

Circle Process: A Tool for Transformative Dialogue

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Received November 2024

Accepted for publication September 2025

Published November 2025

Abstract

A circle is a carefully crafted space for silence, reflection, and dialogue (Boynes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Circles aim to be safe, inclusive environments, offering opportunities for honest sharing and deep listening. The circle keeper facilitates the circle activities, ensuring equity of voice, so no single view dominates another. When we think of circles within the context of education, we commonly associate the process with a facilitative dialogue that is initiated after some conflict has occurred. However, the role circle can play within school settings transcends a mere response to conflict; it can be used to build a sense of community, provide opportunities for staff and leadership development, and transform education environments. In 2020, a group of seven teachers and one school psychologist participated in bi-weekly circle sessions, to take moments of silence, to journal, and dialogue on the topic of school culture (Menting-Wilson, 2021). This article thematically shares experiences of the participants, including breaking isolation, building community, and becoming agents for change, and also offers things to consider when implementing circles for whole school change.

Keywords: *restorative practices, whole school reform, transformative*

Exploring the Current Paradigm

“There is this constant need to rank students and put numbers on them and judge them,” one teacher stated with frustration. Several sighs could be heard, then silence entered our circle. It was a silence filled with recognition, a silence communicating a commonality of experience. Seven teachers and one school psychologist had started a four-month-long journey together, joining each other in bi-weekly staff circles to reflect and dialogue on the topic of school

culture. “I don’t know when or why, but we seem to have moved away from trusting teachers as professionals,” one courageous teacher stated, breaking the silence as they passed the talking piece on to the next participant. “Educators in general are caring people,” the next teacher voiced, teary-eyed, clearly touched by the honest sharing that had transpired. Another teacher added, “but sometimes something gets lost because of the way things are done in a bureaucracy.” As the circle keeper, I couldn’t help but notice the

nodding of heads, signaling a bond of shared perception among participants. And again, pin-drop silence, a soundless notion of knowing, and a deepening of common ground. “I would feel more satisfied as a teacher working for a system that perceives students as more than a grade,” another teacher added (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 97).

As the circle continued, the dialogue highlighted a profound need to be heard and respected, expressing a cry for autonomy, signaling a fundamental longing to connect, a desire to be there on a more human level, for colleagues and students (Menting-Wilson, 2021). Our circle sessions on school culture featured themes commonly associated with what is known as neoliberalism. This paradigm, that has influenced how we structure education since the 1970s, has been well articulated in educational literature (Giroux, 2010, 2013; Sellers & Arrigo, 2018). Neoliberal logic, when applied to education, frames students as consumers, not as life-long learners; educators as managers, not developers of minds; and schools as pipelines producing manpower for the workforce, not as engaged citizens. A neoliberal system is recognizable by: its heavy focus on academic testing, collecting of data that prioritizes deficits, and by its emphasis on accountability and efficiency. Giroux (2013) described the neoliberal school as “a dead zone of the imagination;” one that “de-skills teachers” and marginalizes them into roles of passive followers (p. 351). Study participants experienced this structure as uncomfortable and highly hierarchical, having to shoulder a crushing workload in an environment void of real power or voice (Menting-Wilson, 2021).

The Shift: A Change in Paradigm

The heavy focus on productivity and preparing students-for-the-test has created a work environment that limits innovative practices and

inhibits the teacher’s ability to meet students-where-they-are (Giroux, 2015).

Unfortunately, this type of environment does not support a teacher’s need for agency (Hadley-Dunn, 2018), and can result in them questioning whether they are making a difference in the classroom.

In the midst of these challenges, shifts on how we conceptualize education are emerging. The “No Child Left Behind Act,” known as the driving force behind standardized testing and for holding schools accountable for student performance (Husband & Hunt, 2015), has been replaced by Every Student Succeeds Act, a more holistic approach that is supportive of non-academic aspects of the learning process such as school climate and student engagement (Adler-Greene, 2019). Even more recently, the signing into law of the American Rescue Plan has seen a substantial increase in funding for programs supportive of students' socio-emotional needs (Godek et al., 2022).

The group who joined this study, experienced the role circle could play in personal, interpersonal, and whole school transformation (Menting-Wilson, 2021). They participated in eight bi-weekly circles, all centering around the topic of school culture. Circle participants took moments of silence, journaled, and dialogued to crystallize their ideas. Circle questions that were used were grounded in the work of Block (2008), who identified types of questions that sought to intentionally propel participants into action. Participants explored what a caring school culture could look like, what gets in the way, what commitment(s) can be made, what talents can be shared, to transform the current culture into a collectively envisioned new reality. A sample session plan is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1

Sample session plan

1. Opening Activity
 - Mindfulness Activity (one minute)
2. Guided Visualization
 - Commentary Introducing the Topic of Circle (five minutes)
3. Journaling
 - Opportunity to Reflect on the Visualization (three minutes)
4. Dialogue
 - Round #1
 - You just took a moment to envision a culture of care. What are some of the things that came to mind?
 - Round #2
 - Imagine yourself standing on a crossroad....one road leads you to the school you are so familiar with.... the other is towards the school you are envisioning.... a school based on a culture of care... What about your current school would you need to leave behind if you decide to travel the road of a culture of care? What would you bring with you?
 - Round #3
 - What are some of the things you can see yourselves creating together that would make a difference?
5. Closing Activity
 - Share one word that describes today's circle experience

After a period of four months, this small group reflected on the opportunity of "being in circle." The group identified key themes highlighting their experiences: breaking isolation, building community, and becoming agents for change.

a. Breaking Isolation & Building Community

Members highlighted that how we currently "do" education has created an isolating teaching culture; one that gives little importance to taking moments of silence, reflection, and dialogue. It has become a workplace that undermines teachers as professionals, leaving the impression that if you are "not planning, teaching, or grading, you must be doing something wrong" (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 98)

