

Australian Government Department of Education
Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Taskforce
20 June 2025

Dear Secretary

Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Family Advocacy welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review.

We are a not for profit disability advocacy organisation that works across New South Wales (NSW) to advance and protect the rights and interests of people with developmental disability. We have been providing individual and systemic advocacy for 34 years. We regularly field advocacy enquiries from families for, and on behalf of, children and young people with disability in a broad range of areas that cover the whole of life, but particularly in education and this includes bullying.

Family Advocacy is also a member of the [Australian Coalition on Inclusive Education](#), a national coalition of 26 organisations working together to advance inclusive education. Due to the breadth and depth of our experience in the education area at the individual advocacy and systems levels, we believe we are in a good position to provide valuable feedback.

Questions for students, young people and families

1. If you or a family member experienced bullying in school, were you aware of the supports available from the school to help you or your family member?

Families and young people with disability are not adequately informed about the supports available in schools. Often, parents find out about support options only after significant harm has occurred, and in some cases, only after external complaints have been made.

There is a clear lack of transparency and consistency in how schools communicate anti-bullying procedures, especially as they relate to students with disability. Information is often not accessible, not culturally appropriate, or not tailored to the needs of children with communication or cognitive impairments.

a. If you reported the bullying to the school, what actions did they take in response?

From the perspective of families supported by Family Advocacy, the responses from schools are highly variable. Some families report being ignored, dismissed, or even blamed, while others experience tokenistic actions that do not address the underlying systemic or cultural issues.

In many cases, schools rely on generic disciplinary approaches that do not account for the power dynamics and ableism underlying bullying of students with disability. One example is where a bully pressured a young person with disability to hide a vape in his bag for him. The young person with disability, who had lesser street smarts thought the bully would stop being mean and be his friend if he complied. The vape was found and the young person was suspended.

There are also reports of schools responding by isolating or excluding the student with disability (e.g. reduced hours, suspensions) rather than supporting them and addressing the behaviour of the perpetrators.

b. Did you feel the response from the school helped? If not, how could this have been improved?

The general consensus is that responses from schools frequently do not help, and in some instances, exacerbate the trauma experienced by the child or young person with disability. One parent was deeply concerned with the resolution approach in primary school, where the victim is forced to face the bully even if they are afraid of them to spend time with a person they know does not like them and is mean to them. The impact of the bullying is minimised as the bully has the opportunity for an act of contrition (whether genuine or otherwise) and the victim is forced to sit face to face with the bully and encouraged to forgive/accept the bullying as if it never happened.

Improvements recommended include having a rights-based, trauma-informed approach to bullying that recognises the additional vulnerability of students with disability; mandatory training for all school staff on disability rights, inclusive education, and recognising/responding to ableist bullying; greater involvement of students with disability and their families in planning and decision-making around school safety and inclusion.

c. Do you have any other suggestions on how all schools can better prevent and address bullying that could relate to a national standard?

Multiple State inquiries and the Disability Royal Commission have made recommendations to address this:

Embed Inclusion in Culture:

A known safeguard to prevent bullying is making inclusion of students with disability everywhere the norm, where school is a place where difference is respected. A central theme across the Disability Royal Commission's recommendations is that schools must embed inclusive education, ensuring students with disability learn alongside their peers and have access to supportive environments that proactively prevent exclusion and bullying. An initial step for a national strategy to guide the implementation of inclusive education practices across Australia is the development of a **National Roadmap to Inclusive Education** as per Recommendation 7.13.

We refer the Taskforce to [Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education's Roadmap](#), that sets out clear goals and guidance for stakeholders, based on six pillars under which short, medium and long term outcomes are identified, as well as key levers that need to be activated to achieve inclusive education in Australia. We would like to inform you that this Roadmap was written in 2019 and is in the final stages of receiving refreshment and an update and can forward this upon completion.

Build Capability:

Ensuring the whole school community including educators are equipped to identify and challenge bullying. Across multiple recommendation volumes in the Disability Royal Commission, there was a push for all school staff and associated professionals (e.g., Auslan interpreters) to receive ongoing training in disability awareness, ableism, the human rights model of disability, how to support students with diverse needs, cultural safety and LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices to effectively address bullying of diverse students with disability. See Recommendation 7.11. Schools should be required to make reasonable adjustments to both their responses and preventative strategies for students with disability.

Ensure Independent Oversight and Integrity:

Requiring an independent oversight body to monitor how well schools are meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and intervene when they fail to do so. The current system, where schools investigate themselves, can lead to a lack of accountability and further harm to students and families. The Commission called for robust safeguarding mechanisms in education—such as independent complaint pathways, oversight bodies, and transparent reporting systems—designed to protect students with disability from violence, neglect, and bullying. See Recommendation 7.8.

Enable Adequate Data Collection and Publishing:

Setting expectations for collecting and publishing data on bullying. Recommendations emphasise the need for systematic data collection and reporting on incidents involving students with disability, disaggregated by disability type, setting, and outcome, including bullying, suspension and exclusion

consequences. This supports evidence-based policy and accountability. See Recommendation 7.10.

Provide Tools and Resources:

Incorporating proven toolkits like “*Working Together: A toolkit for effective school-based action against bullying*,” which guides the implementation of whole-school, proactive programs in schools supporting students with disability into national guidance.

Family Advocacy and Student advocacy and support:

Building the capacity of families to have strong family advocacy, and support systems to help navigate the education system and advocate for their child’s needs. This is critical given the mental health impacts of bullying.

Include Student Voice: Ensuring that any national standard includes student voice, particularly the voices of children and young people with disability, in the development and evaluation of school policies.

Implement a structured, evidence-informed tiered support framework

From Family Advocacy’s perspective, the **implementation of a structured, evidence-informed tiered support framework—such as a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)**—offers considerable potential in addressing the complex, systemic drivers of bullying that disproportionately affect students with disability (and other marginalised cohorts). However, for such a framework to be truly effective, it must be explicitly grounded in a commitment to inclusive education, not merely as a strategy for managing behaviour but as a vehicle for meaningful belonging, participation, and equity within the school environment.

Critically, MTSS must directly confront and respond to disability-based bullying, which often stems from ableist assumptions and exclusionary practices embedded in school culture and policy. The model’s tiered structure allows for proactive, layered responses: Tier 1 focuses on universal, school-wide approaches that promote inclusive values, foster positive peer relationships, and build social-emotional capacity across all students and staff. These foundational strategies are essential in shifting the culture of schools towards one that celebrates diversity and affirms the rights of all learners.

Tier 2 enables targeted interventions for students identified as being at greater risk—such as those experiencing social isolation or exclusion due to disability. These supports may include small group social skills programs, peer mentorship initiatives, and trauma-informed practices that foster empathy and connection. As an example, Bob Hawke College in Subiaco, Western Australia, utilises ‘**peer circles**’ as a Tier 2 intervention to strengthen social bonds for students who are more vulnerable to bullying, including students with disability. See Case Study below for the What, why and how of Peer Circles. These approaches align well with inclusive principles when delivered in a way that supports—not separates—students with disability from their peers.

Tier 3 provides intensive, individualised support for students who are persistently targeted or involved in bullying. This level of intervention should include **trauma-informed practice, wraparound planning**, and coordinated support that involves external services where appropriate.

Importantly, the strength of the MTSS model lies in its focus on early identification, continuous data collection, active student involvement in shaping supports, and whole-school accountability. When applied within a rights-based, inclusive education framework, MTSS has the potential to help schools move beyond reactive, punitive responses and towards proactive, systemic transformation—ensuring that all students, particularly those with disability, are safe, valued, and included.

Case study: Building Peer Circles at Bob Hawke College

Why Peer Circles?

Inclusion is not an easy task. All schools struggle with individual students being marginalised because of 'differences', such as skin colour, ethnicity, gender identity, disability or other personal attributes. We are all aware of the lifelong damage that can come from bullying, rejection, and social exclusion. Indeed, many of us can remember those first days in high school where we went from being the 'big kids' at primary school to the smallest and newest in high school, surrounded by physically much bigger students exuding confidence and self-assurance. In many cases, we may have lost most of our primary school friends and felt very nervous and unsure of ourselves in the new environment of a high school. It was perhaps one of the times in our life up to that point, when we felt most vulnerable.

While most students are able to overcome this experience, making new friends and developing confidence, some do not. Indeed, international research shows that 5% of students report having no friends at school. That is one or two students in each class on average, so it is a very real issue with serious impacts. Many of these students are socially vulnerable, sometimes due to the range of differences mentioned above, or just because they lack the social skills to pick up social cues and build friendships. Inclusion is not just a disability or race issue.

While all schools are aware of the social and emotional challenges experienced by many students, the response is often reactive – to act when evidence of harm begins to surface, such as incidents of bullying or when students experience 'school 'can't' – usually referred to as school refusal. At Bob Hawke College a proactive approach is being taken to prevent harm and strengthen inclusion. Under the leadership of the principal and dedicated work by the Inclusive Learning Support team as well as many other teachers and education assistants, Peer Circles are being built around students who are at increased risk of social exclusion and marginalisation so that all students have other students who care about them and go out of their way to ensure that they are included.

What are Peer Circles?

Peer Circles is an idea that has strong research backing. For students at increased risk of social exclusion, a small group of 6-8 students are brought together to jointly work on ways to ensure that student is included throughout the school day in the life of the school. The student who is being supported and their parents and teachers are all involved in the selection of the Circle members, all of whom are volunteers. It has been found that this mix of people doing the selection is most effective as parents, teachers and the student will have different, but important priorities. All Circles are a unique mix of individuals, with some perhaps including an older mentor from a later year at the school, and thought is always given to gender balance and personal dynamics. It is interesting that often a student who is perceived to be a 'bit of troublemaker' or to have some anti-social tendencies will turn out to be highly influential and effective member of the Circle. To give that person a valued role as a Circle member can provide a very strong ally in the schoolyard and help to encourage that student to engage in more pro-social behaviours.

How do we run Peer Circles?

The Peer Circles usually meet once a week at break time and are made up of students and the teacher who is facilitating the Circle and providing oversight as it develops. The Peer Circle teachers know the young person being supported well. Often, they are their CREW teacher or a well-connected, familiar adult from the school. The teachers running a Peer Circle have this allocated as one of their breaktime duties and are thrilled to have such a connected, calm, inclusive duty on their roster.

Case Study (continued)

When we form Peer Circles, the peers run through a short induction to the power of peers and Peer Circles. In this induction, we explain the model of inclusion that Bob Hawke College is nurturing, and we emphasise the importance of their leadership to make this possible. Sometimes, we give some targeted coaching if the young person being supported has nuanced and specific support needs such as co-regulation or using the AAC device.

