Using the Circle of Friends Approach to Include Students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and complex needs

What is a Circle of Friends?

Circle of Friends, sometimes known as Circle of Support, is a powerful tool for inclusion which was originally developed by Forest (et al, 1993) in North America. The values that underpin the Circle of Friends approach are, 'full inclusion for all; the belief that there is not social justice until each belongs and has an equal place in our schools and communities,' (Newton and Wilson, 1999, p.5). The Circle of Friends approach works by developing a support network around individuals in the school community who are experiencing social difficulties often due to a specific disability, difference or behaviour. Volunteers from the peer group meet regularly with the target pupil therefore ensuring that relationships are built around him/her. The group also problem solves with the target pupil in order to address any social difficulties that he/she may be experiencing in school. This approach has been used to great effect in many schools in order to ensure the inclusion of individual pupils.

The approach can be used to develop a sense of community in the class and the school. It is an important tool for enhancing the social cohesion of pupils and for ensuring that a class gels. It can be used for ensuring pupils experience a smooth transition from primary to high school or from other points of transition. At points of transition pupils need to find their own feet but some also need a supporting hand which the programme can provide.

Main Aims of the Approach

The main aims of the approach are:

- To increase the level of acceptance and inclusion of pupils who are currently deemed to be excluded from the peer group
- To harness and further develop the skills of pupils who are already considered to be highly skilled in terms of providing friendship and support to others
- To encourage staff to reflect upon their own views and practices in order to develop more inclusive approaches, resources and policies
- To impact positively upon whole school structures and systems via encouraging a review by the whole school community as to how these can be made more inclusive
- To promote a cultured ethos of social support which encourages all staff and pupils to utilise and develop their own skills in terms of valuing and supporting others
- To encourage the continued and on-going use of 'support teams' in order to ensure the inclusion of all pupils in the school context
- To further develop the social and emotional skills of those pupils identified as members of the group, for example, the ability to listen, to reflect, to evaluate, to empathise, to problem solve, to understand, identify and cope effectively with feelings (of self and others)

'SEBD' and Social Isolation

It is important to emphasise the fact that emotional and behavioural difficulties go hand in hand with social isolation. These students have difficulty being accepted by peers because of their behaviour and behave inappropriately because they feel hurt and angry at being friendless.

The 'Circle of Friends' process attempts to help students to make a link between feelings and behaviour. Forest & Pearpoint (1992) refer to members of the circles as 'potential friends'. If the process helps to turn these into real friends and enhances the student's overall sense of self-worth as an individual then it could also be a life changing experience.

How it Works

Once the vulnerable student who is evidently in need of peer support has been identified, the teacher/facilitator can arrange to conduct the introductory session with the whole class/form group (in the absence of the target student). The 'key' activity undertaken is to complete a Relationship Circles Activity. This involves students in thinking about the people in their lives, family, friends and acquaintances and writing their names in a series of concentric circles. Instructions might be as follows:

1. Put the name of those you are closest to in circle 1, usually your family, sometimes described as people you live with or people you like to hug (people who love you most).
2. Your very best friends in circle 2 but not quite as close as circle 1.
3. Your wider friends in circle 3, maybe people in groups, scouts or a team.
4. Place those who are paid to help you in circle 4, these include people like doctors and teachers.

