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Talking Circles for Adolescent Girls in an Urban High School: A Restorative Practices Program for Building Friendships and Developing Emotional Literacy Skills

Ann Schumacher

Abstract

Restorative Practices (RP) in schools is a new and emerging field. Meeting in Circles to build friendships, develop emotional literacy skills, resolve conflict, or learn interactively are some of the core components of these programs. This article describes a 2-year study of 12 weekly Talking Circles organized under the auspices of a RP program in an urban high school with 60 adolescent girls. Primary data sources included 257 hr of participant observations in Talking Circles and individual, semi-structured interviews with 31 students. The Relational Cultural model, rooted in the work of Jean Baker Miller, served as the conceptual framework for understanding teens’ interactions within the Circle’s unique set of social conditions in a school environment. Findings demonstrated that Talking Circles provided a safe space for peers helping peers, and that the girls improved their listening, anger management, and empathic skills, which led to greater self-efficacy. It appears that Talking Circles could provide another venue for developing social-emotional literacy skills and growth-fostering relationships in schools.

Keywords

Restorative Practices, Talking Circles, adolescent girls, urban high school, social-emotional literacy

School suspensions and expulsions have been rising since the 1990s as a consequence of the “zero tolerance” policy. Recently, schools seeking an alternative to this policy have turned to Restorative Practices (RP) with encouraging results (International Institute of Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2009; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Centered on relationship building, RP, which stem from innovative Restorative Justice (RJ) work in Western judicial systems, address antisocial behavior by shifting the emphasis from blame and punishment to one focused on responsibility, accountability, nurturance, and restoration (Braithwaite, 1989). It is grounded in the ethics of justice and the ethics of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2003).

Gathering in a Circle—a communication model supporting the principles of connection, equality, and power sharing—is a primary component of RP in schools. Most common are Peacemaking Circles to address interpersonal conflict or antisocial behavior restoratively, and Classroom Circles to build community spirit and deal with behavioral issues, on-the-spot, before they escalate (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). Some educational scholars and administrators have suggested that RP programs should go beyond Peacemaking and Classroom Circles and include restorative curriculums and social-emotional literacy training to improve school climate and prevent disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Riestenberg, 2012). Scholars recommending a whole-school approach with RP believe that social-emotional literacy skills can be learned and champion school venues that focus specifically on students’ relational and social-emotional needs to improve students’ connection to themselves and the school (Hopkins, 2004; Weare, 2004). This is grounded in research establishing a relationship between school connectedness and teen health and well-being (Eccles, Early, Fraser, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Search Institute, 2006), and research showing that children who are taught social skills and how to handle their emotional life thrive in school and afterward (Bocchino, 1999; Goleman, 1995).

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In RJ literature, scholars have expressed concern over the rising arrests of girls and proposed school programs that address the unique social-emotional and relational needs of girls before they get into trouble with the law (Chesney-Lind, 2004). Girls’ delinquency studies also have recommended more gender-responsive, holistic, and restorative services—based on the realities of girls’ lives rather than on procedures developed for males—be provided once the girls are incarcerated (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). As the most effective programs for girls have centered on relationship building, some scholars have turned to the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)—rooted in the work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at Wellesley (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991)—to explain female growth and development and to explore ways to bring this theory into the juvenile justice system to change current policies (Covington, 2007; Hossfeld, 2008).

The Relational Cultural model is built upon the premise that “connection” is a basic human need and that especially women and girls flourish cognitively, emotionally, physically, and spiritually when they connect with others (Miller, 1976). Our ability to be empathic, in which each person authentically responds affectively and cognitively to the other, provides the basic foundation of human connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). What stands out in the RCT is its focus on the importance of mutually empathic relationships for a woman’s psychological growth and empowerment. In other words, a woman’s need for giving and receiving empathy is equal to and a core component of her need for developing growth-enhancing relationships, and is the central organizing concept in women’s relational experience. The RCT sees the loss, distortion, or absence of mutually empathic or empowering relationships to be a source of distress or psychological problems that can lead to disruptive behavior and/or violence (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Our human need to feel connected, respected, and understood are the fundamental tenets of RP.

Inspired by the above-mentioned research, as well as reports of adolescent girls’ increasing relational aggression (Arzt, 1998; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005; Wiseman, 2002), use of antidepressants (Olfson & Marcus, 2009), and levels of anxiety (Twenge, 2000), I wondered whether out-of-classroom Talking Circles, held in a safe space with five to six girls weekly, might be a venue for nurturing long-term growth-fostering relationships that address gender-specific issues and encourage the development of emotional literacy skills.

Meeting in Circles to build relationships and discuss community issues has a long history among indigenous peoples, but recently, it has gained a foothold in contemporary culture (Baldwin, 1994; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Pranis, 2005; Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2003; L. Wolf & Welton, 2005). This is particularly true for Talking Circles—a consensus-building, egalitarian process credited to the Woodland Native American tribes (Umbreit, 2003; P. Wolf & Rickard, 2003). Steeped in symbolic ritual, the Talking Circle establishes a communication style that supports respect through the passing of a talking piece—any symbolic object, such as a feather or a talking stick—from one person to the next. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. To ensure safety, all participants agree to the Circle’s guidelines of speaking honestly, listening without interrupting, and maintaining confidentiality. The Circle Keeper preserves the Talking Circle’s integrity by modeling these guidelines.

Context and Method

When a local school district launched a RP program in their one middle and three elementary schools, I was already conducting research on RP and was trained as a Circle Keeper. As this impoverished school district could not finance a RP program in the high school—even though there were 19 expulsions and 1,306 out-of-school suspensions for 933 students enrolled in 2009 to 2010 (Superintendent’s Office, personal communication, June 15, 2011)—I began exploring the possibility of introducing, as an outside volunteer, an abbreviated RP program in the form of Talking Circles for girls.