In weekly Peer Circle meetings, the focus is on building social connection. Sometimes there are guided discussions about how the student who is being supported might be more included in the classes and how playground difficulties might be overcome. For example, if the student is struggling to attend classes, having one of the Circle members who is in the same class as the student accompany the student on the way there and provide reassurance in the classroom, can help them to feel safe and welcome and alleviate anxiety often associated with coming into an environment with lots of students, noise, and expectations.

We are beginning to put older year students in Peer Circle leadership roles so that they take the lead in facilitating the group and learn to think hard about how to go about maximising the inclusion of their peers. This is teaching them skills and values that they are applying to solve real problems and helping them to develop into powerful, caring young adults who can be a force for good in their communities.

Creating inclusive environments where everyone is welcomed and belongs is a complex challenge faced by schools and by society. Peer Circles is one way to support students who are at increased risk from exclusion and marginalisation. It is a model that has great potential to be used in all schools who want to build a more inclusive and welcoming culture. As Janet Klees states, "You cannot create a relationship...but you can recognise, encourage and design opportunities in which the miracle of friendship is more likely to occur".

"I've seen through my own children and their experiences, how Peer Circle at Bob Hawke College benefits our school in many different ways. For my son who is being supported by a Circle, it has been absolutely critical to his successful transition to high school and the foundation for his wellbeing and inclusion. But I have also seen how participation in Circles strengthens the capabilities of students as collaborative problem solvers and provides them and all those who are involved, including parents and carers, with an opportunity to help build an inclusive school community where everyone is welcomed. The Circles approach embodies the essence of our College's motto, "Extraordinary Together", that represents our shared belief as a school community that we can achieve greatness by working collaboratively and supporting each other."

Catia Malaquias, parent of a student with intellectual disability who is supported by a Peer Circle, and her other two children are in Peer Circles that support other students

For more information on Circles at School, see **Appendix 1 Circles@School** at the back of this document – An evaluation of a South Australian Program, by Julia Farr Purple Orange.

a. Do you think your school's response provided you the appropriate related supports?

The prevailing experience is that school responses often fail to provide appropriate or culturally safe supports. In many cases, students with disability experience multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination. For example, ableism compounded by racism. Schools lack the cultural competence to recognise these overlapping identities and respond appropriately. Families report that school staff do not understand the systemic barriers their child faces and instead pathologise their behaviour or dismiss their complaints. Students who sit at the intersections of marginalisation are too often excluded from decision-making, silenced, or further harmed by punitive and deficit-focused school cultures.

b. How could a consistent national standard ensure that schools' bullying prevention and responses are appropriately tailored and accessible to you?

See our answer in 1. c.

Questions for people in the education system and other stakeholders

1. What policies, models and/or practices (i.e. interventions) do you feel are successful in helping prevent and address bullying in schools? Describe the effectiveness of these approaches at a whole of school community level. a. Is there any student or community participation in the development, implementation and review of policies, models or practices to prevent and address bullying in your school?

See our recommendations in answer to 1.c. Essentially, a whole-school approach with inclusive education practices, student and family involvement in the development, implementation and review of anti-bullying policies.

In looking to other jurisdictions where anti-bullying policies have been effective, we refer you to explore:

New Brunswick's (Canada) inclusive education system: A strong prevention focus. We refer to the [Anti-Bullying Summit Report](#) which gives the message that no one person, school community or government, can solve this problem alone. Solutions to bullying require everyone to work together.

We suggest it worthwhile perusing [New Brunswick: The law on bullying and your rights and responsibilities in New Brunswick](#) and [Policy 703: Positive Learning and Working Environment](#), which states the rights and responsibilities of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, school districts, and schools for creating a positive learning and working environment in the public education system. We also direct you to [Policy 703 - Appendix D](#) Provincial Student Code of Conduct Guidelines. The Code, alongside the Positive Learning and Working Environment Plans developed by each school, help foster an environment where all students feel welcome, wanted and have a sense of belonging.

One effective tactic a high school had was an anonymous whistle blowing system where a bystander could report bullying they witnessed by filling out a sheet and placing it in a sleeve that was discreetly placed at each classroom. This meant that for those students who did not feel comfortable or safe to call out the bully directly, there was an opportunity for them to report the bullying behaviour without any fear of backlash.

Finland's KiVa Program: The [KiVa anti-bullying programme](#), has been shown to reduce both self- and peer-reported bullying and victimisation significantly, reduce anxiety and depression and has a positive impact on students' perception of their peer climate. 98 per cent of victims involved in discussions with the schools' KiVa programme felt that their situation improved. It has been adopted in other countries and shown to be effective outside of Finland. It has a prevention, intervention, regular monitoring approach with a particular focus on empowering bystanders.

USA: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities

have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which includes provisions for addressing bullying and ensuring a safe educational environment. See [Bullying Prevention for Children with Disabilities: Using the IEP, 504, or Creating your Own Plan](#). We need to get a lot better in Australian schools at using the IEP for bullying prevention and making it a living document that is regularly reviewed rather than it being a tick box exercise, which is what we often hear from families.

UK: [The Anti-Bullying Alliance](#) in the UK advocates for a whole-school approach to bullying prevention, providing resources and support for schools to develop and implement effective strategies. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Let's utilise the resources that already exist and tailor them to the Australian context.

2. What policies, models or practices (i.e. interventions) do you feel are not working?

See our response to 1.a. and b. under Questions for students, young people and families.

3. What changes do you think are needed to improve bullying prevention and response:

a. from a whole of school perspective?

A two-pronged approach is required. Being pro-active/preventative by establishing an anti-bullying culture, while at the same time addressing individual cases with responsive strategies including specific help for students most at risk.

Preventative approach

As previously discussed, **create an inclusive culture** by implementing inclusive practices such as promoting respect for diversity and difference, implementing zero tolerance policies towards bullying, encouraging contact between typically developing peers and students with disability, reducing isolation by adopting peer-led initiatives, increase disability awareness, improve supervision of bullying hotspots, making sure the policy applies to everyone and ensure policies specifically address students with disabilities.

Adopt student-led initiatives such as “**peer circles**”, inclusive student councils, buddy or connection programmes that provide a “**safe person**” and a “**safe space**” between students who are at risk of bullying and students who can provide support or enhance social standing.

Adopt parent-led initiatives such as the **P&C (Parents and Citizens) Inclusion Subcommittee**. Inclusion involves the whole school community, and benefits ALL students. Parents play an important role in raising and bringing attention to issues that might be impacting their children within their school.

When parents work together, they can identify common issues and collaborate to improve their local school – in both government and non-government settings. A powerful way to do this is by setting up an inclusion sub-committee in their school's P & C Association.

The main aim is to promote inclusion at school; provide parent support; build the capacity of the school, build awareness about the value of diversity and inclusion to the whole school community and the work that the P&C and school are already doing; facilitate a support network to parents from diverse families (on an opt-in basis); promote policies, and resources; organise events and projects that complement what is happening at the school.

In terms of reducing bullying in the school, the P&C Inclusion Subcommittee provides a respectful platform for school communication and engagement, particularly around promoting relevant policies, resources or projects but also provide a two-way street where parents can feed back to the school what there can be improvements and provide positive solutions anti-bullying initiatives they are hearing are working in other schools.

We refer to [Activate your P & C to help promote inclusion of your child at school](#) on Family Advocacy's website for more resources.

Reactive approach

Use the IEP in a productive way; teach the student how to identify, respond and report bullying;

identify a safe person to talk to and a safe place to go for refuge; address the bullying behaviour; peer advocacy and bystander training; educate school staff and peers on the students' disability; evaluate supervision during unstructured times; provide counselling and other support services; communicate the plan to staff.

b. from an education system perspective?

The development of a national policy can ensure a unified consistent approach across schools, including clear guidelines on reporting, intervention and support for victims; Providing ongoing training for educators on identifying and addressing bullying, particularly for students with disability (or any child who is at greater risk of being bullied), can enhance the effectiveness of interventions; Engaging families in the development and implementation of anti-bullying strategies ensures that the approaches are comprehensive, relevant to the localised culture in the school and supported by all stakeholders.

It is critical that the Anti-Bullying Review **acknowledges segregation on the basis of disability is a negative phenomenon that heightens the risk of bullying for students with disability.**

4. What do you think the underlying causes of bullying in schools are?

Bullies tend target their victims based on real or perceived differences in appearance, behaviour or ability. There are many generations in our society who have no personal experience with people with disabilities, and they fear them. It is an unfortunate reality that many of these people pass that ignorance on to their children. Many children and young people with disabilities exhibit such characteristics and are therefore at increased risk of bullying.

Yet another reason to progressively realise inclusive education and gradually phase out segregated school settings. There is a growing body of evidence, including the Disability Royal Commission, which shows that segregation and exclusion in education contribute to higher rates of bullying. We strongly recommend this Review acknowledges same.

It is worth noting here, many young people with disability generally are less able to defend themselves which could be due to a power imbalance; their disability does mean they are unable to understand when they are being bullied which makes it virtually impossible to report the bullying; where the young person is aware of the bullying, many may struggle to explain what happened if say, they have a language disorder.

For students with disability, bullying is often a covert activity so it is not uncommon for supervising teachers to be unaware that a bullying incident has even taken place or it is mistaken for "mucking around". A common situation is when teachers fail to distinguish between behaviours that are bullying-related and disability-related. Some children may show their anxiety by becoming quiet and withdrawn, while others may show a lower tolerance for frustration than usual, becoming aggressive or unregulated – especially if they have been provoked into retaliation. School staff may mistakenly believe that these behaviours are just part of the student's disability) or worse, that the student (i.e. the victim) is actually the instigating bully.

5. What resources are available for school staff to support action on bullying? What else would help build capability to support staff to prevent and manage bullying?

Proactive resources – preventative strategies

One of the safeguards for safety, happiness and bullying is **friendships** and **having valued roles in school** so here are some articles we recommend:

- Friendships

[How can Parents Help Children Develop Friendships](#) – Family Advocacy Inclusion Library

[Friendships as a Safe Harbour](#) - Family Advocacy Inclusion Library

[Encourage Friendships](#) – Family Advocacy Inclusion Library

[Building belonging in the school community: Finding Roles that Help Students Participate and Contribute](#) – Community Resource Unit

[Building Friendships through the school years](#) – Community Resource Unit resource
[Friendships and Belonging](#) – Community Resource Unit webpage

[Circles of Support - Jack's bunch of mates](#) – Imagine More website

- **Creating Valued Roles**

[Valued Roles in Schools](#) – Imagine More, Video by John Armstrong (2.09 mins)

[Resourcing Inclusive Communities](#) (RIC), our capacity building initiative, offers a comprehensive exploration of the power of valued roles that have social status.

