

Session 9 – Restorative Circles, Part 2

Materials:

- Agenda charted on the board or chart paper, or provided as a handout
- A meaningful talking piece
- A meaningful centerpiece
- Chart paper containing Community Agreements from Session 7
- Handout: “The Key Elements a Circle”
- Handout: “The Role of the Keeper”
- AV equipment to play videos:
- [Evergreen First Grade Circle](#), and
- [GEDSB Talking Circle/GEDSB Indigenous Education](#)

Opening Ceremony: Abdominal or Diaphragmatic Breathing (also known as Belly Breathing with younger children)



Talk people through a few abdominal breaths by inviting them first to sit up straight, as straight as is comfortable for them. Have them imagine an invisible thread attached to the top of their head gently pulling them up, aligning their heads with their spine. Invite them to allow their faces to soften, their shoulders to drop and place both feet on the floor as they feel the floor underneath supporting them. Place one hand on their upper chest and the other just below their rib cage. This will allow them to feel their diaphragm move as they breathe. Now invite everyone to slowly take a breath in through their nose so that their stomach pushes out against their hand. And pause for a moment, before breathing out through their mouth, as their stomach retracts towards the spine. Pause again before taking the next breath in through the nose. Repeat five times and give people a moment to check in with themselves.

Go-Round

Sending a talking piece around, invite people to share how they're doing.



Talk Participants Through Today's Agenda

- Opening Ceremony: Abdominal, Diaphragmatic or Belly Breathing
- Check Agenda
- Review Circle Value and Guidelines
- The Circle Structure
- The Role of the Keeper
- Putting It All Together: First Grade Appreciation Circle
- Putting It All Together: A Talking Circle in Middle School
- Closing Ceremony: An Appreciation Circle

Review Circle Values and Guidelines (Agreements)

Review the circle values the group contributed and the community guidelines co-created during the previous session. We'll be doing this regularly to ensure the circle values and practices become a grounding force of our circle practice rather than an activity that's done once, early in the process. Ask participants how they feel about the Values they contributed last time to the centerpiece to ground your work together. How about the guidelines? Ask participants if there are any values or guidelines they'd like to emphasize as we continue our work together. Is anything missing?

The Circle Structure

Remind participants of the idea that the structure of the circle is tight, so that the sharing and listening can flow. Referencing Derick McRae from the video we watched during Session 6:

“Once they got the rules of the circle, and why they sit in the circle, because a circle doesn't have a beginning or end, everybody in the circle is equal and everyone has an equal say, once they understood the ground rules, then it was able to just flow.”

Like with any structures and routines in the classroom, a regular practice, repeated over time, helps to introduce predictability and consistency into the classroom environment. This can provide a sense of safety for young people, especially for those students who deal with uncertainty elsewhere in their lives; students who may come from precarious, unpredictable home environments and those who've been impacted by trauma. The need for routine, consistency and predictability is especially acute for students impacted by trauma and meeting that need can substantially reduce the likelihood that students will

become dysregulated because of anxiety and uncertainty about what comes next. Consistent structures and routines can also help create spaces where young people can take ownership of their own learning and become more accountable to themselves and each other.

“[Fostering student voice](#) [moreover] can have powerful effects on engagement as students who take ownership over their own learning are more likely to enjoy being in [school](#). Including students' voices also can have democratizing effects on both schools and classrooms as diverse perspectives are folded into how problems are framed and what solutions are then proposed. Providing spaces for students to voice their opinions and address issues affecting their lives can empower students to effect positive change in their communities. Such opportunities are particularly crucial for students of color whose voices, resources, and knowledge have historically been marginalized in and outside of schools.”

The Role of the Keeper

Explain that in addition to the core elements of circles introduced in the previous sessions, the role of the facilitator, known as “the keeper” in circles, is another important piece that sets the circle process apart from the more hierarchical educational approaches in our schools. The role of the keeper is different from that of the teacher in traditional (public) education. It pushes back on hierarchy and ownership of the educational process, the idea that only adults in schools have knowledge and wisdom to teach young people. Instead, it promotes the idea that education is a two-way street in which we are all teachers and we are all students and together we co-create knowledge.