After spending 4 months building relationships with potential school gatekeepers (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) and gathering background information on the diverse multi-cultural community at large, I contacted the Superintendent’s Office in January 2010 to present my credentials as a practitioner in RP and mediation, and offered to set up a few Talking Circles as a pilot project. As an academic with college-level teaching experience, I described my interest in conducting an Institutional Review Board (IRB)—approved, ethnographic study to understand how the adolescent girls engaged and gave meaning to their interactions, as well as what they accomplished through their participation in this unique set of social conditions within the school.

By the time I began the Talking Circles in February 2010, I already had access to the high school’s vice-principal and social worker who became two of my three primary gatekeepers. During this period, the high school was going through an administrative upheaval with calls for the principal to resign or be fired. By September 2010, a new principal was in place and she, an ardent supporter of Talking Circles, became my third gatekeeper.

Study Site

This ethnographic study (February 2010–December 2011) took place in a multi-ethnic high school situated in a transient and impoverished immigrant town of 22,000 people speaking 23 languages and tightly packed within 2.1 square miles. Embedded in a large midwestern metropolis, the community houses, in addition to its European natives, first and second-generation immigrants from the Middle East,
Southeast Europe, and South Asia. Another 15% African Americans are added to this multi-ethnic mix. Facing an economic crisis due to local plant shutdowns and lower property values, 51.0% of its children (ages 5–17) are living in poverty (2008 U.S. Census Bureau). The public schools reflect this community’s stress.

Participants

Over the course of 2 years, 60 girls ranging in age from 14 to 18 voluntarily participated in 12 Talking Circles that met between 15 to 33 times each, for a total of 257 hr. They hailed from South Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe; others included African Americans, Polish Americans, and Arab Americans.

Recruitment strategies varied. New to the district and not knowing how to form groups for the study, I initially contacted the social worker (one of my gatekeepers), who together with the gym teacher, recommended the first three groups of girls from gym classes. By the second year, these three groups morphed into three completely new Circles with members added by the girls themselves. Two freshman groups were suggested by a middle school teacher who thought the girls “might fall through the cracks when entering high school without some personal attention.” These two groups, with additions made by the girls, continued for 4 years and graduated together in June 2014. Four individual students—introduced by a teacher or whom I met informally in the hallways—created the final four groups by providing me with their own list of friends and acquaintances who wanted to be in a Circle. The Circles were not formed to address any specific problem, such as a school conflict or behavioral and emotional issues, but were instead for girls who wanted an opportunity to spend time together. The focus was on long-term relationship building, caring, and support.

Participants differed significantly in academic ability, maturity, and interests, and most, but not all, were in the same grade level in a Talking Circle. As these groups were focused on building friendships in a school where 23 languages are spoken and students mix freely with different ethnic groups, Talking Circles were both ethnically mixed and single-ethnic. All participation was voluntary and all students signed a written permission form to participate after receiving a detailed description of the Circle process and guidelines. There was no incentive, such as class credit, to join or remain in the group except for the weekly opportunity to be with peers. A few students said in their interviews that they initially came out of curiosity or to miss class, but as friendships deepened and they became comfortable with the Circle process, they participated for the reasons presented in the findings below. In total, 5 of the 12 circles continued through the 2011-2012 academic year. Of those 5, 3 continued through the 2012-2013 and 2 through the 2013-2014 academic years. The remaining groups disbanded due to graduation or transfers to other schools.

Talking Circles

Once a group bonded, usually by the third meeting, and they affirmed their commitment to the Circle guidelines, I introduced two symbolic rituals—the Ribbon Tying Ceremony and the Values Plate Ceremony—to draw a boundary between the social space of their school activities and the sacred space of the Talking Circle. In the Ribbon Tying Ceremony, each girl tied her ribbon to the person’s on her left while describing someone who was influential in making her the good person she is today (B. Sower, personal communication, December 5, 2009). The circle of ribbons, I described, symbolized their commitment to one another, to the Talking Circle’s code of confidentiality and to the values of trust, honesty, and respect. The key to building trust and safety is everyone’s agreement to the Circle’s guidelines. I explained that I followed the same code of confidentiality except that, if they were getting hurt, or going to hurt someone or themselves, I would have to report that to the social worker.

For the Values Plate Ceremony, each girl decorated a small white paper plate and listed the value(s) she wanted to bring to the Circle (K. Pranis, personal communication, September 18, 2009). Each time a Circle met, I placed their ribbons and plates on the floor cloth in the center as a reminder of how they wanted to be as young women. In fact, this weekly symbolic gesture, in addition to the use of the talking piece (a small squishy ball), proved to be effective for encouraging respectful communication and behavior.

The Talking Circle was organized into four parts, including “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). This structural ritual provided consistency to our meetings and if any part was unintentionally bypassed, especially the “checking in” or “burning issues,” the students reminded me (see Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, for detailed guidelines of the Circle process).

Two requirements are fundamental for an optimal Circle site: quietness and privacy. As this high school, built in 1930 with no upgrades or extensions, is severely limited in space and comfort, I was grateful when a coveted space, known as the Apartment, was identified as the Talking Circle room. It remains so today. The Apartment’s miniature living room with a handcrafted, green-tiled fireplace is both private and quiet with an added bonus of semi-comfort.

Data Collection

Data collection methods included participant observations of 257 hr of Talking Circles; individual semi-structured interviews with 31 students, 5 teachers, and 2 gatekeepers; and archival documents, such as students’ emails and text messages. The data were collected primarily during 3 days a week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays) between 8 a.m. and
3 p.m., when I facilitated Circle meetings and addressed their personal concerns during the school day. I also communicated with them after school via email or text messaging, and was invited to chaperone school functions, such as prom and homecoming. This immersion process provided an immense depth to my research as well as to my own personal growth.

