

## **Fostering Classroom Communities through Circling With Teacher Candidates**

### **Favoriser une communauté au sein d'une classe à l'aide de cercles de discussion entre enseignants en devenir**

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#### Résumé de l'article

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# FOSTERING CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES THROUGH CIRCLING WITH TEACHER CANDIDATES

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**ABSTRACT.** Classroom circles have been recognized as a valuable pedagogical approach to develop students' social-emotional learning and to establish a sense of community within a classroom. Until recently, there has been little consideration that teachers, themselves, may benefit from circling experiences. To garner a deeper understanding of circling for teachers, this study examined teacher candidates' experiences with circling in a teacher education course. Focus groups with former teacher candidates procured three themes: *circling creates safe and engaging spaces for learning, productive tensions create opportunities for connection, and, teachers create effective circles with authenticity*. The results suggest that circling should be similarly used with educators, in addition to use with students, and could be embedded within current teacher-education programming.

**FAVORISER UNE COMMUNAUTÉ AU SEIN D'UNE CLASSE À L'AIDE DE CERCLES DE DISCUSSION ENTRE ENSEIGNANTS EN DEVENIR**

**RÉSUMÉ.** La valeur pédagogique des cercles de discussion est reconnue. Cette approche permet de favoriser l'apprentissage socio-émotionnel des étudiants et de créer un sens de la communauté au sein d'un groupe-classe. Or, jusqu'à récemment, peu d'intérêt était accordé aux bénéfices que les enseignants pouvaient tirer de telles expériences. Afin de mieux comprendre le processus des cercles de discussion chez les enseignants, ce projet de recherche analyse l'expérience vécue par de futurs enseignants expérimentant le cercle de discussion dans le cadre d'un cours de formation des maîtres. Trois thèmes ont émergé des groupes de discussion menés auprès d'anciens aspirants à l'enseignement : les cercles favorisent un climat d'apprentissage sécuritaire et stimulant, les tensions productives font naître des opportunités relationnelles et les enseignants créent des cercles efficaces avec authenticité. Ces résultats indiquent que les cercles de discussion pourraient être utilisés non seulement avec les élèves, mais également avec les enseignants et même, intégrés au programme actuel de formation des maîtres.

With compelling evidence that psychosocial characteristics are vital to children's overall academic and behavioural functioning, researchers have sought to examine the ways through which teachers can address students' social-emotional development needs in the classroom. *Circle time*, as it has been referred to in

schooling contexts, has been promoted to be a promising practice to address students' social-emotional development (e.g., Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Cefai, Ferrario, Cavioni, Carter, & Grech, 2014). A circling approach can be best described as an intentional communication process that is student-centered and focused on helping students to: build and restore healthy relationships, develop skills to solve social problems, build self-esteem, and support cooperative classroom environments (Hennessey, 2007; Riestenberg, 2012). Sitting physically in a circle, members of the classroom community discuss issues, share ideas and feelings, and engage in games and activities most commonly related to social, emotional, or curricular matters.

Circling processes vary widely in their implementation and are commonly used both within and beyond school environments. Many are founded on the spiritual values of Indigenous philosophies, such as respect, honour, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Riestenberg, 2012) but have been modified to meet the diverse contexts of Canadian communities. Although it is not the purpose of this present article to describe the historical and philosophical roots of circling practices, the authors would like to acknowledge the rich Indigenous traditions that anchor the basic principles and processes of a circling approach. Although the specific activities and structure of circling approaches may vary, Kay Pranis (2005) articulated its common elements: Participants first become acquainted with one another and then work to build understanding and trust. All members of the circle address the issues under discussion, sharing their ideas, visions, and goals. Then, participants develop plans for the future while establishing a sense of unity. All components emphasize developing supportive and caring relationships.

