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011). Further research is needed to determine whether show-and-tell is a valuable part of the school day and a justification of circle time.

Although our results suggest that calendar work and show-and-tell were the most common circle time activities, our results also show that they were *not* perceived by the guide as the children's favorites. In fact, our survey responses indicate that the circle time activities which inspire the most interest in children (according to participants' perceptions) are often not the most frequent events of circle time. Only one of the children's preferred five activities (dance and movement) mapped to the five most frequent circle time events. Two favorites of the children, singing and music/rhythm work, were not among the 10 most frequent activities. It is curious that survey participants note this interest yet choose to include other activities more often during circle time. Notably, four of the five most popular circle time practices for children match four of the five most popular for guides. Yet again, these same activities are largely absent in the reported activity frequency. The data also reveal that not only do the guides avoid the children's favorites, but they choose activities that they would prefer to avoid themselves. We must ask: Is there such strong pressure from schools, parents, or educational norms that guides disregard children's favorite activities, and their own, in order to accommodate ones viewed to be necessary, such as show-and-tell or the ubiquitous calendar work?

The Silence Game is also absent among the most common circle time activities. While it still occurs for most participants, 10 other activities are more frequent. It is surprising that the Silence Game, the one lesson that Montessori describes as requiring whole-group participation, is not prioritized. Given participants' misalignment with children's preferences, their own preferences, and Montessori's writings on whole-group gatherings, we wonder how they *do* select circle time activities. Do survey participants choose activities as the result of a conscious choice, TEP training, or conflicting expectations of what circle time entails?

Circle Time Training and Preparation

Considering that the various Montessori organizations barely reference circle time in their criteria, it is noteworthy that many respondents reported circle time training in their TEP. Still, our data indicate that the arena of teacher education has significant potential for growth or reevaluation. Many participants indicate that they could have been better prepared by their TEP for circle time gatherings.

We do not know in what ways survey participants could have been more prepared for circle time, but we do know that many reported a lack of teacher education on this topic. For the Montessori guides who received no circle time training, yet offer it in their classrooms, we wonder when and why they began to practice circle time. Was it a result of children's needs, school norms, or parent pressure? For other guides who felt sometimes prepared, we wonder what additional training would have been beneficial: perhaps more circle time presentations, more education about current research, more practice time, more opportunity to observe circle times, or more literacy and music/movement training? Follow-up research is needed to provide a clearer picture.

Still, considering how much time is spent each week during circle time in most Early Childhood Montessori classrooms (often an average of 75–100 minutes per week), it seems appropriate for TEPs to give circle time training serious consideration. Even Montessori recognized that there were moments in a classroom, though unusual, when it is appropriate to sing songs or read stories as a group (Montessori, 1998). It seems reasonable to equip guides of 3–6-year-old children with the skills they need to conduct engaging and educational read alouds or developmentally appropriate music and movement sessions. Further, Montessori guides must be able to give parents and administrators rationales for excluding unnecessary or detrimental large group activities.

It is likely that there is a connection between participants' TEP and their approaches to circle time preparation. The fact that a significant portion of teachers do not actively plan for this part of the day may reflect inade-

quate teacher education. While there is evidence that poorly run circle time gatherings contribute to behavioral problems or student disengagement, teacher training and experience have been shown to lead to positive outcomes. The decision to include circle time during the school day should be an active choice by guides who are trained and prepared to make the most of these gatherings. Current research suggests that circle time should be treated with as much planning and care as other classroom instruction. In a Montessori setting, this would place circle time planning on par with observation, lesson planning, preparation of the environment, and record keeping.