Valued roles can make a huge difference in a student's life whilst at school and into the future. This is what will support a student's self-determination, confidence and a sense of belonging. **Positive roles act as a buffer to negative assumptions – they help fellow students see the student with disability as more like them, and raise their reputation in the eyes of peers.**

It is not uncommon for people with disability to have diminished roles and as such become devalued in the eyes of their non-disabled peers. To mitigate any subconscious devaluation, extra effort must be made to assist people with disability into valued roles, so they too can reap the wonderful benefits. School communities and families can be purposeful in helping build valued roles for students with disability. Many children may already have roles in their lives such as pet owner, helper, sister/brother, soccer player, computer whiz. They may be natural roles or evolve from their interests. Building on these roles so they are genuinely worthy and important can also change how others view them. It is thus important to think creatively about how the student can participate in a role. Are there valued roles a school/ educator/ parent may be able to invent that will allow the whole school (students and teachers) to view your child more positively. They can brainstorm what they can do really well and what their interests are. For example: Photocopy Assistant in the office, library assistant at lunch, sustainable officer in the classroom, choir member, newsletter contributor, lunch Lego club Captain, computer assistant, garden assistant, canteen assistant, assistant photographer.

In the bigger picture, when we have roles in school, work, community, civic, relationship and recreational, we have opportunity to meet people, develop our skills and project a positive image of ourselves with others. Valued roles are the key to the good things of life for everyone.

Reactive resources – responsive strategies once bullying has occurred

Here are some resources that Family Advocacy recommends:

[NSW Department of Education bullying page](#) to learn about current guidelines and policies.
[Youth Law Australia bullying page](#) in case they wish to formally complain

Other helpful resources we recommend:

[Bullying and Teenagers](#) – Reach Out website

[Cyberbullying and teenagers](#) – Reach Out website

[Say something](#) – Children's book by Peggy Moss aimed at the year 2-6 age group about speaking up around bullying. Read out loud on YouTube (4.24 mins)

8. What guiding principles or other elements could be helpful in developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying?

A consistent national standard for responding to bullying must be grounded in **human rights**, **inclusive education**, and a **social model of disability**, ensuring the safety, dignity, and belonging of every student—particularly those with disability, who are at significantly higher risk of being bullied and socially excluded.

We strongly believe that a national standard must go beyond managing individual incidents. It should guide schools to create **systemic cultural change**, enabling proactive, inclusive environments where all students—especially those who have historically been marginalised—can flourish.

Below are guiding principles we believe are essential for such a national standard. We provide a list based on discussions throughout this submission:

- Inclusive Education as a Non-Negotiable Principle
- Recognition of Structural and Ableist Drivers of Bullying
- Whole-School and Community Accountability
- Student Voice and Self-Advocacy
- Role of Valued Social Roles in Prevention
- Tiered, Preventive Intervention Frameworks
- Accountability, Transparency, and Continuous Improvement
- Staff Capability and Cultural Change
- Clear, Consistent Expectations Across Jurisdictions

Conclusion

The current approaches to bullying in Australian schools fall short of protecting and valuing all students—particularly those with disability, who remain disproportionately targeted, marginalised, and excluded. Family Advocacy strongly believes that bullying prevention and response must be embedded within a broader commitment to inclusive education and rights-based practice.

A consistent national standard must go beyond incident response—it must drive systemic, cultural change that addresses the root causes of bullying, including ableism, segregation, and low expectations of students with disability. Such a standard should promote the development of inclusive school cultures where diversity is celebrated, meaningful participation is the norm, and students with disability are supported to take on valued roles within the school community.

Key levers include: implementation of inclusive frameworks like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS); robust data collection and independent oversight; practical tools and training for school staff; and above all, the meaningful inclusion of students with disability and their families in shaping safe and welcoming schools.

We urge the Anti-Bullying Taskforce to centre the lived experiences of students with disability and their families in its recommendations, and to draw on the strong body of work from the Disability Royal Commission, inclusive education advocates, and human rights frameworks. When inclusion is real and every student is seen, heard, and valued, bullying is less likely to take root. It is time to move from reactive responses to proactive inclusion—this is where real prevention begins.

Yours Sincerely



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APPENDIX 1

Julia Farr Association Inc.

Circles@School

An evaluation of a South Australian Program

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Index

Summary	3
Introduction	6
<i>The Circle concept</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>How the Circles @ School operates.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Evaluation Design.....	9
Ethical Statement	10
<i>Confidentiality and participant protection</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Validity check</i>	<i>11</i>
Methodology	11
<i>Interviews.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Data analysis.....</i>	<i>12</i>
Results.....	13
<i>The relevance of Circles.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Relationship starter:</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Leading on to real relationships:</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Protection of vulnerable students:</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Circles teaching broader issues about similarity and difference:</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Decreased dependence on adults:.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Setting up Circles</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Leadership is key:.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Everyone needs to 'buy in':</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Trust is essential:</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Potential value of a written format:.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Ideas for establishing a Circle:.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>The composition of Circles.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Same or different classes:</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Students with impairments:</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Wider Possibilities of Circles.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Parent Circles</i>	<i>27</i>
Conclusions	29
Recommendations for the future:.....	30
Appendix:	35
<i>Letter to interviewees with list of issues raised for their feedback.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Draft Themes</i>	<i>37</i>
References	46

Summary

Students with a disability commonly experience difficulty in making and maintaining peer relationships, particularly in the later stages of primary school and all through high school. In fact it has been suggested from research in the area that without adult intervention, it is likely that students with a disability will experience social isolation in high school but with adult intervention, real and ongoing relationships can occur with their mainstream peers. One such intervention is the 'Circle of Friends', based on a concept from Canada where an intentional peer group is formed around an individual with a disability to provide support and relationship, with some of these relationships developing over time into ongoing friendships. An intention of the Circles is for the relationships to extend outside of the school into other community interactions.

In this study in six schools across Adelaide, support Circles (Circles@School) were formed around students in Government, Catholic and Independent Schools with the students being across a range of years from early primary, later primary and high school, and with impairments ranging from moderate to severe. Impairments covered significant physical impairments, intellectual impairments and the autism spectrum. A facilitator was employed to negotiate the establishment of the Circles at the schools and liaise with families and school personnel to ensure their smooth running and assisting to resolve any difficulties that arose. The facilitator also assisted in the establishment of support circles for the parents as research had shown that many families of children with a disability experience social isolation and lack of personal support, with few relationships outside of other families of children with a disability. For this reason the parent circles only included individuals without children with a disability themselves.

In this evaluation of the Circles@School intervention, families, school personnel and students involved in the Circles were interviewed about the impact of the intervention

and ways that the concept might be improved in the future. The overwhelming and unanimous response by those interviewed was that the Circles were very effective at enabling relationships to occur that extended into the playground and in some cases outside of the school. The parents of the students with a disability were much more confident about their child being safe and supported by peers in mainstream classrooms and reported that the process had helped significantly in building a positive partnership with the teachers and other school staff. School staff were also very supportive, indicating that the program provided a framework to ensure that relationships were supported and provided an impetus for the gains made through the Circles to be extended into other areas in the classroom. Student members of the Circle clearly enjoyed being part of the Circle and were very willing and ready to support the student with a disability and to step in if other students were in any way negative. It was clear that the interactions with the student with a disability had changed them positively, in some cases significantly 'softening' students who were seen as powerful by other students. Parent Circles were also reported to be supportive for families although it was not thought that these were essential to the success of the Circles@School.

The evaluation provided information on the size, structure, membership and support needed for Circles@School. It was unanimously agreed that a facilitator was essential for the formation of Circles and that this was not possible from within a school without additional resourcing. The facilitator was required to provide ongoing support to the families and school as transitions occurred, staff or family circumstances changed, or problems arose. Without this ongoing support, the consensus was that the Circles would fail over time. The level of support might be able to be modified over time, but could not be withdrawn totally. In particular, the home visits by the facilitator to discuss how the Circles were going and other issues in the life of the family, were seen

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as essential to smoothing the relationship between the school and the family. Circles were seen as having considerable potential for other students who are at risk of social isolation such as new immigrants, newly arrived students or the significant proportion of students (around 5%) who report having no friends. However, an important consideration is how the concept is framed. To 'need' a 'support circle' in order to 'make friends' is likely to do damage to students already at high image risk (including the students with a disability). It was suggested, by the students in particular, that organising around academic areas would be much more acceptable. "We are helping John with his maths" is a much more natural description of a friendship support circle even though the intention would be the same.

While there was some carry-over of the relationships built at school to out of school hours, generally this was less than hoped by the families. There were some indications that alterations to the way students interact in the classroom through the sharing of tasks and other cooperative arrangements would strengthen the natural nature of the interactions. It was suggested that this would assist in the stronger development of friendship that would be more likely to extend outside of school. This is an area worthy of further investigation, and some findings from the research literature are covered in part 2 of this report.

In this intervention, the study was over a range of schools, ages, disabilities and geographical areas. A question that became apparent was how sustainable this would be over time as the facilitator had to travel extensive distances and have multiple skills to interact with such a range of students and families. That the facilitator was able to achieve this was a testament to her capacity, but for future examples, it is recommended that the range be limited geographically as well as in the range of ages of students.

Introduction

Making friends tends to be hard for children with a disability (Estell et al., 2008). This should not be surprising as people with a disability have been kept at the margins of society for thousands of years (Braddock & Parish, 2001).

Since the 1980s, there has been extensive research indicating that students with intellectual impairments or autism can be socially included and gain real friendships although the type of schooling is important. It has been shown that students in general education classes receive and provide higher levels of support to peers and have wider friendship networks composed primarily of children without disabilities (Hunt, Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & et al., 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997). The degree of integration and changes in the social behaviour of children with severe levels of disability has been found to be highly significant, with more inclusive environments significantly better. Rates of social bidding have been shown to be as high as five times more common in inclusive rather than segregated settings (Brady, McEvoy, & Gunter, 1984; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997). However, inclusion by itself is not likely to be sufficient to promote and sustain real and enduring relationships. In a major longitudinal study Estell et al., (2008) found that even though the characteristics of children with learning disabilities were similar to others, they experienced a lower social standing and this was maintained over time. As students get older, adult intervention has been shown to be necessary to establish and maintain social relationships, with support circles being an important development.

