Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

‘Circles’ Methodology for Schools

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

Introduction

Having people in our lives, who care about us and look out for us, are an important resource and can be regarded as our ‘Social Capital’. In many people’s lives, this Social Capital begins to be built where people live and where they go to school. School is a place where students not only get a formal education but also are members of a community. They learn about relationships through the way that community operates. Arguably this is an essential element in equipping young people for a fulfilling life. The unstructured parts of the school day – the journey in, transits between lessons, recess, lunch, the journey home – are all moments where students build fellowship with each other, forming acquaintanceships and then friendships. In this way, students are building their Social Capital.

For some students, it can be harder to build Social Capital and find valued membership in their school community. One approach to minimising exclusion and maximizing inclusion for those students is called ‘Circles’. A Circle, sometimes called ‘Circle of Support’ or a ‘Circle of Friends’, is a highly intentional set of actions where a group of people are recruited to stand alongside the person who is vulnerable due to their circumstances (e.g., disability, Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, poverty, homelessness).

This tool is an introduction to the Circles methodology for school staff. This information will help a school leader determine if a Circle is suitable for a student at their school. School leaders can use the sample methodology under the ‘Actions’ section of this tool to set up and support a Circle.

Ideas

Social Capital is a key asset for a young person’s journey through education. It brings belonging and shared resource, and it is a natural safeguard. Students with increased vulnerability, including due to disability, may have more difficulty obtaining genuine membership in their school community.

Certain students might be excluded from those daily moments of fellowship, in these types of ways:

* *Passively excluded –* where other students might not think to involve the student
* *Actively excluded –* where other students might intentionally exclude the student
* *Actively persecuted –* where other students might bully the student through unkind words or actions that adversely impact on the student emotionally and/or physically.

Because such students often have increased vulnerability because of their circumstances, this exclusion can have a catastrophic impact not only on their education journey but also on their subsequent adulthood.

It is imperative that schools find ways to minimise the risk of such exclusion happening. Schools may already be familiar with a range of techniques for minimising exclusion; for example, a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on bullying. While such signals can help minimise active persecution, they may not by themselves be enough to remove active or passive exclusion and strengthen inclusion habits among the student community. This means a school might need to contemplate techniques not just for minimising exclusion, but for maximising inclusion. One way of approaching this, anchored on building Social Capital, is through a body of methodology called Circles.

What is a Circle?

A Circle is a highly intentional set of actions where a group of people are recruited to stand alongside the person who is vulnerable (described in this tool as the ‘central person’). Highly intentional means the group is set up with the clear, measurable goal of building connections around the central person so they are not alone or marginalised during the school day.

The people who enroll into a person’s Circle do not do it:

* to be paid
* because of feelings of pity or charity toward the person
* to be an official volunteer
* to get work experience
* as part of a personal attainment program/goal e.g., the Duke of Edinburgh Award

Instead, Circle participants are recruited because they are drawn to the importance of seeing the central person included, not isolated; they can see how they can be part of the solution, taking action as fellow citizens, to bring solidarity to a person who may otherwise be alone. This is about young people taking action in support of fairness.

The Circle members don’t have a role description, or sign a special form, or wear a special badge. Any of these things would make the role seem artificial and a ‘service’. It would also reinforce a sense that the central person is different to other students and is being treated in a special way. Therefore, a key element to the success of the Circle is that it is subtle.

Deciding if a Circle of Support is Right for a Student at Your School

Circles is one methodology for supporting students with increased vulnerability to build friendships with peers and belonging in the school community. However, deciding whether it is a good fit for a student and for your school will need to be considered carefully. A student is likely to benefit from being the central person in a Circle, if the student…

* is new to the school and has a degree of vulnerability that may make her/him more likely to be excluded from the rhythms and networks of the student community e.g., trauma, cultural background, disability
* has a history at the school of being marginalised or excluded from the rhythms and networks of the student community because of their perceived differences
* has very few acquaintances and friends at the school and spends much of the unstructured part of the school day alone
* has characteristics that may make it harder for her/him to make connections and/or which may even push others away e.g., using behavior that their peers find unusual or unwelcome
* is undergoing a period of transition where vulnerability is heightened e.g., new school, new class, changes to body or capacity)
* has less communication, social and emotion capacity than their same-age peers

Actions

Sample Steps to Build and Support a Circle Of Support

Below is a sample methodology that was prepared for the *Inclusive School Communities Project* to assist local schools in their work to include all students. It is not the only way to build a Circle, but it is designed to assist schools to apply the information contained in this tool. Over time, a school may develop and evolve its own unique approach to building Circles. It may be helpful for school staff to review the sample methodology in a staff meeting and discuss whether the steps are applicable to their school context.