Circle Time Attendance and Choice

Freedom and choice are essential elements of Montessori practice, but our data reveal that in most participants' classrooms, circle time attendance is required. AMS-associated respondents are more likely to require children to attend circle time compared to AMI-associated participants who are more likely to make circle time optional for children. A similar pattern exists in how long children are required to remain at circle time. AMS-associated participants are more likely to require children to remain at the circle for most of the time (barring behavioral difficulties) compared to AMI-associated participants. Thus, AMS-associated participants are more likely to treat circle time as a large group gathering in which all or most children join for the duration, while AMI-associated participants are more likely to treat circle time as an optional gathering that children can join at will, akin to Montessori's invitations to the large group versions of the Silence Game. It is important to note that children seem to join circle gatherings willingly or even eagerly, suggesting that most children would choose to attend circle time even when it is optional. Children's strong interest in circle time may reflect an inner need that is not otherwise being met. These questions arise: Do Montessori guides, through careful observation, recognize circle time as essential to children's development? Is the method of direct invitation and free choice—as in Montessori herself inviting children to the Silence Game—ineffective in some settings? How can we offer circle time while still supporting a child's development of free will?

The question of freedom also applies to Montessori guides. Few participants were required to offer circle time except for about half of those at perceived AMS-associated schools (our largest participant group). Perhaps some teachers may not be formally required to have circle time but still face pressure to include it during the day—perhaps from peers, parents, administration, or societal expectations. The question remains: Is circle time, so universal in preschools around the world, a practice freely chosen in Montessori classrooms?

Study Limitations

Despite the important contribution this study makes in understanding circle time practices in Montessori schools, we acknowledge limitations. In our attempt to broaden the scope of our research and include more participants, we directly searched for Montessori schools in geographical areas that were not represented or were underrepresented in the AMI and AMS databases. Our process was necessarily subjective as we reviewed school websites to ascertain adherence to core Montessori principles (e.g., a trained Montessori guide, use of a broad range of Montessori materials, mixed age classrooms, and an extended morning work cycle). We trusted that the school websites were accurate and updated while also using our judgement to determine if school images were authentic or stock photos.

The social media participants also raise potential issues because they represent a convenience sample of teachers self-identified as a current or former Montessori lead, co-lead, intern, or student teacher in a 3–6-year-old classroom. Furthermore, it would have strengthened our research to reach out to other TEP affiliations. In retrospect, we could have reduced ambiguity by providing a more specific definition of what we meant by the role of "former Montessori lead."

Finally, our survey focuses disproportionately on private and independent schools (85% of participants) with only 11% of participants representing public or charter schools. A recently published Montessori census article reports a total of 2,728 Montessori schools in the United States with 579, or 21%, being publicly funded (Debs et al., 2022). While we invited public and charter Montessori schools to participate in the survey, many refused. We discovered during the course of our research that some public school districts require all research surveys, regardless of IRB approval, to go through their internal review process before employees can participate.

Furthering the Study

The scarcity of circle time research, particularly within a Montessori context, necessitates increased scholarly research. Moreover, the universality of circle time in all

preschool settings underscores the importance of defining circle time best practices. While there are many promising areas for future research, we consider four areas deserving of particular attention. First, how does circle time impact the Montessori morning work cycle? We know anecdotally that some Montessori programs struggle to achieve an uninterrupted three-hour period of work. If, as we now know, many Montessori preschools include circle time, does this gathering affect the amount of time available for children to complete their morning work cycle?

Second, it would be helpful to examine the community meeting practices of Montessori elementary programs in relation to their preschool counterparts. What continuity, if any, exists between community meetings at different grade levels and how can guides prepare 5- and 6-year-olds to be active participants and future leaders of elementary large group gatherings?

Third, what is the role of Montessori guides in circle time gatherings? How does teacher experience affect Montessori circle time practices? Do guides observe sufficiently during circle time to adjust their practices according to the needs of the children? Are children able to voice their preferences and develop their wills? Why, as we discovered in our results, do guides include circle time activities that are not preferred by the children or themselves?

Fourth, to what extent do circle time gatherings contribute to the classroom community and interpersonal skills of children? In an increasingly remote, screen-centric world, what role does circle time play in fostering a sense of belonging in young children and how can it teach them vital interpersonal skills such as patience, active listening, grace and courtesy, and respect?

Conclusion

This study provides many insights. We know, based on nearly 300 responses, that circle time is commonplace in Montessori classrooms. We also know that the nature of circle time differs between AMI- and AMS-associated settings; it is more often optional in the former versus obligatory in the latter. We know that a substantial number of participants felt that their training did not always or usually prepare them for circle time. Finally, we know that some circle time activities do not align with research-based best practices or perceived child interest.

