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Introduction

This introductory chapter shows why it is critical that students learn about healthy relationships, resilience and authentic wellbeing, not just for their own lives in the here and now, but also for a future society that maximizes wellbeing for everyone. We also clarify how Circle Solutions differs from other approaches to social and emotional learning, and the theoretical constructions on which it is based.

A Positive Approach

The content of this book is strengths- and solutions-focused – what works for social and emotional learning, building positive relationships and enhancing resilience. You will find chapters on what to do and how to do it that will enable pupils to live more flourishing lives, and give teachers confidence in teaching personal and interpersonal competencies. We begin, however, by detailing why this matters and what is happening for many children and young people at home, at school and in society. This provides a strong rationale for taking action in education to build authentic wellbeing at every level.

Mental Health

Much of the Western world is experiencing a crisis in the mental health of children and young people. There has been a significant increase in anxiety and depression, self-harm, eating disorders and uncontrolled behaviour. This is attributed to a wide range of causes, which include poverty, trauma, social media influences and family breakdown. Many children are living with violence, addiction, abuse and neglect. In the UK, these experiences are now referred to as ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences. Although caring schools and teachers can and do moderate the impact, current priorities in education risk exacerbating negative outcomes for many. This includes the narrowing of the curriculum, high-stakes testing, increasing exclusions, toxic environments, little time to develop positive relationships or teach children ways of being that will enable them to flourish in the future, whatever their academic achievement. Even those who appear to be doing well at school

are often under such pressure to achieve that it reduces their joy in childhood or pleasure in learning. There are indications that, when left to their own devices in higher education, young people who have been 'hot-housed' to pass exams may fail to cope.

Disconnection

Alongside deteriorating mental health, children have increased isolation and loneliness. It is no longer a regular expectation that families go out to play in local parks, meet in community groups or even know their neighbours. Even when they are physically together, people are often on their phones or tablets rather than interacting personally. This lack of social capital is having an impact on both young and old people. There is increased fear of 'the other' – people we don't know and therefore judge to be neither agreeable nor trustworthy. This is especially true if the 'other' person comes from a different ethnic, language or religious group. This heightened fear is circular: it results from disconnection, but also inhibits people in reaching out to each other. Schools are one place where mutual understanding, a sense of connection and having good times together can happen, but only if the ethos supports this. Unfortunately, the young people who most need to feel they belong are not often the academic stars that give the school 'outstanding' ratings and a reputation for 'excellence'. Pupils experiencing complex disadvantage may find it hard to settle down, focus and learn, and are also less likely to be compliant. They may find themselves marginalized or even excluded from mainstream schools. Rejecting pupils not only reduces their access to potential career paths, but also makes them vulnerable to gang membership. Young people who do not have a sense of belonging in school may end up looking to find somewhere where they do feel they matter.

Intergenerational Impact

What happens in schools is not just about academics and economics. It is where pupils learn about themselves, their worth to others and the values they will espouse as adults. Without any formal lessons, this learning still happens every day. It exists in the micro-moments of interaction between teachers and students, between peers, and between school and the community, what is said in meetings and written in newsletters. It exists in what happens in the classroom, the schoolyard and the media. If we want a society in which citizens are caring, compassionate, creative and collaborative, where they are motivated to expand their learning and know how to have healthy relationships and deal well with the challenges in life, then we must put things in place in education that enable this to happen. This is found in the priorities and vision of school leaders, the quality of the school climate, and in social and emotional learning curricula.

What Works in Promoting Resilience and Wellbeing

In the last couple of decades, there has been a welcome move in psychology away from a deficit model, which focuses on diagnosing and treating problems, to exploring what helps people to 'flourish' in their lives.

Although feeling good about yourself and the world around you is part of wellbeing, it is much more than this. Wellbeing does not just exist in the subjective happiness of being successful, rich, attractive and popular, as this is often unsustainable. Authentic wellbeing is more about the quality of relationships, and having a sense of meaning and purpose. It is also being engaged with life and having a degree of self-determination, where we can choose our own path and not feel controlled by others. Those who have these things in place are more able to maintain positive psycho-social functioning and cope when things fall apart.

Personal factors in resilience include a positive outlook and sense of humour, a willingness to talk about issues, problem-solving abilities, confidence, a determination not to give up too soon – and not being overly gender-defined. Feisty, confident girls and men who are willing and able to talk about their feelings are more likely to stay resilient. Protective factors in the environment for children and young people include having someone who believes in the best of you, high expectations from those around you and feeling you belong somewhere.

What is School and Student Wellbeing?

There is acknowledgement that schools have a responsibility for the wellbeing of students, but this often appears to be focused on identifying pupils at risk of mental health problems and speeding up their access to ‘treatment’. Wellbeing is different from welfare or pastoral care in schools. Welfare is a response to individuals who come to the attention of staff because their exceptional needs become apparent. This is usually the province of senior or specialist personnel and requires a specific intervention. A focus on wellbeing by comparison is universal and proactive. It is what is put in place for everyone. Research on student wellbeing summarizes the pathways to wellbeing in education as physical and emotional safety, pro-social values, social and emotional learning, a supportive and caring school community, a strengths-based approach, a sense of purpose and a healthy lifestyle. Such a focus not only helps address mental health issues, but also promotes pro-social and ethical behaviour, academic engagement and learning and also teacher wellbeing. The evidence and rationale for developing wellbeing in schools are now overwhelming.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

In 1996, UNESCO published a report entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. This laid out the four pillars of learning as learning to know, learning to do – which are the meat of the curriculum – and learning to be and learning to live together. There are two ways in which young people learn the latter two pillars. The first is what they see, hear and experience in the social and emotional climate of schools, and the second is the formal learning in social and emotional curricula. Circle Solutions attempts to embrace and foster both. Circles give young people a safe space to consider the diverse social and emotional issues that impact on their lives. Structured activities enable children to think through the fundamentals of relationships together with their peers and begin to see that there are ways to be in the world that make them feel better about themselves and others. The aim is for all participants in Circles to take responsibility for the emotional climate of their class

and create a positive environment for learning. What happens in Circles makes a positive difference, not just for individuals, but also for connection and community.