"Being in circle" was described by participants as crucial to breaking a teacher's sense of disempowerment and isolation. Circle sessions gave teachers a safe place to share and deeply listen; helped teachers overcome preconceived notions they had formed about others; supported teachers in finding common ground, and in building community. One teacher stated: "In the first couple of sessions, I sort of was a little nervous, because I didn't know everybody as well" (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 105). "We encountered people differently, so all of a sudden, any optics or any perceptions we may have had about each other have dissolved just a little bit so that we can feel each other from a different space", another teacher reported (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 125). A third teacher said,

"I realized how much I had in common with everyone...that in talking together we really all wanted the same thing" (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 110).

b. Becoming Agents for Change

Developing new bonds and identifying a shared vision generated hope and enthusiasm, and transformed feelings of invalidation into courage to actively participate in co-creating the future (Menting-Wilson, 2021). This transformation

propelled teachers forward, it raised awareness, elicited ideas for change, created camaraderie, and a desire towards taking collective action. Comments received during one circle meeting included:

“We gained support, even though it was a small group, I know we are empowered,” someone indicated (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 132). “We are ready to take this to the next level,” another member added (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 133).

After completion of the study, teachers expressed a desire to continue the momentum. Circles evolved from community building and visionary circles into action-planning sessions. While the initial circles were crucial to breaking isolation, to finding and expressing one’s voice, and building community, the planning circles supported teachers in their role as change agents. The circle offered opportunities to reflect on what was and what was not working, to explore the meaning of available data, and to ponder over next steps. Teachers recognized circle process as a useful strategy; it united them, it empowered them, and provided a platform to get actively involved in school-culture change.

Things to Consider

Facilitating a change in culture, however, is not easy in an educational setting. While circle sessions among staff can open lines of communication, encourage sharing of voice, and propel staff into action, there are known pitfalls, as well as tasks supportive to effective implementation to consider (Menting-Wilson, 2021). This section highlights key implementation considerations, including the role of leadership, the importance of building relationships, as well as the role data can play within a circle process.

a. School Leadership

The first consideration centers around the role of leadership. It could be a potentially devastating experience to offer teachers opportunities to come together, voice their ideas, develop a collective vision on how to “do” education, only to have the system veto any actions taken by teachers.

True voice entails power for real change (France, 2021). Voice without power amounts to a false sense of empowerment; a hopefulness easily crushed by the force of hierarchy. Schools are often resistant to establishing systems where power is shared and equal relationships are supported (Vaandering, 2014). True change, however, requires that leadership not only be aware that circles are occurring within their buildings, but to participate in these sessions actively and equally, and to utilize their leadership role to empower staff. Participants in the study were mindful of the limitations of their power and recognized their shared need to engage leadership in their vision and action planning (Menting-Wilson, 2021). If leadership fails to embrace concepts such as sharing of power and the process of co-creation in circle, then the positive impact generated in circle sessions will likely be diminished (Reimer, 2011). Therefore, assessing the level of comfort leadership may or may not have with collaborative decision-making and co-creation, and preparing leadership by providing training and ongoing support, is highly recommended.

b. Intentional Relationship Building

A second aspect centers around intentionally developing trusting relationships (UNC Institute on Implementation Science, 2021). Breaking down hierarchical ways of being and transforming systems of isolation into communities supportive of their diversity of voice is a slow process that requires deliberate action (Menting-Wilson, 2021).

I think often times people want immediate solutions to big problems. The types of problems we encountered here in this culture don't have quick fixes," one teacher added (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 128). Going slowly would give respect and provide time to build the necessary relationships, so staff can develop trust and feel comfortable to let their "walls down" another teacher said (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 126).

For circles to be effective, staff need to feel psychologically safe, so they are willing to be vulnerable, comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. This process takes patience and trust.

Trust is not something that develops overnight" a teacher corroborated (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 102). "We are dealing with people ranging in age from 22 to 70," another teacher said; some staff might encounter "walls" they have created over the past 50 to 60 years (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 125). "But taking that first step hopefully builds into more deeper and meaningful conversations that can help relieve stress and help move towards the respect and the culture of care we are looking for (Menting-Wilson, 2021, p. 102).

c. Incorporating Data-Informed Practices in Circle

The third consideration centers around the integration of data into circle practice. We live in a data-infused world and the implementation of circles will not likely change that. While the old paradigm uses data to hone-in-on deficits, creating dehumanizing environments for students and teachers, the new recognizes that data alone can never completely drive decisions, but combined with professional insights can be informative and lead to positive change (Schildkamp et al., 2019). While the safe environment of circle can serve as a platform for school members to

collectively explore problems, incorporating data in circle sessions can lead to meaningful discussions about the story that data tells. Integrating data into circle practice can generate insights about the root of problems, elicit collective exploration of solutions, and aid in monitoring progress towards the hoped-for goals.

Summary

This article explored the circle process as a strategy for cultivating teacher agency in a neoliberal school environment. Circle process, a carefully crafted space for honest sharing and deep listening, was presented as a tool for transformative dialogue (Boynes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). In 2020, a group of seven teachers and one school psychologist participated in bi-weekly circle sessions, to take moments of silence, to journal, and dialogue on the topic of school culture (Menting-Wilson, 2021). Circle participation broke isolation, offered opportunities for staff to reflect on how we "do" education, and build community for shaping collective solutions. These activities showed potential for change; they helped identify common ground, encouraged teachers to participate in a process of co-creation, and ultimately supported teachers' need for autonomy and dignity. While circle process is commonly associated with a dialogue in response to conflict, this article aimed to share circle utility in multifaceted ways.

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