Let us return to our initial questions regarding the effectiveness, purpose, and intentionality of circle time in Montessori 3–6-year-old classrooms. There are clear risks to casual circle time practices that may be mitigated through careful TEP preparation and intentional classroom planning. Montessorians have every reason to heed circle time research in traditional education that documents disengagement and concomitant misbehavior resulting from lengthy gathering times, developmentally inappropriate activities such as calendar work, and obligatory attendance. Let us listen to the 45% of respondents who felt underprepared to lead circle time. Strengthened TEP circle time content may help Montessori guides comprehend both the risks and potential of circle time gatherings and understand how to utilize this time effectively, if at all.

Finally, how can we reevaluate circle time in light of Montessori's constant refrain of "follow the child?" Have Montessorians absorbed the practice of circle time with sufficient reflection on its form and content while also considering Montessori philosophy and the needs of the child? We believe that circle time *can* adhere to the Montessori tenets of choice and the development of the will and, at the same time, provide rich opportunities for joyful expression and instruction. Yet constructing circle time gatherings that epitomize the best Montessori and Early Childhood practices requires intentional thought, constant observation, and ongoing education. We hope to join a larger conversation about how Montessorians might reimagine circle time so that it supports, empowers, and delights its child participants.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Q1 Informed Consent

Q2 Thank you for your participation! For the purpose of this survey, "circle time" means a collective, large group gathering during **morning**, **in-person** class time; it is synonymous with the phrases "line time" and "gathering time." Please answer questions according to your pre-COVID practices.

Please only participate in this survey if you are a current or former Montessori lead, co-lead, intern, or student teacher in a 3–6-year-old classroom.

First, we would like to ask a few questions about you and your classroom.

1. What is your primary role in the classroom?
    - o Montessori lead
    - o Montessori co-lead
    - o Montessori assistant
    - o Montessori student teacher
    - o Retired/former Montessori lead
    - o Other
    - o Prefer not to answer

Q3 What best describes your school?
- o Private
- o Public
- o Independent/Nonprofit
- o Charter
- o Magnet
- o Parochial
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q4 What best describes your Montessori program?
- o AMI
- o AMS
- o A mix of AMI and AMS
- o Neither AMI nor AMS
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q5 Where is your school located? [state list displayed]

Q6 About how many students are in your classroom?
- o 10 or less
- o 11 to 15
- o 16 to 20
- o 21 to 25
- o 26 to 30
- o 31 or more
- o Prefer not to answer

Q7 How long have you been a Montessori guide?
- o I am in training/doing an internship
- o 1 year or less
- o 2–5 years
- o 6–10 years
- o 11 years or more
- o Prefer not to answer

Q8 What ages are the children in your classroom? Please choose all that apply.

- o Less than 2 years old
- o 2 years old
- o 3 years old
- o 4 years old
- o 5 years old
- o 6 years old
- o 7 years old
- o Prefer not to answer

Q9 We will now ask some questions about the timing and logistics of circle time in your classroom. How often does your classroom have circle time?

- o Every day
- o Most days
- o Some days
- o Never
- o Prefer not to answer

Q10 When does circle time **usually** occur during the day?

- o First thing in the morning
- o During the morning
- o End of the morning
- o No fixed time
- o Prefer not to answer

Q11 On average, how long does circle time generally last?

- o Less than 5 minutes
- o 6–10 minutes
- o 11–15 minutes
- o 16–20 minutes
- o 21–25 minutes
- o 26–30 minutes
- o 31 minutes or longer
- o Prefer not to answer

Q12 Who attends circle time?

- o All children join circle time
- o All children join circle time unless there are behavior issues or special needs
- o All children attend circle time unless they are concentrating on their work
- o All children are invited to circle time but it is optional
- o Circle time is optional and children are not directly invited
- o Circle time is initiated by the children and is optional
- o Prefer not to answer

Q13 How long do children attend circle time?

- o All children attend for the duration
- o Most children attend for the duration except for those with behavior issues
- o Children are encouraged to attend for the duration but do not have to
- o Children can leave circle at a specified time
- o Children are free to leave at will
- o Prefer not to answer

Q14 Usually during circle time...

