

Talking Circles

Schumacher, A. (2014). Talking circles for adolescent girls in an urban high school: A restorative practices program for building friendships and developing emotional literacy skills. *Sage Open*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014554204>



SWiFT Feature in the Research

Support of students' social and emotional learning plays an important role in a **Multi-tiered System of Support** (MTSS). Schumacher (2014) examines out-of-classroom *Talking Circles* impact on adolescent girls in an urban high school in terms of building friendships and developing emotional literacy skills.

Research Summary

What

According to the Relational Cultural model (Miller, 1976), a human being requires connection, especially women and girls. People tend to grow by connecting with others cognitively, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Talking Circles, adopted from the egalitarian process of Woodland Native American tribes, put an emphasis on credibility and confidentiality by following guidelines. Participants pass a talking piece (any symbolic object) to take turns during the Talking Circles activity. The process of Talking Circles includes “checking in” (briefly sharing momentary feelings), “burning issues” (sharing problems or concerns), “topic of the day” (discussing student-generated topics), and “closing” (reading inspirational quotes or making a wish for the week) (p.3).

Who

Sixty girls (ages 14 to 18) in an urban high school participated voluntarily in 12 Talking Circles. Each Circle included between 15 to 33 meetings with approximately 6 students. Academic ability, maturity, interest, grade level, ethnicity, and first language of participants varied.

How

This systematic ethnographic study occurred over two years and includes 257 hours of participant observations, semi-structured interviews with participants, and analysis of such documents as texts or emails with the students. Each phase of Talking Circles starts with a process of affirming their commitment to the process (i.e., Ribbon Tying Ceremony and Values Plate Ceremony). To secure privacy the meetings were always held in a quiet and comfortable room in the school named the “Apartment,” with a miniature living room set up. The researcher (gatekeeper) built rapport with participants, teachers and a principal by communicating with students, being involved in activities in the school, and observing the meetings.

Major Findings

1. Growth-Fostering Relationships

Participants described the experiences of participating in Talking Circles as (a) the joy of being together and building relationships; (b) a sense of safety grounded in trust, confidentiality, not feeling alone, and not being judged; (c) freedom to express genuine emotions; and (d) increased empathy and compassion.

2. Emotional Literacy Skills

Participants showed improvements in emotional literacy skills that include (a) the capacity to listen, (b) the ability to manage their anger, and (c) interpersonal sensitivity.

3. Self-Efficacy

Talking Circles provided opportunities for students to build friendships. Therefore, the friendships they developed during Talking Circles yielded increased confidence and the power to control their lives (e.g., speaking up for what is right, studying harder, listening in class, trying to control their anger, avoiding gossip and fights, and leaving inappropriate friends). Emotional support from Talking Circles empowered their emotional literacy by helping them believe in themselves.

4. Major Factors that Supported Participant Growth

Talking Piece: A squishy ball was used as a regulator of communication. The talking piece supported students in impulse control and focused listening.

Reflective Inquiry: This practice fostered students' self-reflection and exchanging of ideas.

Circle Keeper: The Keepers (as matured figures) maintained the integrity of the process of Talking Circles and supported the students to be able to explore relationships with others and themselves.

Trust and Safety: These elements were significant social conditions for developing growth and fostering relationships.

Conclusion

Social and emotional support from peers and adults in schools is critical in student development. This outside-of-the-classroom Talking Circles study showed promising results. Although the practice was utilized as an extra-curricular activity in school, educators may scale up the practice as a universal support for social-emotional learning, as well as a means to lessen the number of school suspensions and expulsions.

Suggested Citation

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