In the community, *peacemaking circles* are focused on bringing individuals together who wish to partake in conflict resolution, healing, support, or decision-making activities. Guided by the work of Pranis (2005), peacemaking circles draw from Indigenous approaches to conflict, while infusing contemporary concepts of dialogue and consensus building. The peacemaking circle began in the justice system as an intervention to respond to harm that occurred within a community. Since then, peacemaking circles have been adapted to be used as a process for the prevention of harm — therefore, as both a reactive and proactive tool. Though the specific protocols may vary from peacemaking circles (for example, in *restorative circling*, as envisioned by the International Institute for Restorative Practice), these approaches have been successfully used to respond to harm and to proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent harm. Within schools, for instance, the principles of circling shape the TRIBES *community circle*, a school-based program designed to help develop safe and caring learning environments for children through emphasizing cooperative group learning and social development (Gibbs, 1994). The use of *class meetings* in Olweus's (1994) popular bullying prevention and intervention program also utilizes the principles of circling.

A circling pedagogical approach, circle time, in school contexts, has received attention throughout the past few decades as a useful tool for teachers to foster inclusive, safe, and democratic learning environments (Mosley, 2009). Small-scale studies examining the benefits of circling on children's social-emotional development have indicated that a range of psychological processes are accessed and cultivated through the circling approach. For example, a study conducted by Lown (2002) demonstrated that children's communication skills, particularly listening skills, improved as a result of participating in a circling intervention for at least one term of school. Mosely (2009) noted positive academic and behavioural outcomes, with students' increased concentration, listening, motivation for learning, enhanced communication, collaboration, and heightened self-esteem as indicators of the benefits of circling for students. Work from Miller and Moran (2007) and Collins (2011) collectively points to the value of circling in promoting a positive school and classroom climate. Hennessey's (2007) work also indicated that students who participated in a circling program were perceived by teachers to be more socially skilled and less likely to display problem behaviours. Although some authors have expressed concern about the sometimes "flimsy" evidence for effectiveness (e.g., Leach & Lewis, 2013; Lown, 2002), circling nonetheless has been described as a promising practice that provides a safe base for students to learn and practice social-emotional skills (Cefai et al., 2014).

## TEACHERS' SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND CIRCLING

Despite its potential for promoting positive classroom communities and for providing a safe space for members to discuss and reflect on their own social-emotional skills, circling has often been restricted to developing *students'* competencies, overlooking its possible use with teachers and teacher candidates. This is unfortunate, especially when considering the increasing pressures that teachers face in our current classrooms, sometimes culminating in burnout and teacher attrition. Drawing from the seminal work by Sutton and Wheatley (2003), researchers have posited that socially and emotionally competent teachers are better able to develop safe, supportive, and encouraging classroom environments and are more likely to manage their emotions in healthy ways. Specifically, these teachers have high self and social awareness, they recognize their emotional patterns and tendencies, and they demonstrate an ability to utilize their social and emotional skills to motivate their own and their students' learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' social and emotional competencies play a significant role in the implementation of programming that effectively targets students' social and emotional learning, such as circling practices.

In a recent report on the state of social-emotional learning in Canada, the researchers cited a need for pre-service programs to allow space for teachers to learn curricula and pedagogical approaches that support students' social-

emotional learning (Guyn Cooper Research Associates, 2013). There is ample evidence to support the importance of addressing students' social-emotional learning and developing positive school / classroom climates (e.g., Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), in addition to numerous lines of research that urge teachers to develop their own social-emotional competencies (e.g., Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Researchers have also argued that teacher education should be a venue for discussing and exploring social skills, emotions, and relationships, but that this happens infrequently and unsystematically. There are only a small number of formal programs across Canada to provide this opportunity for teacher candidates (e.g., the University of British Columbia's Social-Emotional Learning concentration).