The Circle concept

The first recorded example of a support circle was the 'Circle of Friends' created by Marsha Forest and Jack Pearpoint around a young woman, Judith Snow (Pearpoint, 1990). Judith was in her 20s and living in an aged persons home and an intentional circle was built around Judith that resulted in her being the first person in Canada with

a significant disability to live in her own flat with personal assistance. A second circle was built around Marcia Forest when she contracted cancer some years later. The use of the 'Circle of Friends' at school was reported as early as 1992. Haring & Breen (1992) demonstrated a social network arrangement for high school students with moderate and severe disabilities. Nondisabled peers met weekly with an adult integration facilitator to discuss means to increase the integration of two students with a disability aged 13 years. As a result of the development of the social network, the frequency and quality of interactions increased and promoted the development of friendships (Frederickson & Turner, 2003). Kalyva & Avramidis (2005) set up a circle in a pre-school and showed a significant decrease in unsuccessful response and initiation rates over time and a significant increase in successful response and initiation rates compared to a control group. Frederickson, Warren, & Turner, (2005) found that the circle of friends changed the behaviour of other children in one study but did not alter the behaviour of the child with a disability or the general class ethos -- although there was evidence from previous research that the focus child was less likely to be blamed. In a study looking at changes over time, they used a repeated measure analysis to show significant increases in acceptance and significant decreases in rejection but this did not change over time with further circle meetings. There was also a trend of the positive results decreasing over a long-term follow-up. These findings would indicate that more than the regular meetings are necessary for long term sustained development of relationships. James & Leyden (2010) took a grounded theory approach to analyzing circles and interviewed 25 facilitators of circles aged between 7 and 12 years. They found very positive results coming from circles in terms of social relationships that extended beyond the circle meetings and that there was a 'ripple effect' whereby other students not in the circle started to be influenced positively. Their analysis was that circles allowed a child who was socially isolated to

effectively open a 'closed' field and so experience a range of opportunities to interact and form new relationships.

The central concept of the 'Circle' was the bringing together of people who know and care about the person so that they can meet regularly to think and plan around the life of the person. It was not considered essential that all the members of the circle were necessarily friends of the person but instead shared a concern for a person that they personally knew. However in many cases real friendships have occurred as a result of the formation of a circle.

In reviewing the literature, it is clear that circles are a powerful way of breaking through a cycle of potential and real rejection and providing a framework whereby real and enduring friendships can flourish.

How the Circles @ School operates

Based on interviews with participants and the steering group as well as from reading documentation on the Circles @ School the pattern was as follows:

A facilitator was appointed who had a good aptitude for working with families as well as experience with the school system. The facilitator in fact had a teaching background, was a mother of young children herself and worked easily in both school and home environments.

Parents of students with an impairment mainstreamed into regular school were offered the opportunity to have a 'Circle' formed around their son or daughter. Those that applied had the concept explained by the facilitator and were advised of the requirements for them and others. They were strongly encouraged to be part of a Parent Circle whose members would be chosen by them but could not include other parents who had a child with a disability. The parent Circle was designed to provide additional support to the families that was not focused just around disability as was

considered likely if the Parent Circles included other families with a child with a

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disability. They would meet regularly with the parent circle members as well as the facilitator.

After the participants had been invited the facilitator went to the schools involved and negotiated the establishment of the Circles @ School. Several students from the school were invited to be members of the Circle for the student, and would have scheduled times organised to meet with the other Circle members and the student, together with the facilitator. At these meetings they discussed how the student was being included in the class and playground and ways that the student could be more effectively included in the school. Invitation methods varied for individuals. For some the student had a major impact on who to invite; in other cases the school or the parents had the most influence. In all cases the students involved in the Circle volunteered, even when their participation had been suggested by teachers or parents.

The facilitator also met regularly with the teachers and school staff on a regular but relatively informal basis. The intention was to catch any difficulties early before they became major problems and ensure that the school was happy with the arrangements over time. If any difficulties were occurring from the perspective of the parents or the school, or an individual student, the facilitator would attempt to assist with a resolution that was acceptable to all.

Evaluation Design

To evaluate Circles @ School an interview design was used. Representatives from all stakeholder groups were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed in relation to the project and interviews were arranged accordingly. In November 2013, a series of formal and informal interviews were conducted covering the following stakeholders:

- 6 Parents of a student with a disability in a 'Circle'.
- 11 school staff including principals, teachers and special education support staff.

- 4 members of the Circles @ School steering group.
- 2 students with a disability in a 'Circle'.
- Approximately 10 student 'circle members' including one extensive interview of a student with a disability and his friend together.
- Interviews with the Circles @ School facilitator, the overall manager of the project and the CEO of Julia Farr, the coordinating organisation.
- Indirect feedback from members of parent circles. It was not possible to get direct information from parent circle members in the time available. One interview with a circle member from a parent circle was scheduled but was unable to be held due to time availability.

Ethical Statement

Confidentiality and participant protection

All interviewees were assured of confidentiality and no specific information from any interview was shared with either the administration of Circles @ School or others being interviewed. For example, no information raised by a parent about a school would be shared with that school or vice versa, nor was specific information shared with the program managers or Julia Farr Association. Only summary data were shared as described below. All recordings and other data were coded and names of individuals were not associated with any data collected.

It was not considered that there would be any risk to a participant as a result of their involvement in the research and in fact there were considerable potential benefits possible through feedback on ways to improve Circles @ School for them and future participants. All participants were voluntary and were free to cease participation at any point. There was no requirement for any particular question to be answered.

Validity check

To ensure that the information collected was seen to be accurate, two primary methods were used. Following the determination of themes described below, these were sent to all participants in the interviews with requests that they check for accuracy in terms of what they had contributed as well as to add any information that they did not think had been adequately reflected in the themes. In addition, points made by one participant were put to others when interviewed to check for generalization of the issue as well as check for accuracy by triangulation.

Methodology

Interviews

Interview times were arranged by the Manager of Circles @ School and were held in areas most convenient to those being interviewed. This included cafes, schools and family homes.

The interviews were designed to have minimal structure to allow novel or unpredicted responses to emerge, although as all participants were aware that it was the Circles @ School that was being looked at the topics covered inevitably tended to be focused around related issues. However, the interviews were commenced with families around very broad questions about how they saw the future for their son or daughter; what was included in the vision for the future and general conversation around the personality of the child. This was done to reduce the formality of the interview so that they would feel as relaxed as possible and for unexpected areas to be raised that might not have occurred under more formal questions. In addition, a list of areas considered important to the steering group were held and if these areas had not been mentioned by the end of the interview, specific questions related to these were inserted --

although this was rarely required. For questions about the 'Parent Circles', the questions tended to be more direct as comment on the parent circles did not always occur spontaneously in the interviews.

For interviews with the students and others in the 'Circle' there was a strong attempt to minimise formality and ask questions indirectly. This was to minimise the danger of 'desirable' responses being given by those involved rather than providing true responses to how they felt about the Circles @ School arrangement.

Interviews with the steering group and school staff tended to be more structured although it was always the intention to make the interviews as informal and non-directive as possible to allow for honest and direct feedback about the program and individuals involved.

All interviews were digitally recorded apart from the informal interviews with student circle members and ongoing follow up interviews with the facilitator, Circles @ School manager and CEO of Julia Farr. The regular interviews with the latter group were needed to clarify issues that had been raised in interviews and ensure that the key areas of interest to them had been covered appropriately. Most formal interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes with the informal discussions with students lasting about 10 minutes. No analysis of data was commenced until all interviews had been completed.

Data analysis

Tapes were replayed and issues raised in the interview were written on a card – one issue per card. Cards and tapes were coded for confidentiality. When all of the interviews were completed, the cards were manually sorted into headings or 'themes' that became apparent from the content of the issues raised. As a validity check, these themes were then sent out to all of those interviewed to ensure that there was no area that they had raised that was not covered in the themes, and that the themes were in

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accordance with the information that they had given. No concern was raised by any interviewee.

From this analysis it was possible to see the range of issues raised and how many were shared across the different individuals, families and schools.

Results

From the analysis of the recorded interviews, the following broad headings emerged:

- *Rationale:* The relevance of Circles @ School to build social relationship at school.
- *Setting up Circles*
 - Key elements for success in setting up Circles
 - Relevance of Circles for different individuals and ages
 - Applicability of Circles @ School concept for groups other than students with a disability.
- *Circle composition*
- *Parent Circles*

Each of these headings incorporated several themes, which are commented on in some detail below. However it should be stated clearly that the support for the concept of Circles @ School was universal and strong. Comments were primarily about what were considered to be key elements and how the Circles @ School could be improved.

The relevance of Circles

Relationship starter:

It is quite common for students with a disability to have no relationships at all at school, which is extremely lonely for them and a poor model for the inclusion of students into the wider society (Heinman 1998, 2000).

There was strong agreement across all families and school staff involved in the Circles @ School that they were a beneficial idea. That is, a lack of or poor relationships were seen as a potential or real major problem by all parents and most of the school staff interviewed. In particular, Circles @ School were seen as a very good means to start a relationship, which might not occur spontaneously due to lack of social skills of the participants or peer pressures in the class and school. It was thought that there were three situations where relationships were particularly difficult for students with a disability:

- For young students up to about grade 5, if the individual had very low social skills or had some behaviours that tended to alienate others. In most cases however, for young students relationships tended to occur spontaneously.
- In primary school around about grade 5 and later, boys and girls tended to separate more into gender groupings with interests and activities being more gender related such as physical games for boys and social activities for girls.
- In high school, peer grouping became very powerful with the possibility of teasing or bullying preventing or reducing the possibility of spontaneous relationships occurring with a student with a disability.

In all of these cases, the Circles @ School was seen as a very effective approach to overcome many of these difficulties.

Leading on to real relationships:

While the relationships established with Circles @ School were intentional in the majority of cases, it was apparent that these relationships developed into real relationships over time, at least in the school situation. Students from the Circle would spontaneously invite the student with a disability into playground games and activities and by providing a model, other students not in the Circle would join in as well. In a

few of the specific instances the relationships at school spread outside of the school to

invitations to parties and in at least one example, a deep and genuine relationship that was identical to the relationships of other students at the school. However it was apparent from many of the interviews with parents that the extent of the relationships was less than had been hoped. While they saw major gains in the relationships within the school, extensions beyond school were often unreliable and infrequent.

For relationships in the class and school generally, a lot seemed to depend on individual teachers and schools. In some cases, the teachers had taken on the idea of peer tutoring and students working in groups with the student with a disability, which tended to increase the inclusion in activities outside of the classroom. When this was occurring in the classroom, it seemed that the extent of social inclusion was more solid as relationships from the shared tasks in the class carried over into the playground.

Building social skills:

Several people mentioned the increase in social skills of the student as a result of Circles @ School. It seemed that other students would directly teach the student appropriate ways of responding, as well as the student picking up social nuances from modelling. For teenagers in particular, many of the social nuances are very subtle and often not known by adults. The meaning of particular words, abbreviations in text messages and aspects of dress are often best taught by peers and it appears that this was occurring.

