Setting the Scene

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the history, principles and theoretical foundations for Circle Time and defines emotional literacy. Here the rationale for using Circle Time is given. The rest of the book shows you how.

Circles in History

The symbolism of circles is ageless. A circle can represent wholeness, continuity, universality, unity, inclusion, equality and protection. As with sunlight, the power within circles radiates out to all.

Using a circle formation as a means of social interaction is also historical and cross-cultural. The North American medicine wheel is just one example of how traditionally indigenous communities have used circles as a means of decision-making and conflict resolution. The ‘Quality Circle’ initiative, first developed by Kaoru Ishikawa in Japan in the 1960s (Ishikawa, 1985), has been used widely in a business environment. It is based on the principle that full participation in decision-making and problem-solving improves the quality of work. Circles are now also an essential feature of the restorative justice movement, involving all who have been affected by an offence, including the offender.

Development of Circle Time in Education

I first came across Circle Time in 1991 in New Jersey. The school principal told me that each class had a ‘Magic Circle’ session every day after recess. He was convinced that it was this that maintained a sense of calm, purpose, and mutual support.

Others have since taken up and developed the Circle Time framework and ethic. Much of this book builds on the ideas of Jenny Mosley, Barbara Maines, George Robinson, Theresa Bliss, Margaret Collins and Murray White. Jenny, in particular, is widely recognized for the significant contribution that she has made, notably for taking Circle Time into a framework for whole school quality. Like language, however, Circle Time is constantly evolving and being developed still further by authors such as Tina Rae, Charlie Smith and Andrew Fuller. Teachers and students themselves devise ever more ingenious ways of meeting the aims for social and emotional learning and some of their ideas are included here.
There are different understandings and definitions of both the terms ‘emotional literacy’ and ‘Circle Time’, so first we will clarify the meanings and foundations on which we are building here.

**What Is Emotional Literacy?**

Emotional literacy is a values-based concept concerned with all aspects of relationships. This includes not only the development of knowledge and skills within individuals but also the ethos of the systems and communities in which we live and work. The following is a brief summary of what this means at different levels.

Emotional literacy for individuals encompasses:

- personal awareness, understanding, knowledge and skills related to what we feel and why
- knowing how to regulate emotion safely
- having awareness of what maintains emotional resources
- having a repertoire of ways in which to express emotion safely and being able to put this into practice in challenging situations
- awareness and knowledge of others and skills in relating to them
- the ability to tune into the affective to manage situations well
- a focus on the positive
- personal and professional integrity: identifying values and acting consistently across contexts on the basis of these
- a sense of personal effectiveness and an internal locus of control
- acting thoughtfully rather than on impulse.

Emotional literacy between people promotes:

- the demonstration of acknowledgment, acceptance and value
- positive and constructive communication
- effective interactions, including appropriate assertiveness
- honesty, transparency and trust
- support and the mutual maintenance of emotional resources
- willingness to resolve conflict by negotiation and compromise
- a focus on issues rather than personalities
- exploration of competencies and possibilities rather than making judgements and attributing blame
- skills to de-escalate potential confrontation
- the ability to withdraw from situations appropriately and safely.
Emotional literacy at a systems level (classroom, school, family, community):

- enhances emotional safety
- gives agency and ownership to decision-making
- is ethical and fair
- encourages a constructive, positive and solution-focused approach
- promotes responsibility
- values diversity
- is flexible and creative
- has high expectations
- is modelled by leaders.

Emotional literacy means working in the following ways to develop social and emotional capital:

- collaborating to promote inclusive well-being rather than a blame culture
- proactively addressing underlying issues rather than reacting to and ‘treating’ symptoms of distress
- being reflective, listening to people and withholding hasty judgement
- focusing on the humanity we all share, respecting difference, valuing diversity and promoting a sense of belonging.

Emotional literacy is neither sentimental nor self-indulgent. It has great potential to enhance both individual and community well-being. Re-evaluating the way we think about ourselves and how we interact with others can be exciting but also challenging.

**Emotional literacy is not a program – it is a way of being.**
**Circle Time is one way of developing it.**

**What Is Circle Time?**

Circle Time is a structured framework for group interaction. It can be used in many different ways, but within a classroom it is focused on developing:

- self awareness, knowledge and skills
- knowledge and understanding of others
- a sense of belonging and connectedness
- a focus on the positive
- increased emotional resources and well-being
- collaborative decision making, conflict resolution and problem-solving.
Circle Time takes place at least once a week for approximately 30 minutes, depending on the age of the children. Regularity is important. There is little educational benefit in having Circle Time occasionally as a ‘treat’.