A survey conducted by Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, and Merrell (2009) demonstrated that nearly all teacher respondents (98.9%) perceived social-emotional learning to be important in school, yet less than half (45.5%) of classroom teachers were currently implementing social-emotional learning programs in their classrooms. When asked about their satisfaction of their current knowledge and skills related to social-emotional learning, 44.7% indicated that they were *somewhat* satisfied and 37.5% reported that they were *unsatisfied*. Similarly, 31.1% of respondents stated that they were *not* confident in implementing social-emotional learning programs in their classrooms. Teachers are often the primary deliverers of social-emotional learning programming – yet these results emphasize an apparent gap between teachers' beliefs about social-emotional learning and their confidence and satisfaction with their knowledge and skills. Opportunities in teacher education suggest an area for potential attention and growth. The principles of circling applied in a teacher education context may provide an avenue for prospective teachers to develop the confidence and skills to implement programs that enhance students' social-emotional competencies. Additionally, teachers often facilitate social-emotional learning more implicitly, often without the aid of a formalized program. We agree with Jones et al. (2013) that socially and emotionally competent teachers are in the strongest position to build supportive, caring relationships with students – an important foundation for delivering both formalized social-emotional learning programming and implicit social-emotional learning, embedded in the daily life of the school.

This study examines the uses and experiences of circling for teacher candidates in a teacher education program in Ontario, Canada. The purpose of the study was to examine teacher candidates' experiences with circling, including the aspects of the circling that were most influential to the teacher candidates' development, the benefits and challenges of circling, and the learning outcomes resulting from the circling process.

## METHOD

### *Theoretical framework*

This study is informed by the philosophy of social constructivism. Distinctly subjectivist and relativist, social constructivists are concerned with individuals' ways of creating meaning, mediated through interpretative strategies informed by social groups and cultures. Researchers grounded in a constructivist frame are concerned with the idiographic lived experiences of participants and their meaning-making processes. The researcher and the researched are connected throughout the data collection, analysis, and representation processes, and there is an adherence to the multiple contexts and realities that shape participants' narratives. In the context of this present work, a social constructivist approach to the research involved: prioritizing participants' voices through using In vivo codes during the initial coding phase, acknowledging the multiple contexts that may impact participants' meanings and experiences (e.g., the focus groups themselves, the medium of the focus group – online or offline, their current work as teachers / educators, their experiences throughout their teacher education programs, and their prior teaching and learning experiences). We were cognizant of how these lived experiences shaped their dialogue within the focus group and how our discussions together could reciprocally impact their meaning-making processes. We also acknowledge that, as researchers, we have an intimate and necessarily influential role in the construction of the research data. However, our pre-conceived notions about circling and teacher education do not stand as barriers to the research process. Rather, they act as initial vantage points from which to view this phenomenon.

### *Participants*

All participants in this research were enrollees in a one-semester course entitled "Creating healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments" (described in next section). All former students of this course were contacted via email to participate in the study. The recruitment process yielded nine participants (three female, six male). All participants, at the time of being enrolled in the course, had completed one intensive teaching practicum of four weeks in a junior, intermediate, or senior classroom in Ontario. All participants went on to graduate from the teacher education program and are currently licensed to teach in Ontario. At the time of the focus groups, all participants were involved ( $n = 8$ ) or had expressed interest in becoming involved ( $n = 1$ ) in education in some capacity; for example, as occasional teachers in a public board (5), a teacher in a private school (1), a teacher in an international school (1), and a graduate student of education (1). All participants had little prior experience engaging in a circling process in a teacher education course, though there was some variability of experience partaking in circling in other teaching and learning contexts (such as in their former schooling, as a practicum student in a school, or through professional development initiatives).

### *Course description*

The second author of this report was the instructor of the 10-week course, with 40 students enrolled. The course was designated as an elective, so many of the students purposely selected the course based on their personal interests or course schedules. The impetus to design a teacher education course using a circling approach came from her experiences as a classroom teacher and administrator in a large secondary (grades 7-11) school. She used circling with both students and staff as an approach to build community and to respond to conflict. She observed, anecdotally, that the circling approach helped to reduce classroom management struggles, increase student engagement and to resolve conflicts within the school community. The approach also appeared to help address the tensions amongst school staff, who were in transition to merging under a single school administration. In the winter of 2015, the second author embedded these experiences into a teacher education course designed from a Restorative Justice framework that reflected the principles of a circling pedagogy.