During the Circle hour, I jotted down social interactions on a clipboard held in my lap, and immediately after or a few hours later, expanded the observations into detailed accounts, adding my own interpretations on a sidebar. This parallel recording and interpreting follows the recommendation of Denzin (1989) who claims that “thick description” first attempts to “rescue the meanings, actions and feelings” in an interaction experience and then it interprets the interaction by capturing “the meanings persons bring to their experiences” (p. 159). Following the grounded theory model, I wrote memos throughout the collection process as a means for comparing and exploring ideas, and for providing theoretical direction to the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The memos offered a vehicle for bringing subtle observations and questions to the surface of awareness and helped crystallize some of the emerging categories and themes.

Individual semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 45 min, provided the most insight into the students’ experience. Even though there were many commonalities in the interviews, sometimes reaching saturation, each student contributed something unique which I did not want to miss. I also wanted to explore emergent themes in more depth, and to check for personal biases that might have arisen in my roles as both the participant (insider) and observer (outsider). Maintaining this balance was challenging.

For instance, I could not get away from the fact that I had lived and worked in the Balkans for 13 years, and therefore spoke a dialect of some of the girls’ language. I also had conducted research for 2 years in South Asia from where another group of girls came. Furthermore, for the last 17 years, I have been a foster parent for two African American children, and thus have strong emotional ties to the third major cultural group represented in these Circles. Aware that each of these life experiences could create a filter through which I collected and analyzed the data, and for the purpose of assuaging concern that the girls might be biased toward pleasing me during their interviews, I cross-checked the data by interviewing 31 of the 60 students (including two to three from each Circle as well as those of different ethnic backgrounds). I also debriefed with the three gatekeepers and many of the students, especially when I needed clarification on certain behavior or comments.

Another bias I had to consider was my growing awareness from literature of the success of RP in schools, which could potentially compromise my objectivity as a researcher. In fact, the very act of introducing Talking Circles under the auspices of a RP program suggested that I was a proponent of these practices. However, it was not until I completed my own 2-year study of the Talking Circles in the high school, as well as observed firsthand the positive effect of the other RP programs in the district’s middle and elementary schools, that I could claim the status of advocate for RP in schools.

Data Analysis

During data collection, I organized my field notes and interview transcriptions in the coding layout described by Charmaz (2006) and coded with gerunds to capture the action of and remain close to the raw data (Glaser, 1978). This interpretive and inductive approach provided an immediate feedback system for identifying emergent themes, which I developed through memo writing as described above. In this way, data analysis occurred in parallel with data collection.

Once I coded the field notes and interviews and collapsed some of the redundant themes, I turned to a modified version of Spradley’s (1980) ethnographic approach and conducted a domain analysis to identify key concepts. The search for semantic relationships, or links of meaning connecting patterns and categories, led to the identification of four relational themes, which affirmed the development of growth-fostering relationships within the Talking Circles, and three emotional literacy skills, which improved the girls’ competence and self-efficacy.

Results

Growth-Fostering Relationships

The four relational themes included the joy of being together and building relationships; a sense of safety grounded in trust, confidentiality, not feeling alone, and not being judged; freedom to express genuine emotions; and increased empathy and compassion.

Joy of togetherness. Being happy to be together and deepening friendships was a primary leitmotif that permeated the Circle meetings and was clearly palpable when the girls entered the Apartment, chatting animatedly about the day’s events. Limited time to be together was one reason cited for this tangible exuberance. As Amirita (Circle C) explained, “I don’t see my friends together all of the time and like, when I’m in a Circle, I feel really happy and grateful that I have friends like that.”

Girls across the Talking Circles expressed similar reactions to Amirita. According to Trina (Circle A), friendships deepened because they could basically hang out . . . so to me, it’s something to look forward to because I know I am growing like deeper bonds with all of my friends . . . and it’s something that I’ll remember after I graduate.

Nourishing this connection was key to the cohesiveness of the Circle, which Nandita (Circle C) clearly articulates. “What’s making it work,” she said, “is the friendship around
the whole Circle. How everyone became closer to everyone since we are expressing ourselves to each other . . . so it’s the friendship bond!” For Letti (Circle D) seeing her friends each week made her “just wanna get tighter to each of them,” which was echoed by Jayashri (Circle C), who said, “As a group, we come together! We help each other!” Wanting to get closer and help each other already suggests that empathy and caring are emerging in their relationships.

I asked Trina (Circle A) what factors enhanced their friendships. Pausing, she responded thoughtfully, “We were doing the same thing together so we had something to share and then, hearing each other’s opinions and how they feel, and stuff, just made me understand them more and just like everybody more.” Smiling, she said that when she passed them in the hallway during the week, she felt a special “connection because we shared this thing” together, indicating that their bond had spread beyond the Circle’s physical space.

The opportunity to meet regularly and build this social network was particularly relevant for the South Asian and Middle Eastern girls whose more traditional families rarely or never allowed them to attend after-school or weekend functions where they could socialize with friends. The weekly Circles provided a safe haven to discuss, among other topics, challenges they shared as Muslim teens living in what they perceived as two cultures.

For others, such as Deshawna (Circle G) who grew up in the local community, deepening bonds with girls she had known since childhood was significant because she “learned new things about people that I like . . . who I’ve always known but never really knew like that!” As these growth-fostering relationships matured, she said that she recognized the value of supportive “relationships, keeping the right ones and letting go of the ones that you know just aren’t right.” This insight indicates a budding ability to discern which friends have her best interests at heart, and a new sense of empowerment to make her own choices about what she values in relationships.

**Feeling safe.** Feeling safe and protected in the Talking Circle, the second relational theme, can be attributed to three factors—their ability to trust each other, not feeling alone, and not being judged. “Like your best friends,” said Maya (Circle H), can come to this quiet place and nobody can listen to what they say, and like nobody will go out and say what you said—like the personal stuff—and you can just talk about everything that you can’t talk about to other people, and you know that you can trust them.