In circles, we turn some of the traditional structures and assumptions in education on their head. Going beyond most roles in education, the keeper is seen not as a neutral facilitator, but as a participant as well as a host. The keeper invites circle participants into the space, sets a welcoming tone for all, while focusing on people's inclusion and safety to the best of their abilities. The keeper introduces the circle process and teaches “by doing,” in that they model how to be in circle, abiding by the circle process, guidelines and values as they share responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the circle with the rest of the group.

Ultimately, in the circle, everyone is both keeper and participant. Everyone is both teacher and student.

Distribute “The Role of the Keeper” handout and invite participants to read *Building a Strong Circle Foundation* and *Sharing the Space Responsibly and Maintaining the Integrity of a Circle: Part 1*.

Pair Share

Invite participants to share with each other, taking turns speaking and listening:

- Share your impressions, feelings, experiences, and/or thoughts about what you just read.
- How is the role of the keeper different from other roles you've played at school?
- What excites you about this approach? What concerns you about this approach? Why?

Large Group Share

Invite some participants to share their IFET on the role of the keeper and any other reflections they have as a result of the reading and pair share.

Putting It All Together: First Grade Appreciation Circle (2:07 min)

Play the following video: [Evergreen First Grade Circle](#). The video shows a first-grade circle, in which students express their appreciations for one another. Invite participants to pay attention to the key elements of circles introduced so far.

Make a mental (or physical) note when you see or hear about these key elements in the video.

Also let participants know that you'll be closing today's session with an appreciations go-round in which each participant will be invited to appreciate the person sitting next to them, just like the first graders do in the video.

Explain that you'll go straight into showing another video in which you'll see students and adults participating in circles while also reflecting on the circle process and how it has enriched their classroom.

Putting It All Together: A Talking Circle In a Middle School Classroom (7:11 min)

Play the following video: [GEDSB Talking Circle/GEDSB Indigenous Education](#), inviting participants to, once again, pay attention to the core elements of circles that have been

introduced so far. Also invite them to listen for some of the other characteristics of the circle practice that we've explored.

Reflection: Pair Share

Invite participants to share with each other, taking turns speaking and listening:

- What are any impressions, feelings, experiences or thoughts that came up for you during these videos?
- Specifically: what *feelings* came up for you when watching these videos? How do you think the students in the circles felt?
- What core elements of the circle were present (as far as you could tell) in these circles?

Large Group Share

Invite some participants to share their IFET on the restorative circle practice portrayed in the videos. Make sure to touch on the structure of the circle.

Before closing your circle today, let people know that for your next session, you invite them to bring a talking piece of their own to the circle. Have them think about a meaningful item that they might use with their students when they start facilitating their own circles in their classrooms.

Closing Ceremony: An Appreciation Circle

Thinking back to the first-grade circle, invite participants to go around the circle, one after the other appreciating the person sitting next to them in the circle.

Additional Resources: Session 9

Additional Written Resources:

["Building Community with Restorative Circles"](#) by Marieke Van Woerkom, *Edutopia*

["Uplifting the Voices of Students of Color Through Restorative Practices and Civic Engagement"](#) by Jessie Tobin, Aaron Leo, & Kristen C. Wilcox for *NYKids*

Additional Video Resources:

[Suzie Miller GEDSB Talking Circle](#), Suzie Miller of the Grand Erie District School Board, is a First Nations Instructional Coach who talks about the Talking Circles she introduces into classrooms

[Using Dialogue Circles to Support Classroom Management](#) in Elementary School (play through 3:10 min) - Note, what comes after the 3:10 minute mark is presented as a restorative intervention, but it's not. Name calling, shaming, blaming are antithetical to restorative practices.

[Restorative Practices | Community Building Circles](#) in Middle School (1:54 min)

Handout: Key Elements of a Circle



Key Elements of a Circle

The structure of the circle



Centerpiece



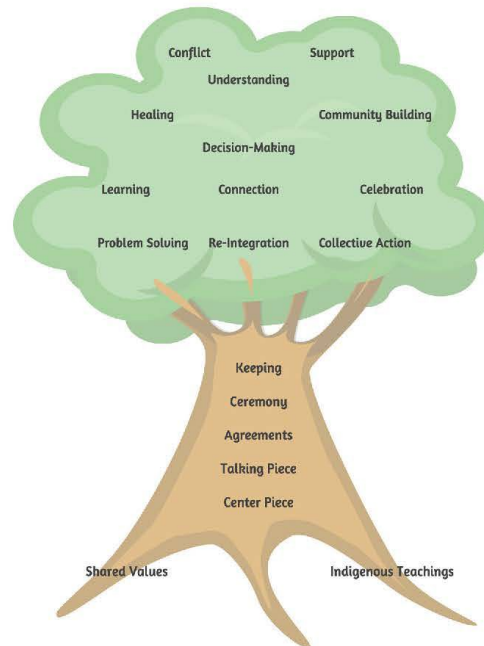
Talking piece (globe, figurine)