The Circle Diagram
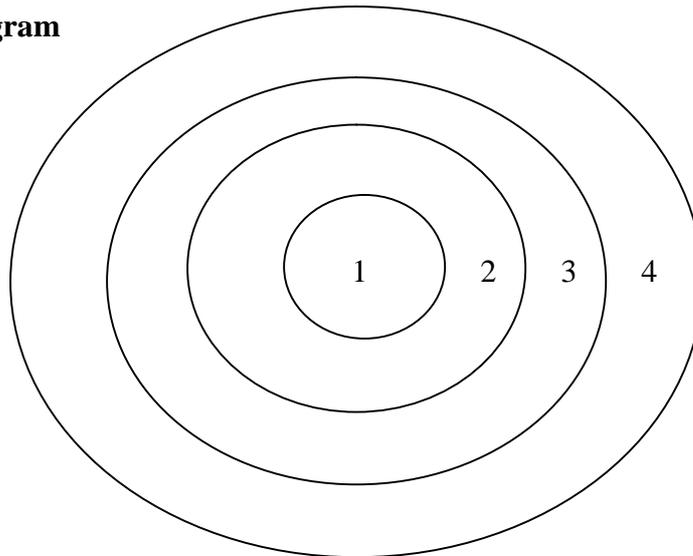
Students are then encouraged to consider the target student and the fact that he/she is absent from the room. They are asked to think about his/her problems and possible lack of friends due to these difficulties and consider what this student does that causes problems to them. Then ideas can be recorded prior to students explaining their circle diagram to others and to specifically consider how they would feel if they had no one to place in circles 2 and 3. Feelings are recorded and the students are then asked to consider how the target student might be feeling and whether or not they may be able to help in supporting the student in forming a Circle of Friends. Volunteers are then requested and a small group (6-8) is chosen by the facilitator/teacher to undertake this intervention. The facilitator then meets with the target student to explain that the group has been formed and that they will be supporting him/her in the following 6-8 weeks in order to further facilitate and ensure their inclusion.

The Meetings

The first meeting is arranged for the following week in order to give those involved thinking time. At the first meeting the rules of the circle are decided, confidentiality is again emphasised, as well as the times set. The group decide upon a name but this should not involved the name of the focus student, as the aim is clearly to try to help the student become part of the circumference of the circle not the centre point, Mackan & Cormier (1992). The kind of rules set are often similar to circle time e.g. one person speaking at a time, everyone listens to each speaker and only constructive comments are allowed (although students may have to talk honestly about the behaviour of others, it must be done in a kind and positive way, often described as 'no put downs'). The students are assured that everything will take place in school time and they are not to worry about problems brought up in the circle at home. During circle meetings the group talk with the target student about the good things they've seen him/her do that week. The student can then talk about any troubles he/she is having and how the group can give support, helping him/her to deal with difficult times in a more positive way. The group is encouraged to be honest, supportive and understanding. The development of empathy is clearly central here.

Key questions for the sessions might be posed as follows:

- What has gone well for the student this week?
- What have we, as his/her Circle of Friends observed?

- What hasn't gone quite so well?
- How can we help to change this?
- Does the student feel this is an accurate picture?
- What would he/she like support with?
- What strategies can we use?
- How will we measure our success and when will we do this i.e. set the date!

A Success Story

When the teacher/facilitator effectively supports the Circle of Friends participants in delivering the intervention, positive outcomes are generally guaranteed. The target student will hopefully have gained in three key areas and be more able to:

- Effectively manage his/her behaviour in school
- Built positive relationships with peers
- Improved his/her self-concept and self-esteem

The Circle of Friends group will also clearly have benefitted in terms of developing their own pro-social skills, empathy, ability to analyse others' behaviour and increased their awareness of the value and importance of including others in positive and meaningful relationships. As adults, we should never underestimate the latter.

As Newton and Wilson (1996) explain, 'we have underestimated the therapeutic power of acceptance and overemphasised the negative influence of the peer group. The reality is that there are enormous benefits to all if the strengths of the natural peer group can be realised to support the vulnerable individual.' P.9.

Useful References and Resources

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MacConville, R., & Rae, T. (2006) *Teaching Peer Support for Caring and Cooperation Talk Time A Six Step Method* London: Paul Chapman Publishing

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Resnick, L. B. (1987) *Education and Learning to Think* Washington: National Academy Press

Rhodes, J., & Ajmal, Y. (1995) *Solution Focused Thinking in Schools* London: B.T. Press

Shaw, L. (1990) *Each Belongs – Integrated Education in Canada* Bristol: The Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education

Tyrrell, J. (2002) *Peer Mediation* London: Souvenir Press

Activity
How do you currently develop social skills and friendship skills in your context?
Could this Circle of Friends approach be adapted for use in your context?
How do you promote a sense of belonging and social support in your context?