Trina (Circle A) explained that she could “speak more . . . like give more insight of myself . . . actually tell what I’m really feeling because I know that whatever I say, isn’t going to go out of the Circle.” Fayina (Circle K) agreed, claiming that, “If we talk about something, we don’t like spread it in the school, saying, ah, she’s like this. Her life is like messed up and stuff like that. That’s the thing I like!”

In fact, the code of confidentiality was so respected, said Shoma (Circle A), that, after the Circle, none of us would talk about anything that happened in the Circle. We tried finishing a problem we had in Circle . . . so once we’re outside the Circle, like we won’t have anything to say to each other about the Circle.

The trust they built among themselves, claimed Letti (Circle D), “bettered us, all of us” because, according to Shoma (Circle A), “kids are not really good at keeping things to themselves,” and learning how to “keep secrets, others’ secrets that are really personal, to yourself instead of telling them,” had helped her and the others mature. The decision to not share confidences outside the Circle suggests that the girls adapted to the standards expected in the Circle and were able to keep the Circle special, like a secret room, for themselves.

Knowing that they were “not alone with their problems” was another component of safety.

That makes me feel so much better! Like when you’re having a bad day or something bad is happening at home and you come to school and it’s like the day you gonna have a Circle, it’s like OMG, you feel good! (Nadja, Circle E)

The same was true for Samira (Circle B) when she realized that the girls in her multi-cultural Circle “had their own problems,” and “I’m not the only one! I don’t stand alone!” Another student, Marisha (Circle H), who struggled with low self-esteem, was surprised that the girls in her Circle talked about the same things I feel and it’s just nice to have somebody who understands me. I never knew nobody could understand me I used to be mad at the world. Like can’t nobody understand me, but when I heard them talk about it . . . that’s exactly how I be feelin’!

The knowledge that they were similar not only made them feel understood but also safe because they no longer felt isolated.

A third aspect of safety was being able “to express what we really feel without nobody judging us or anything. Like it just basically helps us get a lot of stuff that needs to be said out without it being a school-wide problem,” remarked Breona (Circle D). Deshawna (Circle G) explained that she had “always been one who just holds it all inside, but when I come here, like I know I can just let it go and I won’t be judged or anything like that.” Also in this type of non-judgmental space, “you know people are listening,” said Nadja (Circle E), “you know that you’re around people who care about you and want good for you, and want to help you and that makes you feel safe for you to open up.”
Thus, feeling safe and not alone—core issues in the teens’ interactions—were grounded in the underlying trust that they developed together in their own private, non-judgmental environment. Almasa (Circle A) described their psychological sense of safety as “a security blanket” that is “warm and friendly” and Jayashri (Circle C), as “a little oval that is protecting us from the rest of the world.” The girls’ responses in this research corroborate the study, *Feeling Safe: What Girls Say*, which revealed that most girls define safety and feeling secure in terms of positive relationships and the trust they have for the people around them (Schoenberg, Riggins, & Salmond, 2003).

**Expressing genuine emotions.** Being able to openly express genuine emotions, which were often described somatically, was the third relational theme. For instance, Tiana (Circle H) claimed that for years she had had a “cocky attitude, like I don’t care about nothin’ attitude,” but,

> in the Circle I can express how I feel . . . It helped me to not keep it bottled up ‘cause I don’t tell nobody nothin’ . . . Like nobody, but when we got into the Circle, I did.

Natalie (Circle H), a student who witnessed the aftermath of her step-father’s murder, explained,

> when I hold everything in and keep it bottled up, eventually the bottle’s gonna bust and I don’t wanna do nothin’ crazy, so I just come to the Circle and I just let everything out and we talk about everything and so . . . I don’t feel like a lot of stress like I did when I didn’t have nobody to talk to.

Getting a weight “off their shoulders” or “chest” was another way they described the release of emotional tension. According to Ida (Circle E), “I feel when I come to Circle and when I leave, it’s like everything is lifted off your shoulders. It feels good.” For Marisha (Circle H),

> It’s like a peace place. It’s like mellow and it makes me get a lot of stuff off my chest. Like I can talk about my feelings or stuff that’s been bothering me, or like problems and how to stop the problems, and like how to control my anger.

Releasing emotions made Amirita (Circle C) feel “calm, relaxed . . . like it’s going to be such a great day! Every Wednesday I feel like it is so wonderful!” For Monique (Circle F), “It’s like a pimple! You just pop it and let it go!” and for Deshawna (Circle G) “It’s a gift in the middle of the week! Because I have that off my chest, I can be more ME instead of being my secrets.” In other words, the Circle provided a safe, non-judgmental space for venting teenage angst that, in many instances, could have exploded elsewhere in inappropriate places. They began recognizing another way of expressing themselves safely, as well as their own power for controlling what many felt were insurmountable emotions.

**Cultivating empathy.** The emergence of empathy was the fourth relational theme. As we know from the RCT, respecting and making the effort to understand another’s perspective are foundational for cultivating mutually empathic relationships and are essential in the management of conflict. One teen, Danica (Circle G), described with great clarity her newfound ability to look at a situation from three different angles. Before the Circle,

> I always just looked from my point of view until I sat down with all of these girls. They say “Oh, you know, I see it from this side; I see it from that side.” Some of us see it the same way. And I’ve just learned like when I do something, I think of it as in like, how do I feel doing it; how does the other person I’m doing it to feel; and how is everybody else looking at this conflict. I think like in three ways just to see how everything is going to turn out.

The capacity to step out of a situation and be aware of how someone might feel shows remarkable maturity and insight, especially for a person so young. This level of sensitivity could also be seen in Breona (Circle D) who claimed that the Circle “helps me like see what is going on with the people I’m around . . . to like know what their problems are, so that if something is wrong, then I can help them.”

