

## INTRODUCTION

Circles are a tradition from communities of the past where people joined in a circle to understand one another, share perspectives, solve problems or possibly make peace. Even today, healthy families will find time to switch off the TV and join together with a hot drink to talk honestly about how things are.

Today Circles are being used in a vast variety of contexts. In schools they are building trust and understanding within tense class situations, in police contexts internationally they are being used increasingly to resolve deeply entrenched difficulties between gangs and community groups, lowering murder rates. In neighbourhoods Circles are being used to rebuild the structure of 'community', helping isolated people to feel supported and appreciated. In social support agencies, Circles have been used for years to engage families and professionals together in mutually beneficial environments.

Circles have in fact arisen from an instinctual need by the 21st C citizen to regain connectedness in an increasingly disconnected world. Along with many useful communication advancements, in many ways today's world encourages isolation and separateness amongst the people of our communities. This worrying trend has not escaped notice and 'home-grown' responses have appeared world-wide to address this threat. For example, the 'Men-shed' concept in Australia is bringing men together to discuss health and personal issues using the traditional back-yard shed as a gathering point. (see <http://www.mensheds.com.au/>)

## The Danger for Young People

The break-down of long established community institutions and traditions have fractured many of the mechanisms that young people innately used to learn the ways of adulthood. Combined with historically high rates of family breakup, the structures that young people have used to build a healthy relationship with the world are disappearing. Young people who would once have had exposure to a wide cross-section of opinion and experience from a variety of age-groups are increasingly finding company with a narrow niche of people – often no older or wiser than themselves. The delinquent sub-cultures such as youth gangs are evidence that isolated young people are both a danger to themselves and others.

## Young People and Schools

Educators would wish that schools be regarded by the community as places of refuge and security for young people – but this is not always so. In small primary schools where all members of the school community know one another, students may feel connected but in large secondary schools, the sense of isolation and disconnection can be felt strongly by teenagers. In other words, a large secondary school can reinforce the fear that young people have about their failure to belong in an impersonal world. Any well-intentioned college will make every attempt to address the issue of belonging by creating opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships using smaller, more personal structures such as tutor groups and form classes. However, a couple of concerns must be considered.

Firstly, even if these groups are overseen by a goodhearted individual, unless a specific process is followed that maximises relationships and understandings between members of the tutor group/form class, the worth of these groups are marginalised. Secondly, the average student's day consists of many opportunities for harm within the subject class setting. Unless a process is used that integrates with their subject class routines, possibilities for resolving issues with the members of those classes is effectively denied to that student.

Accordingly, the Circle process can ideally be used in both tutor group/form class and subject class contexts to build a sense of community, belonging and shared understanding.

## Circles and the NZ Curriculum

Thankfully, the needs of the new (2007) curriculum to recognise broader aspects of personal development for young people than earlier documents have been met. The new national curriculum paper pays considerable attention to aspects of the young person's education experience outside of the Eight Essential Learning Areas. Most importantly for the mental and social health of students are the Key Competencies. People use these competencies to live, learn, work, and contribute as active members of their communities. More complex than skills, the competencies draw also on knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate or stand-alone. They are the key to learning in every learning area. The New Zealand

Curriculum identifies five key competencies:

1. managing self
2. relating to others
3. participating and contributing
4. thinking
5. using language, symbols, and texts.

Although the Key Competencies will hopefully be delivered to and experienced by students in many ways throughout their school lives, the Circle process may be considered one of the ideal vehicles for the promotion of these learning opportunities. Circles may be considered a prime tool for this vital learning area as in Circles the student becomes an integral part of the learning process, rather than an outside observer to it.

## Circles, Restorative Practices and Class Conferences

There is rapidly building interest worldwide in the education sector in the benefits that Restorative Practices (RP) appears to be offering schools. As research and practice develops yearly, it is clear that RP are not intended to be used as a 'programme', but as a philosophy for the school community to build its culture and processes around. One exciting element of RPs in use in NZ schools and elsewhere has been the 'class conference'. A class conference is a gathering of all the people involved with a particular class with an express interest in voicing concerns surrounding the class and moving towards solutions.