The course consisted of 10 classes, each 3 hours in length. Substantively, the course sought to cover issues related to school safety, student mental-health and wellness, and building healthy school relationships. Each class had the same structure: an opening circle, literature circles, an energizer activity, a guest speaker or an example of an instructional strategy, and then finished with a closing circle. All community circles followed the circling process guidelines that students developed together as a class community. Conversations within the circles were based on the course themes, but they often moved into discussions of educational values, insecurities about teaching, previous experiences in a classroom, hopes for the future, and areas of confusion or tension related to their professional roles and responsibilities. Whereas the first two classes were facilitated by the instructor and focused on “ice-breaker” activities and building familiarity with the circling process, the remaining classes were facilitated by student groups. These student groups were called “literature circles” comprising six students selected by the instructor. Students would rotate through various roles (chair, reporter, note-taker, etc.) and discuss the weekly readings. As a group, they would also be responsible for leading the opening circle, the energizer activity, and the closing circle in one class, which would be based on the class needs in relation to community building. For example, where earlier community circles were focused on “getting to know one another,” later circles were more personal and opened up spaces to have more challenging discussions. After facilitating as a group, each student was required to reflect in writing to the course instructor on the process and the impact they felt it had on the class community.

### ***Data collection***

Upon receiving university ethical clearance, data were collected through three focus groups: one occurring in a traditional in-person format, and two taking place online through synchronous chat software. Focus groups have been described as spaces for interactive and intensive discussions based on specific discussion questions, whereby participants co-construct their understandings in a shared environment (Rodham & Gavin, 2006). Focus groups were deemed to be particularly appropriate for this study as the processes that are foundational to focus groups are similar to the circling approach that was utilized in the course. Discussion questions centered on participants' descriptions of circling, the benefits and challenges, and the impacts of circling.

The first author led the focus groups, and the second author participated in an observing and note-taking role. The first online focus group consisted of two participants (1 female, 1 male). Three participants (1 female and 2 males) comprised the second online focus group and the in-person focus group included four participants (1 female and 3 males). All focus groups were 1.5 to 2 hours in length.

Online focus groups were particularly suited for this study because these methods have the potential to reach participants from a wide geographical area. All participants were former students in the teacher education program, but many had transitioned to new locations in order to seek out teaching opportunities. Participants were given the choice to take part in an in-person focus group that was conducted on the university's campus or online through a chat software. Five participants chose to partake in the online focus group; the researchers conducted two separate online focus groups to accommodate participants' schedules.

All participants were reminded of the goals of the focus group — to garner an understanding of their experiences using a circling approach in a teacher education context. Although the course instructor (second author) was present during the focus group (in a note-taking role), all participants expressed their comfort to discuss the course in the presence of their former course instructor. The focus group was conducted 9 months following the completion of the course, and all participants had successfully graduated from the university and had received their certification to teach in Ontario.

### ***Data analysis***

Grounded in a social constructivist framework, this study utilized thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis emphasizes identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns found in the data. To begin the data analysis process, the first two authors transcribed the in-person focus group discussions and exported the textual data from the online focus groups into a word document. To become familiar with the data, the first two authors read



and discussed their general perceptions of the data and then set out a process for coding the data. They conducted the preliminary coding procedures independently and then came together to discuss the initial codes. These authors used In vivo codes throughout the initial coding process to give precedence to participants' own language and meanings. After a series of meetings, the first two authors formed categories from grouping codes that seemed to represent similar phenomena. General categories identified during this phase were: descriptions of circling, challenges / barriers to circling, and impacts of circling. Following this, the first and second author engaged in cross-category analysis to identify similarities amongst the categories and subsuming codes. Based on these discussions and resulting interpretations, the first two authors then developed three core themes that represented these blended categories. The third author served as an auditor in the analytic process. He reviewed the final themes and supporting data and provided feedback, which was incorporated into the final results presented below.