Protection of vulnerable students:

It was accepted by all those interviewed that students with a disability were potentially vulnerable to bullying, more so than the general student. In all schools, staff interviewed indicated there was a high awareness of the potential for bullying and proactive strategies were in place at the schools that applied to all students. It was not seen as a problem by any school as a result of this, and instances of bullying were not an issue for families although they were very aware of the potential dangers for their son or daughter. Parents in particular

saw the Circles @ School as being a major safeguard against bullying as they believed that students from the Circle would intervene if cases of bullying occurred. In discussions with student members of Circles, it was very apparent that they would step in if the student with a disability was being teased or bullied so there was direct evidence of the reality of Circles @ School providing a real safeguard in addition to those in place at the schools.

Circles teaching broader issues about similarity and difference:

In some of the schools, in particular where the teachers had focussed on peer tutoring and careful grouping of the student with the disability with appropriate peers, broad issues of similarity and difference were canvassed and understood by students. This appeared to have more to do with the culture of the school and the school leadership rather than Circles @ School, but the Circles may have made the raising of these concepts easier and more likely to occur. Inclusion is a societal response in direct relief to millennia of rejection of people with a disability and their exclusion from schools and society generally (Braddock & Parish, 2000). This means that many attitudes are deeply embedded in the consciousness of society and will not change easily, so direct discussion of the similarity and difference is likely to be a key factor in changing attitudes over time.

Decreased dependence on adults:

An important concept that has emerged from the work around the use of teacher aides (Giangreco et al, 2005) is the danger of 'learned helplessness' due to over-reliance of the student with a disability on adult assistance. Particularly where the primary or only direct support available to the student is the teacher aide, then it is likely the student will come to rely on the aide for assistance rather than asking for help from peers or the teacher, or working independently. Parents in particular saw the Circles @ School as being a very important tool to reduce the dependence on the teacher aide and have the student working cooperatively with peers who could be guided in the appropriate level of support. Several

students also reported that they assisted the student with a disability with class tasks and indicated that they had a good understanding of the capabilities of the individual student – a key skill in ensuring that overdependence did not occur. While the Circles @ School has not been going long enough to determine the extent of independence developed, the early indications are positive.

Setting up Circles

The facilitator was critical to implementation of Circles @ School.

Both families and schools saw the role of the facilitator as critical to establishing Circles @ School. There were key aspects to the setting up Circles @ School that were seen as beyond the capacity of any individual family or school staff member. It was considered that a school could set up a Circles @ School without an external facilitator but a dedicated person from the school would have to be allocated that task and this was unlikely to occur without additional resources being made available to the school. Several aspects of the facilitator's role involved considerable time as well as skill and expertise:

- Getting to know the family and the child with an impairment, and having a strong enough relationship with them to support them through any difficulties with the school.
- Negotiating with the school administration to gain agreement with the school on joining into Circles @ School or this program.
- Building a relationship with teachers and support staff that was collaborative but also relaxed and relatively informal.
- Assisting the school and family to determine the appropriate makeup of the Circle and negotiating changes if they were required over time.
- Developing a relationship with the students involved in the Circle to gather information on how it was going and any changes that might be required. Also, to

gather ideas from the students on what might make the Circle work better that could be passed on to the teachers and other staff.

- Attending regular meetings of the Circle at the school.
- Meet regularly with both teachers and family members, helping to build the partnership and maintaining strict confidentiality of information received from individuals.
- Able to think and plan strategically to ensure that both parents and school staff were supported at all times with possible difficulties foreseen and planned for wherever possible.

There was general agreement that the role was a complex one requiring a person with good knowledge of the education system as well as very good skills in working with both parents and school staff. The facilitator of the Circles @ School in this report was very strongly supported as extremely capable and having the requisite skills. From the school perspective, it was essential for the facilitator to have knowledge of the school system and the pressures on teachers. This would imply that a facilitator would need to have at least some teaching or similar school background.

For Circles @ School, a strategic decision had been made to have the project grounded in the family, whilst working in close partnership with school staff. This was due to school staff changing over time and different schools and individuals varying in their support for inclusion. Families often experience resistance from educators when seeking good mainstream inclusive education (QPPD 2011).

Continuation of the Circles @ School without a facilitator:

This was seen as feasible by some respondents after the program had been well embedded in a school. It was generally thought that it would take approximately 2 years for the ‘bugs’ to be ironed out within the school so that it could fit into the normal school routine and be managed without a facilitator. If there wasn’t a facilitator available to iron out problems in

the earlier stages it was thought that it would be hard to maintain the Circle concept.

However continuation without a facilitator would require a strong commitment to the idea of Circles by the school and for it to maintain a high priority in the face of many competing demands. Maintaining good communication with the home over time with changes in school staff would also be a considerable challenge. At high school the challenge would seem to be even greater with multiple teachers involved with all student as well as the staff changes over time. From the evidence collected in this review, it would need an exceptional school with consistent leadership to be able to maintain Circles @ School without a facilitator, even when it had been successfully implemented for 2 or more years. However there would be an expectation that over time the level of support to maintain the Circles @ School could be reduced.

Leadership is key:

In line with research findings on the impact of school leadership on academic and social outcomes (Robinson, 2007), several participants stressed positive school leadership as a core ingredient to the success of the Circles @ School. Administrative support; promotion of a positive inclusive culture as well as strong core values at the school; a belief in and active support for partnerships with parents, as well as good communication were all cited as examples of how this leadership was demonstrated.

Everyone needs to 'buy in':

A concept that came across strongly from both families and schools was that Circles @ School was essentially based on a partnership between the family and school and also between numerous individuals within the school. If this partnership was not there it was felt that the likelihood of success would be minimal or non-existent. While some participants felt that Circles @ School could be conducted solely within the school without parent involvement, such an approach was seen as an inferior model. It was also felt that generalisation of relationships outside of the school would be more difficult without good partnerships between the families and the school, and with other parents from the school.

Trust is essential:

Relationships between parents of a child with a disability and a school are often characterised by ill feeling and criticism (QPPD, 2011). If such an environment exists, actions by either party are viewed with suspicion and mistakes or misjudgements can become a source of major conflict. It was considered that it would be difficult for Circles @ School to be successful in such circumstances. It is only when there is trust between the parties that the school can be allowed the latitude to try new approaches without fear of criticism, and the views and expertise of parents can be incorporated into the inclusion experience. However, some families felt that the Circles @ School had helped to improve the relationship with the school by adding structure and having the facilitator as the 'go-between'.

"You have to let go":

Closely associated to the issue of trust, both parents and school staff reported that the Circles @ School concept had allowed them to 'reset' their relationship and they had to let past grievances go if the concept was to succeed. While this was obviously difficult for some individuals, a genuine effort was apparent to view actions in a positive light rather than with suspicion.

Flexibility:

It was put strongly by the school staff that Circles @ School was not a 'recipe' for building social inclusion and relationships. The process needed to be flexible to fit in with the culture of a school and the individual students involved – those with and without a disability. Hence the makeup of Circles, the structuring of meetings, the level of formality of the relationship with the facilitator needed to adapt to the different conditions.

Potential value of a written format:

While the importance of flexibility was apparent, there were also some comments that in the initial period of setting up Circles @ School it was not clear how it was going to operate or how the school was to be involved. This was clearly due to the facilitator's concern to not

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be seen as ‘pushy’ and trying to impose a system onto a school, but it resulted in some initial confusion and uncertainty. It was suggested that a clear description of the concept with suggested steps for implementation could help to clarify the initial implementation as long as it was clear that the format could be adapted to fit in with the needs of both parents and the school.

Ideas for establishing a Circle:

Based on experience of working with Circles, several ideas were put on how they might be established more effectively, or ideas were shared on what had been successful:

- Particularly as students get older – and in high school in particular, how the concept is framed is critical. To be seen to need a support structure to make friends is likely to have a negative impact on self-esteem. A major way around this is to organise a Circle around the concept of ‘peer tutoring’ where the student is paired with other students to work collaboratively on academic tasks. This could be established on a 1-1 basis initially with the numbers of students involved gradually increased over time. “Helping John with his maths” or “getting some help for my maths from Mary” is a very different image to “being in John’s social support circle”. Teachers who had employed peer tutoring reported that it made the Circle work more effectively and seemed more ‘natural’.
- Pre-teaching some concepts to other students: For example, lessons focussing on the meaning of difference and how it is a natural part of the makeup of the world. Similarly, teachers had employed strategies such as having everyone describe one way in which they were similar to all others in the class and how in another way they were unique. This could be done either as a class exercise or a more long-term project of each student building up a written personal profile.

- Social stories of difference were seen as very relevant for younger students, with older students perhaps jointly developing a social story as an exercise, which could help build relationships if it included the child with a disability in the exercise.

When are Circles most likely to be very important?

Circles were seen as being most likely to be needed at times of transitions. The most common major transition is from primary to high school which is a scary time for most students as many old school friends are lost due to going to different schools and a whole new set of relationships has to be formed. For a student with an impairment, to naturally form friendships may be effectively impossible to achieve at this time. With strong peer pressures on all students in a new environment and the possibility of teasing and bullying high, spontaneous social approaches by the student or peers may have real dangers. Also, if a student goes to a new school for other reasons, adult support to establish relationships is likely to be necessary for older students with a disability. As mentioned earlier, from around grade 5 relationships start to change, particularly across gender lines and the students with a disability may not understand this change or be able to effectively adapt. It was thought that Circles could be a very effective strategy for assisting with this.

For preschool and early school students, most school staff believed that relationships tended to happen spontaneously and it would be better to support these than set up a more formal arrangement with a Circle, but that Circles would be appropriate if the younger student was not making friends. For families, a distressing issue was that the numbers of invites to sleepovers, play dates or birthday parties was lower than for most students so they were generally in support of as much assistance as possible to make these events more likely to occur. Parents tended to be supportive of Circles at all ages.

The composition of Circles

For the formation of Circles, there are multiple variables possible such as age, gender, same or different classes, with or without impairments, and different personality types. Also, the composition of the Circle could be primarily determined by child choice, parent wishes or school recommendations.

In the development of the Circles @ School considerable thought was put into the composition of circles, and the following were found to be the key aspects by those interviewed.

Age:

There was a general recommendation for similar or older age Circle members rather than younger aged unless there was a relationship already established. Most interviewed were very aware of the modelling, image and self-esteem impacts that could occur from grouping with younger students. There was some advantage seen from having at least one or two older students in the Circle to act as older mentors and models as well as to add some status to the circle. On the other hand it was important to have several same aged peers as these were most likely to extend to real relationships.

Gender:

This was not seen as an issue. Even for high school students, the key factor was friendships, personality and interest, which were seen to transcend gender.

Same or different classes:

This was not clear in terms of feedback. The advantage of being in the same class was the opportunity to work together in class and for this to continue into the playground. For being in other classes, the advantage was seen as widening the area of support and potential protection, and if older students were involved, the value of mentoring and having an older, respected member in the Circle. It would seem that this is an area that is best handled on an individual basis, taking into account the needs of the student and the wider environment. This is what occurred in this project, and it was found to be the best way of operating.