Personally, I believe that class conferences can be a powerful intervention for one of the most problematic situations facing any school – the class that is not functioning as a harmonious, respectful learning unit. But also after much reflection, I have begun to look at troublesome classes in a new way. I now understand more clearly that the bad behaviour is not the problem but the symptom of a problem. This is not revolutionary thinking but it has changed my orientation towards dealing with it. Having started Circles in several classes that were once very much a 'problem', it became immediately clear that the students were operating from a very low sense of trust with each other. The bickering, put-downs, inattention to work, belligerence towards teachers were in many ways an expression of that mistrust. Once, we had begun to build trust with Circle exercises, many elements of class behaviour began to show significant improvement and continue to do so.

Does this mean that class conferences are redundant? No, not at all but it means that staff have choices about how we approach the problem. If we wish to have relatively swift responses to problem behaviour, then a class conference may be the best option. If however the time can be taken to devoting more time to building trusting relationships within the class, the Circle approach may pay greater long term dividends to the class and school. I advise for schools to trial both and make their own decisions.

### **Circles – Reactive or Preventative?**

It is probably clear from the above discussion that Circles can be used reactively – for a class that is not working as well with each other as possible. This however seems like a shameful waste of the power of this process. As Mosley and Tew (1999) suggest, the Circle process can also help an average class to become exceptional. I am in favour of using Circles as a preventative process – with the hope that a reactive stance never has to be adopted. The model shown here is a useful guide by academic Brenda Morrison to how the various levels of restorative practice in a school can be understood. I suggest that although class conferences belong in the ‘targeted’ level, Circles belong in the ‘universal’ level. This is not to say that every student is always participating in Circles but that each student would have at least had exposure to Circles during the formative part of their school life – possibly in junior years.

### **How are other Countries using Circles?**

Perhaps the clearest example of what is possible may be the United Kingdom where many primary and secondary are beginning to embrace the Circle concept as a powerful resource option within their curriculum. Personal and Social Health Education (PSHE) is a mandatory curriculum strand which best equates to NZ’s Health and Physical Education element. Within PSHE, Circles are among approaches that teachers have found real success and satisfaction with.

Australia and the USA are also pioneering countries in the Circle field. For some wisdom relatively close to home, check out the great work of Canberra’s Peta Blood at <http://www.circlespeak.com.au/>

### **The Benefit of Circles in Student’s Social and Personal Development**

Perhaps the best way for people to understand the potential benefits is to quote from some of the UK experts, Jenny Mosley and Marilyn Tew.

*“Recent research indicates that successful schools are characterised by a healthy climate and a strong ethos, which respects and nurtures good relationships with clear, safe and secure boundaries. We cannot transmit moral codes through exhortation or cajole young people into becoming good citizens. Instead we need to provide them with a range of different opportunities to explore their feelings about how they live their lives and how they engage with other people. As a group process, Circle Time helps to generate a sense of ‘belonging’ which encourages individuals to become active members of the class and school community. This ‘hands-on’ participation in democratic processes in the microcosm of the classroom or school helps to develop individual and corporate responsibility and hopefully, better citizens of the wider community”*

Mosley and Tew, 1999:9

## **CIRCLES PROCESS - THE BASICS**

### **Necessary Groundrules**

There are several indisputable guidelines that must be followed. Simply, they are as follows:

- The designated speaker should not be interrupted in any way.
- People should signal if they wish to speak.
- If people do not wish to speak, they are entitled to ‘pass’ – they are also entitled to speak once the round has finished.
- No put-downs at all. The person speaking is not to name anyone in a negative way. The speaker is entitled to name behaviours or actions but not individuals – or hint at individuals.
- Circles should be preferably a positive environment.
- Accordingly, issues can hopefully be talked about with an emphasis on ‘solutions’ rather than ‘problems’.

### **The Debate – The Place of Games in Circles?**

The choice of Circle process will depend on its application. Even within education settings, there does not appear to be a conclusive understanding about which is the best model.

The secondary school model described by Mosley and Tew appears to be a derivation of their popular and well established primary school model. The primary model has a considerable emphasis on games and other elements of fun that stand alongside the component of open talk. Mosley and Tew’s secondary school model has placed less importance on games but repeated references can be found in their literature about the need for ‘fun’, even with teenagers. That said, even gurus like Mosley acknowledge that games can be hard to sell to secondary age students.

