SOFTWARE & TECH

Teaching Restorative Practices With Classroom Circles

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Introduction: Building a Culture of Connection and Accountability

In today's classrooms, educators are increasingly asked to do more than deliver academic content. They must also nurture social-emotional learning, resolve conflicts, and create safe, inclusive environments where every student feels seen and heard. One powerful approach that has gained significant traction is **teaching restorative practices with classroom circles**. This method shifts the focus from punitive discipline to relational accountability, helping students build empathy, communication skills, and a sense of shared responsibility. Rather than asking "What rule was broken and what punishment fits?", restorative circles ask "Who was affected, what needs to be repaired, and how can we move forward together?" This article explores the principles, practical steps, and transformative potential of implementing restorative practices through classroom circles.

What Are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practices are a social science that studies how to build and restore relationships in communities. Originally developed in the criminal justice system as an alternative to retributive justice, restorative practices have been adapted for schools to address misbehavior, conflict, and community building. These practices emphasize repairing harm, giving voice to all parties, and fostering accountability. At their core, they operate on the belief that people are happier, more cooperative, and more likely to make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them.

Restorative practices encompass a continuum of strategies, from informal affective statements ("I feel disappointed when I see trash on the floor because it shows a lack of respect for our shared space") to formal restorative conferences. Classroom circles sit in the middle of this continuum—structured yet flexible enough to be used daily for community building (proactive circles) or reactively to address specific incidents (responsive circles).

Key Principles of Restorative Practices

- Respect for all voices: Every participant has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Focus on harm and needs: The conversation centers on how actions affected people and relationships, not on blame or punishment.
- Accountability through repair: The responsible party is held accountable by actively contributing to making things right.
- Community involvement: The entire classroom community participates in creating solutions, reinforcing shared norms.

Teaching restorative practices with classroom circles helps children internalize these principles from an early age, developing emotional intelligence that serves them throughout life.

What Are Classroom Circles?

A classroom circle is a structured gathering where students and the teacher sit in a circle—physically arranged so everyone can see one another—and engage in guided dialogue. A talking piece (an object passed around) ensures that only the person holding it speaks, while others practice listening. Circles can last anywhere from 10 to 45 minutes depending on the purpose and age group.

There are three main types of classroom circles used when **teaching restorative practices with classroom circles**:

1. Community-building circles: Regular, proactive circles that build trust, belonging, and shared identity. They often begin with a check-in question (e.g., “What is one thing you’re grateful for today?”).
2. Curriculum circles: Circles that integrate academic content with social-emotional learning, such as discussing a character’s choices in a novel or analyzing a historical conflict.
3. Restorative (responsive) circles: Circles convened in response to a specific incident of harm, conflict, or rule-breaking. These follow a more structured protocol to repair relationships and plan restoration.

Benefits of Implementing Classroom Circles

Research shows that schools implementing restorative practices see reductions in office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions—especially among students of color, who are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline. But the benefits go far beyond discipline data.

- Improved classroom climate: Students report feeling safer, more respected, and more willing to take academic risks.
- Enhanced social-emotional skills: Circles teach active listening, empathy, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution.
- Stronger teacher-student relationships: When teachers participate as circle members (not just facilitators), students see them as human and approachable.
- Increased student ownership: Circles give students a voice in shaping classroom norms and solving problems, shifting from compliance to commitment.

Teaching restorative practices with classroom circlesalso equips students with lifelong communication tools. In a world where digital interactions often lack nuance, the ability to sit face-to-face and navigate difficult conversations is invaluable.

How to Teach Restorative Practices With Classroom Circles: A Step-by-Step Guide

Implementing circles effectively requires intentional preparation and consistent practice. Below is a practical roadmap for educators new to this approach.

Step 1: Shift Your Mindset

Before introducing circles, reflect on your own disciplinary philosophy. Restorative practices require a fundamental shift from a “zero tolerance” mindset to one that views misbehavior as a teachable moment. Educators must be willing to share power with students and model vulnerability—admitting when they themselves have caused harm.

Step 2: Create a Safe Physical and Emotional Space

Arrange chairs or desks in a circle without barriers. A talking piece—a small object like a smooth stone, a stuffed animal, or a specially decorated stick—helps regulate turn-taking. Establish clear circle norms together with students: for example, “What is shared in the circle stays in the circle,” “Speak from your own experience,” and “It’s OK to pass.” Post these norms visibly.