Another student, Marisha (Circle H), learned in her Circle that people are often misjudged and that when one takes the time to know them, impressions and feelings might change:

> Normally when you meet somebody, you really don’t know a lot about them, and sometimes you can be judgmental. But then when you know a lot of things, it makes you like sympathize, but it also makes you like care about them and grow more as a person with them.

According to the RCT, when such care and empathy, described by Marisha, flow within a relationship, there is a heightened awareness and affirmation of self that gives one a greater sense of purpose and meaning (Jordan et al., 1991). I observed the positive impact of many mutually empathic relationships, but one particular example stands out. Maya (Circle H), who suffered from a mild learning disability, shared her embarrassment in Circle about her academic challenges, especially reading at a lower grade level and not always comprehending what the teachers said in class. One girl piped up, “Oh, I can’t tell. Like you hide it good” and proceeded to compliment her on other qualities. In our interview, Maya explained that she was so startled by her peer’s reaction that she wondered whether other people in school might also be hiding disabilities or troubles,

> and they be sad and then that’s why most people be in fights . . . because they be like one minute, happy, but then inside they be sad, and one person that do one thing and then they get real mad, and like they just did that for no reason, but maybe they were going through some stuff that day but you just couldn’t see it. I don’t need to just jump to conclusions and say like, Oh this person is bad and this person is that!
The response of Maya’s friend, which spontaneously emerged from their mutually empathic relationship, allowed Maya to expand her own compassion for others. This empowered her to invite girls who sat alone in the cafeteria or at school events to join a new Circle she helped create for the 2011-2012 academic year.

To summarize, these findings highlight several points of interest. The Talking Circle provided a reflective space, separate from the daily routine of school, where girls could privately share that which was relevant in their lives. Through this act of sharing, the girls not only deepened relational bonds but also identified what they valued most in friendships both within and outside the Circle. By talking within a social environment that felt safe, the girls learned to be more trusting and trustworthy, more open and authentic in speech, and less judgmental of themselves and others. Through this interactive experience, they not only expanded their horizons in interpersonal communication and relationships but also accomplished and refined certain social-emotional literacy skills as described below.

**Emotional Literacy Skills**

Bandura (1994) suggests that a “vast amount of social learning occurs among peers” (p. 78) because their knowledge and thinking skills are continually being tested both socially and academically. We also know that healthy relationships require self-awareness to recognize and manage one’s own emotional state, as well as to acknowledge and respond appropriately to the emotional state of another. My data indicate that the girls improved three important emotional literacy skills, including the capacity to listen, the ability to manage their anger, and interpersonal sensitivity.

**Learning to listen.** An essential social skill is knowing how to listen and many students, like Maya (Circle H), thought that they had become “a better person” because they had learned “to listen more and have a conversation with somebody without going off and disregarding everything they say.” In fact, some seemed surprised that this new listening skill actually worked when their parents were talking to them.

Another aspect of good listening is not interrupting or talking when someone is speaking. Kendria (Circle H) observed that when she waited “to hear what the other person has to say,” she was a better friend because “some people don’t always want my opinion or some of the things I say may come off stronger!” Nandita (Circle C), who used to be reprimanded for talking too much during class, discovered that she talked less since being in Circle. “Before I used to talk all day, so I don’t know if people were listening to me, but now I don’t talk about random stuff. I talk about stuff that are important.”

These astute observations, I propose, provide insight into how effective sitting in Circle can be in refining listening skills, especially when week after week, they have the opportunity to practice with people they care about. At times, as facilitator, I would need to remind them to be respectful and listen, but the longer the Circle was together, the more they monitored themselves with the help of the talking piece. This suggests that social-emotional learning, as scholars have reported, is possible (Goleman, 1995; Hopkins, 2004; Weare, 2004).

**Managing anger.** Another emotional literacy skill is managing one’s anger, but many of the girls were not aware that they had anger issues. For instance, Jatara (Circle D) described how “people always say I got anger problems, but I think I don’t got anger problems. Then I learned I do! Like if someone, if one person makes me mad, I take it out on everybody else.” Jatara was not alone. There were many other students, like Breona (Circle D), who also realized, “I have anger management problems. I get mad to where . . . like I let it build up until I blow and then like being in Circle . . . every week I get to let it off!”

The data revealed that the girls expressed their anger by ignoring the problem and suppressing emotions, exploding and being verbally and/or physically aggressive, or “getting an attitude.” For instance, Jatara (Circle D) described how she used to “explode, but since being in the Circle, I don’t let nobody make me angry no more like that! I just keep it movin’! No nothin’ be stormin’ me no more!” Letti (Circle D) observed that sometimes, “I would have blew up but then once us goin’ into the Circle like—in the middle of the day—that it calm me down. It made it real better about my little attitude.”

For some, relationships with family and peers began improving once they gained more control over their anger. Marisha (Circle H) claimed that she learned to shut my mouth! Like if somebody say something to me, I do not always gotta say something back. Every since like I’ve been in the Circle, I stop and just think about it. Like if I say this, what is it really gonna change? I can’t change the way a person feels, so I’m just gonna be quiet!

Others became role models, like Letti (Circle D), who organized a lunchroom Circle to prevent a physical fight between several friends. When I asked whether she was pleased to have acquired new conflict resolution skills, she replied, “Yeah, because it can better my life. Like I can deal with problems more.” This was supported by Dina (Circle G), who said, “You can’t just let stuff go. You have to sit down with the person and talk with them . . . give each other time to talk and apologize and like, get your ego out of the way.” Such insights helped Nandita (Circle C) understand that the change is for me! It’s not for anyone else . . . I realized that if I keep doing stuff I did before, I’m not going to get anywhere in life! The earlier you change it, the better it is!
Nandita’s realization parallels Goleman’s (1995) observation that the skill at which we handle our emotional life determines how well we thrive. Self-awareness led Nandita and the others to understand that through constructive dialogue and calming outlets, such as supportive friends, they could responsibly and safely manage their anger. This knowledge is core in a teen’s maturation process.