Students with impairments:

There was a strong desire by parents to avoid having other students with an impairment in the Circle. Many had the experience of their son or daughter being grouped 'with their own kind' which defined their child's most important aspect as being the disability. They had found that this grouping lowered expectations, reduced individualisation and made inclusion harder as they were more strongly imaged as disabled. Schools were more open to such grouping although they respected the parents' wishes. There was one example where a natural relationship between a student and another student with a disability in another class had developed. It was clear that this relationship was real and not pressured by school staff and there seemed to be benefits for both students with minimal cost. It would seem that in general there are very good reasons for not including other students with a disability in a Circle, but that an open mind be kept about naturally occurring and positive relationships of people with a disability. The general bias however would be against having other students with a disability because of the associated risks mentioned by parents. This was certainly the intention of the Circles @ School project and this is based on strong evidence from the literature and history of people with a disability.

Personality types:

This was a very informative area of learning for all concerned. Initially many families tended to want to choose students for the Circle who were very 'nice' children and very supportive. However, often these students were fairly quiet and non-assertive, so while they were supportive, they may not have had a wide impact on other students. On the other hand, teachers had often found that a more exuberant, pushy student could have a much greater impact on peers if they were a member of a Circle. Several school staff noted that even a student known as a potential 'bully' would often be an excellent Circle member as it softened them but also meant that the student with a disability was

automatically taken seriously by others due to having a powerful and respected ally. If there was a consensus view over the interviews it was that Circles needed to have a balance. There needed to be some students who mainly supported and with whom the student felt comfortable, but also some other students who 'stretched' the student and took them out of their comfort zone. A reality for many students with a disability is that they are put in low risk situations all their life and are at high risk of learned helplessness. Having students in their Circle who challenged them as well as those who primarily provided support and comfort seemed to be a good balance. Different personalities tended to stretch different aspects of the student with a disability.

Who chooses?

In some situations the parents were very influential on the choice of Circle members. In others, it was left to the school staff and the student themselves. There seemed to be disadvantages whenever one group had major control over the decisions of Circle membership. Where parents dominated, it did not accommodate the huge knowledge of school staff, who saw relationships and personalities at close hand and so could make astute recommendations on potential members. If the schools dominated, there was a danger of the parent desires for relationships to extend outside of school to be overlooked and for the expertise of families as to the individual needs of their child to be downplayed. If the student was the key person selecting Circle members, there was a danger of other dynamics coming into play. The student could see Circle selection as a 'power' thing, bringing in or rejecting Circle members on the basis of minute-to-minute emotions and relationship changes. Particularly for very young children, this meant that decisions could change rapidly! For older students, many of whom are likely to have undergone numerous rejections through life, rejecting first before the other person does it to you could help protect self-esteem. Balanced against this of

course is the obvious desire to have the person strongly involved in the selection of Circle members.

It came across that the best decisions on Circles were made in partnership with everyone's views taken into account and a consensus emerging – although this may have meant over-riding the student's choices where other aspects were seen as more important than student choice. It was also apparent that the membership of Circles needed to continually change as relationships changed, students dropped out and others emerged as potential members, and unexpected impacts occurred requiring Circles to change.

Size of the Circle:

While there was no clear ideal Circle size, it seemed that about 5-6 people was the preferred number. If the Circles were too big, relationships tended to be less personal and the process a bit cumbersome. On the other hand, if the numbers fell too low, a loss on one individual could have a major impact on how the Circle operated and there was less 'padding' to absorb the feelings of loss through the support of those remaining. This is probably quite reflective of normal relationships. If one has 5-6 close friends and one moves away this is sad but not devastating. On the other hand, a single friend's move could have a major impact.

Wider Possibilities of Circles

Students with disabilities are clearly not the only students to have relationship difficulties. It has been shown that in average classrooms, around 5% (1 in 20) students report having no friends (Heiman, 2000). Depression and suicide amongst teenagers is often reported as highly related to relationship issues so the problem is an extremely serious one. When this was raised in interviews, there was a general belief that the Circles @ School was a concept that could have broader utility than just

disability. However, as was mentioned in interviews about framing for students with a disability, how it was framed would be critical to its success with mainstream students. It would need to be framed around academic or sporting assistance, or through promoting group tasks that required cooperative behaviour by all involved. This would seem to be an area where the input of the students would be particularly valuable. They are the ones with the knowledge of the important social nuances, the underlying dynamics associated with rejection of individuals and could suggest ways for adults to become involved that would not engender further hostility. Overall, it is apparent that Circles @ School has considerable potential for building relationships more broadly than in the current program.

Parent Circles

As part of the Circles @ School, all parents were strongly encouraged to develop a Parent Circle. Membership of this Circle was determined by the parent, who approached the individuals involved with the assistance of the facilitator where needed. The Parent Circle could not include other parents of children with a disability. The rationale for the Parent Circle was that parents of children with a disability are often isolated and faced with taking on a large range of tasks over and above the normal ones of raising a child. It is very common for their main support to come from other parents of children with a disability who share common pressures and have an immediate understanding of the many problems experienced. It was felt that if parents could gain support from other people in their network their support structure could grow and the Circle members without a child with a disability would gain a much greater insight into the pressures faced. In particular, it was hoped that relationships with parents of other students at the school would develop so that the possibility of invitations outside of school might increase – play dates, school drop offs, party

invitations etc. In addition, if relationships were developed with other parents of students, there was potential for allies to develop in support of the student's inclusion. From interviews, the overall reaction of parents was that the Parent Circle idea felt forced and unnatural and that they wouldn't have done it unless it was part of Circles@School requirements. On the other hand, several parents reported that on reflection, the Parent Circle had been quite helpful and that supportive relationships had developed as a result of their regular meetings with the Parent Circle. In particular, the ability to express frustration and even anger within a supportive and trusted environment was seen as quite helpful for letting anger go to better calmly resolve issues with a system later. Parent Circles also provided an opportunity to discuss and develop strategies for resolving issues constructively. However some parents had developed extensive networks on their own and did not see any particular added advantage of a Parent Circle, even though they viewed the members of their Circle very positively.

While it was not possible to interview members of the parent circles due to time limitations, comments from some of them indicated that the experience of sharing experiences had opened their eyes to some of the extremely trying experiences undergone by parents of children with a disability – almost all of these trying experiences being associated with their interactions with societal systems rather than difficulties with the child with a disability.

Overall, it would seem that Parent Circles are a useful addition to Circles @ School but not an essential component of the success of the Circles@School project. However, caution is needed here as it was not possible to interview members of parent circles. It may be that their perspective might build a strong case for putting additional thought and effort into the development and maintenance of Parent Circles as an important strategy for developing relationships outside of the school. Certainly, the clear benefit

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received by some families from the Parent Circles indicate that it is a worthwhile addition to Circles@School.

Conclusions

Circles @ School is a powerful, effective approach to building and extending social relationships at school. It requires the resources of a capable facilitator to get it established and maintained; a receptive school staff and positive school leadership, and families willing to engage positively with the school. It is fundamentally built around partnerships as the key to its success. Partnerships of the school with the families of the student with a disability; partnerships within school so that there is a lot of collaboration between staff; partnerships with students who are willing to engage and support the inclusion of a peer, partnerships of school community parents and partnerships with the facilitator across all groups. The fact that the Circles@School project trial was across multiple schools, a wide age range, upper and lower school and over many families -- indicates that the model is robust and flexible. The fact that everyone interviewed supported the Circles@School project and the positive results were so widespread indicates that the model could be introduced elsewhere with similar results. It also has capacity to be used with other students who are socially isolated due to other factors such as ethnicity or low social skills. However, the model would need to be looked at sensitively in terms of how it was framed to ensure that it did not unintentionally add an additional burden on the self-esteem of individuals. The program does need resources. A facilitator is probably going to be needed at a school on an ongoing basis although some school staff interviewed thought that the level of support might be able to be steadily reduced as the program becomes firmly established in the school. However, relationships and schools are in a continual state of change so a program succeeding one day could be undergoing stresses the next.

Without the support of a facilitator to resolve such problems, it is almost certain that the system would fail over time. While it was outside of this evaluation to do a cost benefit analysis, it comes across as a very cheap way to transform lives. It clearly reduced the pressure on families markedly to know that their son or daughter was actively being supported in relationships and highly likely to be protected from bullying as a result. The student with a disability was gaining the social skills to build and maintain relationships, which have been shown to be one of the major factors in job success later in life. Perhaps most importantly, the other students have learned how to relate to a person with a disability and gain real friendships – which would never have been possible with a segregated environment, and much less likely without the Circles @ School.

This program needs to be applauded as a very worthy innovation and supported into the future.

Recommendations for the future:

1. The funding for Circles@School should be continued.

It is clear from this evaluation that Circles @ School is a powerful model to enhance the social inclusion of students with a disability in mainstream education. It has shown the capacity to transform the school experiences for the student and family as well as impact on the attitudes and beliefs of a new generation of students who will take these attitudes out into the wider world. It also has had the effect of softening the relationship between school and family in some situations where friction was apparent before the Circle. On a wider basis the approach put inclusion clearly on the agenda not only for the school but for individual staff who were engaging with social inclusion and how to enhance it, where they might have been less engaged prior to Circles @ School. It was a joy to talk to teachers who were inspired with what they were doing

around inclusion and implementing many creative adaptations and cooperative approaches in a school. A clear overall impact was a genuine increase in general positivity and expectation around inclusion that I do not believe would have been so clear without the Circles @ School. However, this evaluation was conducted when the program had only been in operation for a relatively short period. There was considerable adaptation occurring from experience gained and it is certain that with further experience, many more improvements will occur. It is essential that the program funding be continued to allow these important further improvements to be made that will ultimately save money through the finessing of the program processes. The program would need to run for 3-5 years to fully research the program possibilities.

2. Restrictions on NDIS funding for Circles initiatives be removed.

In discussion with the steering group, it was apparent that the school system was seen as being outside of the funding parameters for NDIS, so programs such as this could not be supported under that program. This is clearly illogical and would dramatically impact on the potential of the NDIS to benefit school-aged children. With the majority of relationships at this age occurring through school, to deny support to establish and maintain such relationships just does not make sense. It is strongly recommended that this restriction of NDIS guidelines be removed as a matter of priority.

3. Circles @ School be trialled with other groups that may experience social isolation.

The success of this initiative with students with a disability indicates that it should produce similar outcomes for other students who are in danger of social isolation. Newly arrived immigrants, students with English as a second language and Aboriginal students are possible examples as well as mainstream students with low social skills.

However such an expansion would seem to be outside of the capacity of the Community Living Project that implemented this program.