I will never argue against the need for teenagers to have genuine, harmless fun but at this stage of my learning about Circles, I am treading cautiously. My argument is this: teenagers (especially teenage boys) will characteristically use humour as a means of side-stepping emotional transparency. By deliberately introducing humour into Circle, we stand the danger of giving young people another opportunity to use the same tactics of personal avoidance that they routinely use with their friends. Even if a Circle starts with a game, the Circle then has to be moved towards a deeper level of human engagement – it appears to me that the game has to be chosen carefully to perform a learning function - and then have that function explained to the students. At Rosehill College we are 'playing it safe' by using energisers mostly derived from the excellent Peer Support Programme (sponsored by Rotary) and these simple exercises seem to be able to complement the deeper learning of the more traditional Circle processes.

Allow me to explain my apparently conservative approach. Evidence suggests that teenagers are mostly still able to experience ‘fun’ – even if through somewhat illicit means. But I contend that there is a vital element of human experience that most of the 21st Century’s teenagers know little about – and that is the experience of reverence. By reverence I mean the sense of awe that a person might feel by witnessing a breathtaking sunrise or even the sense of awe that parents may feel witnessing their new-born baby. Many of the aspects of young people’s life in which reverence may once have been found have since been largely lost – the visits to church, neighbourhood connections with community leaders, etc. By restoring opportunities for young people to feel reverence, young people have a sense of something greater than themselves, a sense of humility that is healthy for a positive outlook towards life.

### **Successful Circles – the Importance of the Facilitator**

Probably understandably, the single most important guideline for Circle is the provision and maintenance of emotional safety. Open disclosure of difficult topics and innermost experiences is difficult for all people in the best of circumstances. For a teenager to talk honestly about their lives in the midst of put-downs or with the subsequent risk of ridicule later, it is virtually impossible. So, freedom from criticism is utterly vital at all stages of the Circle – and of course in the days between Circles. This uppermost concern for emotional safety reveals an inescapable truth – that the skill and performance of the facilitator is pivotal to the success of the process. Bluntly, there are many other aspects of the Circle process that the facilitator must be vigilant about, but if the facilitator cannot be ‘ruthless’ about providing a safe environment, every other effort is wasted. This will entail modeling a respectful stance at all times, watching and listening for any emotional threats and acting swiftly and effectively when they do occur.

In essence then, it will become clear to readers that the positive qualities seen in good teachers are extremely useful for running Circles. Does this then mean that a good teacher is necessarily a good Circle facilitator? In my opinion – No. I think that teaching skills are useful but I believe something extra is needed to make an excellent Circle facilitator. The extra qualities that I believe are also required are an understanding of the inner world that teenagers live in and emotional literacy. Firstly, understanding the teenager’s inner world. The facilitator needs to understand that what he or she most values in the world is possibly not the most important to teenagers. It is easy to

dismiss teenage concerns about belonging as superficial or worthless – but that is the reality for many teenagers and the facilitator needs to value these concerns too while working with students. Secondly, if the facilitator is able to look inside himself/herself and express the emotional currents that lie within him/her, the students will have an invaluable role model in the room with them. Needless to say, it takes courage on the behalf of the facilitator to share some of these more private feelings with a group of teenagers but we cannot expect the students to do something that we are not prepared to do ourselves.

### **The Physical Environment**

This is another vital aspect of the process as the environment. An unclean or even uncared-for room can have a suppressive effect on human emotions. Conversely, a bright, clean and orderly room can lift emotions and encourage expression. Accordingly, a Circle should ideally be run in a room that is pleasant to the eye. If rubbish has been left on the floor by a previous class, it will be necessary for the floor to be cleared before the Circle is contemplated. The room should be private in the sense that no-one should be able to overhear talk from the Circle. As importantly, the Circle should be held in a room that is quiet. Students who talk about private issues within the Circle often do so in a quiet, shy voice - if there is any outside noise, their words are often lost amongst the background din.

