

Guide to Collaborative Circles in the Classroom

What Are Collaborative Circles?

Collaborative circles are structured discussions that create a safe space for students to express themselves, build relationships, and resolve conflicts in a respectful manner. They are widely used in restorative discipline approaches to foster community, empathy, and accountability. Circles provide an opportunity for every student to be heard and valued while reinforcing positive behaviors and emotional intelligence.

How and When to Use Circles

Circles can be used in various settings, including morning meetings, community-building exercises, conflict resolution, and academic discussions. Educators can implement them daily, weekly, or as needed based on the classroom dynamics. Below are some key moments when circles are most beneficial:

- **Morning Meetings:** Start the day with connection and positive reinforcement.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Address behavioral issues in a non-punitive way.
- **Social and Personal Learning Sessions:** Help students process emotions and experiences.
- **Academic Discussions:** Foster collaborative learning and reflection.
- **End-of-Day Reflections:** Review the day's events and share successes or challenges.

How to Implement Circles in the Classroom

1. **Establish Clear Expectations:**
 - Set ground rules to ensure respectful communication.
 - Use a talking piece to indicate who has the floor.
 - Reinforce that the space is safe and confidential (within mandatory reporting guidelines).
2. **Create a Welcoming Environment:**
 - Arrange seats in a circle to foster inclusivity.
 - Encourage active listening and participation.
3. **Choose Age-Appropriate Prompts:**
 - Select discussion topics suited to the developmental level of the students.
 - Adjust prompts to align with classroom needs and dynamics.
4. **Facilitate Discussions Effectively:**
 - Guide the conversation while allowing students to lead.
 - Model vulnerability and openness.
 - Validate all contributions.
5. **Reflect and Close the Circle:**
 - Summarize key takeaways.
 - Encourage students to carry insights beyond the discussion.

Using Prompts for Different Age Groups

The prompts provided can be tailored for both younger and older students. Below is a guideline for adapting them effectively:

For Younger Students (Elementary Grades)

- Use simple, concrete questions that encourage self-expression and social learning.
- Incorporate visual aids (e.g., emojis for mood descriptions).

- Keep responses brief and engaging.
- Focus on emotions, friendships, and daily experiences.

Example Prompts for Younger Students:

- What animal do you feel like today?
- Use an emoji to describe your mood.
- What makes you smile?
- What is your favorite candy?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be?

For Older Students (Middle and High School)

- Use prompts that encourage deeper reflection and critical thinking.
- Encourage students to connect prompts to real-life experiences.
- Facilitate discussions on societal issues, personal growth, and relationships.

Example Prompts for Older Students:

- What is a law you would change if you could?
- What is the best advice you've ever received?
- How do you deal with stress?
- What jobs do you think won't exist in the future?
- What does freedom mean to you?

Circle Expectations

To maintain a respectful and productive environment, educators can establish the following expectations:

1. Listen and speak with your heart.
2. Balance sharing and listening.
3. Be present and engaged.
4. Maintain a safe and judgment-free space.
5. Respect confidentiality within ethical limits.
6. Use active listening skills.
7. Respect all ideas and perspectives.

By integrating circles into the classroom, educators can cultivate a safe and supportive learning environment where students develop communication skills, empathy, and accountability. With the provided prompts, teachers can tailor discussions to their students' needs, fostering personal and academic growth.

References

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