Opening and closing ceremonies

Values (see centerpiece image of index cards)

Community practices, guidelines, agreements

Role of the keeper



Handout: Role of the Keeper

The role of the Keeper in a Circle is multifaceted. The Keeper plays the role of organizer, host, backstop, manager, troubleshooter and overall guide.

Building a Strong Circle Foundation

As the Keeper, you are responsible for the Circle preparation and for arranging the space. You want to make sure to familiarize yourself with the people who are invited to the Circle so that you know what topics, questions and prompts may resonate. You also want to get *yourself* ready so that you can be fully present with the group. This means getting enough sleep and nutrition and whatever other practices allow you to transition into the Circle space with focus and awareness.

When the time comes, you are responsible for getting the process started and setting a welcoming and respectful tone. You may introduce yourself and provide participants with a quick overview of what Circles are about. But Circles are the ultimate in experiential learning, as far as giving voice to all, sharing the space, and learning by doing. So as soon as participants have a sense of the Circle process, you want to get started. This is NOT a presentation! An opening ceremony and an introductory round of the talking piece get people right into things.

Early on, invite participants to create their own Circle guidelines and discuss values that are important to them. In Circles the goal is to turn the "reigns" over to the participants as much as possible. Building the space collectively at the onset is one way to do this and can help when things get challenging down the road, when difficult conversations are introduced, strong feelings are shared, or conflict arises.

Sharing the Space and Responsibility

Circles are about sharing the space and responsibility. Everyone in a Circle is invited to be both participant and Keeper. That includes you. As a Keeper you are not a neutral outsider. You are part of the process. This means you share of yourself just as you ask students to share of themselves. Being a Keeper means putting yourself out there. It requires trust in the process and in your students, even when things don't quite go as planned.

And though you collectively build and manage the Circle space with your students, as the Keeper you are also the backstop. You have the ultimate responsibility, especially when the going gets tough, when there is the potential for things to get dicey or unsafe.

The Circle can be a powerful vessel to hold and support difficult conversations, diverse points of view, conflicts and strong emotions, but it needs to be built and sustained. The Keeper is there to protect the integrity of the Circle process. This is especially important when people share difficult experiences or opinions, when intense feelings are voiced or displayed.

Circles can have profound emotional moments that draw everyone in and build empathy. They can be healing for some, but such moments can also be uncomfortable to the point that students may act out. Circles can trigger participants. They can become unstable if the foundation is shaky or if the Circle is not managed well. A strong and sensitive guide is needed to navigate groups through such experiences.

Maintaining the Integrity of a Circle: Part 1

As a Keeper you can take different measures to maintain a Circle's integrity, depending on the issue at hand. Sometimes it suffices to acknowledge the feelings in the Circle, to recognize that things are tough, and to maybe ask participants what they need from the Circle at this time.

During a particularly difficult go-round, the Circle Keeper may ask participants to breathe and take a few seconds before or after someone speaks. This allows what was said to sink in, for some time to pass, emotions to settle, and thoughts to be collected, before the next person shares.

Another way to slow down the Circle process when things get tense or heated is to ask participants to first paraphrase what the person before them said, or what the person they'd like to respond to said. Only then, can they share themselves. You could even introduce prompts like, I'd like to (dis) agree with what x said when [paraphrase what x said]; I was triggered by what x said when [paraphrase what x said]; what I heard x say was [paraphrase what x said].

The Circle process inherently slows down any group dialogue by the mere fact of the talking piece going around in order from one person to the next. This can allow those who

might get triggered to calm down before speaking because they have to wait for the talking piece to come around.

Revisiting the Circle guidelines/agreements and values at the start of a challenging Circle can help students reflect on what they discussed and agreed to earlier (in the year). It can serve as a reminder of what it means to work toward being our best selves in Circles and put the responsibility of continuing to keep the space welcoming and safe on the participants as well as the Keeper. This invokes the idea of a Circle of co-Keepers and reminds students that this is *their* Circle.