A Universal Approach

Everyone needs to know what is involved in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship, how to handle conflict when it occurs, and ways to respond when faced with inevitable challenges in life. It is not only children with special needs who struggle with social and emotional learning – academically able pupils often do as well.

It is not only skills that are being addressed in Circles, but also beliefs and perceptions, so it is important that this takes place as an inclusive activity where participants work and talk together. We know that when targeted students are given social skills instructions in a separate group, they learn new skills, but these are not always sustained when they return to the mainstream context: other students will not have changed their perceptions of these individuals, so reinforce earlier behaviour. Even where young people are doing well, we have a duty of care to ensure that they stay that way.

What Works in Promoting Positive Behaviour?

Effective teachers are in charge of classroom situations – well prepared and able to deliver stimulating lessons. This is different from *controlling* students. Imposing external discipline does little to change behaviour over the longer term, although students may learn that they must behave in certain ways to keep out of trouble. This puts a focus on what they can get away with rather than helping them understand that it can be worthwhile to be considerate to others, regardless of who is watching. When young people receive the message that they need to be controlled because they can't control themselves, they will look to others to determine their behaviour rather than make pro-social choices for themselves. Circle Solutions aims to address behaviour from the inside out, not the outside in. This is more likely to lead to sustainable change.

How Circle Solutions Differs from Circle Time

Many people ask what the difference is between Circle Time and Circle Solutions. I have been involved with Circles for many years, working with schools and teachers across the world. Although there are some overlaps with Circle Time, the development of the Circle Solutions framework is in response to perceived critical issues, feedback from participants in schools, and research. Specifically, Circle Solutions has moved beyond an individual skill development model that is often focused on addressing deficits, to one that adopts a collaborative, solution-focused, strengths-based approach. In particular, it promotes group agency to encourage young people to take responsibility for themselves and each other. Specific problems and incidents are never discussed in Circles, only issues and directions for change. The focus away from the personal to a consideration of topics that impact on young lives makes Circles a safer and more comfortable place for both teachers and students. The ASPIRE principles of Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and

Equity sum up this unique approach and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. It is ASPIRE that makes this pedagogy unique, evidence-based and different from Circle Time.

Theoretical Foundations of Circle Solutions

Circle Solutions is based on several ways of thinking about learning, human interaction, wellbeing and the development of pro-social behaviours. The following brief summary is intended to support eclectic practice and guide those who wish to explore these theories more deeply.

Positive Psychology and Solution-focused Approaches

Positive psychology focuses on the study of positive emotions, character strengths and healthy institutions. It researches authentic happiness and wellbeing. Circles helps students identify their diverse strengths and encourages constructive collaboration to deal with everyday issues. An indirect approach, focusing on what is wanted, can work better than a more direct problem-based approach. Instead of bullying, we talk about safety; instead of discussing stealing, we talk about trust.

Social Learning Theory

Much learning occurs in a social context, including watching and hearing others. Circles provides many opportunities for both active and reflective learning, and support the attention skills necessary to maximize observational learning, advocating that the facilitator models behaviours they want pupils to learn.

Eco-systemic Theory

This theory, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), emphasizes that there is rarely a linear cause and effect in human relationships and behaviours. Events, the context in which they occur, interpretations and responses, interact in an accumulative and circular way to produce an outcome at any given time. Circles does not happen in isolation. The skills learnt are generalized and reinforced across the school context.

Social Constructionist Theory

This emphasizes the power of language: what people say and the way they say it create 'realities' for their worlds. Circles actively changes conversations in order to construct more positive ways of seeing the world. It is also helpful for students to understand that some emotions are socially constructed; we feel proud or embarrassed by what our culture determines.

Choice Theory

Choice theory says everyone has a need for love, freedom, power, belonging and fun. Glasser (1997) emphasized the importance of schools exploring ways to meet these needs within a whole-school framework. He highlights the importance of respectful

relationships and that everyone needs to take responsibility for the choices that they make. Circle Solutions puts choice theory into practice.

Moral Development Theories

There are different theoretical approaches to moral development, with varied emphases on justice, fairness and the 'ethic of care'. Being 'good', however, is not simple obedience to authority and conformity to social norms. It involves understanding why we make the choices we do and what is involved in responsibility towards the self and others. Circles provides an opportunity for reflection on these issues, so moral values can be internalized within a sound personal rationale rather than imposed from without. Circle Solutions motivates students to choose prosocial behaviour, whether anyone is watching or not.

Embedding Circle Solutions as a Tool for Wellbeing

We need an education system that is congruent with healthy child development; one that values creativity, play, and the social and emotional growth and needs of every child. Without this, our children will grow impoverished in many areas of life, even if they can pass exams. Wellbeing in education underpins an effective environment for learning and helps to provide the experiences that enable young people to learn healthy relationships, be connected with others and cope with adversity.

Circle Solutions is not a panacea, of course, but it can make all the difference to wellbeing across a school, especially when supported by school leaders, adopted within school policy and given protected time. The ASPIRE principles of Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equity are not only the basis of the Circle Solutions pedagogy, but also encapsulate a framework of values that support whole-school wellbeing: more on this in the next chapter.