- o The guide talks most of the time
- o The guide and children (collectively) share/participate an equal amount of time
- o Children share/participate most of the time
- o Prefer not to answer

Q15 The following three questions have the same possible answers. We will ask about the frequency of various circle activities: whether they occur usually, sometimes, or never.

Which of the following activities **usually** occur during circle times? Please choose all that apply.

- o General conversation
- o Adult led question and answer
- o Discussion of day/month/season ("calendar work")
- o Discussion of weather
- o Music/rhythm work
- o Singing
- o Read aloud (stories)
- o Read aloud discussions (stories)
- o Read aloud (poetry)
- o Read aloud discussion (poetry)
- o Vocabulary lessons/discussions
- o Dancing or movement
- o Finger plays
- o Grace and courtesy lessons
- o Peace/conflict resolution lessons or discussions
- o Math games or lessons
- o Literacy games or lessons
- o Cultural games or lessons
- o Other group presentations
- o Birthday celebrations
- o Guest presentations
- o Silence game
- o Snack time
- o Seasonal celebrations
- o Presentations of new materials
- o Discussion of class rules
- o Show-and-tell
- o Other
- o None of the above. We do not have circle time.
- o Prefer not to answer

Q16 Which of the following activities **sometimes** occur during circle time? Please choose all that apply.

- o General conversation
- o Adult led question and answer
- o Discussion of day/month/season ("calendar work")
- o Discussion of weather
- o Music/rhythm work
- o Singing
- o Read aloud (stories)
- o Read aloud discussions (stories)
- o Read aloud (poetry)
- o Read aloud discussion (poetry)
- o Vocabulary lessons/discussions

- o Dancing or movement
- o Finger plays
- o Grace and courtesy lessons
- o Peace/conflict resolution lessons or discussions
- o Math games or lessons
- o Literacy games or lessons
- o Cultural games or lessons
- o Other group presentations
- o Birthday celebrations
- o Guest presentations
- o Silence game
- o Snack time
- o Seasonal celebrations
- o Presentations of new materials
- o Discussion of class rules
- o Show-and-tell
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q17 Which of the following activities **never** occur during circle time? Please choose all that apply.

- o General conversation
- o Adult led question and answer
- o Discussion of day/month/season ("calendar work")
- o Discussion of weather
- o Music/rhythm work
- o Singing
- o Read aloud (stories)
- o Read aloud discussions (stories)
- o Read aloud (poetry)
- o Read aloud discussion (poetry)
- o Vocabulary lessons/discussions
- o Dancing or movement
- o Finger plays
- o Grace and courtesy lessons
- o Peace/conflict resolution lessons or discussions
- o Math games or lessons
- o Literacy games or lessons
- o Cultural games or lessons
- o Other group presentations
- o Birthday celebrations
- o Guest presentations
- o Silence game
- o Snack time
- o Seasonal celebrations
- o Presentations of new materials
- o Discussion of class rules
- o Show-and-tell
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q18 Now we would like to know about reactions to circle time in your class.
How do **most** of the children in your class respond to a circle time invitation?

- o They are eager to join circle time and/or ask for it
- o They join circle time willingly
- o They need to be reminded to join circle time
- o They would rather do their work
- o They avoid circle time
- o Not applicable. We do not have circle time.
- o Prefer not to answer

Q19 How many children participate during circle time (verbally or with motions)?

- o All children participate during circle time
- o Most children participate during circle time
- o Some children participate during circle time
- o Children usually don't participate during circle time
- o Prefer not to answer

Q20 What do children seem to enjoy most during circle time?

- o General conversation
- o Adult led question and answer
- o Discussion of day/month/season ("calendar work")
- o Discussion of weather
- o Music/rhythm work
- o Singing
- o Read aloud (stories)
- o Read aloud discussions (stories)
- o Read aloud (poetry)
- o Read aloud discussion (poetry)
- o Vocabulary lessons/discussions
- o Dancing or movement
- o Finger plays
- o Grace and courtesy lessons
- o Peace/conflict resolution lessons or discussions
- o Math games or lessons
- o Literacy games or lessons
- o Cultural games or lessons
- o Other group presentations
- o Birthday celebrations
- o Guest presentations
- o Silence game
- o Snack time
- o Seasonal celebrations
- o Presentations of new materials
- o Discussion of class rules
- o Show-and-tell
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q21 Do you enjoy circle time?

