BUILDING BELONGING: THE POWER OF CIRCLES IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION
Poll Question

Do you use circles in your classroom?
Times of Crisis

Translates into urgent need to support teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

- Pandemic
- Learning loss
- Mental health surge
- School shootings
- Climate crisis
- Economic uncertainty
- Authoritarianism and racism
- War in Europe and Middle East
“Go upstream”

Need a positive frame
The Clover Model

- Assertiveness
- Belonging
- Reflection
- Active Engagement
A Developmental Process Theory

Pre-School
Ages 0-5

Elementary School
Ages 6-10

Early Adolescence
Ages 11-15

Late Adolescence
Ages 16+
Connect & Thrive!

STORY-POWERED CIRCLES
Focus:
Belonging & Reflection

**Belonging** is about developing strong relationships, group acceptance and group identity. Humans are social, and group belonging is *essential for well-being*.

**Reflection** describes the human need to create and make meaning. It involves making sense of one’s own experiences, emotions and thoughts to create a *sense of personal identity*. 
Check-in: Mood Meter

Which color are you today?
Let's review our group agreements!
1. Can someone summarize for the group what happened last session?

2. What are some things that you feel are going well in our circle?

3. Is there anything we want to add or change about our circle?
Group Pledge

We sit in a circle. We all speak up and try hard to listen. We get to know each other and our teacher to understand each other better.

Today’s activity is:

Mandala Designs
Book

the dot
How did Vashti feel about her first dot right after she made it?

Did her thoughts about her dot change after she saw it framed in gold?

What do you think made Vashti brave enough to show all of her work in the art show?

Let’s create and share some of our own work!
Activity:
Mandala Designs

Relationship Building Skills:
Sharing ideas & Vulnerability
A mandala is a kind of art that is shaped like a dot. It is a Hindu or Buddhist symbol of the universe. You can make your own design that looks like a mandala by starting with a circle and adding details.

1. Get a piece of paper and pencil.

2. Follow along with the guide, drawing your mandala design on your paper.

3. After each step, we will share our progress with each other.
Step 1: Circle
Step 2: Bigger circle
Step 3: Two smaller circles
Your mandala doesn’t have to look exactly like the model! Keep going!
Step 4: Petals or ovals to fill in the space
Step 5: Shapes to decorate inside the petals
What are you enjoying? What are you finding difficult?
Step 6: Lines between outer circles and two small middle circles
Step 7: Circles under each petal
Keep sharing your progress!
Step 8: Center petals
Debrief

How did it feel to share your design with the group after each step?

Was it easy or difficult to share the unfinished versions of your design? Why?

How did it feel to see everybody else’s mandalas?

Why is it sometimes difficult or uncomfortable to share things that we have not finished, or don't feel are perfect?

How might it be beneficial to show our imperfections to others?

What are other times when you have had to show imperfections and be vulnerable with others? How did that feel? What did you learn from it?
When you have time, add more details and color your design!
Check-out: Sounds

Make a sound that expresses how you feel now!
“I loved how easy it was to see the visual of the activity and you had written directions. I spent maybe 2 minutes looking this over and still felt prepared. The kids were engaged for the whole time... They were encouraging to each other and they worked together.”
Important Research

- Relationships & belonging
- Mentoring
- Peer dialogue
When We Don’t Belong

- A recent research review, published in *Nature Neuroscience*, suggests that social disconnection may be processed in the brain in the **same way as the threat of physical harm**.
- When toxic stress responses occur continually, or are triggered by multiple sources, it can have a cumulative toll on an individual’s physical & mental health, **for a lifetime**.
Belonging Can Make the Difference

- Feeling socially connected can lead to better health. It is thought to cause the release of stress-reducing neuropeptides such as opioids & oxytocin, which boost the immune system & protect the body from damage due to inflammation.

- Oxytocin signaling also plays a key role in modulating social behavior, evoking contentment, inducing trust, generosity & bonding.

- Research also indicates that supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible, can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress responses.
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