4. An implementation structure be written up to guide future implementations

For the future, it is recommended that an implementation structure be written up to be given to a school to increase their understanding of what is involved and provide a basis for negotiating individual changes relevant to the school. Flexibility is critical, but a written structure can provide a format for consideration and adaptation – or direct implementation if the school is happy with it. This should save some time for the school and facilitator.

5. The facilitator is an essential component of the initiative.

The facilitator is critical to the process and there was a clear consensus on this. The current facilitator was thought of very highly and particular attributes were knowledge of the school system; ability to work easily with families, children and school staff; have a good knowledge of inclusion and sensitivity to subtle exclusion occurring unconsciously; and high commitment to the program. While any individual will bring different elements to such a position, in selection it would seem that these characteristics should be looked for.

6. Parent Circles be encouraged as a useful addition.

Parent Circles are a useful addition for many families, but it is not recommended that they be insisted upon – but still highly recommended as many parents might not be willing to try them without encouragement. They could perhaps be renamed as ‘parent allies’ or left without a name to make them seem more natural.

7. The description of the Circles@School project is critical. Best framed as academic support.

A consideration that was raised by students that is particularly important for high school is the 'framing' of support. At high school, self esteem and how you are viewed by others tends to overwhelm academic or other considerations. Getting academic support from a peer has a very different image to having a friendship support group. Ending up in detention like your peers may be more important than making 'allowances' for a student with a disability that could be seen as 'unfair' by peers. Sitting next to an aide has a very different impact to sitting next to another student with occasional input from a teacher and aide. These are subtleties that students are much more highly sensitised to than adults so we have much to learn from students as to how we might build social inclusion. This might mean that the concept of Circles @ School might need to be re-framed as 'student co-support' or 'ways to work together'. I am sure that others could come up with better names, but the point is one that should not be lost in the future.

8. Further work is needed to extend relationships beyond the school environment

Social relationships outside of school are difficult. This requires a major leap from sharing the class and playground to sharing life outside. Every student has a small number of friends to share life outside of school so many students are left out of any individual's circle of close friends – but most students have at least some friends that extend beyond the school gate. Unfortunately, it has been found that often students with a disability can miss out on this extension of relationship. Further work on the Parent Circles and building relationships with other families at the school could be an important strategy that would seem to have real potential, although time limitations meant that this aspect was insufficiently explored in this evaluation.

Broader concepts of inclusion and how they could be used to increase the spread of relationships outside of the school will be considered in part 2 of this report.

9. A demonstration school:

One aspect of the current trial was that the program was run over numerous schools that were separated geographically. This meant that the facilitator had large distances to travel between schools as well as to each of the family homes. Clearly this led to some inefficiencies, transport costs and pressures on the facilitator who was the mother of a young family. An alternative suggested was to have a facilitator work with a few demonstration schools that were fairly close geographically but which could have several students with a disability involved with Circles in each school. In this way the schools could build up considerable expertise in the social and academic inclusion of students with a disability and perhaps even extend the concept to other students experiencing social isolation. The facilitator would have a much greater opportunity to work collaboratively with the school staff and students at the school and so be likely to maximise the impact of the Circle. A particular advantage pointed out was that teachers like to 'see' something in operation rather than learn about it in theory. Hence a demonstration school(s) could provide a venue for other schools to view the process, talk to the teachers and facilitator and hopefully be inspired to try the approach at their school. In this way the process of inclusion of students with a disability could be enhanced overall through the provision of positive models and support to teachers through such an approach. It is recommended that this possibility be looked at for the future expansion of circles @ School.

10. For future implementations, range and geographical considerations need to be considered.

In this initiative, for understandable reasons of wanting to test the extent of usefulness of the initiative, the project covered a very wide range of ages, disabilities, school types and geographical areas. Unfortunately, this also had the effect of seriously increasing the complexity of the initiative with considerable pressure on the facilitator to deal

with a very wide range of complex environments. It is a testament to the capacity of the facilitator in this case that she was able to manage such complexity so well, but in future it is strongly recommended that the level of complexity be reduced. For example, breaking the geographical areas into north and south with different facilitators; facilitators specialising in either primary or high schools (which have very different cultures and issues to address), and limiting the number of schools for a facilitator would make the long term viability of the process much more assured.

Appendix:

Letter to interviewees with list of issues raised for their feedback.

CIRCLES AT SCHOOL

Thank you for participating in the interviews around circles@school.

Following the interviews, all recordings were analysed with individual issues raised by interviewees written on system cards. This resulted in approximately 300 cards. These cards were then initially sorted into broad headings such as 'School Circle', 'Family Circle', 'Facilitator issues' etc. Each of these sets was then further sorted to determine themes that seemed to be emerging.

Attached is the result of that sorting. Please go through the lists to ensure that you feel that issues that you raised have been included, and if you think that I have captured the information accurately as far as you are concerned. Of course there will be issues mentioned that you did not cover as they were raised by others.

Please give feedback on the accuracy as you see it. That is, even if you see it is all okay, please let me know, as that will be part of the validation process. Similarly, if you feel I have missed something that you said, please also let me know.

Following your feedback, we may develop a short survey for distribution to all involved in circles so that we can judge how uniform the views are on major issues raised. Also of course, the information will be condensed into a report with recommendations based on your input.

Thanks again for your participation.

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CIRCLES@SCHOOL

Draft Themes

Rationale

- Circles are a good process to build relationships – relationship starter.
- Intentionality of circle relationships can lead to freely given ones
- Circles can help to teach and generalise social skills of relationships
- Circles can reduce vulnerability of isolated students
- Circles allow all students to have the experience of relationships.
- Circles can teach all students about difference and similarities of humans.
- Circles should lead to greater independence and less dependence on adults.

Setting up Circles

- A written structure on design and implementation would clarify and speed up the process
- Process needs to be flexible to fit school culture and processes.
- Circles not a 'recipe'. Has to be individual to children and school.
- Partnerships between families, school, teachers and facilitator a powerful starting point.
- Everyone needs to 'buy in' including admin staff, other teachers etc.
- Trust is essential to the building of partnerships.
- To (re)build partnerships, everyone needs to "let stuff go"
- Circles most needed years 5-7 and high school
- Circles very important at transitions – particularly to a new school
- In early education circles are not so critical as relationships tend to occur spontaneously.
- Particularly in high school and late primary, a student working 1-1 in a peer-tutoring framework minimises social risk for all and maximises direct interaction.
- Starting 1-1 and expanding might be a good set-up strategy.
- To set up, good to start with some pre-teaching of other student's social issues around difference.
- All students building a personal profile can illustrate how they share similarities and differences.
- Joint development of social stories can help build relationships.
- Good to have a balance of students in circle for 'comfort' and 'stretching'.
- Starting with natural relationships can help build structure for times when relationships start to change.
- In High school, introducing circle members as "helping x with his academic work" very good for minimising social cost to all.
- If used with kids with other issues (e.g. depression, social isolation etc.) then academic framing of circle essential for self esteem.

Circle composition

- About 5-6 seems a good number – can be too big
- Best if chosen by joint decision of family, school and child.
- A range of personalities is best to bring out different aspects of relationships.
- An outgoing or even 'bullying' child can be a good ally in a circle.
- Overly mothering students can hold back independence.
- Gender not a major factor – more personality.
- High status students on circle enhances reputation and safety of a child.

- If child totally in control of choosing circle, can become a power game.
- Schools see potential relationship possibilities that parents may not see.
- Can be advantages in having some older students in circle as 'mentors'.
- Natural 'chemistry' key to successful circle relationships.
- Similar age often best for 'chemistry'.
- Circles should not include another child with a disability except when a strong relationship is already present.
- Having more than one child with a disability in a class tends to result in them being seen as a group and different.
- If students in circle are in the same class with child, more opportunity for inclusion in class tasks and peer tutoring.
- Individual characteristics of ALL circle members need to be considered – not just child.
- Circle membership having the same interests helps.

Maintenance of circles

- Partnerships between family and school very important
- If problems occur, time needs to be spent on rebuilding partnerships
- Needs one or more people in school highly committed to maintaining the circle and relationships.
- Senior management of school needs to be on side, even if not directly involved.
- There may need to be some direct teaching of social skills
- Circle meetings need to be at least once per fortnight.
- If there is a natural connection, circles are more effective.
- If relationships are not developing, may need to 'manufacture' opportunities for interaction (e.g. a card club).
- Working on joint tasks a very powerful strategy to build and strengthen relationships.
- Longer circle sessions can help with relationships.
- If a circle member leaves the school, sometimes relationships can be maintained if helped.
- If teacher, school, circle, SSO and family are together on handling difficult behaviour, then very powerful.
- Children want to be involved in the same tasks as peers.
- Peers working with student can minimise feelings of failure or too difficult.
- Building relationships takes time. "2 years?"
- Good to have continuity of relationships where possible.
- Circles may need time to fit into culture of school.
- Scheduled circle meetings help build relationships.
- Good staff allies and circle can overcome staff who are less supportive.
- SSO can be critically important in building and sustaining circle relationships.
- Once started, circles are easier to maintain.
- Circles may be easier to set up and maintain with younger children.
- Circles could be managed by a school if a system was organised.
- Might need to be supported by a facilitator for at least 2 years.
- All students need to follow rules but flexibility needed.
- Students have a heightened understanding of fairness. Important that rule following, test difficulty are seen as fair by all.

Bullying, safety

- Peer awareness programs may help with bullying.

- Circle seen as a protection against bullying for most if not all.
- Inclusion and circles good protection of student – e.g. against paedophiles or other dangers.
- If relationships are deep, protection against bullying will continue beyond circle.

Reaction of other parents

- Other parents supportive of circle concept.
- Other families informed by facilitator or parent of child.
- No problems from other families.
- Linking of families may be a side effect of circles.

Continuity or expansion of circles to other students

- Circles 'make sense' for students with isolation or social issues.
- Many other students could benefit from circles.
-

Parents

- All families interviewed held a vision of an ordinary life for their child.
- Parents saw community attitudes improving.
- Parents noticed change in attitude of other students with circle.
- Parents would recommend circles to others.
- Parents would like circles to be available for all families.
- Many families experience difficulties around inclusion.
- Not all families provide the necessary support to the partnership around circles.
- Having an articulate supportive parent helps circles.
- Circles can help parents to be less overprotective.
- If parents are readily available to discuss problems circle support easier.
- Trust of parents essential for good partnerships.
- Circles might help families uncertain about including a child in mainstream.

Facilitator -- General

- Strong support for work and skills of facilitator.
- Circles could not be implemented without a designated facilitator.
- Facilitator role pivotal at building links and taking pressure off teachers.
- A designated person would be needed to ensure circles continue over time.
- Key to have one person liaising with teachers, administration, families and circle members.
- Facilitator role could be done within school but would need a designated person with time allocation.
- Facilitator role could be done with time allocation of one day per week or fortnight.

