



Connection Circles to Build Community and Deepen Relationships

In this lesson, students learn about connection circles, a restorative practice that builds relationships by honoring students' voices and cultivating agency.

Essential Question

How do we work together to create a fair and just classroom community where individual and collective learning is engaging, valued, and liberating for all?

Guiding Questions

What is a connection circle? How can connection circles help us build our classroom community and grow in our understanding of one another?

Objectives

- Students will understand what community circles are and how they help to deepen relationships.
- Students will participate in a community circle.
- Students will understand how their unique and diverse identities enrich the classroom community.

Advance preparation

- Fill out your own Identity Chart
- Select talking piece and Community Wall area
- Display posters
- Select and load video
- Prepare student handouts
- Place “green dot” stickers on student desks
- Ensure classroom has space for a circle of chairs

Materials/Resources

- PowerPoint slideshow 4.1 (adapt as needed)
- Talking piece (an easily held, visible physical object that indicates that the one holding it has the right to speak. This could be a classroom object such as a school mascot or pennant, a natural object such as a feather or stone, or any other appropriately-sized item you select.)
- Circle Instructions and Identity Vocabulary posters

For more information, email

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Student Materials

- Identity Chart
- “Connection Circles Fast Facts” handout

Vocabulary

- Belonging
- Community
- Compassion
- Diversity
- Equity
- Ethnicity
- Identity
- Inclusion
- Nationality

Do Now

5 min.

Students complete their Identity Chart. This chart draws on the two brainstorming activities from Lesson 1.2, “A Few Fast Facts” and “A Starring Role in Your Life Story,” but additionally invites students to include their ethnicity.

As students read the chart, ask them to underline any word whose meaning they don’t recognize as well as those words they would like to know more about.

Introduction (Framing/Overview)

5 min.

1. Slide 3: Student Dedication (30-60 seconds)
2. Introduce the unit by explaining to students that being able to relate to one another is an essential factor in everyone’s success. This unit will focus on how to build those relationships and create a classroom community where each person feels valued and respected. Briefly review the day’s agenda (slide 4).
3. Call students’ attention to posted vocabulary words (slide 5). Ask students to pay special attention to the ways these vocabulary words are used throughout today’s lesson. Give students an opportunity to “green dot” unfamiliar words on the poster. Let students know that they will learn more about these “green light” vocabulary words as they delve into the lesson.

Activity 1: About Community Circles

12 min.

4. Select one of these two video options to show students (slide 6):

**Media
Interaction**

Community Building Circles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMp6IoLDlvY>

Circle for Change (video is 11 min. long; if using it, stop at min. 4:22)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzbDJBXjVIU>

5. Invite the class to bring their chairs to arrange in a circle. Introduce the concept of circles by posing a few questions (slide 7): Who is visible to you when you sit in rows? Who is visible to you when you sit in a circle? Why do you think we sit in a circle?

**Whole
Class
Discussion**

After listening to students' responses, acknowledge and enhance their thinking by adding that through the use of circles, we will learn about and connect with each other. Add that circles may also be used to plan, to learn new academic concepts, and to resolve conflicts.

**Direct
Instruction**

Explain to students (slide 8) that meeting in a circle, with no specific starting and ending point, establishes a level playing field for all participants. Use of circles dates back to a time when people would sit around a fire, so that everyone had equal access to heat and light. Members of a school or a community can meet in circle arrangements when there is an issue that is relevant to everyone present.

Circles are powerful symbols of community, connection, inclusion, fairness, equity, and wholeness. We use circles to build community and deepen relationships. Circles by their very structure convey equity, trust, safety, and agency. The handout “Connections Circles Fast Facts” can serve as a reminder of these points.

Connection Circles are the basic building block for developing a restorative community. The circle process fosters relationships among students, school staff, parents, and community members by giving everyone an equal voice and a safe space to be heard. Conflict is reduced and relationships flourish as people know one another better.

6. Show students the “talking piece” (a physical object that you have selected to indicate that the person holding it has the right to speak). Explain that the talking piece will move around the circle in “popcorn” style. A student who would like to contribute will ask for the talking piece. Emphasize that the person holding the talking piece is the only one speaking at that time; everyone else tracks the speaker by maintaining eye contact and listening.

Activity 2: Circles, Identity, and Community

15 min.

7. Refer to the Identity Chart from the Do Now (slide 9). Show students your identity chart filled out with one or two words underlined.

Circle-Teacher Modeling

8. Highlight the information shared on the identity charts: likes, hobbies, interests, ethnicity, language, culture, traditions, favorite and least favorite academic subjects. Affirm that our individual identities contribute to building our collective identity. They shape our community, informing how we interact with others and how we learn together. Also, as we learn about ourselves as a community, we learn about the world and expand our global understanding.

Circle-Direct Instruction

9. Invite students to participate in the connection circle (slide 10) by responding to one of following prompts:

- a) Share something people do not know about you **or**
- b) Share a fact on your Identity Chart that would surprise others

Circle-Whole Class Discussion

Ask for a volunteer to whom you will pass the talking piece to begin. After speaking, the volunteer moves the talking piece in the direction of choice (right or left). Circle participants share sequentially until the loop is completed. Students may exercise their right to **pass**, or the right to **come back to me**.