Step 1: A Moment of Leadership

First, a leader at the school identifies a student could benefit from a Circle (referred to in the following steps as the ‘central person’). This could be a formal leader at the school such as the principal, deputy principal, counsellor, a senior teacher or student leader. It could also be an informal leader such as a parent, another adult with ties to the school or a fellow student.

Importantly, the leader first talks with the central person to better understand the situation from their point of view. Best practice is for the central person to be a partner in the Circle process because she/he is the main beneficiary and the main narrator of her/his own life and wellbeing. Depending on circumstances, this talk may involve a trusted adult such as the central person’s parent/carer or another support person.

The leader will raise the suggestion of a Circle with the school principal or other senior leader with formal responsibility for student wellbeing during Step 1 either before or after confirming interest from the central person; the timing depends on the student and the school’s policies and procedures.

Step 2: Developing a Plan

A meeting is called of the above people to better understand the central person’s experience at school and how their vulnerabilities play out each day. For example, there may be a specific part of the day or week when the student is particularly vulnerable to isolation, exclusion or bullying within the student community. There may also be parts of the school teaching program that the student engages in poorly because they don’t have significant Social Capital at the school. For example, a student may find it easier to participate in physical education or a science practical if she/he has acquaintances or friends in the same class.

The meeting contemplates which other students might be potential allies and who might become part of the Circle to assist in these key moments of vulnerability. Possibilities include:

* peer-age students in the same home group as the central person, and who have a reputation for being helpful, engaging and fair
* peer-age students known to carry similar hobbies or interests to the central person (e.g., sports, video games, science, music, etc.)
* peer-age students living in the same neighbourhood as the central person who use the same way of getting to/from school
* older students in leadership roles at the school
* older students where there is some commonality with the central person (e.g., neighbourhood, hobbies and interests)

The plan for their involvement is simple: to be with the central person at those key moments of vulnerability, and to otherwise make sure the central person is included. This may also include making peer introductions to help widen the number of students who have a positive connection to the central person.

Step 3: Engaging Students into the Circle

This needs to be done particularly mindfully, to minimise the risk of students becoming involved for the unwanted reasons listed earlier. Two ways to think about this are the direct approach and the indirect approach, and each can work depending on the circumstances.

*The direct approach*: This is where the leader approaches the student(s), explains the situation, sets out the importance of inclusion, and then makes the request. It is important not to make it sound like an onerous commitment, but instead for the student to see her/himself as keeping an eye out for the central person and making a positive step to include the person wherever needed.

*The indirect approach*: This is where the leader creates situations where the central person and the other targeted student(s) are brought together for a common reason (e.g., a class assignment, a moment of helpfulness such as assisting the teacher with a practical matter) using that situation to create a positive connection and to then make the request based on a shared experience of the central person’s vulnerability/exclusion.

Step 4: Monitoring and Staying in Touch

For the students enrolled to the Circle, part of the brief is to stay in touch with the leader to help track whether the experience of exclusion is being replaced by the experience of inclusion. This can help create moments of celebration and affirmation about the Circle and initiate problem-solving.

Where several students have become involved in the Circle, it may be beneficial from time to time to call them together with the central person. This catch up can be helpful to think through steps people can take to build and safeguard the central person’s connections and to resolve stubborn issues that are hindering the experience of inclusion. When the Circle comes together like this, it is important for it to feel as natural and informal as possible. No printed agenda or other hallmarks of formality; it’s a chat among citizens of a school community about how best to assist one of their own.

Step 5: Closing a Circle of Support

If the Circle has travelled well, it does not need to be formally closed. Instead, the intentionality of the work is gradually replaced by the natural, self-perpetuating fellowship that has been built between the central person and the other members of the Circle. The leader may remain ready to reengage if this is signaled by a Circle member or someone else.

It is possible that some members of the Circle drift from it and for whatever reason cannot sustain their involvement as a practical ally to the central person. This is not a reason to close the Circle but instead, if the need and interest from the central person is still present, to begin a new round of scouting for potential allies who might join the Circle as per Step 2.

More Information

Edition 38 of CRUcial Times from Community Resource Unit (QLD) on the theme of ‘Circles of Support’ including an article by Canada’s Janet Klees on the role of circles in building relationships, belonging and mutuality. http://cru.org.au/crucial-times-issue-38-circles-of-support/

Information and videos about Circles of Support from Resourcing Inclusive Communities (NSW) including their manual for getting started and a webinar sharing a family’s experience of a circle. https://www.ric.org.au/circles-of-support

Information about Community Living Project’s (SA) Circles Initiative which works in partnership with people and their families to build freely given relationships which strengthen the person’s opportunities for an inclusive life. http://communitylivingproject.org.au/circles-initiative/

Video about the Community Living Project’s ‘Circles of Support’ Initiative to facilitating a person living with disability to build a network of friends and support https://youtu.be/-aQRY1c4Xos

Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Robbi Williams, CEO of Julia Farr group and edited by JFA Purple Orange.