- o Always
- o Usually
- o Sometimes
- o Never
- o Prefer not to answer

Q22 What do you usually enjoy most during circle time? Choose all that apply.

- o General conversation
- o Adult led question and answer
- o Discussion of day/month/season ("calendar work")
- o Discussion of weather
- o Music/rhythm work
- o Singing
- o Read aloud (stories)
- o Read aloud discussions (stories)
- o Read aloud (poetry)
- o Read aloud discussion (poetry)
- o Vocabulary lessons/discussions
- o Dancing or movement
- o Finger plays
- o Grace and courtesy lessons
- o Peace/conflict resolution lessons or discussions
- o Math games or lessons
- o Literacy games or lessons
- o Cultural games or lessons
- o Other group presentations
- o Birthday celebrations
- o Guest presentations
- o Silence game
- o Snack time
- o Seasonal celebrations
- o Presentations of new materials
- o Discussion of class rules
- o Show-and-tell
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q23 Now we would like to learn about your circle time planning and preparation.
Do you feel like your training/Teacher Education Program prepared you for circle time?

- o Always
- o Usually
- o Sometimes
- o Never
- o Not applicable. We do not have circle time.
- o Prefer not to answer

Q24 How often do you prepare for circle time?

- o I prepare for circle time every day
- o I prepare for circle time every few days
- o I prepare for circle time once a week
- o I do not actively prepare and instead follow my inspiration
- o Children lead circle time
- o Other
- o Prefer not to answer

Q25 How do you prepare for circle time? Please choose all that apply.

- o By reviewing my classroom observations
- o By reflecting on the students' needs or interests
- o By having discussions with my co-lead/assistant

- o By referring to lesson plans and records
- o By checking the calendar for events or birthdays
- o By reflecting on housekeeping needs
- o By discussions with students
- o By following inspiration
- o I do not actively prepare
- o Prefer not to answer

Q26 In your circle time preparation, how much time do you plan for student participation during circle time?

- o I plan for students to participate constantly during circle time
- o I plan for students to participate most of the time
- o I plan for students to participate about half of the time
- o I plan for students to participate occasionally
- o I plan for the students to participate rarely
- o I do not plan for student participation
- o Prefer not to answer

Q27 In our final section, we would like to explore how circle time impacts the three-hour work cycle in your classroom, knowing that many teachers face obstacles in this regard.

How long is the typical morning work cycle in your classroom (from when children begin their work to when they stop working in the morning)?

- o 2 hours or less
- o More than 2 hours–2.5 hours
- o More than 2.5 hours–3 hours
- o More than 3 hours–3.5 hours
- o More than 3.5 hours
- o Prefer not to answer

Q28 Do you feel like circle time complements the morning work cycle?

- o Always
- o Usually
- o Sometimes
- o Never
- o Prefer not to answer

Q29 Do you feel like circle time lessens the morning work cycle?

- o Always
- o Usually
- o Sometimes
- o Never
- o Prefer not to answer

Q30 Are you required to offer circle time in your classroom?

- o Always
- o Usually
- o Sometimes
- o Never
- o Prefer not to answer

Appendix B: Survey Invitation

Hi there,

I am reaching out in hopes that you and your teachers will consider assisting me in my graduate research work. I am a master's student at UWRF and I'm studying Montessori circle time practices (or lack thereof) for my thesis project. I am distributing a survey to AMI and AMS schools across the United States to learn more about Montessori circle time norms and the three-hour work cycle. The survey is completely anonymous and is hosted on the UWRF Qualtrics website. Would your primary level teachers consider taking the survey? There are 30 questions and it should take 10–12 minutes to complete. Please feel free to email/call/text with questions. I am happy to provide more information.

The survey may be found here:

Insert Link

Thank you in advance for your time,

Andrea Koczela

4xx-xxx-xxxx