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Transitioning Away From Social Emotional Learning Programs to A Well-Being Paradigm

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“Early in the morning, without my mind, can’t take the pain that I face. It is eating me up. Body bag, body bag. How many body bags does it take to make a war? Each bag has a boy or girl from the hood, just another name on the tape to send to their families in a black body bag...Undressing him from head to toe, taking more pictures. Black body bag, black body bag. There he goes in the black body bag. Five thirty-eight, I realize I had an hour to sleep, to get ready for school as I think why me. As I think to myself, I already got a lot of stuff on my mind, only nineteen and seeing a lot of stuff that I don’t need to see.” (Eva 2015)

From Program to Paradigm Shift

A young Black woman I will call “Eva” who lived on the Westside of Chicago shared this poem with me while I interviewed her for a program evaluation examining the potential impacts of a culturally relevant social and emotional learning (SEL) program. After the interview, Eva explained the context for the poem stating that while doing homework late one night, she heard shouting outside her bedroom window in an alleyway a couple of stories down. When Eva peeked out the window, she saw two men shouting at each other, and things quickly escalated as one pulled out a gun and shot the other and ran off. She was the first to call the police and commented that the young man who was shot was alive and breathing for 53 minutes, but the ambulance didn’t arrive until an hour after she called and by then he was dead. With only an hour of sleep, she shared that she still went to school the next day. When I asked her to explain why she decided to attend school after witnessing such a tragedy, she explained that she had the leadership program to look forward to that day and knew the leaders would help her process the pain. She also explained that she promised her mom she would graduate high school. It was during this culturally relevant SEL class that she was encouraged to write the poem that she shared with me during the interview. I was taken back by my encounter with this young woman, not just her experience with a traumatic event, but by the audacity of her hope, her desire to heal, and her drive to reach her dream. I followed up with an administrator at the school and learned later that Eva graduated from high school that year. Despite the positive impacts of the SEL program being evaluated, the school eventually eliminated it to make room for more standardized test preparation. This incident caused me to investigate the pervasiveness of trauma in the lives of young adolescents of color in urban areas and to explore how schools and communities can become places that promote healing, nurture hope, and cultivate thriving in the face of oppression, so that students like Eva can change their

environments. As twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism continue to wreak havoc in the United States, I pondered how education could be repurposed for empowering youth to contribute to not only solving problems on a test but to solving problems in their lives and in the world at large. My journey of discovery began with a global scan to examine school communities doing an exemplary job at engaging marginalized and vulnerable youth, creating the conditions for them to thrive, and helping those dealing with trauma to experience post-traumatic growth. Simply defined, post traumatic growth is the process by which an individual or a community experiences a trauma and undergoes a process that leads to greater empowerment, a sense of purpose, and enhanced relationships. It stunned me when I realized that the insights I learned from these growth-oriented, thriving school communities around the world would become so relevant to public education plagued by the dual pandemics of racial trauma in the U.S. and the subsequent inequitable impacts of COVID-19 to communities of color. Systemic racism in the U.S. is proving to be the pre-existing condition allowing COVID-19 to impact disproportionately communities of color.

A research brief from the Society of Research and Child Development reports that COVID-19 has impacted communities of color more severely. For example, 84% of Latinx parents report that they cannot telework as they are part of the essential workforce working in meatpacking and poultry plants (34%) and agriculture (80%); industries that have become the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreaks. These inequities in the workforce have led to Latinx adults, ages 40–59, being infected at five times the rate of non-Hispanic White people in the same age group. Further, although Native Americans make up 9% of the population in New Mexico, they make up 40% of all the state's COVID-19 cases. The Navajo Nation, which spans New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah, has the highest infection rate in the United States. In addition, the Center for Disease Control reports that although Black Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, they make up 33% of all COVID-19 hospitalizations and 34% of all deaths. Due to systemic racism, people of color in America are disproportionately put in situations that make contracting COVID-19 more likely. This includes employment in essential industries, reliance on public transportation, crowded substandard housing, and being over-represented in correctional facilities. This combined with historical inequities such as high rates of being uninsured, living in food deserts, inequitable access to healthcare, and exposure to environmental toxins heightens the threat to COVID-19 infection. As the current model of education continues to fail our youth, the

inequities in education and subsequently in the life for students of color are becoming even more pronounced as a result of COVID-19.

