CIRCLE SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT WELLBEING
2nd Edition
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The Circle Solutions Philosophy and Principles

Circles in History

The symbolism of circles is ageless. A circle can represent wholeness, continuity, universality, unity, inclusion, equality and protection. Using a circle formation as a means of social interaction is both historical and cross-cultural. The North American medicine wheel is just one example of how traditionally indigenous communities have used circles as a means of decision-making and conflict resolution. The ‘Quality Circle’ initiative, first developed by Kaoru Ishikawa in Japan in the 1960s (Ishikawa, 1980), has been used widely in a business environment. It is based on the principle that full participation in decision-making and problem-solving improves the quality of work. Circles are now also an essential feature of the restorative justice movement, involving all who have been affected by an offence, including the offender.

Development of Circles in Education

I first came across Circles in 1991 in a school in New Jersey. The principal told me that each class held a ‘Magic Circle’ every day and how this made a positive difference across the school. Others have since taken up and developed the Circle framework. It is known by many names, including Circle Time, Tribes, Learning Circles and now Circle Solutions. Much of this book builds on the ideas of Jenny Mosley, Marilyn Tew, Murray White, Bob Bellhouse, Tina Rae and others. Like language, the Circle framework is constantly evolving, with contributions from many educators.
Why ‘Circle Solutions’?

I have been involved with Circles now for more than a decade, working with schools and teachers across the world, mostly in Australia. This revision is based on all I have learnt. After much thought, I have dropped the word ‘Time’ and added ‘Solutions’. Any intervention for social and emotional learning needs to go beyond a timetabled slot in the week to become an integral part of individual, class and whole school development, seeking constructive ways forward for everyday social and emotional issues for everyone (Elias, 2010; Roffey and McCarthy, 2013).

Although it is critical that Circle sessions happen regularly, students need to reflect on and practise what they are learning. When the principles for Circle Solutions (CS), summarized as respect, agency, positivity, inclusion, democracy and safety, are embedded throughout the day and across the school, the desired outcomes are more likely to be sustainable. Seeing Circle sessions as an ‘extra’ misses the point. Even if someone else facilitates a Circle, the teacher needs to be an active participant to enable and strengthen pupils’ understanding and skills.

CS adopts a solution-focused, strengths-based approach. It promotes group agency to encourage young people to take responsibility for themselves and each other. Specific problems and incidents are never discussed in Circles, only issues and directions for change. The focus away from the personal to consideration of topics that impact on young lives make Circles a safer and more comfortable place for both teachers and students. This responds to some of the criticisms and concerns that have been expressed about ‘therapeutic education’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008) and is congruent with a relational approach to behaviour in school (Roffey, 2011).

What is Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is not simply subjective happiness. Although feeling good about yourself and the world around you is part of wellbeing, it is much more than this. Subjective happiness can be self-absorbed and shallow – based in being successful, rich, attractive and popular. None of this brings sustainable wellbeing. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) demonstrate in their analysis of their research on equality, authentic wellbeing begins with ‘we’.

In the last decade there has been a welcome move in psychology away from a deficit model, which focuses on diagnosing and treating problems, to exploring what is effective in promoting wellbeing and what helps people to ‘flourish’ in their lives. Seligman (2011) summarizes this with the acronym PERMA:

- Predominantly **Positive** feelings – about yourself and the world around you.
- **Engagement** – being absorbed by what you are doing – not bored or anxious about performance.
- **Relationships** – having positive interactions with others and managing differences and conflicts well.
- **Meaning and purpose** – living a life that you see as worthwhile.
- **Achievement or Attainment** – setting your own goals and reaching them.

Keyes and Haidt (2003) define flourishing as positive psycho-social functioning. They say this happens when we accept and like most parts of ourselves, see ourselves
as developing into better people, have warm and trusting relationships and a degree of self-determination.

The above is congruent with the research on resilience, the factors that enable people to recover from adversities in their lives (Benard, 2004). Protective factors for children include having someone who believes in the best of you, high expectations from those around you and feeling you belong somewhere. Personal factors include a positive outlook and sense of humour, willingness to talk about issues, problem-solving abilities, confidence, determination not to give up too soon – and not being overly gender defined. We need to grow boys who will become ‘good men’, willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and others rather than fitting a macho image. Girls need to develop the confidence to grasp the opportunities available and be motivated to support each other.

School and Student Wellbeing

Wellbeing is different from welfare or pastoral care in schools. Welfare is a response to individuals who come to the attention of staff because their exceptional needs become apparent. This is usually the province of senior or specialist personnel and requires a specific intervention. A focus on wellbeing by comparison is universal and proactive. Research on student wellbeing (Noble et al., 2008) summarizes the pathways to wellbeing in education. These are: physical and emotional safety, pro-social values, social and emotional learning, a supportive and caring school community, a strengths-based approach, a sense of purpose and a healthy lifestyle. As the MindMatters and KidsMatter mental health initiatives in Australia say: ‘Every teacher is a teacher for wellbeing’. The research indicates that such a focus not only helps address mental health issues but also promotes pro-social and ethical behaviour, academic engagement and learning and also teacher wellbeing (Roffey, 2012a). The evidence and rationale for developing wellbeing in schools is overwhelming.