## RESULTS

Throughout the focus groups, the participants reported many positive experiences with circling in their teacher education course. The words community, trust, empathy, learning, and relationships characterized many of their discussions and helped to formulate the three core themes: circling creates safe and engaging spaces for learning, productive tensions create opportunities for connection, and, teachers create effective circles with authenticity. Each will now be considered in turn.

### *Circling creates safe and engaging spaces for learning*

The former teacher candidates described the circling approach as an effective tool to facilitate professional, social-emotional, and experiential learning. Many students reported that they were better able to learn the course content, including their roles and responsibilities as teachers, through the circling approach. This professional learning was fulfilled due to the attentiveness and engagement that the circling experience fostered. One student commented on how the physicality of the circle impacted her learning: "The set-up of the class – sitting in circles with nothing around us...no distractions – allowed me to be fully attentive to my surroundings and the conversations around me." Another student reported that the circle enhanced his learning because he "was more alert and willing to participate in the classroom and I gave it my 100% because I was actively, as opposed to passively, involved." When reflecting on the conditions that promote learning, one student argued that circling was a "welcome approach" as opposed to the more traditional teaching methods that are often used in a university setting: "I don't think that people can learn effectively sitting alone in a four-hundred seat auditorium." This paradox of "sitting alone" amongst "four hundred people" was a particularly powerful

assertion of the isolation that may be felt in traditional classrooms, despite being surrounded by many learners.

The teacher candidates also reported that their feelings of comfort promoted their professional learning. One commented on the ease by which she learned the course content: "It felt easy to learn and to remember the important aspects to take away from the class." Another suggested that the circling encourages one to "open yourself up a bit" and that this "enhances learning because you are more comfortable." He went on to argue that "the more comfortable you feel in the class, the less likely you are to feel like you made a mistake." This comment provides some indication that the circling approach promoted a safe space for learning.

The most frequently cited learning that resulted from the circling approach tapped into teacher candidates' social-emotional competencies. The participants articulated how the circle approach provided a space for teacher candidates to discuss social-emotional issues and experiences. One student argued that circling gave them the opportunity to

share each other's stories and thoughts and experiences...it really helps to understand and gain compassion for others – and that's something that you can bring not only into your teaching practice but also just into your day to day interactions with your friends and family.

Another student reported that "circling allowed me to trust complete strangers; I shared personal information about my teaching with people I barely knew." Some students articulated the specific social-emotional skills that were enhanced as a result of the circling approach. For example, statements such as, "it [circling] made me conscious of my choice of words and how they might be interpreted or the impact they have on other people in the room," "it made us aware of our own needs and the needs of our classmates," and "it definitely made me think about my relationships with my own students and my colleagues. It made me more aware of the challenges that people are facing and how everyone deals with them" collectively describe how the circling approach prompts reflection on social-emotional issues. This reflection, precipitated by circling, assisted participants to "see the depths of what they already know or feel, or to learn and become aware of patterns in your actions." Throughout the focus groups, the participants cited many social-emotional benefits of circling, such as "promoting empathy," "building confidence," "supporting others," "helping to manage or overcome stress," and "fostering positive classroom relationships," further indicating the potentially powerful outcomes of circling in this teacher education course.

In addition to the professional and social-emotional learning opportunities that the circling afforded students in the class, the focus group participants also acknowledged experiential learning as an important aspect to circling. Specifically, they argued that practicing the circling approach provided a

foundation of experience that they could then bring to their own classrooms. For example, one student reported, “on paper, if I were to read about this approach, I would like the sound of it, but wouldn’t feel comfortable doing it because I don’t fully know or understand the strengths and weaknesses of it.” Another student echoed this sentiment: “It’s just such a new idea that had I not experienced it first hand, I would have likely felt uncomfortable with the idea that I could pull it off on my own.” Many of the students believed that there needed to be a connection between what they were talking about as a class (e.g., the importance of inclusive and safe learning environments) and the pedagogical approaches used to facilitate this learning. They felt that the circling approach allowed them to “practice what they preach.” One student expressed this in his statement: “To me, that was one of the neatest things about circling — that we were actually practicing the idea and not just talking about it.”