An absolute rule of Circles is that everyone should be able to see one another clearly. This is the reason why a circle formation is so important. There should not be any physical barrier separating people and for this reason all the class desks will have to be temporarily stacked in the corners of the room. It is necessary to have the rule of students placing their bags behind their seats, rather than in front of their feet as they often prefer. It is good practice to never have an empty seat – if a student should have to leave the room, the group should remove the vacant chair from the Circle and the gap ‘filled’.

### **Regularity of Circles**

I believe that this is a more critical consideration than it first appears. I believe that for Circles to achieve what it is fully capable of in a school, it has to be overtly valued. If students can clearly see that staff recognise it as a vital tool in the delivery of the new NZ Curriculum, they will engage with it more earnestly than if they thought it was a way for teaching staff to fill in odd periods. If it is clear that their Circle facilitator is has received specialist training and is operating as a skilled person, they will also engage more earnestly.

Probably the best way for Circles to be accorded value in the student’s eyes (and staff too, probably) is for Circles to be provided space in the timetable – probably one hour per week for the target group. Beyond promoting Circles as a legitimate educational tool, a timetabled slot gives predictability for students, giving them confidence that they will have an opportunity to talk to classmates about important issues within a certain timeframe.

### **A ‘Talking Piece’**

There is varied debate about the value of a talking piece (TP) but I think that Rosehill College Circle staff are sold on their effectiveness. A talking piece can be any object that is passed around the Circle that symbolically gives the holder the exclusive right to talk – all others must listen. The talking piece needs to be of a size that allows everyone in the room to view it. In other words, it is unsuitable to use a small shell or stone as a talking piece because it is easy for such an item to be hidden out of view in a student’s hands. Authors suggest that any object such as a soft toy can be used as a talking piece but given the propensity of some teenagers to turn a serious situation into a farce, I believe that it is taking an unnecessary risk to use any object that can become the focus of a joke. Natural objects such as manicured tree branches make ideal talking pieces because they tend to transcend culture and race more than manufactured objects.

The TP has a value beyond just encouraging one person to speak at a time. Because it takes time for the TP to be passed from person to person, it can ‘slow down’ the passage of conversation (Pranis, 2005) from a possible frantic pace to a manageable level that students can follow. The possession of the TP also offers young people a prosocial experience of personal power – an alternative to some less healthy

expressions of power such as bullying or even loud behaviour.

The words of advice that I give young people when first experimenting with the TP is to regard it as being a very precious object. I explain the preciousness of the TP as follows: The TP symbolises words. Words are powerful - they can create war or heal nations. Words therefore must be chosen carefully and used wisely. Accordingly, at Rosehill College we ask that no-one ever throw, shove drop or otherwise disrespect the TP. For the talking piece to be effective, the rules for its use need to be scrupulously observed. In other words, if the talking piece is in use by the Circle, the facilitator needs to recognise democratic process and touch the talking piece before talking him or herself. The orientation of the talking piece can be used to ‘mark’ the status of a Circle. For example, TP is upright in someone’s hands – person is talking. TP lies flat within Circle – TP is available for someone to retrieve. TP lies horizontal in front of the facilitator – paired talking, etc.

### **Hand Signals**

In order for the basic groundrules to be followed, it is necessary to have a system where students can make simple communications without interrupting others – handsignals are an excellent tool. A hand outstretched is a clear signal for, “Can I please have the talking piece?”. A signal that Rosehill College has successfully used is the upraised hand which means, “I can see or hear a put-down – either from the speaker’s words or from the actions of a non-speaker.”

This ‘Rosehill’ system to prevent ‘put-downs’ in the Circle appears to work very well and is based on the following premise: the person with the TP will feel put-down if others are whispering, laughing, looking around, fidgeting, or basically not listening intently. Therefore, we have instructed any students in the Circle to raise a hand high in the air if they witness any of the above events – a verbal rebuke is not necessary. Necessarily, if a student who is whispering, laughing, looking around, fidgeting, or basically not listening intently should see a hand (or several) being raised in the air, they should reflect upon their own conduct to evaluate whether they may be the cause of concern – if so, they should amend their behaviour and refocus on their listening. As I said, this system seems to work well and is a very valuable tool for building student’s self-awareness without overt criticism. I have experimented with other hand signals but they have been far less successful than the two above.