**Developing interpersonal sensitivity.** Self-awareness also strengthened interpersonal sensitivity. While there were many moments of empathy and care shared within the Circles, such as impulsive hugs and kind words, students’ comments, like these of Jayashri and Tiana, testify to the deepening sensitivity toward those who were not necessarily their friends:

The Circle made me like not judge people. I guess if I see someone like acting up, instead of saying “Oh, my gosh, they’re just so ignorant!” or “Why are you doing something so idiotic?” I’ll just sit there and think, “Did you have a bad day?” “Let’s talk about it.” Yeah, like I’m more understanding. (Jayashri, Circle C)

You can’t judge a person by the outside. Like just because from the clothes they wear, you think they livin’ good, but they could be with their lights out, or nothin’ to eat . . . You never know. So you can’t judge nobody by their appearance. (Tiana, Circle H)

Another sign of the emerging capacity to understand others was how they handled gossip and “backstabbing.” For instance, Taisha (Circle I), a young freshman, claimed that she “knew from the beginning that gossiping was bad” but after observing the pain it caused several girls in her Circle, she realizes that one “shouldn’t do it . . . like I guess the Circle has showed how bad gossiping is . . . like more than what I saw before.” Another student, Maya (Circle H), explained that she stopped gossiping because

maybe their hair is like that and their clothes is like that because they don’t have no money . . . I don’t know . . . I just don’t like talkin’ about people like that no more, ’cause I don’t want nobody talkin’ about me like that!

The gossip drama, according to Taisha (Circle I), was “over crazy things, like boys and like, about he says–she says stuff” or when a girl thought she was helping a friend by telling her what others said about her. Some, like Kendria (Circle H), realized that this only inflamed the situation and decided she should be more discerning to avoid spreading a rumor and hurting a friend:

I mean like when I hear . . . when people tell me stuff about people, like by me being their friend or something, I say it. Then I had to think about it. Like certain stuff you can say, but certain stuff you have to keep to yourself.

Each teen’s response represents a profound nuance of empathy, which, as we know from the RCT, is core to human connection. I observed, as Miller and Stiver (1997) affirmed, that the personal experience of a mutually empathic relationship was empowering, especially for those girls going through disturbed familial connections. Often, the effects of healthy relationships spilled over into real life and provided the girls with enough grounding to make more mature, self-enhancing decisions that increased self-efficacy and brought more positive, long-term consequences.

**Self-Efficacy**

People with high self-efficacy, claims Bandura (1994), believe that they “exercise influence over the events that affect their lives” (p. 71). As confidence increased, many girls began believing in and acting upon their innate ability to influence or change events in their lives that once seemed beyond their control. For instance, Natalie (Circle H), who suffered from low self-esteem, indicated that she was “feelin’ a lot of confidence and ready to continue with her day” after each Circle. “And even if we have our breakdown moments where we cry and stuff, I always leave happy ’cause I know that once I leave, I won’t let nobody . . . nobody bring my day down!” Marisha (Circle H), who struggled with broken familial ties, acknowledged that

sometimes I’ll doubt myself, but I really am strong and I’ve learned that we all got a future and the things we do now gonna, like affect our future, so if we grow, then our future will turn out better.

When I asked what we talked about in Circle that led to this insight, she responded,

You told us that you wanted to see us graduate. Like you didn’t want to see us be back here again, and it just made me think, it’s like a lot of people watchin’ me, and I don’t wanna like you see me 20 years from now and I’m like my dad or my mom, or somebody who really didn’t do nothin’ with their life. I wanna be somebody like . . . she graduated, she’s a doctor or a nurse, like I had her in my class. Like be proud of me!

This unwavering sense of self was a powerful antidote to some of life’s challenges both Natalie and Marisha were facing.

Alisha (Circle F), with few words and a deep sadness over the recent loss of her mother, was another student whose self-awareness and confidence began evolving in the Circle. Usually silent and rocking a sock doll, one day she suddenly shared that she felt disrespected by her current boyfriend and showed us his rude text messages. Her shocked peers exclaimed, “You gotta stand up to him! You can’t let him treat you that way!” Later, in her interview, she explained that

the little advices about my boyfriend and stuff like that, it really helped me be more confident because like, usually I just not say nothin’ to the stuff he say, but now, like I’m speakin’ up more
and he like has changed differently. Like he has more than enough respect for me. Like he doesn’t say anything like the text messages I showed you.

I asked what she did differently.

I just spoke up and I told him, “I’m not a hoe; I’m not a B; you’re not gonna talk to me that way. And if you think you’re gonna talk to me that way, then you might as well just leave!”

When Alisha learned to set boundaries to influence change in her boyfriend’s behavior and be respected, her level of confidence increased.

Others, like Monique (Circle F), Danica (Circle G), and Deshawna (Circle G), discovered an inner strength to express their opinions and stand up for what they believed. As they each explained,

The Circle has built confidence in me. You know I never used to speak out. Now I just be like “OK. Look, I gotta talk to you about something. Something you did really bothered me and it’s itchin’ me . . . it’s gettin’ on my nerve and I gotta tell you.” Now I’m like that and it’s really changin’ . . . (Monique, Circle F)

Like when I see something, I stand up for it and I didn’t know I could stand up for it, you know, and keep myself guarded up and not let anybody break me down on how I feel. I think this person sitting right here in this chair is ME!!! (Danica, Circle G)

The Circle helped me express myself more . . . ’cause I’ve always like had an image in my head of what a person should be and what a person should have, you know . . . but it’s made me realize that like it doesn’t matter, you are YOU and you should be your image, not a picture of something else or somebody you see. Be your image to follow! (Deshawna, Circle G)

Such insights suggest that the Talking Circle offered a unique social environment where the girls felt free enough to express themselves and in this freedom, they found their own voice, as both Danica and Deshawna eloquently describe. For all of them, the strength of their friendships gave them the confidence needed to affect their environment and to make small changes that bettered their lives, such as speaking up for what is right, studying harder, listening in class, trying to control their anger, avoiding gossip and fights, and leaving inappropriate friends. The girls made these changes because they cared and felt cared for, and because they were empowered—through the maturation of their emotional literacy tools—to trust themselves.