10. Next, direct students' attention to posted vocabulary words. Explain the meaning of "green light" words (those that students have flagged as unfamiliar or not sufficiently understood). Explain that it is important to be aware of identity-related vocabulary as we begin to explore and celebrate our diverse identities to build the foundations of our community. Discuss how equity (fairness) within the classroom supports collective compassion and understanding. If you wish, post Vocabulary Recap definitions as a reminder.

Circle-Direct Instruction

11. Indicate the section of the wall that you have designated as the **community wall** (slide 12). Invite students to begin building the community wall by posting identity charts on that space. Encourage students to continue to update their charts throughout the semester.

Closing

8 min.

12. Still in the circle, students respond to the following prompt (slide 13):

Share one new thing you learned from today's lesson.

After the circle is completed, thank students for their participation in today's lesson and for their willingness to try something new.

Notes:

- 1) Costello, B., Watchel, J., and Watchel, T. (2010). *Restorative circles in schools: Building community and enhancing learning*, Bethlehem, PA: International Institute for Restorative Practices.
- 2) Bucci, D., Cannon, A. and Ramkarran, A. (2017). *Community, circles, and collaboration: The first 10 days*. Armadale Public School, Markham, ON, Canada.
- 3) Edutopia Videos from George Lucas Educational Foundation
- 4) Posters from International Institution for Restorative Practices

Identity Vocabulary

- Belonging
- Community
- Compassion
- Diversity
- Ethnicity
- Equity
- Identity
- Inclusion
- Nationality

Connection Circles

Instructions

Participants sit in one large group circle. The facilitator holds a talking piece of his/her choosing. The talking piece should have some sort of significance or meaning for the facilitator. The facilitator first establishes the ground rules of the circle.

Ground Rules

1. We **maintain** the shape of the circle.
2. We **listen attentively** to others and refrain from interrupting.
3. Before exercising the right to pass, we challenge ourselves to **participate** and **contribute** in discussion.
4. We offer feedback, suggestions, and opinions in a **respectful** and **inclusive** manner.
5. We use a talking piece **appropriately**.

Adapted from Community, Circles and Collaboration: The First 10 Days, Armadale Public Schools, Markham, ON, Canada

Connection Circles Fast Facts

Developing Positive Relationships

Restorative Practices

are an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities.

Ground Rules

- Confidentiality
- You can pass, but we will come back to you. You do not have to answer the question at that point.
- The person with the talking piece gets everyone's full attention.



Connection Circles

are the basic building block for developing restorative communities. This process fosters relationships among students, school staff, parents and community members. Conflict is reduced and relationships flourish when people get to know one another better.

School and Classroom Climate

Safe space, trust, and equal voice.

Circles Promote Belonging, Purpose, Hope, and Agency

Circles are powerful symbols of community

Circles convey connection, inclusion, fairness, equality and wholeness. We use circles to build community and deepen relationships.

MY IDENTITY CHART

Nationality.....

Ethnicity.....

Language.....

Culture.....

Favorite traditions.....

Hobbies.....

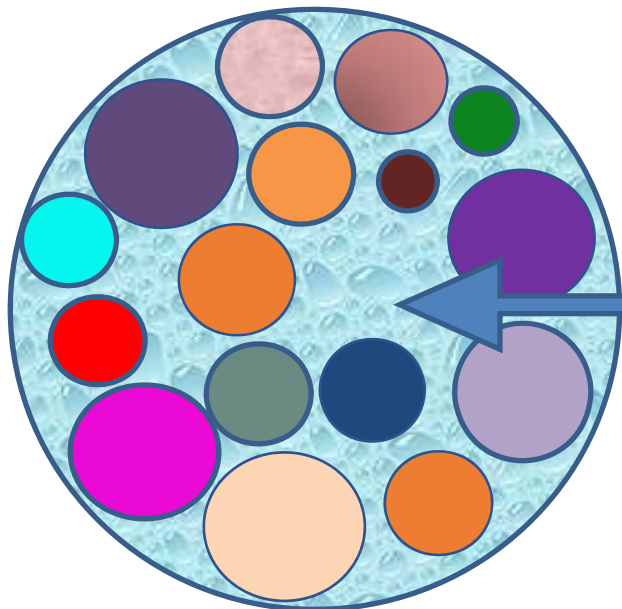
Extra-curricular activities.....

Career interest.....

Favorite subject.....

Least favorite subject.....

My Name



Vocabulary Recap (Poster)

- **Belonging:** feeling appreciated and accepted. People who feel they belong are not distracted and worried about being treated as a stereotype or reduced to just one part of their identity.
- **Community:** a classroom environment where all students are treated fairly and feel included, safe to be themselves, and free to exercise agency while challenging themselves.
- **Compassion:** empathizing with someone who is suffering and feeling compelled to reduce the suffering.
- **Diversity:** differences or variation among people.
- **Ethnicity:** identity based on ancestry; being a member of a social group that has a common history, culture, and language.
- **Equity:** fairness; policies and practices to ensure people don't have different outcomes based on their identity or demography.
- **Identity:** who a person is with respect to categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, physical ability, religion, etc.
- **Inclusion:** honoring the equal dignity of each person within a community.
- **Nationality:** belonging to a particular nation by birth or naturalization.