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RESTORATIVE
PRACTICE THROUGH
DIALOGUE CIRCLES



SOUTH AFRICAN
EXTRAORDINARY
SCHOOLS COALITION

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The following document is a brief guide to using Dialogue Circles. It includes:

a) A description of Dialogue Circles as they relate to Restorative Practice

b) Guidelines vis-a-vis the Dialogue Circle process

c) 7 easy steps to holding a Dialogue Circle

d) Links to additional resources on Dialogue Circles

Introduction

Restorative Practice is a framework for building community and for responding to challenging behavior through authentic dialogue and understanding. The term finds its roots in a segment of the criminal justice field known as "restorative justice." This form of justice is not punitive, but rather seeks to hold offenders accountable for their crimes by involving them in face-to-face encounters with the people they have harmed. Similar restorative practices may be used in schools for a variety of reasons – from mentoring, to academic intervention, to classroom management.

Dialogue circles are grounded in the Restorative Practice framework. Dialogue circles are gatherings in which all participants sit in a circle facing each other to facilitate open, direct communication. Circles provide a safe, supportive space where members can talk about sensitive topics, work through differences, and build consensus.

"It was an incredible experience - the [learners] were sharing and disagreeing but not being disagreeable. Some even cried during this session...The learners' feedback was very positive and they asked to do another circle again. It also made a huge difference in the learner behaviour and improved the discipline in the class."

**—Gcwelumuzi Mkhwanazi, Maths and EMS teacher
at COSAT (Centre of Science and Technology)**

Guidelines

A Dialogue Circle process should to be guided by the following:

- Participants sit in a circle

- A facilitator introduces and facilitates the process, clarifying the purpose of the circle
- There is no hierarchy, all participants are considered equal and the facilitator serves as a neutral guide, s/he does not hold a primary decision-making role
- An instrument, such as a bell or rattle, is passed around the circle and only the person with the item may speak
- Every participant has a chance to speak and everyone is required to listen with attention
- Participants must show care, understanding and respect
- The facilitator allocates time for participants to write thoughts or evaluations
- The facilitator allocates time for reflection

How-to

1. Create a safe space for dialogue. This may be accomplished by starting with a moment of silence, affirmation, or something similar.
2. Set guidelines for the dialogue (see aforementioned guidelines).
3. Offer the question or issue for exploration – i.e., the “theme” of the dialogue session.
4. Share stories related to the question, issue or theme
5. Listen attentively as participants speak and honour the person who is speaking
6. Close the dialogue. Explicitly state or mark the close of the dialogue session, shifting to discussion mode
7. Debrief the learning (take aways/next steps)
8. Reflect on the dialogue.

Additional resources

The following resources may be used to broaden your understanding of Restorative Practice and help you use restorative Dialogue Circles in your environment:

- Using Circles in Schools SAESC Presentation (BRIDGE) - click [here](#).
- Using Dialogue Circles to Support Classroom Management (Edutopia) - click [here](#).
- Restorative Justice: Resources for Schools (Edutopia) - click [here](#).