Why Use a Circle?

Circles have been used as a forum for meeting throughout history and within many different cultures. Some reasons why a circle is an appropriate structure for groupwork are:

- A circle encourages **equality** - there is no beginning or end to a circle, therefore no fixed "first place/last place", no hierarchy and no leader. Similarly, everyone is on the same level and no one sits above anyone else.
- A circle builds **trust** - everyone can see everyone else and can hear everyone else more easily. Hopefully, it is easier for people to talk honestly about experiences and views when they can see everyone else's reactions. The contrast, for example, might be rows of desks where a child or young person in the front row worries about what reactions might be happening behind as he or she speaks.
- A circle encourages **participation** - on a practical level, there is more incentive to participate because everyone can see and hear everyone else, and it is easier to move about if an exercise requires it. The nature of the circle and the use of tools such as a talking object also encourage each person to contribute as they feel able.
- A circle promotes a sense of **belonging** - people can see that they are part of a group, and the nature of the participation encourages this still further. This can also encourage the group to think about themselves as a team and increase their support to each other.
- A circle creates opportunities for **affirmation** - because the facilitator can also see and hear everyone else, there are many opportunities to give affirmation to group members. Encouraging group members to give affirmation to each other can also be an important part of this process.
- A circle encourages a sense of personal and group **responsibility** - the equality within the circle and the supportive group setting encourages people to take responsibility for themselves and to develop this as a group. For example, this might be around what they contribute to the sessions and how they keep the ground rules they have developed in their contract/learning agreement.

Questions for Reflection

- Do I feel comfortable and confident working in a circle?
- Where can I gain some experience, training, or support in relation to this?
- How can I best familiarize group members with this way of working?
- What resources might I need?

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Some Strategies for Circle Based Work

Not all children, young people or adults will feel comfortable speaking in a large circle all the time. There are a number of different strategies which you can use to encourage and support group members in their participation. These include:

- **Using a talking object**

  This is an object which is passed from person to person around the circle. The person who is holding the object is the person who is allowed to speak. This helps the group members to focus on and develop listening skills, as well as enabling them to see when their turn is coming.

- **Being able to say, "Pass"**

  While you want to encourage everyone to participate, there may be some people who feel unable to do so from time to time, or because of the particular theme being explored. Being allowed to say, "Pass" can take the pressure off these people. However, sometimes people say, "Pass" because they have not had time to think, so it is worth asking at the end of a circle round whether there is anyone who passed who now feels ready to contribute.

- **Using partners or small groups with feedback**

  Some people feel much more comfortable speaking to one other person or to a smaller group. It is good to mix in activities where group members work in pairs or in small groups (3s or 4s) and then provide feedback about their discussion to the large circle. Not only does this support participation in general, but it also enables more in-depth discussion of the theme being explored. The feedback to the large circle can then form the basis for a whole group discussion, if appropriate.

- **Supporting shy or less confident participants**

  In addition to the strategies outlined above, there may be individuals who consistently find it difficult to participate. While each person has to take responsibility for their own participation, some people may need specific support to enable them to grow in confidence. In part, this is about sensitive and appropriate facilitation, as well as recognizing that listening is as important a form of participation as speaking. However, strategies such as the use of puppets and masks as a medium to talk through can be useful in this process. With younger children, allowing a friend to speak for them or asking them if they would like to sit beside you so that you can speak for them can be useful starting points. However, it is important to try to move on from this position by using some of the other strategies, such as the puppets or masks, or those outlined above.

What is Circle Time?

The term "Circle Time" has come into increasingly common usage in schools and tends to describe one form of groupwork where the class, or a group within the class, meet together in a circle. Although often associated more with primary schools, it is also a valuable methodology for use at post-primary level,

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particularly where pupils are already familiar with the process from their primary school experience, and for use with adults. The purposes behind it include:

- Building self-esteem and self-discipline;
- Developing communication skills (Talking and Listening, etc.);
- Developing emotional literacy;
- Building positive relationships and a sense of team within the class;
- Developing problem solving and conflict resolution skills.
- Building on these core purposes, it is a methodology which can be used to explore a wide range of themes and curriculum areas.
- It is most effective when:
- It is part of a whole school approach, where all school staff work within the context of the ethos which it promotes and operate a consistent rewards and sanctions policy;
- All classes have regular Circle Time sessions, so that children and young people experience progression in their learning through their years at the school;
- Circle Time sessions are integrated into the life of the classroom and the school as a whole;
- Circle Time sessions have a clear purpose, structure and intended learning outcomes.
- One such model is the Whole School Quality Circle Time Model developed by Jenny Mosley. Her books provide information on how the model works as well as suggested outlines for individual circle time sessions with different age groups. See the Resource Section for further details.

Questions for Reflection

- Does our school have an ethos which would support Circle Time work?
- Are there ways I could use Circle Time in my classroom?
- What personal preparation would I need to do?
- What support/training needs do I have?
- What resources might I need?
- How can I practically integrate Circle Time into my teaching plans and the ethos of my classroom?

Note:

Building a positive atmosphere in the classroom/school in general and for Circle Time specifically is easiest when you feel good about yourself. Similarly, it is difficult to build the self-esteem of participants if you yourself have low self-esteem. A few suggestions:

- Create a space in each day which is specifically for you – even if it's only 10 minutes to have a peaceful cup of tea, playing your favorite music in the car on the way home from work, or taking the dog for a walk.
- Take time to think about the different things, big and small, which you have achieved over the past week, month, year. If you find this difficult, ask a friend or colleague to help you!
- Everyone has bad days, so don't blame yourself further for these. Instead, be honest with the group about how you're feeling, or postpone the session to a better time.

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A Possible Outline for Circle Time

Intended Learning Outcomes
In preparing for the session, you need to start by defining your purpose and intended learning outcomes for the series of circle time sessions and for this particular session. The activities you choose will seek to achieve these outcomes and enable progressions from one session to the next.

Welcome and Introduction
It is important to set a positive atmosphere at the start of the session and to remind participants briefly of important ground rules. These statements will also explain what the session is about so that the participants are clear about what is expected of them. It also makes links to past and future sessions.

Introductory Game
This game will help to create a relaxed atmosphere and, where possible, provide a fun introduction to the theme being explored.

Sentence Completion
Participants are given a "sentence starter" to complete which will focus on the theme being explored. Asking someone to start, the "talking object" is then passed round the circle enabling everyone to have a turn in speaking.

Discussion Forum/Sharing more information
This is where the main exploration of the theme will take place, and where use of pairs/small group work, role play, creative art activities, etc. with feedback to the large circle can be useful tools.

Closure
As with all groupwork, it is important that the Circle Time session is brought to an appropriate close so that participants can move on to whatever they are doing next. This might take the form of a Closing Circle which allows people to evaluate the session or say how they are feeling, a game to release any tension, or a simple guided meditation to help bring a sense of calm to the group.

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