### *Productive tensions create opportunities for connection*

While all of the interviewed students reported on the benefits of circling in terms of their learning, the process of circling was not without its discomforts. The participants described the various tensions that existed, both as a result of the circling process itself and what the circling pedagogy represented. These descriptions have been conceptualized as relational and institutional tensions. Relational tensions describe the discomfort felt by participants as they grappled with their feelings of vulnerability versus control, specifically in how they related to others and to themselves. For example, one student reported that these feelings of vulnerability were particularly pronounced at the beginning of the course:

I just remember the first time that I walked in. I think a lot of us had this impression — it was that everything was pushed to the outside wall, and you walked in and it was a big circle and you were like, “oh no! It’s a bloody circle!” I can’t hide behind my desk, right? I know I’m going to have to talk to people I don’t know.

Other participants argued that the circling made them “lower their walls and barriers to others” and that they were “nervous because it can make you feel vulnerable...I just feel more comfortable behind desks.”

Another common thread of discussions concerned the aspect of listening. In any circle, participants are encouraged to listen to members of the circle, rather than devoting more time and energy to developing their responses. One student in the focus group described this important component to circling:

When you are listening, just listen, and feel that, believe that you’ll speak from the heart so you don’t have to rehearse it ahead of time. One of the biggest impediments to communication is when you are thinking about something rather than listening.

He went on to say that, “I think this was a big strength and weakness of it [circling], because it’s a big challenge to get people to recognize the importance of that.” These comments suggest that the process of struggling through the tensions that are precipitated by the circling approach can be a valuable learning experience.

A common line of discussion throughout the focus groups centered on how circling represented a departure from the “status quo” of teaching that currently dominates in traditional schooling. The participants felt that circling prompted institutional tensions: they argued that the goals, structure, and processes of circling do not align with our current conceptualizations of teaching and learning in our current school contexts. For example, one student reported on how the characteristics of circling can be viewed as both strengths and weaknesses. While one student reported, “looking forward to our class more so than other classes because it did not fit the mold,” he also cited that “some students are used to the status quo, so it could be difficult to overcome their feelings of uncertainty.” Another participant argued that she was initially uncomfortable with circling because “we are used to desks, usually in rows. This is something that we grew up with.” Many students also suggested how difficult it would be to implement circling in their own classrooms, given our education system’s preoccupation with testing and standardized curriculums. One student cited that a weakness of circling might be that “some people will feel that they are not learning unless they have notes on a piece of paper, to quantify everything that happens in class.” Another student discussed her professional reputation: “What I would be more concerned about as a new teacher is the impression of other staff members. It’s something that is seen as progressive. As a new teacher you want to fit in and land your job. And especially at the intermediate / senior level, we are always preparing our students for university. And if you don’t see university as a place where circling can happen, implementing that might be difficult.” These discussions highlighted how the circling approach can help to “break the cycle of how we’ve been taught” while concurrently pointing to the institutional strains that are often felt by practicing teachers.

### *Teachers create effective circles with authenticity*

Throughout the interviews, the teacher-candidate participants believed that circling requires authenticity in order to be maximally effective. They described authenticity in terms of genuineness and consistency on the part of the instructor and the approach itself. In terms of genuineness, the students spoke about the invaluable role of the instructor’s enthusiasm when implementing the circling approach. For example, one student reported: “if the instructor is extremely passionate and genuine about it [circling] and does not give up on the concept, it can certainly succeed at any level of education.” Another student spoke of the authenticity of circling in classrooms: “How do we integrate this into people’s lives that has meaning, a deep meaning, a lasting impression?

We gotta live it, it has to be actually lived.” The participants argued that this all starts with the instructor’s genuine approach to implementation and an ongoing commitment to the process. One participant reported,

I definitely see myself implementing it, particularly in the early part of the semester when building relationships is really important to set the tone for the rest of the semester, and then to keep using it throughout the year to send a message that relationships are important in my classroom.