You could also ask students to pick a value they think will be important as we talk about [challenging topic] or pick a value that might be challenging for them today as we reflect on e.g. what happened last week and try to come up with solutions going forward.

Of course, in Circles (as in class) we don't always know what will happen ahead of time. Sometimes, when students share authentically of themselves in especially deep ways, other students don't know how to handle what it brings up for them. They may feel uneasy and react by having side conversations or giggling. They may say things under their breath, and as such breach the Circle guidelines agreed to earlier in the year.

When possible, as the Keeper, try to address breaches when the talking piece comes back you so as not to breach the Circle guidelines yourself. As the Keeper you constantly seek to model behavior aligned with Circle guidelines and values. Modeling is a powerful way to convey messages and teach. It may require you to sit with discomfort as the talking piece makes its way back to you, but it also gives students an opportunity to step in and say something.

In class we are often the ones responsible for running things. In Circles we look to share that responsibility as fully as people are ready to accept it. It's a great moment when students start to reinforce Circle guidelines themselves, when they call each other on disruptive or hurtful behavior, when they start taking responsibility for their Circle. For that to happen, we need to be able to leave space and hang back a bit. When students decide to step in and call their fellow students on disruptive or disrespectful behavior ("you don't have the talking piece," or "that wasn't very nice," or "yo, respect!") consider recognizing their support when the talking piece comes back to you. Point out that people are starting to take responsibility for the Circle and are stepping into the role of co-Keeper. You may want to express appreciation for their support in addressing behavior and say something about the respectful nature of such comments if needed.

So in the case of minor breaches that aren't mean spirited or intentionally unkind, consider continuing to model active listening and respecting the talking piece. This allows space for students to step in but if needed, you could also use body language—a look might work, a hand gesture, or a calming and quiet shhhhhhhh, as the talking piece continues around the Circle. These non-verbal cues can remind students of Circle guidelines as they are made aware of their behavior. And when the talking piece comes back to you, you can address the behavior verbally: acknowledge the giggling, the speaking out of turn, the breach of Circle guidelines.

Rather than the usual reprimands or telling students how you want them to behave, the power of Circles lies in speaking from our own experience and inviting people to reflect on theirs:

E.g., I understand that it might be difficult to listen to the stories we just heard. It can be uncomfortable. Some people express their discomfort through giggling or side conversations or other ways that detract from our Circle. I know that for me, if I were sharing, I might not want to continue if that were happening. I might not feel particularly comfortable sharing of myself when people are giggling or having side conversations, seemingly disinterested in what I have to say. I wonder if this is true for others in the Circle as well. So I'd just like you to reflect on your behavior and think about the impact it may have on others. Let's see if we can get back to the Circle guidelines we agreed to earlier in the year.

As a Keeper you can also check in with students individually after a particularly tense or emotional Circle. Acknowledging challenging feelings from the Circle would be one way to start any such conversation because it tends to help people calm down—"You appeared frustrated when ." or "I know you get anxious when .." Allow the student to respond and listen actively to what they have to say. When the student is calm you might invite them to paraphrase what they heard, share their perspective, reflect on their behavior, and ask them for help in working things through when you reconvene the Circle. These can be useful approaches to redirecting behavior and roles that people tend to take on in groups.

In the heat of the moment, because people are triggered or because of old habits, Circle guidelines may be breached to the point that the Circle is at risk of losing its integrity. Students may be interrupting the process, speaking out of turn, or using disrespectful or hurtful language in potentially explosive ways. If no one else in the Circle steps in to remind the group of the guidelines or values, it is up to the Keeper to do so.

A pause or short time out, asking students to take a few deep breaths, and/or asking them to regroup themselves by looking over the values at the center of the Circle, can allow students to calm back down and be ready to reengage in the Circle process. It's a reminder of what they agreed on needing from the Circle earlier in the process. You may even ask them to recommit to a value that is particularly challenging for them in this moment.

But this may not be sufficient when things escalate to the point of the Circle starting to unravel. Students themselves often don't feel comfortable stepping in when such escalation occurs either. It is at times like these that you need to step in to explain that the Circle is no longer working, it is no longer constructive or safe to continue. A time out or other way to help hit the reset button may be necessary. Acknowledge that you are temporarily suspending the talking piece and pausing the Circle so that we can reestablish a safety.

