

**THE DYNAMICS OF SUPPORT CIRCLES**

**by**

**Dr. Patrick Mackan**

**and**

**Lynn Cormier**

## THE DYNAMICS OF SUPPORT CIRCLES

By Dr. Patrick Mackan and Lynn Cormier

Friendship is what carries us over the waters of life. Everyone needs friends. Human life and growth is meaningless without them. Boys and girls at the earliest of ages know the importance of friends in their lives. A group of grade 4 children in Stratford, Ontario, described the importance of friends in a very simple way:

"They play with us, share with us, help us, cheer us up, care for us, go out of their way to help us, talk to us, make us feel special, stick up for us, and listen to us."

In the normal course of school experience, friendship just seems to happen. Periodically, some child may not make friends easily and steps will be taken to make sure that the child is being included in opportunities that make friendship possible. Sometimes, children arrive in a school from different ethnic or racial backgrounds and the classroom teacher will take special effort to ensure that the stranger is accepted and welcomed into the group. Once involved in regular classroom and school experiences the child has more of the normal opportunities for friendship.

More and more Canadian schools are registering students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The needs and dreams of these students call for support from fellow students. Classmates and schoolmates are invited into the life of the student with disabilities in order to meet the need for acceptance and belonging. The role of a support friend is to enhance that possibility. These support students are responding to the needs and dreams of another human being. They come to know and care about these former strangers and become friends. These support circles of friends increase the enrichment of classroom life and personal growth and provide opportunities for friendship and community involvement. Support circles for students with disabilities are appearing across the entire K to 12 spectrum. In the nursery and K to 3 classes they are less structured, as everybody just seems to be part of the class and all the kids just seem to naturally accept one another and not see too many differences. All children are just part of the class. As grade levels increase, the total interaction of all begins to reveal special needs to be addressed, and it is here that friendship needs to be focused on and the support circle of friends must become more structured.

Although each situation and child is unique, beginning at about grade 4 the support circle has to be intentionally designed. It seems that as children get older they need assistance to understand that their friendship with a

student with challenging needs is vitally important if that person is to be a part of society and have the chance to realize his or her dream.

The establishment of support circles is simply a specific invitation for students to come into the life of another person who needs their particular love and concern in order to grow and develop. Any student can respond to the invitation to come into a support circle because it is a response to another individual and not a response to a specific need that may require a specific type of person to be involved. Support circles just seem to attract people who like people. Very often the most unlikely students consent. It has been the surprised experience of many teachers as to who does answer. In Ottawa, a school troublemaker became the most committed responder to the support circle concept. The more we evidence this type of student involvement, the more we are convinced that the behaviour problem student or the student that has felt rejected in life feels a call to his or her own personhood, to the self rather than the behaviour label by which he or she has become identified. In general, there will be as many reasons why a student answers an invitation to come into a support circle as there are students who respond. The important thing is that students will reply affirmatively. There is something very personal in each of the responses.- What is the basis for this? It may be a value system, a personal experience, a perception of justice, a sense of compassion, or a feeling for what it must mean to be isolated. Some may come forward out their own need to love or even their own need to be loved. They could be fulfilling their own needs. Some regular students seem to have an intuition that sees the person rather than the disability. Some may see the disability first and only later see through it to the person. But whatever, we can never predetermine that quality of the response. The best bet is to just take the responders as they are. It will be this cake mix of motives of reply that will produce beautiful fruit in the growth of the support circle. It will be all these different reasons underlying the response that will energize the circle itself.

To get the right mix of students we must take care not to define the purpose of the circle too specifically. It is best seen as a call into another person's life. It is this that enables all students to come forward. If the circle is proposed around specific needs related to the disability, then only those who have an ability to offer in relation to the need will come forth. Others will feel that they have nothing to offer. So it is not a case of offering anything but friendship itself; simply becoming involved in a person's life. The more it is a response to a disability of handicap, the less it will be the experience of intimate friendship.