Many of the participants echoed the importance of consistency, both within one classroom and across classrooms. For example, one participant cited that he thinks circling could become more effective “if there were colleagues that were doing it, that might be a different story. If there were people I could talk to about it and they were already on board about the idea...the idea could spread.” One student described the importance of a school-community buy-in for implementing circling:

So even if you have one class, the moment that you unplug from the class and go to the next one, it’s hypocrisy in the students’ mind because they don’t believe it, because other people don’t support it. If there is no community buy-in then it is meaningless.

Here the student is suggesting that in order for circles to be as maximally effective, they must be met with authenticity, delineated particularly by consistency. In his perspective, “consistency” did not necessarily imply that each classroom teacher must employ circling to be effective, but rather that a circling pedagogy in one classroom should parallel the philosophies of circling (e.g., student centered learning, sense of community, etc.) in other classrooms throughout the school.

## DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the three focus groups describe teacher candidates’ experiences using a circling approach within a teacher education course. These themes collectively point to the participants’ reflections as members of the circle during the course and to their considerations of circling as a pedagogical tool within the wider school system and their future classrooms. While there has been little published on teachers’ or teacher candidates’ experiences using circling approaches, there is ample research to support the importance of the three themes that emerged in this study.

Professional learning was a key outcome of circling, as interpreted by the teacher participants. We envisioned professional learning as the development of the knowledge and skills for teachers to become maximally effective in their work. The circling approach provided opportunities for teacher candidates to learn substantive knowledge about teaching and learning (for example, the role of mental health to student learning) and space to connect this understanding to their teaching practices. Circles are communities that offer the

right conditions for powerful professional and personal learning experiences, specifically by providing emotionally safe and intellectually engaging spaces to explore new ideas and practices. There has been less consideration of the specific pedagogical approaches, employed by teacher-educators in teacher education classrooms, in the service of promoting the kind of safe and generative learning context a circle provides teacher candidates as they progress in their professional learning. In this regard, we argue that teacher-educators should not only disseminate current knowledge on the circle practices in elementary or secondary classrooms, but should model these practices themselves in the service of developing their teaching. This suggestion is also reflected in the participants' discussions of circling as experiential learning. Based on the results from this work, the circling approach could be a promising practice that could serve to both introduce teacher candidates to substantive topics and to promote a classroom community that is conducive to professional learning.

Because circling approaches are often used as a strategy to encourage members of the circle to reflect on social or emotional issues, we were not surprised to find that social-emotional learning was a significant outcome of circling, as articulated by our participants. This association between circling and social-emotional learning has been substantiated across numerous studies (e.g., Cefai et al., 2014; Hennessey, 2007), though these largely link circling and the development of social-emotional competencies in children and adolescents. Research depicting the ways through which *teachers* develop their own competencies is relatively scarce, despite numerous reports demonstrating that students' social-emotional learning is heightened when teachers are mindful of their emotions and their relationships in the classroom. For instance, some reports have revealed the link between teachers' own social-emotional competencies and the effective implementation of social-emotional learning programming in schools (Brown, et al., 2010). Another study argued that teachers' social-emotional competencies influence the quality of teacher-student relationships (Jones et al., 2013). For example, when teachers are skilled at regulating their emotions, treat students warmly (even when students behave in challenging ways), and display positive affect towards students and colleagues, students are more likely to be engaged in school and report more positive relationships with teachers. These findings suggest that tapping into teachers' social emotional competencies could be a promising avenue for promoting students' social-emotional learning. This highlights the need for teacher development, such as in pre-service teacher education, to include curricula or programming that ask teachers to reflect on their relationships and their emotional experiences within the classroom. We argue that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) five social and emotional core learning competencies (emotional self-awareness, social-awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship management) should be given consideration as important components to teacher candidates' professional learning. These core competen-

cies have been promoted as essential learning for students' social-emotional growth, but we argue that they are equally essential for educators for growth and wellbeing throughout their teaching careers.