### **Circle Timing**

The timing within the day does not appear to be totally critical. Staff working with Circles at Rosehill have speculated that the 1st period of the day may be a bit more difficult as the students are still adjusting to ‘school’ mode. We have run many Circles in Period 5 without substantial concentration issues. There does appear to be a clearer pattern about the useful length of time for a Circle. When classes are still learning about the Circle process, around 40 minutes is a useful amount. As the students begin to make bigger contributions to conversation and more students begin to speak, the full hour will be required. Smaller classes, particularly with students of lower ability will need less time. Needless to say, five minutes is lost at the beginning and end of each hour for the removal and later reassembling of the desk arrangement. The provision of a specialist Circle Room would clearly save 10 minutes of each Circle period and would signal to students a valuing of the process by the school management.

## CIRCLES PROCESS - THE FINE DETAILS

### Circle Techniques

There are several techniques that appear to be universally useful during Circles. The two most elementary techniques are as follows and can each be used in a variety of ways.

**'The Round'** – this is where the TP is passed from student to student in a sequential order, either clockwise or anti-clockwise, often starting from the facilitator. Each person who holds the TP in turn is allowed to speak, but people are able to pass if they wish.

**'Pick Up'** – this is the technique where the TP is available for anyone who wishes to speak. The person collects the TP from its resting point in the middle of the Circle and after finishing speaking returns it to the middle again for the next person to take it. Clearly, this process allows an infinitely varied speaking order. A natural variation on PU occurs when a sequence of students indicate that they would like to have the TP. Rather than dogmatically returning the TP to the middle, it is natural courtesy for the person who has just finished with the TP to pass it immediately to the next person in the rank.

**'Talking Pairs'** – this is a technique that we have not experimented much with but hold considerable promise. This is where before holding a 'round' the students count themselves off as 1, 1, 2, 2, 1, 1, 2, 2, etc. The 1's and 2's form pairs around the Circle to discuss a particular issue and report back together, each holding on to an end of the TP. This pairs activity is best done once friendship pairings have been divided up – this can be done through boy/girl arrangements or the Continuum (see below)

**'Continuum'** – this is where the individuals within the Circle organise themselves in rank order, moving themselves between chairs as they see fit. For example, students (and staff) can organise themselves on the basis, "I feel good about myself today" or "I love swimming", etc. This makes a graphical illustration for the Circle about people's opinions and preferences and is a very useful starting point for discussion.

### Circle Exercises

Whichever way that you structure your Circle on a particular day, have a selection of options to choose from if one activity should unpredictably 'bomb' for an unfathomable reason – much in the same way that a good teacher will always have a spare activity up his/her sleeve. Aim to have a good 'pace' to the Circle so that there is a sense of energy – but balance it with restraint when a slower speed is necessary for things such as sensitive topics (Tew, Read and Potter, 2007).

**A Moment's Silence** - Many students live in a constant barrage of interaction and noise from the moment the school day starts to the moment that it finishes. 15 seconds silence at the start of the Circle process is a wonderful way for students (and staff!) to collect their thoughts and focus upon where their thoughts are at.

**Confidentiality Agreement** – Before Circles are run properly for the first time, the issue of confidentiality has to be thoroughly discussed. Students need to understand that Circles are about being honest and that honesty is hard to exercise if people are going to abuse our trust in them. I like to include a round about 'confidentiality' in the first Circle, then gain absolute agreement from every person not to repeat what they have heard in the Circle outside the room. Thereafter, I like to repeat the reminder about confidentiality at the beginning of most Circles, especially in classes who have historically shown willingness to tease and mock.

**'What's on Top'** – this is the universal starting exercise for every Circle. After the Circle has been declared begun, the TP is passed as a 'round', with each person stating what is 'on top' of their thoughts at the moment. This may be a happy thought or possibly a recurring sad thought - it may be a conversation that they keep reliving in their head or possibly an idea that has popped into their head as they sat down for Circle. Often you will get a mundane response such as, "I'm looking forward to seeing my favourite TV programme tonight", which is fine.

Sometimes if the 'What's on Top' has been a bit flighty or superficial, once the round has finished I will send the TP back on a second trip around the Circle with the instruction to dig deeper than their initial words. For those students who passed, this is an encouragement to say something and for those students who have already spoken, they can give more details about their earlier words. On occasions I have sent the TP around on a third trip around the Circle to good benefit.