There is a clear format in which students and teachers take part in a wide range of individual, paired, small group and whole class activities. Many activities are presented as games and participants are mixed up so that everyone interacts with everyone else.

There are three rules based on the principles of respect, safety and inclusion:

1. everyone gets a turn–when it is someone’s turn to speak, everyone else listens
2. individuals may pass if they wish – there is no pressure to say anything
3. there are no put-downs at any time – this means no naming, blaming or shaming.

**Principles of Circle Time**

The following principles of Circle Time are the foundations of the framework.

**Democracy**

There are equal opportunities to participate and contribute. No one group or individual is able to dominate. Knowing that each person will get their turn promotes cooperation.

**Respect**

The rules emphasize respect for individuals and their contributions. The Circle will discuss problems, but not people. Students who experience respect and have it modelled to them will understand what it means and feels like, and therefore be more able to show this to others.

**Empathy**

Many Circle Time activities are aimed at breaking down barriers and stereotypes, valuing differences and seeking what is shared. Mixing students up so that they get to know their classmates in a variety of ways is a key feature. This actively addresses bullying, prejudice and discrimination.

**Community**

Promoting a whole class ethos where each is responsible for others and for creating a safe atmosphere is a central tenet of Circle Time. Although there are some team games, activities emphasize collaboration rather than competition.

**Inclusion**

Everyone in a class is welcomed into the Circle regardless of their ability or behaviour. Each person is given the same opportunities as every other one. Established Circles sometimes invite students from different classes or years, parents or other visitors.
Choice

No-one is pressured unduly to participate. This means that running Circles in a classroom should be a teacher’s choice, not mandatory – a teacher feeling compelled to do so is unlikely to run a successful Circle. Students who regularly demonstrate they are unwilling or unable to behave appropriately in the Circle are given the choice to conform to the basic rules and stay or to leave the Circle.

Safety

As with the above, no one has to respond verbally. Students may pass if they wish for as long as they like. Students usually join in when they have the confidence or otherwise feel comfortable. Focusing on the positive helps facilitators to avoid more sensitive issues but they need to respond quickly and appropriately if these are raised.

Agency, Responsibility and Locus of Control

Circles are less about telling students what to do than providing a framework in which they take responsibility. Students are given opportunities to construct solutions for class issues themselves. Devising solutions together increases the responsibility for making them happen. Giving students agency also helps to change an ‘external locus of control’, where a person believes that everything just happens to them (good things happen by chance and bad things are someone else’s fault) to an ‘internal locus of control’, which is a belief that a person’s own actions and efforts can effect change.

Reflection

Many of the games and activities are designed to encourage discussion and reflection. This includes definitions of more abstract concepts such as feelings, values, rights and responsibilities. Even very young children can talk and think about what is fair, friendly or kind.

Creativity

There is a wide scope for creativity in Circle Time activities. Imagination underpins the ability to problem-solve, have compassion for others and think laterally.

Positive emotionality

Many activities are structured so that individuals experience positive emotions. When people feel better about both themselves and others they have more emotional resources to cope with challenges (Frederickson et al., 2000).
Having fun

The focus is on feeling good in a safe and supportive way. This increases the sense of belonging in a class, which in turn raises resilience. Students are highly motivated to participate in Circle Time because it is fun.

The actual content of Circle Time is varied. Teachers may determine activities or students may suggest topics: these may arise as issues which need addressing.

Circle Time is an indirect teaching tool. The aim is for students to think reflectively and creatively, talk together about important issues, grow to have understanding about themselves and others, and over time to develop knowledge and skills that they can put into practice. If Circle Time is run with too didactic an approach, where teachers tell children what to think and do, it may not be so effective in the long run. The skill lies with the facilitator asking the best questions and making the links for students.

Although Circle Time can serve a therapeutic purpose it is not intended to be group therapy. Similarly, although behaviour is likely to improve, Circle Time is not intended to be a behaviour management strategy.

Why We Need Circle Time for Emotional Literacy

Many children today face major challenges in their everyday lives. Although poverty is a reality for some families, economic disadvantage is not the only reason that children are vulnerable. There is less stability and more stress in families, increased mobility as a result of social and political unrest, more mental illness and addiction, high levels of social exclusion and a competitive ethos which interprets success in terms of money and status, which are denied to many. Racism, violence, fear and greed are on the rise while lower standards of ethical behaviour are evident across all strata. Global conflicts are dealt with in ways that sometimes seem archaic when seen in the light of what we know about effective conflict management. Bullying behaviour and hypocrisy is rife.