The teacher candidates' discussions of tensions and authenticity align with American psychologist Carl Rogers' (1986) compelling work on person-centered approaches to teaching and learning. His initial examination of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change, which he identified as unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence (or authenticity), point to the core conditions that a therapist should embody to help to liberate the client to move toward a fully functioning state. In his later work, Rogers' argued that these conditions are also important for teaching relationships and are fundamental to supporting learners move towards their own self-actualization and fulfillment. Most pertinent to this study, authenticity describes the genuineness and consistency of the teacher (or facilitator) from the perspective of the learner (circle participant). The participants from this study cited how the instructor's enthusiasm for the circling approach was genuine and that she was consistent about her vision of a student-centered class from the outset.

Authenticity has been variously defined across both philosophical and empirical works and has also been conceptualized within different areas of professional practice, including teacher education (Bialystok, 2016; Kreber, 2010). Kreber and Klampfleitner's (2013) work identified the idea that university lecturers and students attach a positive value to authenticity in teaching, specifically distinguishing the factors that comprise authenticity: genuineness, consistency between values and actions, and care for subjects and students. Rabin (2013) also found authenticity to be a core dimension of cultivating positive teacher-student relationships, citing authenticity to be a precursor to demonstrating an ethic of care in the classroom. Our findings support these observations, as our student participants also noted the importance of genuineness and consistency in effective teaching, particularly in the success of the circling approach. Taken together with Rogers' person-centred approach to teaching and learning and extant literature on authenticity, our work highlights the notion that students are perceptive to the sincerity and enthusiasm of their teachers, and that these qualities can impact the successful implementation of pedagogical practices suited to promote classroom communities.

## CONCLUSION

This study reports on a small number of teacher candidates' perceptions and experiences using a circling approach in one teacher education course. As such, readers should be cautious to generalize the findings across multiple contexts. The results do, however, point to many influential concepts that should be taken up by future examinations of the circling approach, particularly in teacher education learning environments. Secondly, although attempts were made to

safeguard participants by reminding them that their comments would have no bearing on their relationship to their former course instructor, some participants may have chosen to reflect more positively on the course because the course instructor was present in the focus groups. All participants were encouraged to report their negative experiences, and while many certainly did, it is still possible that participants discussed what was socially desirable. Despite these limitations, the results from this study contribute important insight to teacher candidates' circling experiences.

Moving forward, we hope that this study provokes teacher-educators to reflect on their pedagogical approaches, and, similarly, to consider the value of circling to foster supportive classroom communities that stimulate teacher candidates' learning. Based on the results from this work, we recommend that teacher-educators incorporate circling approaches within their teaching practices in an effort to promote professional, social-emotional and experiential learning, to encourage teacher candidates to confront tensions in order to foster openness and lower psychological barriers to learning, and to give attention to authenticity in teaching relationships. There are many resources that teacher-educators can consult to learn more about circling practices (e.g., Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Costello, Wachel, & Wachel, 2010; Riestenberg, 2012). A variety of programs (i.e., TRIBES) and organizations (International Institute for Restorative Practices) also offer training on the circling approach and community-building strategies. As was pertinent to this research, we also recommend that teacher-educators reflect on and discuss their pedagogical choices with colleagues.

Although circling approaches carry specific, albeit flexible, guidelines for implementation, we argue that many of the principles that ground circling could also shape teacher-educators' general teaching practices, such as through student-centred approaches that prioritize introspection and the development of empathetic, supportive relationships. Just as we have recommended that teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their social-emotional abilities, teacher-educators should also take the time to consider their own emotions and relationships and how these important competencies shape their teaching practices and teacher candidates' learning. Our work points to the need to attend to the development of supportive learning communities across multiple educative contexts – from teacher education programs to elementary and secondary schools. We contend that these efforts must continue to be examined to inform a robust, research-driven conversation on best practices for developing a shared sense of community amongst learners, and, particularly in this case, for teacher candidates.



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