**'Praise Round'** – this is something that has deserved more attention than we have given it. Many students go through the entire day at school without receiving any positive words and in a praise round this can be rectified. Although this can be done in many ways, I believe that every person in the Circle should receive some words of acclaim, even if only for an achievement such as talking less in Science, etc. This can be done by the TP moving on a round, with people naming people who deserve mention. Naturally as the TP moves around, the people most deserving of mention will be already discussed - the later people in the round will need to 'dig deep' to bring to light positive things that the less deserving people have done. For the least popular students with problematic reputations, the entire Circle will probably have to work hard to identify their rare achievements – possibly even "coming to school" or "not getting kicked out of class" are worthwhile contributions.

**'Sentence Starters'** – this is as it sounds. Someone starts the sentence and the TP is moved on a round with people finishing the sentence in as much detail as possible. A set of cards is available that gives many options for the facilitator such as, "When my parent's ground me I ....." or "My favourite hobby is .....", etc. Finding a democratic process for deciding upon the best sentence starter has many options – maybe asking the person most mentioned in 'praise round' (see above) to select the sentence starter for the entire Circle?

**'Conversation Starters'** – this is something that we have yet to trial more at Rosehill College and yet offer wonderful possibilities. This is something that a person brings to the Circle as a point of discussion. It may be a poem, a photo, a special object, a newspaper cutting or other items. Once the provider has talked about the item from their own viewpoint, the item is placed in the middle of the circle as a visual focus for the Circle, helping to guide conversation as the TP moves around.

**Closing** – There are several options to choose from here. The purpose of closing is to bring the Circle process to a smooth and natural conclusion in time for the classroom to be reorganised in time for the next class. Tricky or sensitive issues encountered during the Circle may need to be acknowledged by the facilitator and students may even need to be reminded that school counsellors are available to discuss feelings that may have arisen during the period. There may be a 'round' where people talk about what lies between this Circle and the next one. Alternatively, an opportunity may be offered for someone to provide an uplifting wish for the entire group. Feel free to be creative, providing that the emotional needs of the Circle participants are basically attended to – as best you know.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### Start with Easy Topics

The inclination of students, especially in the early weeks of a Circle's life, can be to skip or bounce around issues. By this I mean that they will naturally wish to avoid disclosing private information about themselves to a group of students who may have historically appeared threatening. The only antidote to this is to start with topics of discussion that are quiet safe and move towards more difficult topics as the trust level grows in the group. If you feel that a Circle has 'choked' on a particular day, there may have been a harmful event outside of the Circle that has temporarily damaged trust. In such cases, you may have to 'backtrack' for a week or two and build back up to tricky topics once trust has returned.

### Learn to Use Silence

All teachers have been told to wait for several seconds after having asked a question to a class and as all teachers know, it is harder to do than it sounds. Likewise, learning to accept and even use silence in a

Circle is very necessary learning for all facilitators to acquire. Silence can arise in a Circle for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it can be because the facilitator has just given an instruction or request that has completely confused students. Or possibly the discussion point may be out of the depth of the target audience. In situations such as this it is the facilitator's responsibility to rectify the situation with a clearer instruction, etc. However, sometimes a silence has arisen because students are deeply contemplating a profound thought or concept. In times like these it is very important as a facilitator to maintain the silence until it is broken naturally by a student wishing to speak. Instructing students about the power of silence early in the life of a Circle is a beneficial task that will help guide students for times to come. Students will eventually become less intimidated by silences and will even visibly relax when they naturally occur.

### **Involve Everyone**

I am not pretending to know the answer to this one yet but it should be the goal of every facilitator to have students involved with the concept, even if not with every individual Circle. This may involve finding the pet topics of some of the quieter students and using those as the focus for upcoming Circles. Alternatively, the facilitator or another staff member could have a private chat with some of the less involved students and find out what barriers may exist to their involvement – alterations to Circle process should be considered if other students are not disadvantaged by the changes. Regular evaluations of Circle classes are an obvious means of identifying issues that are attracting or discouraging students from the Circle process. Using it as a topic for discussion in the Circle is another instant source of information for facilitators.