It is not surprising that people get the idea that it is everyone for themselves. The importance of strong communities has been systematically eroded. Children may have few good models from which to learn how to work in collaboration with one another or develop constructive ways of dealing with difficulties. Even children from traditionally ‘good’ homes may believe that they have no responsibility towards others.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that there is a resurgence of belief in cooperation, working together and the vital importance of community. There is also a growing awareness that values in education matter.

Professor Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year 2003, says this:

There is abundant evidence that the ‘me first’, individualistic, materialistic approach to life pathways doesn’t lead to happiness. Rather, a focus on the quality of our human relations and the collective good or a sense of ‘outer directedness’ brings much greater individual as well as community well-being. (Stanley et al., 2005: 184)
To develop and learn optimally children need stability, loving and nurturing relationships, acceptance of difference, strong communities and a sense of agency. All of these foster social inclusion and well-being. Where this is lacking in the home and neighbourhood, an emotionally literate school can provide a community with structures and relationships that facilitate and support positive change in individuals. It gives them a sense of belonging that is the cornerstone of resilience. Schools can build community values from the inside out.

**Impact of the Social and Emotional Climate of Classrooms and Schools**

There is now a wealth of research that highlights the importance of a caring supportive ethos for both well-being and academic outcomes (Cohen, 2001; Zins et al., 2004). Schools that have a strong focus on the welfare of students, and a culture that promotes inclusion, benefit not only the more vulnerable children but everyone. Circle Time is a ‘universal’ intervention. It is not just about meeting the needs of targeted individuals but developing relationship knowledge and skills for all.

**Teacher–Student Relationships**

Circle Time has the potential to develop the positive relationships that teachers have with their students in the same way that it changes peer relationships. Many have commented that the intervention has changed the way that they see individuals and increased their enjoyment in teaching their class. Any behaviour management strategy will be more effective when implemented by a teacher who has established a positive relationship with a student (Roffey, 2004; 2005b).

**Effective Approaches to Reduce Bullying**

Interventions have moved away from focusing exclusively on students who bully and those who are bullied to a whole school approach. Bullying has an impact on everybody and can thrive only in a culture that condones it, either actively or passively. Fear, anxiety, discomfort, anger and disempowerment can thread through a school, undermining positive relationships. Motivating and empowering bystanders to discourage bullying incidents is one of the more promising approaches (Rigby and Bagshaw, 2006). Circle Time can change how students perceive one another and create an ethos in which bullying behaviour is challenged more easily. It also provides an ideal framework to address bullying when it occurs.

**Developing Pro-social Behaviour**

Reward and sanctions have limited effect in changing behaviour, especially when strong emotions are involved. Although Circle Time is not a behaviour-management strategy, it does provide a place for reflection on behaviour and helps individuals to explore their emotional reactions in situations. If a student is given structured opportunities to establish positive relationships with others in their class, they also have more motivation to behave in pro-social ways.

**A Community Approach to Reducing Violence/Restorative Practices**

There is a growing interest in addressing conflict between individuals and groups based on building self-respect and relationships and mending what is broken between people. Circle
Time is congruent with the ‘alternative to violence’ and ‘help increase the peace’ workshops which have been run in several countries and evaluated as making a positive difference (Phillips, 2002).

**Mental Health and Resilience**

There are many excellent initiatives taking place to promote mental health in young people and to help them cope with the myriad difficulties that they face in life. These include anger management strategies, peer mediation and social skills programs. However, research indicates that all such initiatives need to be integral to the life of the school to maximize their effectiveness, otherwise the positive effects can wear off (Murray, 2004). Circle Time is not a ‘one-off’ program but an intervention that is embedded into school life. One of the strongest protective factors in resilience is a sense of belonging. The inclusive ethos of Circle Time actively promotes this.

**Democracy and Citizenship**

What happens in schools has an impact on what happens in societies. Where there are demands for unquestioning conformity to imposed rules and expectations, young people have no experience of participating in decision-making. Even when there is a school representative council, not everyone has their views represented. Circle Time gives all students the opportunity to express their opinion. This ‘agency’ develops a sense of ownership and responsibility, not only for students as individuals but also for what happens in their class.