One way to do this would be to have students put back their desks and chairs to do a quiet reflection exercise. This can be done through journaling or by simply having students close their eyes while you talk them through a set of questions (see below). Have them consider the feelings and thoughts the Circle brought up for them. Why do they think this is? What did they hear? What do they think others in the Circle heard? Did other people in the Circle think/feel similarly? What do they think was underneath what was said? What might

people's needs have been? What were your needs? What were your contributions to the Circle? What was their impact on others, i.e. were they helpful/harmful to the dialogue? How and why? What is one thing you think you could do to help support the Circle in situations like these going forward? What is one thing you'd like to get out of the Circle next time we convene? What is one thing you might do to repair, restore or help support the integrity of the Circle when we reconvene?

Maintaining the Integrity of a Circle, Part 2

When sexist, racist, or other derogatory and offensive language is used, students may not be triggered to respond in ways that explicitly breach Circle norms in the moment. Instead, they might end up silenced, feeling marginalized and unsafe to the point of no longer wanting to participate in the Circle. You may never hear about the impact unless you speak up as the Keeper, modeling how to address hurtful and oppressive behavior, trying to restore safety to the Circle.

As best you can, try to not to reprimand or chastise, as this may alienate the speaker and cause them to shut down without being able to learn from the experience. Try to speak from the "I" position about how such language negatively impacts you and the communities you are a part of. There's good reason to believe others in the Circle are impacted as well, especially those who are associated with the slurs. This then becomes a teachable moment because not all students are aware of the impact of their language, the weight behind their words, the histories of oppression and damage done over centuries. So if no one in the Circle speaks up, you need to take the lead, teaching how such language and behavior is a breach of Circle guidelines and will not be tolerated in this Circle.

Even harder to recognize is when students are being marginalized and silenced in what might appear to be more subtle ways, especially if you're not part of the marginalized group yourself. You may not be attuned to the language or behavior used to make a particular group of students feel unsafe or unwelcome. Sometimes our own implicit bias keeps us from being aware; sometimes we've been submerged in the oppressive culture too long to recognize our own role in it.

And then there are the times when things get said or done in a Circle that intentionally make the space unsafe. Things may be said, stories might be told to insinuate and intimidate.

Laughter and commenting, as was mentioned before, can be as a result of participants' own discomfort but similar behavior can be much less innocent when used to target and harass. As the Keeper it's important to be sensitive to such behavior and language, to distinguish between the innocent and more intentionally harmful behavior, so that you can pick up on the more serious Circle breaches when they occur. These too are teachable moments, to

show that it's important to use what power we have to stand up to bullying behavior and be allies to those who are targeted.

Intimidation and intentional harm, whether in Circles or other settings, needs to be stopped. And even if we're not sure of what's actually happening, it's always better to be safe than sorry. If you don't know exactly what to do or say, how to do or say it, it's still important to interrupt the behavior somehow. Do or say something. With everything you do, or don't do, you send a message about what's acceptable and what isn't. And if you

find out afterward, you were wrong about the intent and responded in a harsher way than may have been necessary you can always come back, admit your mistake and, if needed, apologize. The message you want to send is that you are vigilant when it comes to maintaining the integrity of the Circle and keeping the participants in it safe. The other message is that we all make mistakes and that we can learn from those mistakes and, if we are willing, repair and restore any harm we might have done.

We try in Circles, as best we can, to have students learn from their behavior and share from their experience. This can happen when we create a space that is safe, safe not only to stand up for ourselves, but safe also to make and own our mistakes. This allows us to learn from our behaviors, even when we inflict harm on others. Such learning is more likely to happen when there is a generous, forgiving tone in the Circle, one that doesn't make people feel any more defensive than they might already be feeling after making mistakes. One that doesn't make people feel afraid to make those mistakes in the first place. The Keeper sets this tone through her actions and behaviors.

Our Best Selves

The role of the Keeper in a Circle is multifaceted. Not only does the Keeper play the role of organizer, host, backstop, manager, troubleshooter and overall guide; the Keeper also needs to model being their best self throughout it all. This means remaining grounded, fully present, and cultivating a keen awareness of one's own triggers and biases. It also requires developing a tolerance for emotionally difficult moments, being able to sit with discomfort and anxiety, and having the humility to reach out to others in the Circle when there are questions you are unsure of. Finally, the highly effective Keeper trusts that Circle participants can bring their best selves forward and work through difficult situations. It is in these moments that Circles can produce magic.