Facilitator – needed skills

- Good communication skills
- Knowledge of school systems and pressures.
- Respectful of schools and processes.
- Has credibility.
- Cool and calm.
- Can work with a range of families.
- Good follow up and hold people accountable for promised actions.
- Reliability.

- Knowledge of inclusion and how it can be implemented.
- Supportive of inclusion in mainstream lessons.
- Asks for and gives feedback.
- Seeks ideas and opinions.
- Collaborative.
- Good relationship with students.
- Committed.
- Flexible.
- Efficient.
- Reflective.
- Good planner.
- Expert knowledge of circles.
- Fits the program to match the school.
- Good at building partnerships.
- Objectivity.
- Confidentiality.
- Has own children.
- Feeds back to families on how it is working at the school.

Process used by facilitator

- Needs to work with culture of school.
- Circles need to be fully agreed on by school before moving forward on implementation.
- A written explanation of circles and the process of implementation would clarify expectations.
- All processes need to be flexible to fit school.
- Patterns of visits, approvals etc. need to be negotiated and clear.
- Some schools want more administrative control than others. Needs to be negotiated.
- Joint meeting with all involved at start might clarify things.
- Larger schools may want more following of procedures than small schools.
- Needs to balance need for natural growth of relationships with needs of school for accountability.
- May not need a facilitator in early years when relationships tend to occur naturally.

School – Attitude

- Without a supportive school, circles could not be implemented.
- Some key senior people need to be on side.
- With a supportive school, positive partnerships with families much more likely.
- Schools are main areas friendships are developed – so school support essential.
- Very positive Teacher or Support Staff can overcome less supportive school.
- If school not supportive, little things continually overlooked.
- Circle not seen as an imposition on the school.
- At least n champion needed at school to make it work.
- Circles could be seen as ‘just another complication’.
- If school supportive of full mainstreaming, circles tend to be easier.
- Supportive attitudes to circle associated with good communication.
- If school very supportive of circles and mainstreaming, may be possible without facilitator.
- Strong inclusive school values helps inclusion and circles.
- If good mentoring programs at school, need for circles may be less.

School processes for circles and inclusion

- 'Disability day'
- Getting everyone together, good communication.
- Continuity of team members helps.
- Suggested BBQ of circle students and their families with teachers and parents of child in circle. To build community. Link to normal school event where parents attend.
- Awareness sessions before starting circle helps others understand the 'why'.
- Partnerships with circle, families and school help with behaviour issues.
- Peer support used in classroom to engage in tasks.
- In High School, key person likely to be form teacher or counsellor.
- School would need extra resources or re-allocated resources to run circles – and skilled people.
- Chemistry of class can influence success.
- Circle implementation needs to be different in different situations, different students.
- If schools, teachers and support staff understand inclusion and circle issues, quality of circle better.
- More than one student with a disability in a class can affect staff mind set.
- Circles not so effective if more than one student with a disability in a class.

Impact on School

- Circle has highlighted dependence and isolation with Support Staff.
- Circle raises awareness of need for social inclusion.
- Relationships often seen as something 'they work out by themselves'. Circles challenge this.
- Circle members can make school and teachers aware of needs of the student – e.g. larger font size.
- School has adjusted classrooms to fit student.
- School has organised a meeting room for students, unlocked doors etc. for circle.
- Circle has made teachers more aware of relationships.
- If staff are away, circle will provide support to student.
- Circle is providing a safeguard against bad things happening at school.
- Circle has made school focus on relationships. May not have happened without it.

Demonstration School

With the amount of travel by the facilitator and the spread over five schools and six families, alternative arrangements were suggested. One in particular, was the idea of 'demonstration schools'. That is a school with a strong support from the idea of implementing circles would be worked with to develop several circles, and their experience used to mentor other teachers and provide a model for other schools.

- Great idea.
- Could allow whole school implementation.
- Would be great to observe a model school and learn from it.
- Individuality of circles may make it hard to easily implement a model in another school.
- Using demonstration schools may allow some schools to ignore the issues of inclusion and relationships.
- Good to do both public and private schools.

Teachers and Support Staff

- Inclusion and circles have changed the way that teachers work:
 - Adjustments to curriculum
 - Adjustments to assessments.
 - High sensitivity to not treating child as different.
 - Teachers start to see the 'big picture' of what is important.
 - Children demonstrate to teacher how child can be included in tasks.
 - Teachers are more aware of how social isolation and failure can lead to depression and low self-esteem.
- Not all teachers make adjustments.
- Supportive teachers can change the life of a child.

IMPACT OF CIRCLES

Relationships in school

- Good relation ship with circle members
- Child normally with at least one of circle.
- Relationships at school have broadened outside circle
- Those without circle always alone
- Because of circle child is never alone.
- Relationships would not have happened without circle.
- Set circle times ensure that relationships occur.
- "We see the impact in the yard".
- More conversations, joining due to circle.
- Most relationships still at school for some children.
- Circle assists what happens naturally.
- "He now has some mates".
- Other students come up spontaneously.

Relationships outside of school

- Relationships have expanded outside school.
- Some play dates.
- Students went on arranged out of school activities.
- Some old relationships reconnected.
- Invited to party "because he's a nice kid".
- Some continuing contact with a child who went to another school.
- Overture by a girl during holiday.
- Some joint activities – bowling, sport.
- Some natural relationships picked up outside of school unrelated to circle.
- Some relationships from previous school continue.

Impact on other children

- Modelling positive contact to other children in public.
- Children adapt game rules to include.
- Good support on camp – taking responsibility.
- Students learn not to over-mother
- Circle helps child and other children.
- Circle learned how to handle difficult behaviour – e.g. stubbornness.

- Circle has helped links with other agencies.
- Circle brings other students out.
- Other students learn how to interact after seeing it modelled by circle.
- Circle has meant other students are aware of disability.
- Sometimes circle can be exclusionary – e.g. “I am one of the circle”.
- Children become aware of importance of relationships for everyone.
- Being in circle has ‘softened’ some difficult students.
- Ha built up relationships so that they all support each other.
- Shows other students that similarities are more important than differences.
- Has broadened school knowledge of child.
- Other children will speak up if teacher is not including child.
- Members of circle set child up to succeed.
- Circle has demonstrated very mature judgements in relation to child.

Standing up for Child

- Bullying occurs with others but not with child in circle.
- Circle would definitely stand up against bullying or teasing.
- No bullying but circle would stand up.
- Circle saw child isolated and stepped in.
- Students will “step in” if program or lesson is not going to work with the child.
- Child used to be blamed for problems caused by others. Less likely with circle.
- Circle provides voice for child who cannot speak.
- Circle may not have increased resilience.
- Having leaders in his circle increases safety.

Change in the child

- Lack of relationships leads to lack of social skills in life.
- Circles build independence in child.
- Circle provides structure for building self-control.
- Circle made school transition much easier.
- “He’s happy at school”. Circle helped this.
- Without belonging, earning is less likely.
- Circle “changes the life of child and other students”.
- Less tantrums when she can’t succeed”. May not be result of circle.
- Circle builds self-esteem and the awareness of other children of how to include.
- Circle helps child learn typical skills.
- Experience of circles increases desire for relationships.
- (Young) child has changed dramatically due to circle.
- Child can now voice opinions about circle and how it should run.
- Has become less bossy about circle members.
- Circle teaches that certain behaviour is not acceptable to friends.
- Has grown in confidence. “Has found her place”.

Change in Teachers

- If older mentors they can take student to next class rather than support worker.
- Circle has helped teachers and students to work out how to include child in class.
- Circles can help schools to understand the subtleties of inclusion.
- School has provided a quiet place for students to meet.
- Circle has led to activities being structured.

- Circle concept excellent for educating others about difference.
- Including children with disabilities changes the attitudes of teachers.
- Circle has helped school plan long term.
- Circle has helped to change mindsets. E.g. building in buddy systems.
- Circle helps us to understand important aspects of relationships. E.g. helping may not be helping.
- Circle has taught us about strengths of other children.
- Discussions have changed from consideration of child to consideration of interactions.
- Ideas from circle are being used with other students.
- Circle has heightened teacher awareness of friendship issues.
- Peer mentoring has resulted from the circle.
- Circle has shown school that expectations are the same but flexibility is needed.
- Circle has encouraged relationships between school, teachers and family.
- Without circle child would tend to be in segregated unit in breaks.
- School has become an extension of home due to great partnership.
- As a result of success of circle, might try with other students in future.
- Circle lets children do things together.
- Other children volunteer to peer tutor.
- Circle has led teacher to using circle members as peer tutors.
- In younger groups, lots of sharing of tasks in lesson.
- Circle has encouraged teacher not to take easier segregated options.
- Circle has encouraged teachers to include child more in curriculum.

Impact on parents

- More hopeful that relationships will develop.
- More positive about future.
- Have learned that other students will become involved.
- Has reduced need for mother to negotiate directly with school.
- Has highlighted issues where previous school has had illegal arrangements.

FAMILY CIRCLES

Forming the circle

- Not allowing parent of a child with a disability was difficult.
- Ultimately good idea to not allow parents of a child with a disability.
- Difficult to choose members of circle – particularly if new to town.
- Did not feel 'natural'.
- Did not feel need for circle support.
- Assumption that parents have a range of issues that need support. May not be true.
- Not sure they are essential.
- Some isolated families may not seek support without encouragement.
- Circle 'not me' but has helped.
- Perhaps could be recommended but not compulsory.

Impact on parent

- Circle meetings good fun.
- Get ideas from circle.
- Good practical support from circle.
- Get to say things that you wouldn't otherwise.

- Can reduce stress by allowing parent to talk over issues.
- Could become a 'bitching circle'.
- Circle can be a sounding board.
- Parent circle may moderate focus on child.
- Parent circle helps facilitator build relationships with family and school.
- Not used for emotional support.
- Good for parents without networks.
- Have opened me up to help from others.
- Hard to decide whom I would trust to be on circle.
- "Has grown on me a bit".

Impact on circle members.

- "Had not realised what parents go through".
- Has built adult relationships with child.
- All family circle member contacted were very positive about the experience.
- May allow people to help without feeling they are interfering.

Ideas on family circle

- Would be good to have circle members with children at the school.
- Would be very helpful if parents of children in the child circle were on the family circle. Might need to wait until child circle well established.
- Would family circle work with non-articulate families?
- If families of circle members on family circle, would get more information on how it was going.
- If families of circle members on family circle, it would help remove any concerns of other families.

BROAD IDEAS

A number of broad ideas were canvassed relating to continuing the circles into the future, alternative means of funding, development of a model under the NDIS and many associated issues such as developing a website. These will be weighed in the final report. It was also canvassed whether this should be a mainstream program for all isolated children or limited to disability, with the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

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