The creation of the support circle begins with the story of the person with special needs. Someone who is familiar with the story, and who is

committed to the welcoming and the accepting into the school community, relates the story to a class or some group of students. The nature of the disability itself is merely referred to, as it is not necessary to go into detail at this time. The important thing is the telling of the story that highlights the isolation and segregation that has been in the life of the person or will be in the future of the person's life as a result of not belonging in the regular classroom or mainstream of student life. Here is a person who needs friendship. The situation of the person's life is described in such a way that it will trigger a response in some of the students. There is presented a person who needs welcoming and belonging. Sharing information with the students about the person's life situation and the need for support from others to live a meaningful life will call forth a response. In essence, fellow students are invited to be a part of this certain student's life. Notice that this is not a call for volunteers to help, but a cry to love another person by coming into that person's life. This is an invitation to a relationship.

It is that inner quality of a spiritual nature in the listeners that becomes the seedbed of a response. There is something in the story that speaks to the listener. Sufficient attention has yet to be given to the uniqueness of the individual responses. Our experience at the moment in schools across Canada suggests that the story, once heard, elicits in the listener something that expresses his or her own life experience. Students who join support circles propose knowing what it is like not to be loved, to be alone, to feel not supported, to feel rejected. In Kitchener, Ontario, a behaviour problem student who acted out in bizarre behaviour to gain attention resisted all protestations that he was loved until he experienced the presence in the school of a student with very profound disabilities. When that student was seen to be really accepted and loved, he realized that he, too, was loved and his bizarre behaviour came to a dramatic end. In Ottawa, a very gifted student responded to the support circle concept because she felt that this was going to make a profound difference in the meaning of her own life. In Mississauga, a young man joined the circle because he realized the value of a deep sense of self-worth and he saw in the student with disabilities the possibility of a denial of that student's self-worth. Again and again there is evidence that the response to the invitation to enter into a meaningful personal relationship with another human being comes from a deep need within the self for personal growth and meaning. The support circle relationship is providing a unique environment for learning about self and others that no other school programme is providing. The wisdom of bringing all children together for their schooling is providing a quality education for all students in many dramatic ways.

In most cases, more students respond to the invitation to join a support circle than are going to be required. In one high school in Mississauga, 70

came forward where only 40 were deemed necessary for the forming of five circles. Techniques and methods in forming circles have been developed and address such an issue as this. In this article, the dynamics of circles are being highlighted rather than technique.

The whole process of establishing support circles requires a facilitator if they are to achieve their maximum benefit for the student with challenging needs and the members of the circle themselves. Usually, the facilitator is a staff member of the school community. This could be a teacher assistant, a regular teacher, a special education person, a chaplain or one of the school administrators. In Stratford, the principal acts in this role. In Winnipeg, it is a special education teacher. In Kitchener, it is a teacher assistant. In Mississauga, it is a regular classroom teacher. In Ottawa, a guidance teacher acts as facilitator. In each case, the facilitator volunteered for the task and that is important. The person involved in facilitation must not only see the enormous benefit of the support circle but must also be committed to making it work. A good facilitator will act as yeast for the group which will allow all the ingredients of the group to come to fruition. A poor facilitator can be an oven door slamming, causing the mix to fall and be ineffective. The good facilitator allows the group to empower itself and to take control and responsibility for their role as a support vehicle. The support members are empowered to use their own insights under the guidance of the facilitator.

Once formed, the support circle needs to meet regularly because they themselves have ownership and control of their own group. They need to be working out the dynamics of the circle constantly. They need to talk about the problem-settings that handicap the opportunities for the person with a disability to participate in the fullest way possible. In Winnipeg, the very first thing the support group did was to approach the school administration to ask for a more desirable location for their friend's locker. At the group meeting, the members discuss how they can include their friend in upcoming school events and social get-togethers. They deal with the whole range of situations that would enhance the relationship of the person with disabilities with fellow students and the wider community. They seek ways to broaden the possibilities for friendship. The facilitator, as a representative of the school, assists them in making these things happen. Often, there are initial problems and these need to be discussed and solutions sought. In Ottawa, a student previously labelled trainable mentally retarded and segregated for ten of his school years, had difficulty behaving properly in the school cafeteria. The large grouping of students for lunch completely fascinated him and he would roam all over the cafeteria helping himself to the french fries of others. The support circle discussed the situation and found a simple solution by companioning him with another student that he greatly admired. In North York,

