

BOOK REVIEW

Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis, *Circle forward: building a restorative school community* (2 ed.), St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2020, 528 pp., ISBN 978-1-937-14119-6 (pbk)

In *Circle forward*, Boyes-Watson and Pranis provide a very comprehensive look at the basics and foundations of circles and their importance in the use of restorative practices. For those just learning how circles can help schools create stronger communities, six groups of theories are provided to assist in supporting the reader with theoretical pillars on which the remaining sections of the book can stand. This all-inclusive book, just over 500 pages, describes the way in which circles came to be and why they can be so effective. There are over 100 examples of circles, categorised by different modules, that come together to create a uniquely comprehensive authority on the circle process. This manual is not written to be a curriculum to follow but rather a guide for educators to bring the circle process to students at all grade levels.

The authors support the reader with an abundance of background information that is based on having minimal understanding of the circle process and other components of restorative practices. Included in this introductory material are quotes and short stories which underscore some of the reasons practitioners choose to do circles and what the benefits are in a school setting. These excerpts serve as talking points on their own and are encouraged to be used as such by the authors.

Boyes-Watson and Pranis extend the base of knowledge by explaining how circles work, where they came from, and why planning is such an important role in developing an effective circle. One of the strengths of this book is the way in which the authors explain how to introduce the circle process to staff so that they are thoroughly familiar with the setting, preparation and implementation process. There are examples of several different approaches which aim to assist staff members with practical applications to serve as examples. Teachers are shown how to develop a system so that there is consistency in the classroom whenever the circle process is called upon.

There are two areas of this manual that merit particular attention. The first is the plethora of proactive, reactive and multi-process circle examples that are well-organised and easy to deliver in any primary or secondary school. From norm-setting circles to circles that can be used with co-curricular groups, the authors provide purpose, materials and preparation steps to maximise the circles' effectiveness. Teachers looking for a resource that they could utilise daily for a variety of topics and situations will find all they need here.

What sets this book apart is the targeted circles that are designed to address challenging societal topics, including those related to diversity, equity and inclusion. The authors place these examples after the more simplistic ones so that practitioners become more comfortable delivering the process as the topics become more challenging. Most of these more complex circles involve processing emotions

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and exploring societal norms, along with addressing behaviours and stereotypes. These topics are crucial to discuss, so it is beneficial that Boyes-Watson and Pranis provide multiple examples that vary in sophistication and depth. Perhaps just as importantly, there are examples for faculty and staff to explore so that the discussions surrounding these critical issues can be ongoing and can permeate the school environment.

The authors assist the reader by providing guidance in areas where both teachers and students sometimes find it difficult to engage in challenging conversations. This resource guide establishes the necessary foundations that are needed to develop and sustain strong peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships.

As with most use of restorative practices in educational settings, there are going to be times in which the best preparation, the best dialogue, and the best discussions still bring about harm and the need for repair. Another strength of this guide is the detailed explanation of how to approach these situations. Teacher response samples are provided so that staff have appropriate wording to use to differentiate between traditional discipline and restorative discipline. There is no minimising of any type of behaviour; instead, the authors give a framework of how to process with both those who have been harmed and those who have committed harm.

Module 14, a section dedicated to moving toward racial equity, differs from all other modules as it specifically includes voices beyond the two authors. Boyes-Watson and Pranis sought the wisdom and experiences of those from different races, socioeconomic status, and daily life experiences. The authors acknowledge that their way of seeing the world is limited by unconscious bias and the exercise of white privilege in their daily life. By widening the circle of association with those outside their own, Boyes-Watson and Pranis highlight perspectives that they themselves cannot convey. This facilitates an even deeper awareness of racial injustice and the conclusion that racial awareness must be made a priority in our everyday conversations with students. There are multiple excerpts from other books included here which call out the problem of inherited whiteness and its long-standing harm to people of colour. What makes *Circle forward* unique are the activities which are designed to initiate discomfort, but in a way that opens dialogue and allows the lifting of the heavy air that surrounds racial equity work. This module, with the additional reflections of those who continue to tirelessly work for racial equity, is instrumental in supporting some of the most challenging work keepers will ever do with their students.

The guide closes with five appendices which provide additional validation for the process of building a positive school climate. There are prompting questions for deepening discussions, openings and closings to provide a springboard for conversations, a theoretical essay on the underpinnings of why circles are essential, and multiple websites, books and articles to further corroborate this component of restorative justice work.

Circle forward is an exceptional source for both beginners and novices when looking for a variety of topics to discuss with students. The authors are intentional in composing each module so that adults understand that the purpose of the circles

and the methods described are to provide emotionally safe opportunities for children to grow and learn more about themselves and others in their environment. This process is meant to be progressively challenging and recommended to be done sequentially to build trust and respect before taking on some of the more difficult conversations. The contributing voices add to Boyes-Watson and Pranis's expertise to make this a most worthy addition to any restorative practitioner's desk.

*Michael G. DeAntonio**

* Michael G. DeAntonio is the Executive Director at Buxmont Academy, USA, and a Lecturer at the International Institute for Restorative Practices.
Corresponding author: Michael G. DeAntonio at mdeantonio@csfbuxmont.org.