Why We Need Circle Solutions for Wellbeing

Academic achievement opens doors but does not necessarily lead to successful and worthwhile lives or the development of thriving communities. CS aims to promote wellbeing for all students, both the vulnerable and the achieving. This includes healthy relationships, resilience in the face of adversity and responsible behaviour. These three aspects are symbiotic and together lead to more effective learning environments and flourishing individuals.

Many young people today face major challenges. Although poverty is a reality for some, economic disadvantage is not the only adversity children experience. There is less stability and more stress in families, increased mobility as a result of social and political unrest, more mental illness and addiction, high levels of social exclusion and a competitive ethos that categorizes some people as ‘losers’. Bullying behaviour and hypocrisy are rife.

The importance of strong communities has been eroded and children may have few good role models to help them learn emotionally literate and considerate behaviour. Teachers now talk about ‘bubble-wrapped children’, who are over-protected, not allowed to experience anything negative, nor encouraged to become
independent. We also have young people under extreme pressure to achieve who may have little chance to be still and reflect on who they are becoming. Children from traditionally ‘good’ homes who have not learned any coping or problem-solving strategies and are not well connected to others, may go to pieces when faced with failure, loss or other stress.

Where children receive loving, facilitative parenting (Mosco and O’Brien, 2012), which also sets out clear boundaries and high appropriate expectations, children grow up in an optimal environment for their wellbeing. But this is not the case for everyone. For some individuals what happens in schools can make all the difference to their future. Although teachers rarely get acknowledged for this, an educator’s belief in the best of a student can change that person’s life and future.

CS gives young people a safe space to consider the diverse social and emotional issues that impact on their lives. Structured activities enable children to think through the fundamentals of relationships together with their peers and begin to see there are ways to be in the world that make them feel better about themselves and others.

The Development of Pro-social Behaviour

Effective teachers are in charge of classroom situations – well prepared and able to deliver stimulating lessons. This is different from controlling students. Imposing external discipline does little to change behaviour over the longer term, although students may learn that they must behave in certain ways to keep out of trouble. This puts a focus on what they can get away with rather than helping them understand that it can be worthwhile to be considerate to others, regardless of who is watching. When young people receive the message that they need to be controlled because they can’t control themselves, they will look to others to determine their behaviour rather than make pro-social choices for themselves.

Content and Context for Social and Emotional Learning

The twelve dimensions for social and emotional learning (see Appendix 1) have much in common with the CASEL framework: self-awareness; social awareness; self-management and organization; responsible decision-making; and relationship management. It clarifies and extends these components by separating emotional understanding and skills into different dimensions, and places empathy under ‘situational’ awareness, which includes the importance of timing. It adds dimensions of shared humanity, positivity, ethics and spirituality. There are plenty of socially skilled individuals who do not care much about others, and shared humanity is intended to address this. Goal-setting and confidence comes under leadership. As people can often establish positive interactions but are confounded when relationships present challenges, dealing with conflict is also considered separately. This framework considers contextual issues and looks at what is congruent within an educational setting. CS impacts on whole school processes and interactions – not just what happens in one class in one lesson a week – as the research highlights the importance of contextual factors for sustainable change (Elias et al., 2003).
The Principles of the Circle Solutions Philosophy

The following principles are the foundations of CS – both for the content of Circle sessions and the context in which they are embedded. They can be remembered under the acronym RAPIDS, and perhaps a teacher can think about negotiating the RAPIDS!

Respect
The guidelines emphasize respect for individuals and their contributions. The way we listen to each other matters. As issues may be discussed but not incidents, there is no blaming, naming or shaming. Students who experience respect are more likely to act with respect towards others.

Agency
Everyone is responsible for creating a safe and positive atmosphere. Pupils work together to construct solutions to class issues rather than being told what to do. Giving students agency helps change from an ‘external locus of control’, where you believe everything just happens to you, to an ‘internal locus of control’, where you learn that you can effect change.

Positivity
Many activities deliberately foster positive emotions. When people feel better about themselves and others they have more emotional resources to cope with challenges (Fredrickson, 2011). An increased sense of belonging raises resilience. When there is a need to discuss a problem (e.g. bullying, exclusion) this is changed to seeking a solution. What will help us develop a friendly, inclusive, fair and happy classroom for everyone?

Inclusion
Everyone in a class is welcomed into the Circle and students are expected to work with all their classmates. Mixing pupils up so that they get to know each other is a key feature.

Democracy
There are equal opportunities to contribute. No one group or individual is able to dominate. Knowing everyone has their turn promotes cooperation.

Safety and choice
No one is pressured to speak and participants may ‘pass’ for as long as they like. By being in the Circle they are watching, listening and learning. Pupils usually join in when they have enough confidence or something to say.