the support circle discussed the screaming and hollering of their friend in the school library. Their simple solution was to take her to a rock concert where screaming and hollering was appropriate behaviour. So no longer performs this way in the library. In Brantford, a support group found that the drooling of their friend was a hindrance to making friends. They decided, with the support of their facilitator, to pinch his nose every time he drooled, and it worked. There is no end to the situations that a support circle can deal with in order for the person with disabilities to enter into a full relationship with the school community. *It is not the student with the disability that is the focus of the support group, but the relationship of that person to others and to the community.* The group supports the relationship and not the person. If the focus is on the person, the tendency of the group will be to help by doing things for the person rather than enhancing the relational skills and opportunities for building friendship and acceptance. The focus on the person, in respect to skill development and academic learning, belongs to the classroom teacher in the same way that it does for all other students. It is the relational aspect of the student's life that is the proper domain of the support circle. The members of the circle may or may not be resources to learning in the classroom itself. All fellow students may be classroom assistants. This a reminder to us that the support circle does not limit other friends in the student's life.

The regular meeting of the support circle has for its agenda the relational issues that arise in the welcoming and accepting of the student with challenging needs into the school community. In addition to this agenda, we have discovered a whole set of dynamics in the lives of the members of the circle themselves. In the dialogue and discernment among the members there evolves a sense of respect and trust. As circle members come to know each other, the possibility of intimacy happens, and trusted friendship comes about. The circle members become friends and some become close friends. The discussions that occur in the support circle meeting reveal the character and personality of each to the other. In an Ottawa meeting the following comments were made:

"Our modelling is so important. What we do he does. Often, when he is bad, we have to accept some responsibility for that. He began being very hyper -- just being here. But being around us has settled him right down and he doesn't needs pills."

"From the beginning, I didn't think that the support circle was anything for me. I was opinionated, quick-tempered, argumentative in class. So how could I teach him to be cool and patient and so on? Now, as a result of being in the support circle I have had to review

my morals, my life, my priorities, my choices. I love him. I wish I wasn't graduating. It has taught me a lot. I realize how much I will miss him."

"I saw him as just different. But now I see him as just like everyone else. I get mad at him like anybody else. His response is that you are fired but through diversion and substitution he quickly reconciles and moves along."

"I am a lot like Jennifer. I couldn't agree on anything. It has taught me a lot. I have learned patience. I have become attached. I will miss him. I even look forward to having lunch with him."

"When I was first accepted into another high school, it was no big deal leaving here, but now I know how much I am going to miss you guys. We should put a person like him in every high school. This is what I will miss about this school."

"Will I ever miss him. He becomes a real part of you. I forget I am talking to him. I was sarcastic and he picked up on it. I hadn't thought I was sarcastic but he picks up on that -- emotions and sarcasm."

"We noticed that he doesn't pronounce 'S'. 'Pitting' for spitting, 'nort' for snort, we have him SSSSSsing."

"Other people ask us how he is doing. They are interested. One group of guys make fun of him, especially in the lunchroom. Kids chastise these kids. Remember, they think that it is cool to insult others."

"His early behaviour was hyped. He has had time to relax and has really settled."

"With proper behaviour with women, the girls are handling it beautifully. 'You are not supposed to do that', they tell him and he stops."

"His co-ordination has really improved. In soccer, he used to look at the ball and kick and miss. Now he just kicks. He even passes the ball and picked up sharing and teamwork. Will try to get him on the badminton and basketball teams next season."

"I see him in each of us. We react also. We feel the same things. My 'make my day' reaction to my sister is the same as his reaction to some people who annoy him."

"I never thought about such people before. I felt sorry but never cared. Now I see him as a special person -- what a difference. I look more at his personality, not the physical him."

"I had known him a little -- have seen him around. I was afraid of him as he was unpredictable and I was scared. When I heard about the support circle I didn't think about getting involved. Now I understand it more. One thing -- I don't take my everyday life for granted. I think of my abilities and reflect on having them and using them."