**Values and Human Rights**

Many education authorities have mission statements about values such as respect. Circle Time provides a space for reflection and deconstruction of these values: what do they mean and why are they important for both individual and communities? Circle Time itself is a values-based framework with a foundation based in both rights and responsibilities.

**Promoting Acceptance and Reducing Prejudice**

Racism and intolerance of difference is the basis of much conflict in the world. Circle Time actively promotes acceptance by helping students to know one another in ways that break down stereotypes and exploring the many things that individuals and groups have in common. It also celebrates differences and the uniqueness of each individual.

**Social Inclusion**

There has been much discussion about the impact of social exclusion on the health of the community and ways to address the issue. Social exclusion can be mediated or exacerbated by what happens in schools, and Circle Time is one way of mediating the risk for young individuals by providing a motivation to be engaged in something positive.
Theoretical Foundations of Circle Time

The philosophy of Circle Time is based in several ways of thinking about learning, human interaction, well-being and the development of pro-social behaviours. Many books have been written about each of these. The brief summary provided here is intended to support eclectic practice and enable people to explore these theories more deeply if they so wish.

Positive Psychology and Solution-focused Approaches

This comparatively new branch of psychology focuses on the empirical study of positive emotions, character strengths and healthy institutions. It moves away from the traditional model of psychology that deals with deficit and pathology, in an attempt to discover what actively makes people happier and more fulfilled (Seligman et al., 2005). The evidence so far indicates that meaningful and engaged lives are more important than pleasurable experiences in determining well-being.

Circle Time seeks to help students to identify their strengths, competencies and potential. It encourages collaboration to construct possible solutions to everyday issues. Often it is not a direct approach that works best but an indirect one focusing on the positive. Instead of talking about bullying, we can talk about safety; instead of discussing stealing, we talk about trust and how trust develops.

Social Learning Theory

Much of our learning occurs in a social context, including watching and hearing others. Circle Time provides many opportunities for both active and reflective learning and collaborative problem-solving. It supports the attention skills necessary to maximize observational learning, strongly advocating that the facilitator models the behaviours that they want the children to learn (Bandura, 1986).

Eco-systemic Theory

Each person lives and works in nested systems, all of which have an impact on the other in both directions (Moen et al., 1995). This theory, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, emphasizes that there is rarely a simple cause and effect in human relationships and behaviours but that events, the context in which they occur, interpretations and responses interact in an accumulative and circular way to produce an outcome at any given time. Circle Time is intended to make a positive difference within context: for individual students and teachers, groups and classes and their thinking, being and doing both inside and outside the Circle.

Social Constructionist Theory

This emphasizes the power of language: how what people say and the way that they say it create ‘realities’ for their worlds. Circle Time actively changes the discourse in order to construct some alternative ways of seeing the world. This theory says that what much of what we feel is
also socially constructed. If the dominant culture promotes success as having high grades then people will feel proud or ashamed of their results: if the dominant culture dictates an obligation to defend your family against any abusive remarks, you are more likely to experience anger if someone says something nasty about them (Potter, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978).

**Choice Theory**

William Glasser (1997) says everyone seeks to have their needs met in whichever ways are available to them. These needs are for love, freedom, power, belonging and fun. Glasser emphasized the importance of schools exploring ways in which to meet these needs within a whole school framework. He also emphasized the need for respectful relationships and for everyone to take appropriate responsibility for the choices that they make. Circle Time puts choice theory into practice in several ways.

**Attachment Theory**

People need to feel a sense of belonging, inclusion and safety in order to function well. Attachment theory usually refers to the relationship that infants have with their immediate carers and the impact this has on their future functioning (Bowlby, 1982[1969]). However, we know that a sense of belonging can be developed by people outside that immediate group and provide a buffer of resilience for children who are otherwise very vulnerable. Circle Time supports this sense of inclusion in a class setting.

**Moral Development Theories**

There are different theoretical approaches to moral development, with different emphases on justice, fairness and the ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg and Turiel, 1971). However, being ‘good’ needs to develop from simple obedience to authority and conformity to social norms, to understanding why we make the choices that we do, and what is involved in responsibility towards the self and others. Circle Time provides an opportunity for reflection on these issues, so that moral values can be internalized with a sound personal rationale rather than be imposed from without.

**Summary**

There are many reasons to consider using Circle Time in your classroom. The next chapter details how to successfully establish the framework with your students – how to get it going.