Step 3: Start With Proactive Community Circles

Begin with low-risk, fun prompts. Do not wait for a conflict to occur. Daily or weekly community-building circles build the relational trust necessary for deeper work. Sample prompts include:

- “What is your favorite memory from this week?”
- “Share one word that describes how you’re feeling right now.”
- “What is a strength you bring to our classroom community?”

During these circles, the teacher participates as an equal—answering the same questions, passing the talking piece, and listening without judgment.

Step 4: Teach the Circle Process Explicitly

Students need to understand the purpose and expectations. Explain that circles are not punitive but restorative: they help us understand each other and solve problems together. Model the use of “I” statements and demonstrate how to respond when someone shares something difficult. You might use role-play to practice active listening and respectful disagreement.

Step 5: Transition to Responsive Circles

Once your class has experienced several successful community circles, introduce responsive circles for minor conflicts. Use the “restorative questions” framework:

1. To the person who caused harm: “What happened? What were you thinking at the time? Who has been affected? What do you need to do to make things right?”
2. To the person harmed: “What happened? How did it affect you? What do you need to feel safe and respected again?”
3. To the group: “How can we support both parties and prevent this from happening again?”

Facilitate the dialogue with the same circle structure. The goal is not to assign blame but to co-create a plan for restoration—perhaps an apology, a service task, or a change in classroom procedure.

Step 6: Integrate Circles Into Academic Content

Teaching restorative practices with classroom circlesis not a separate subject; it can be woven into literature, social studies, and even science. For example, after reading a chapter about a character’s betrayal, hold a circle asking: “How might the story have changed if the character had used restorative communication?” In history, explore conflicts from multiple perspectives using circle dialogue. In science, discuss ethical implications of experiments. This integration reinforces the idea that restorative values are part of all learning.

Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Implementing classroom circles is not without obstacles. Here are some frequent concerns and practical solutions:

- Student reluctance to share: Start with anonymous or low-stakes prompts. Allow students to pass. Over time, as trust grows, participation deepens.
- Disruptive behavior during circles: Circle norms should include consequences for interrupting or disrespect. If a student is persistently disruptive, a brief private restorative conversation may be needed before including them in the group circle.
- Lack of time: Even 10 minutes twice a week is effective. Prioritize a short community circle over no circle. Many teachers find that time spent on circles is recouped because fewer behavioral issues arise later.
- Teacher discomfort with vulnerability: It can feel risky to share personal experiences. Start with safe topics like “a book that influenced me” and notice how students respond with respect. Remember that modeling authenticity builds connection.
- Pushback from colleagues or administration: Share research and data showing reduced disciplinary referrals. Invite administrators to observe a circle. Offer to lead a professional development session on the benefits of teaching restorative practices with classroom circles.

Practical Tips for Sustainable Implementation

1. Co-create norms annually: At the beginning of the school year, work with students to develop the circle agreements. This builds buy-in and ownership.
2. Vary the talking piece: Let students bring in objects from home to use as the talking piece. This adds novelty and personal relevance.
3. Use a circle keeper or co-facilitator: In older grades, train students to facilitate circles. This builds leadership skills and frees the teacher to participate fully.
4. Reflect and refine: After each circle, ask for feedback: “What worked well? What could be better?” Adjust accordingly.
5. Celebrate successes: When a circle resolves a conflict effectively, acknowledge that effort publicly. Positive reinforcement encourages continued use of restorative skills.

Conclusion: Circles as a Foundation for Lifelong Learning

Teaching restorative practices with classroom circlesis not a quick fix or a prepackaged program—it is a cultural shift that requires patience, practice, and commitment. Yet the rewards are profound. Classrooms become places where mistakes are opportunities for growth, where every voice matters, and where relationships are prioritized over rules. Students learn that they are part of a community that cares about them, and that their actions have consequences—not just punishments, but opportunities to repair and reconnect. As educators, we have the privilege and responsibility to create environments where students feel safe enough to be vulnerable, brave enough to be accountable, and empowered enough to lead. Classroom circles offer a simple, powerful structure for exactly that kind of transformation. By weaving restorative practices into the daily fabric of teaching, we prepare students not only for tests but for life—equipped with empathy, communication skills, and the understanding that we are all in this together.

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