There are an enormous number of issues here in this dialogue that speak to the utter importance of kids being together in the educational process. It is not the purpose of this article to address specifically that proposition. What we are trying to show here is the revelation of self that support circles foster and the coming to know each other at a deeper level that leads to close and trusting friendships within the circle members themselves. These students in the support circle come to see each other in a new and exciting way. They not only gain insights about their own selves, but they have the privilege of sharing the revelation of the other. That is a dynamic that seems to happen nowhere else in the school experience. It is this relational component that is giving the members of circle a heightened sense of dignity, value and self-worth and thus freeing them to be better students and citizens. In the Christian tradition, one is reminded that the love of another is greatly enhanced when one's own self-worth is more deeply felt. The mutual relationships that develop in the support circle offer unique opportunities for personal growth. Being with others in the circle of friends around the life of a fellow student builds a trust of others in one's life because everyone in the group is concerned about the other. There is an evident lack of selfishness and this leads each to open to the other in a trusting relationship that is non-judgmental, suspicious, jealous or doubting. And it is precisely here that friendship has the possibility of becoming mutual love. This in turn leads to an enormous increase in self-confidence.

In order for a support circle to function well, the members must have an interactive growth among themselves that allows the circle to be energized and enlivened. There must develop a love among themselves that trusts their mutual intervention in the life of the student with disabilities. Otherwise, the circle could disintegrate into a group of individuals who give of themselves



but do not receive anything of value from each other. The personal growth of each person in the circle spins off to the other networks operative in each of their lives. Each brings this new perspective of themselves to their own networks. Parents have remarked how the attitude of their son or daughter has changed. Teachers have noticed profound changes in the students who have taken responsibility for someone else. Each affects a bunch of networks within the school and the community. This somewhat new person, with a sense of joy, peace and worth, comes into a group in a new way and it is very impactful.

Support circles can be too big and likewise too small. Our experience tells us that the optimum size is somewhere between six and ten persons. This is the number that seems best to promote dialogue and personal relationships. To determine the size of membership in the circle or who of the many responders should be selected, it is suggested that some relational event such as a pizza party or play activity be planned that would allow people to get to know each other in the company of the person around whom the circle is to be formed. As a follow-up to such an event, the responders could be asked to express through a poem or some other artistic expression, just why the circle appeals to them. We at the centre for integrated education have used a variety of methods to select the circle members.

The question is often asked, "Is it possible for the person with disabilities to be part of the selection?" This would depend for the most part on the capability of the person to participate. Often, the disability itself or the condition of the person due to long isolation from a normal environment, renders the person powerless to call people. Obviously, there are many situations where it would be most appropriate and proper to have the person involved in the selection.

It is essential, though, that the person with disabilities be seen as a member of the circle and not its focus. The person with challenging needs is not the centre of the circle but very properly part of its circumference. He or she is a full member who has many gifts to bring to it. It is important to recall what was said previously -- that it is the relationships in the person's life that the circle supports. Where better to begin this than in the circle itself? It is the formation of friendship with the person in the circle itself that takes priority over involvement in activities just for the sake of involvement. The developing of this friendship will take time, attention and togetherness. The circle members have to determine how to work all of this out. It will be initiated by the individuals themselves as they plan out their involvement in the life of the person with challenging needs. Often, the person around whom the circle is formed plays a dramatic role in reciprocating love and concern. In the video, "Jenny's Story" we see Jenny herself

responding to the hurt and pain of one of the circle members.

There is something very dramatic taking place in schools where integration is taking place under the banner "All kids belong together." The educational impact of making the school an inclusive community will be dealt with in a future writing. It has become obvious that this philosophy of full integration is providing quality education and life for all students. The development of non-discriminatory attitudes and the recognition of the giftedness of every child is creating a non-threatening and enriching atmosphere in the school community. The focusing on individuals rather than labels or problems is setting all kids free. This gives a sense of joy and a sense of self-worth. There is an aura of love and kids are freed up to learn. "Happy kids learn." The excitement of the discovery of self leads children to want to learn more. Complete integration where all kids belong together and are supported in circles of friendship is creating a new and different school!

Dr. Patrick Mackan is co-director with Dr. Marsha Forest of the Centre for Integrated Education, Frontier College, 35 Jackes Street, Toronto, Ontario.

Lynn Cormier is an associate of the Centre for Integrated Education and community worker with the Kitchener-Waterloo Association for Community Living, Kitchener, Ontario.