**Community Building Circles**

**What is it?**

A restorative practice intended to establish strong trust, relationships, and a sense of interconnectedness in a class or homeroom (advisory). The circle should happen on a regular basis, in the same class, at the same time — daily or weekly.

**Purpose:**

Circles provide an opportunity for students to build trust, share experiences, and contribute to a unique group identity. This identity is not only created verbally, through conversations and what is shared, but visually. Students can contribute special objects to the centerpiece. Students can also take turns providing a soft object to be used as the “talking piece”.

**Why Do It?**

In addition to creating a more unified class community, community-building circles set a precedent for discussing important topics from a place of honesty and compassion. Teachers can use it as an opportunity to teach social emotional skills like compassion for self and others; empathy; active listening; and how to know what our personal comfort level is when sharing with a group. When the circle practice is strong, it becomes a container wherein more difficult topics—including conflict or stressful assignments—can be processed. You can think of a circle as the ‘wellness visit’ your doctor wants you to have each year: it makes it easier for that doctor to treat you when you are sick, and can offer you preventative strategies to keep from getting sick in the first place. Similarly, if we take the time to emotionally nourish our students and socially nourish our classes, we can make it easier to process difficult issues that arise later in the year. (Teachers: you will hopefully find ways to make community-building circles a nurturing opportunity for you as well!).

**Tips for Implementation:**

* The circle should be formed with chairs (no desks) so that students, teacher(s), and aids are equally part of the activity.
* A “center piece”, made of valuable objects from each member of the group, should be created in the middle of the circle.
* One person facilitates the circle; this could be a teacher or a trained student.
* The circle works by members passing around a “talking piece”: an object that is special to the facilitator and preferably not easily broken.
* Members only speak if they have the talking piece, and unless otherwise stated, there is not free conversation. Instead, the talking piece is passed around the circle, and each member has an opportunity to answer the given question or build on the topic of discussion.
* The circle can go around as many times as time permits, or as is necessary to address the issue being discussed.
* Members can pass, and then the talking piece should come “back around” to them after everyone else has shared.
* Students sense teachers’ nervousness, and will not trust a process unless they see you taking it seriously. Make sure you are comfortable leading a circle and perhaps practice with colleagues first.
* Select questions that you think will encourage students to be vulnerable. Explicitly talk to students about sharing from the heart while respecting their own boundaries. Do not select questions that you have reason to think might trigger some students’ trauma. This may be obvious, but with older students, deeper topics will inevitably lead to difficult situations. Know your students and take calculated risks. If a student seems unusually uncomfortable or exhibits signs of shut-down after a circle, confer with them privately and consider referring them for counseling services. You may also consider inviting a school counselor for conversations that you think might be difficult for some students.

It is essential to establish norms for community building circles. Students should help propose norms, but here are some examples that the teacher might propose:

1. Confidentiality—what is said in circle stays in circle, unless the sharer gives explicit permission to discuss outside the room
2. Listening with our whole bodies (use body language to show attentiveness; refrain from having devices or side conversation)
3. Demonstrate empathy
4. Speak your truth and respect the truth of others
5. Share as honestly as you feel comfortable

**What Ages It Works For:**

K-12, and staff. Depending on the age of your students, consider what questions would be appropriate for building community and helping children practice empathy. Different ages will also require different speaking norms and levels of explicitness in terms of behavioral instruction. Younger students may need to practice elements of the circle for a few days before adding the actual discussion, such as sitting in a circle, passing the talking piece, modeling good listening, etc..

**Equity Principals:**

* **Language:** ESL students may enjoy additional/separate circles that help them practice their English language skills. In a Bilingual setting, they might also appreciate the opportunity to hold circle in their native language. Consider how this will allow students to open up differently and feel more comfortable at school.
* **Dis/ability:**Consider students’ 504 plans and any struggles they might encounter sitting in the position necessary for a circle. Practices can be made more inclusive. For example:
	+ If there is a deaf or hard of hearing student in the room, consider using ‘jazz hands’ to show empathy or support while a classmate is talking. Make sure everyone knows to talk slowly so the interpreter has time to fully interpret.
	+ If there is a child in a wheelchair, ensure the circle is big enough to incorporate the wheelchair as a full part of the formation
	+ If a child has a dis/ability that you anticipate will be a distraction, discuss it explicitly with that student and the class so that there is a clear behavioral expectation for how that student will be included. For example, a student with a speech impediment creates a wonderful opportunity to practice our mindful listening skills, patience, breathing, and “listening with our whole bodies” (see above).
* **Culture:** if children bring in centerpiece objects that represent aspects of their culture or religion, allow them to share about their culture and answer questions. Normalize the experience of learning about each other’s cultures and recognizing that there are different cultures out there besides our own. Process any negative attention or teasing that might arise as an example of why we need to build trust and learn about each other’s cultures: so that we do not fall prey to stereotypes and miss the opportunity for a special community like the one we have. Depending on your comfort level and student familiarity, you might engage conversations about more systemic levels of prejudice, like racism, hate crimes, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia.
* **Psychological Trauma:** It is normal for some students to become emotional, and these instances can be beautiful opportunities for the rest of the group to demonstrate empathy and create space for sharing. As noted above, it is your responsibility as a teacher to notice if a student responds to a question in a way that suggests trauma: shutting down, lashing out, excessive emotional outbursts, or other behavior that is unusual for that student. Some forms of trauma are not merely personal, but societal. Here is how we can be sensitive to various student needs while running a circle:
* **Societal Trauma:** If you are discussing prejudice or other issues in society, it is important to realize that students who have been victims of these issues may respond in a variety of ways. They may participate in the conversation, be very quiet, or become angry and resistant to the practice itself. These are all normal responses to trauma that can and should be processed. It is okay to stop or redirect a conversation if it is causing distress.