The aim for CS is for students to think reflectively and creatively, talk together about important issues, grow to have understanding about themselves and others, and over time to develop knowledge and skills that they can put into practice. The skill lies with the facilitator asking good questions and making the links for students between the activities and the learning.
The Social and Emotional Climate of Classrooms and Schools

A wealth of research now highlights the importance of a caring ethos for both wellbeing and academic outcomes (Cohen, 2006; Horsch et al., 2002; Zins et al., 2004). Schools that have a culture of inclusion and a focus on wellbeing benefit everyone, not only the more vulnerable pupils (Skiba et al., 2006). CS impacts on:

Teacher–student relationships
Many teachers have commented that Circles have both changed the way they see individuals and increased their enjoyment of teaching. Any behaviour management strategy is more effective when implemented by a teacher who has established a positive relationship with a student (Roffey, 2004, 2011).

Reducing bullying
Interventions have moved away from focusing exclusively on students who bully and those who are bullied to a whole school approach. Bullying can only thrive in a culture that either passively or actively condones it. Fear, anxiety, discomfort, anger and disempowerment can thread through a school, undermining positive relationships. Motivating and empowering bystanders to discourage bullying is one of the more promising approaches (Rigby and Bagshaw, 2006). Circles change how students perceive one another and create an ethos where bullying behaviour is challenged.

Developing pro-social behaviour
Reward and sanctions have limited effect in changing behaviour, especially when strong emotions are involved. Circles help individuals explore their emotional reactions in situations. Where students are also given structured opportunities to establish positive relationships with others they have more motivation to behave in pro-social ways.

Mental health and resilience
There are many initiatives to help young people cope with the myriad of difficulties they face in life. These include anger management, peer mediation and social skills programs. Research indicates, however, that all such initiatives need to be integral to the life of the school to maximize sustainability (Murray, 2004). CS is not a stand-alone program but an intervention embedded in school life.

Democracy and citizenship
What happens in schools has an impact on what happens in societies. CS gives all students the opportunity to consider their perspectives and express their opinion. This develops a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Values and human rights
School mission statements often include values such as respect. Circles provide a space for deconstruction of these values, what they mean and why they are important.

Promoting acceptance and reducing prejudice
Intolerance of difference is the basis of much conflict in the world. CS promotes acceptance by breaking down stereotypes and exploring commonalities. Circle activities also celebrate differences and the uniqueness of each individual.
Theoretical Foundations of Circle Solutions

The CS philosophy is based in several ways of thinking about learning, human interaction, wellbeing and the development of pro-social behaviours. The following brief summary is intended to support eclectic practice and guide those who wish to explore these theories more deeply.

Positive Psychology and Solution-focused Approaches

Positive psychology focuses on the study of positive emotions, character strengths and healthy institutions. It researches authentic happiness and wellbeing (e.g. Keyes and Haidt, 2003; Seligman, 2011; Roffey, 2012b). CS helps students identify their diverse strengths and encourages constructive collaboration to deal with everyday issues. An indirect approach focusing on what is wanted can work better than a more direct problem-based approach. Instead of bullying, we talk about safety; instead of discussing stealing, we talk about trust.

Social Learning Theory

Much learning occurs in a social context, including watching and hearing others. Circles provide many opportunities for both active and reflective learning, and support the attention skills necessary to maximize observational learning, advocating that the facilitator models behaviours they want pupils to learn (Bandura, 1986).

Eco-systemic Theory

This theory, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), emphasizes that there is rarely a linear cause and effect in human relationships and behaviours. Events, the context in which they occur, interpretations and responses, interact in an accumulative and circular way to produce an outcome at any given time. Circles do not happen in isolation. The skills learnt are generalized and reinforced across the school context.

Social Constructionist Theory

This emphasizes the power of language: what people say and the way they say it create ‘realities’ for their worlds. CS actively changes conversations in order to construct more positive ways of seeing the world. It is also helpful for students to understand that some emotions are socially constructed; we feel proud or embarrassed by what our culture determines (Potter, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978).

Choice Theory

William Glasser (1997) says everyone has a need for love, freedom, power, belonging and fun. He emphasized the importance of schools’ exploring ways to meet these needs within a whole school framework. He highlights the importance of respectful relationships and that everyone needs to take responsibility for the choices that they make. CS puts Choice Theory into practice.
Moral Development Theories

There are different theoretical approaches to moral development, with varied emphases on justice, fairness and the ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg and Turiel, 1971; Noddings, 2002). Being ‘good’, however, is not simple obedience to authority and conformity to social norms. It involves understanding why we make the choices we do and what is involved in responsibility towards the self and others. Circles provide an opportunity for reflection on these issues, so moral values can be internalized within a sound personal rationale rather than imposed from without. CS motivates students to choose pro-social behaviour whether anyone is watching or not!

Embedding Circle Solutions as a Tool for Wellbeing

Social and emotional learning requires a congruent context where teachers model high levels of emotional literacy with students, colleagues and families. Policies need to be aligned with the focus on wellbeing. Check Appendix 1 to see how your own school measures up.