### **Be Patient**

Although this may seem a given, it is worth mentioning repeatedly. In asking students to talk openly and listen attentively, we are asking some students to turn around negative social habits built up over nine or ten years. Practice and research in Circle processes suggest that even when it appears as though students do not benefit immediately from the Circles concept, they probably are assimilating valuable learning that is difficult to quantify. Learn to make judgments about the progress of Circles over a course of months rather than days or weeks.

### **Variation in Circles Exercises?**

There appears to be contradictory opinions about this topic and you may have to come to your own conclusion before research gives us a clearer answer. One argument is that by having a predictable order of exercises, students will find security and reassurance. The other argument is that predictable order will create boredom and indifference.

Personally, I recognise the value of both opinions and recommend that elements of predictability and spontaneity be incorporated into Circle traditions. I believe that opening exercises such as 'What's on Top' and closing rituals must always be present. Some new, unplanned and even experimental approaches will probably be highly appreciated by participants and should be incorporated from time to time.

### **Discipline in Circles**

Provided that you as facilitator have attended to all the other issues described in this paper, you may have less to deal with than you may first imagine. Many of Rosehill College's first experiences with Circles were for addressing relationship issues in 'troublesome' classes. Despite the tricky groups that Circles were being run with, apart from the odd exception we have had little discipline concerns to deal with. If students are not engaging with the process, I recommend that you assume that students are feeling unsafe to participate - as facilitator you may have to be more stringent about put-downs in any form. If you feel that you need to address discipline issues in the Circle, attempt to do it in the most discrete manner possible. This may involve smoothly swapping seats with students, using simple hand signals to indicate your wishes or best of all, eye contact and barely perceptible shakes of the head.

If it is likely that groupings of students around the Circle may be mostly responsible for your concerns. Be clever in your planning of activities so that these groupings are broken early in the period and a safe Circle

environment is established quickly. It may also be helpful to have another staff member there in the early life of a Circle while students are becoming trusting of the process.

*"One of the most frequently asked questions when training secondary teachers in Circle Time is, 'How can I keep discipline? What do I do when the student does not keep the ground rules?' These questions are usually asked with particular characters in mind whom the teacher has found tricky in other lessons. The anxiety in taking on a new technique when the tried and tested ones are not working is understandable and the temptation is to stick with the familiar methods whether or not they are successful. This can lock both teacher and pupil into unhelpful cycles of action and response and serve to entrench the unwanted behaviour. Sometimes a new process such as Circle Time breaks the usual pattern of interpersonal relating and allows both parties to develop a different view of the other which in turn facilitates new ways of behaving."*

Mosley and Tew, 1999: 49

### **Groom for Leadership**

Although I am not suggesting that every class should be running democratically, Circles should be regarded as democracy in action. Accordingly, it makes sense that anyone should have the opportunity to lead the Circle, provided they have the right credentials. I believe that a wonderful time in the evolution of Circles in a school will be when a student facilitates the Circle and staff temporarily relinquish that role. This is certainly possible, provided that the keen students are given the same degree of training that staff are given.

### **FINAL WORDS**

In days gone by it may have been the mark of professionalism for teachers to have a sense of distance and detachment from the students in their care. More transparent connections with students might have been regarded as frivolous or unnecessary. However, the paragraphs above probably reveal a reality for the NZ teaching profession of the 21st Century. Recent research of NZ's own Russell Bishop and his team's development of the Te Kotahitanga programme reveals a truth: That perhaps the single biggest determinant in the strength of the learning process is the quality of the relationships within each classroom.

Relationships have moved from becoming a by-product of the school process to becoming a vital raw ingredient. Furthermore, the new national curriculum document indicates that no longer are schools just a place where a student learns a subject then goes home to receive moral guidance and character development. Schools are for increasing numbers of students the most stable influence in their lives and are understandably a vital locale for accessing these broader elements of personal and social education. Processes such as Circles promote learning in the greater sense of the word, the development of the 'whole student'. Even acknowledging that the Circle process is somewhat a step into the unknown for NZ secondary schools, it has centuries of tradition behind it to recommend it as a worthy inclusion into school life.

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