Discussion

RP in schools is a new and emerging field. This research of 12 proactive, gender-specific Talking Circles, established under the auspices of a RP program in an urban high school, contributes to this burgeoning discipline and provides insight into the role they play in supporting caring friendships and building emotional literacy skills in schools.

The Talking Circles were created on the premise that people are “hardwired to connect” (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003) and that personal growth occurs in connection through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Jordan et al., 1991). As teenagers are not afforded many opportunities for nourishing this kind of intimacy, especially in school (Kessler, 2000), and we know from the literature that relational bonding is particularly relevant for girls (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999; Miller & Stiver, 1997), I wanted to understand how the girls interacted and what they accomplished under the unique social conditions of a Talking Circle within a school environment. The long-term intention was to consider whether Talking Circles might be a restorative option for building positive peer relationships and supporting social-emotional competency in schools.

Findings from this 2-year systematic study suggest that the Talking Circle is a safe, collaborative space for the development of growth-fostering peer relationships, resulting in three primary outcomes—deep relational bonding, authentic expression of emotions, and evolving capacity for empathy. The data further indicate that the girls refined three key emotional literacy skills—active listening, anger management, and interpersonal sensitivity. What supported these accomplishments?

Talking Piece

The use of the talking piece (squishy ball), as a regulator of communication, was one important factor because it explicitly prompted impulse control and focused listening. Once accustomed to the process, the ball not only encouraged them to listen more intently, “because it’s so quiet, so peaceful” (Dina, Circle G), but it also allowed them to feel heard since “everyone in the circle pays attention to you!” (Nandita, Circle C). It was challenging when several wanted to describe an event at the same time or during rare disagreements because, as Danica (Circle G) acknowledged, “none of us want to wait to say something when we’re upset!” In spite of these frustrations, however, most agreed with Amirita (Circle C) that, “when we take turns and hear one story, there’s no miscommunication going on with anyone . . . and you know the whole entire story. That’s what I like!” Generally, misunderstandings cleared once each person got to tell their story.

For other teens, like Cyiarra (Circle F), the ball served as a tool of empowerment, “as a microphone. Like I’m talking here.” Monique (Circle F) felt the same as Cyiarra and explained that the ball “makes me feel like I have the power . . . You know, like, I have the ball. I’m talking!” Thus, for many, the action of holding the ball implied “holding power”—the power to speak and to be heard with respect. In fact, when there were interruptions or sudden side conversations, many of the girls would point to the ball and remind everyone with, “Hey, I’ve got the ball! It’s my turn to speak!”
By allowing everyone an opportunity to speak and be listened to, the girls gained insight into the meaning of dignity and respect for themselves and others. The squishy ball also served as a stress reliever for those wanting something to occupy their hands, especially during personal sharing.

**Reflective Inquiry**

The reflective questions, posed during the “topic of the day,” were another supportive element because they stimulated self-reflection and encouraged the exchange of ideas. The questions “make you think about yourself in ways that you wouldn’t think if you were on your own . . . think of things deeper,” explained Amelia (Circle B) and for Trina (Circle B) the questions “brought an insight in me as a person. Like I got to know myself better!” Monique (Circle F) described the reflective inquiry as a way of bringing thoughts “to the front of your brain, like come to your mind, like not stay at the back of your head.” In other words, the reflective questioning elicited ideas they were unaware of and enabled them to not only gain deeper “insight into other people’s opinions” (Trina, Circle A), but into their own as well. This opened space for them to explore meaningful issues together, which positively affected the relational bonding described in this study.

**Adult Circle Keeper**

Another contributing factor to these findings is the adult Circle Keeper who has two primary roles—maintaining the integrity of the Circle process and providing mature, steady support as the teens explore the vicissitudes of their interpersonal relationships and their emerging selfhood. The Circle must be grounded in respect modeled by the Circle Keeper through his or her calm and courteous demeanor. The adult Circle Keeper “is important because we need somebody that, like . . . to keep everything together,” Maya explained (Circle H). Otherwise, “people probably would stop somebody else from talkin’ and try to talk when they was talkin’,” said Letha (Circle D). An adult is there to ensure that everybody is given “a chance to speak” (Alisha, Circle G), and to guide participants “back when we were goin’ off topic” (Kendria, Circle H). Furthermore, said Amira (Circle C), if the adult is not present “we wouldn’t have deep talk . . . like about what’s in people’s hearts, or let our emotions out.” In other words, the Circle Keeper helps maintain the structure of the Circle, so that each person feels respected and safe in the shared collective space.

The adult also serves as a supportive guide. Jatara (Circle D) told me that she wanted an adult in the Circle “because you know more than us. You can help us too, just like everybody else is helpin’ each other!” For Marisha (Circle H), if there was “somebody our age, they’d probably tell us the same stuff, like ‘Girl, just fight!!!’ They don’t be understanding . . . they got no experience.” Was our vast age difference an obstacle, I inquired? “No, it doesn’t bother me at all,” said Nandita (Circle C), “I like that you are older because you have more knowledge. I’m pretty sure you went through the stuff we went through, so you know how we feel.”

Amelia (Circle B) appreciated having a non-parent adult involved in her life because you know they’re gonna help you, not because they’re your parents, but because they care! And that’s very important because I think it’s hard to find a role model and somebody you trust like that to tell things to, ’cause you can’t say some things to your parents.

