**Circles**

Intentionally creating a space that lifts barriers between people, circles open the possibility for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding.

Derived from aboriginal and native traditions, circles are built on caring relationships, positive expectation messages, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

Participants gain valuable life skills that will not only positively contribute to improved interpersonal relationships and academic success, but will also prepare them for their future endeavors and relationships.

**The circle process provides a way of bringing people together in which:**

* Everyone is respected and gets a chance to talk without interruption
* Participants explain themselves by telling their stories
* Everyone is equal- no person is more important than anyone else
* Emotional aspects of individual experiences are welcome

**Typical Circle Structure:**

* Chairs are placed in a physical circle, enough chairs for all participating members with no additional furniture blocking any participants
* The facilitator is called the “keeper”, and leads the meeting (may possibly be lead by a student)
* The keeper makes introductory comments, often including a discussion of the values that guide the success of the process, and may place the written values/positive agreements on the floor in the middle of the circle for all participants to see.
* The keeper poses a question or topic (of which depends on the purpose of the circle)
* A talking piece is introduced and passed, usually clockwise around the circle
* The only person authorized to speak is the person holding the talking piece (one person at a time), participants may choose not to speak if they wish
* When a person is finished speaking, they pass the talking piece onwards to the next person
* The process of passing the talking piece around the circle may continue for a number of rounds. Since only one person speaks at a time, it’s important to offer participant’s a chance to reflect on what the others are saying in the circle.

**Role of Circle Keeper:**

Circle keepers are the caretaker of the circle process, they are not facilitators. As a keeper, it is your job to ensure that everyone takes responsibility for making the circle a welcoming, safe place for open dialogue. Very often, and usually unconsciously, participants will situate the keeper as an authority figure, looking to him or her to direct or make decisions for the group. When it seems the process isn’t going smoothly or is taking a direction different than you imagined, it is important to remember that your role is merely to guide the group. It is your job to introduce questions that empower the group to do the work they need to do. As soon as you intervene in a more directive way, participants become less accountable for their actions and decisions. Resulting agreements become much less a reflection of their process and needs and more about what you think the group needs.

**Circle Keepers:**

* + Do not control the circle but help participants uphold its integrity.
  + Help to hold a space that is clear, open, respectful, and free. This means knowing when/how to interrupt, when to open and close the circle, when to take a break, and how to remind people to adhere to the agreed-upon guidelines.
  + May be a participant in the circle
  + Don’t need to be a mediator or group facilitator in the usual sense; it’s not a position of power, but it is a responsibility to others to keep to the values of the circle.

**Suggested language for circle keepers:**

* **Promote Equality**; “We all have important experiences and something to offer.”
* **Generate Respect**; “We are different but we all have something to learn from each other.”
* **Share Responsibility;** “We all have a responsibility for finding solutions.”
* **Encourage New Ideas**; “Every idea is a good one. We work together to find solutions.”
* **Seek Solutions that Benefit Everyone**; “Can we find a way to meet the needs of all involved today?”
* **Maintain Positive Perspective;** “This is difficult work, and at the same time, we are moving toward a positive outcome.

**The Talking Piece:**

* Is an object of focus accepted and used by the group. Often something is used that has special meaning to the group.
* Provides greater opportunity for listening and reflection since a person has to wait for the talking piece to come around before speaking. Participants tend to focus more on what people are saying than on preparing an immediate response.
* Prevents one-on-one debates since people cannot respond out of turn.
* Encourages shared responsibility for discussion.
* Reinforces equality in the circle since it provides equal opportunity for all to participate.
* Provides more opportunity for those who are often silent to be heard since they don’t have to compete with those who are more verbal.

**Circle Agreements:**

It is very important to convey the importance of, and hold participants accountable to the circle agreements as they directly impact the success of the circle.

* Respect the talking piece: everyone listens, everyone has a turn
* Speak from the heart: your truth, your story, your perspective
* Honor confidentiality: no names no gossip
* Mutual respect: no put downs
* Right to pass: your voice is important and we will come back to you and check in

**Time:**

Circles can form for as little as 10 minutes through an entire class period depending on the need and purpose for the circle.

**Community Building:**

Circles foster attentive listening, empathy, sharing, and equal opportunities of participation for all members, therefore, the circle process helps cultivate a strong sense of belonging and build positive relationships.

**Community Building Circles:**[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors.
* Are NOT held in response to an incident or problem.
* Ideally should account for no less than 80 percent of all circles a student experiences.
* Are based on topics intentionally selected and sequenced to increase risk-taking over time.
* Build the social capital necessary to support successful Responsive Circles.
* Are used to set up behavioral expectations prior to events that occur outside the regular classroom.

A Continuum of Questions:

Simple:

* I feel excited when…
* I feel stressed when…
* My favorite food is…
* My favorite weather is…
* If I could be an animal I would be…
* When I become an adult I will…

Risky:

* Share a happy childhood memory.
* If you could be a superhero, what super powers would you choose and why?
* How would your best friend describe you?
* What would you not want to change about your life?
* If you could talk to someone from your family who is no longer alive, who would it be and why?

Deeper:

* What touches your heart?
* What gives you hope?

**Content or Curriculum Circles**:

Enhance learning by providing an interactive forum for students to participate in the learning process.

* The best/worst thing about this science project is…
* The main character in the book we are reading is like/not like me when…
* These math problems make me feel…
* What are your thoughts or reflections on today’s assignment?
* Can be used to help students with academic goal setting and planning.
* Can be used to set ground rules for projects and activities.
* Can be used to build or monitor understanding of academic content.

**Conflict or Problem Solving Circle:**

Brings together disputing parties to resolve their differences. Resolution takes shape through a consensus agreement. Conflict can be between several students, a student and a teacher or a problem in the classroom or the school.

* A group of students who are having a hard time working together on a project
* Teasing or talking out of turn in the classroom
* A student continues to talk back to a teacher (should be facilitated by another adult, not the classroom teacher)

Use of the Restorative Practices Questions:

* What happened?
* What were you thinking of at the time?
* What have you thought about since?
* Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way?
* What do you think you need to do to make things right?

**Students and Staff feel:**

"The underlying premise of restorative practices is that people are happier, more cooperative, more productive and more likely to make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things WITH them rather than TO them or FOR them.” (The Restorative Practice Handbook, Costello and Wachtel)

The International Institute for Restorative Practices: Whole School Implementation overview and essential elements

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)