In fact, Trina (Circle A) thought that these types of Talking Circles with mixed generations could be a “bridge for the growing gap” she sees developing between teens and adults today. Considering that current research (Noddings, 2005; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2010) suggests teens are missing deep connections with adults, Trina might be drawing an insightful conclusion about how to address a cultural and psychological gap that is damaging to both teens and adults.

**Trust and Safety**

A trusting and safe atmosphere was the essential social condition needed for building growth-fostering relationships. Comments abound about the Talking Circle being a “security blanket,” and “a little oval protecting us from the rest of the world” where they could “tell each other their deepest thoughts and feelings.” The introduction of ceremonies to mark a tone of reverence, the Circle Keeper’s respectful demeanor, and the securement of everyone’s agreement to the code of confidentiality all contributed to the trust and safety factor. In fact, the code of confidentiality was so respected that, as far as I know, it was never violated during the 2-year research period. This is remarkable considering that trading secrets is an important characteristic in girls’ relational development (Brizendine, 2006). Because the environment was safe and secrets were not violated, many girls were finally able to connect to their raw emotions, especially fear and anger, and use the Circle as a constructive channel for discharging pent-up emotional energy. Many reported that the relational support and empathic responses often surprised them, which increased their self-confidence and self-worth, and gave them a sense of being loved and cared for.

**Voices of the Administration**

The ability of the girls to handle emotions in a more mature manner, according to the principal, had a positive impact on some of the school’s social problems:

A lot of the drama has been tamped down by the Circles. I just awoke one day and like, whatever happened with that? There are
kids that are in the Circles that were in my office regularly at the beginning of the year, who are no longer here, and nothing else that I’m aware of changed. I’m sure their parents got on them, but they stopped being in here!

The vice-principal also told me that he had seen a drop in “school drama” caused by gossip and “he said/she said” situations:

It happened a lot less because of the Circles, because you had a big mixture of girls and it wasn’t all just local girls, all city girls, or anything like that. It was a good mixture and . . . they had a dialogue. They had a dialogue. They had a place where they could talk; where they felt safe and it wasn’t, you know, spillin’ out into the hallways!

The comments by the principal and vice-principal demonstrate two relevant factors for schools. Talking Circles provided a supportive haven where girls learned to trust and respect each other enough to honor the code of confidentiality and not be involved in gossiping that led to “drama.” Second, the Talking Circles offered a safe outlet where girls could move toward greater self-awareness and maturity by exploring their individuality and differences without engaging in counterproductive or destructive behavior. They were no longer sitting in the principal’s office for disciplinary reasons.

**Limitations of the Study**

Certain limitations of this study suggest future research that would be relevant for educators. First, the study does not show definitively that Talking Circles reduce harmful behavior or the number of school suspensions and expulsions, even though both the self-report data and participant observations suggest that they were influential in curbing behavior that might have led to harm. By incorporating objective measures of behavior (grades, truancy, suspension, and expulsion reports) into future research, it might be possible to determine whether Talking Circles are capable of reducing negative events. Second, the results cannot be generalized to adolescent boys as the research focused only on girls. Further research could establish male Circles of similar size and make-up as those of the girls and record whether they form growth-fostering relationships and develop similar emotional literacy skills. Third, it is unclear from this study whether Talking Circles have the capacity to change or influence the overall climate of a school even though both the principal and vice-principal have intimated this. The interview data do suggest that when the girls connected with their friends in the supportive Circle environment, they were happier and more connected to and invested in the school. Analysis of climate change, however, requires a large-scale, systematic implementation of gender-specific Talking Circles for both boys and girls.

**Implications of the Study**

The significance of this research is twofold. This is the first systematic, qualitative study of Circles organized under the auspices of a RP program in schools. Looking through the lens of the Relational Cultural model (Jordan et al., 1991), as a framework for understanding the interactions of adolescent girls in a unique set of social conditions, I observed the emergence of both growth-fostering relationships and social-emotional skill development. This corroborates the data presented by the Girls Circle program (Hossfeld, 2008). Second, as RP is a recent, flexible, and emerging grassroots movement in schools, accompanied by a variety of experimentations, these findings assist both practitioners and theoreticians in identifying patterns that inform how we refine and operationalize the potential of Circle processes. This is particularly relevant, because as the field expands, there is genuine need to systematically document and share information that is emerging from experimentation. Finally, this research encourages further dialogue on the implementation and value of Talking Circles as part of a whole-school restorative program for working with gender-specific issues, for introducing the merits of respectful dialogue and conflict resolution, for addressing teen disengagement and loneliness, and for teaching and practicing emotional literacy skills.

**Conclusion**

In closing, educational scholar, Rachel Kessler (2000), asks us to imagine what it would be like

> if every student in the United States were provided a safe place to sit with a small group of their peers and reflect on their lives . . . to share the questions that trouble or confuse or mystify them . . . to find support for their pain or joy. (p. 159)

Kessler notes something profound. In essence, how do we co-create safe spaces in school where each person feels comfortable to be exactly who he or she is because they feel honored and respected?

I propose that Talking Circles are such a space. They support peers helping peers through sharing collective wisdom and caring. They provide opportunities for students to directly experience positive social values, such as respect, by being treated with respect. They address some of the psychosocial and emotional needs that do not appear to be met in other school venues. The Talking Circle provides a microcosm where the students can be themselves and where, unstructured by judgment and fear, they can tap into the very essence of what it means to be human—to care, to listen, to be heard, but most of all, to be authentic.

The Circle is about girls coming together and helping each other. If we all just came together and just, like, took each other by the hand and just loved each other enough to not let things hurt us, then I think it would turn around the whole school. (Deshawna, Circle G)
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1. Names of participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
2. Topics: interpersonal relationships (love, friends, boys, parents), school (Facebook, gossip, rumors, uniform policy, teachers, classes), personal (careers, self-esteem, anger management, puberty), and social (sexual harassment, stereotyping, racism, social media, teen pregnancy).

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