The combined effects of racial injustice and COVID-19 have created an unprecedented educational landscape. America's Promise Alliance published a report that surveyed 3,300 adolescents ages 13–19 asking about their experiences during COVID-19. The results were startling: 78% reported being chronically disengaged from virtual learning; 30% reported feeling unhappy or depressed, indicating they were not having their basic needs met; and 29% reported that they felt no connection to their school community. Even more startling is the 45% of Black Americans who have lost their jobs since COVID-19 and the adverse psychological impacts on Black students who reported worrying about their family's finances, or the 70% of Black youth who are anxious that they or a family member will contract the virus. Moreover, Native American and Latinx inequities in their ability to access technology have made engaging with online learning a challenge, and some reports suggest that one-third of pre-pandemic reading gains and half of math gains will be lost, further exacerbating the academic achievement in education caused by racism (Society for Research in Child Development Report, September 2020).

Many educators are waiting for the vaccine to hit so they can go back to “normal.” However, research suggests that normal was not faring well for our youth and our youth of color in particular before the epidemic. Disproportionate discipline rates for students of color are at three times the rate of Whites; mislabeling students of color as special education at six times the rates of Whites; and the school to prison pipeline underscore the probable long-term impacts across the lifespan. COVID-19 has amplified the inequitable outcomes and the holes in the community ecosystem that already existed, especially as they relate to people of color suffering from food insecurity, housing instability, inequitable access to health care, and the like. Public education stands at a crossroads, one direction leading to a form of schooling that focuses on preparing students to solve problems on a test, which is quickly becoming obsolete, and another direction that can engage students in authentic education that prepares them to solve problems in their lives and in their community; and such a path may be the true medicine for which the world is waiting. A year ago, a small group of scholar-activists and I sought out the world's best educational ecosystems helping marginalized youth and youth dealing with trauma thrive. We didn't realize then how

relevant these findings would be in a climate where the trauma caused by the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice would plague our educational landscape. Following are insights we learned about building an educational ecosystem of thriving that we gleaned from exemplary communities around the world and how these insights can be applied to our school communities in creating a new and better normal.

This moment in time gives us the ability to construct a new normal, one that expands the goals of education beyond the hyper-focus on unidimensional assessments of academic performance, teaching to the test, and white-washed social and emotional learning. We now have the opportunity to build a community-based education model that allows for self-actualization, community revitalization, genuine academic rigor, and cultural sustainability. But this shift requires a fundamental reset in determining the very purpose of education, which needs to extend beyond motivating youth extrinsically with gold stars, GPAs, and test scores. This paradigm shift requires engaging youth in relevant and intrinsically motivated ways that allows them to build a healthy cultural and ethnic identity while also taking the lead in making their education relevant to solving problems in their community and in the world, using their often overlooked assets and cultural capital. The following synthesizes what we learned from our year of examining best examples of thriving educational ecosystems that exist in school communities around the world. This evidenced-based practice has been remixed with practice-based evidence in developing a framework we call critical well-being that allows all to thrive. It comes from in-depth case studies of school communities grounded in native traditions that nurture staff and student well-being; cultivate critical consciousness in the school community; and produce the fruit of student action aimed at creating social change. We never anticipated how relevant what we learned from these three communities would become in this time of education at the crossroads.

The common denominators across these thriving educational ecosystems include three main tenets: 1) Each included youth and community voice in authentic and transformative ways. In many instances this meant that youth and community voices were engaged in everything from co-creating the mission and vision statements of their education systems to continuing participation in leadership teams and conducting formative assessments using metrics they deemed important. 2) In all the

exemplary sites we found a commitment to nurturing the well-being of staff, students, and community. This often required working across systems to create a web of services that nurtured the minds, bodies, hearts, and spirits of every member of the community in culturally sustaining ways. 3) The educational ecosystems possessed a deep understanding of the impacts of trauma that extended beyond traditional definitions, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and included historical trauma, systemic racism, and various forms of implicit bias and microaggressions that create racial oppression. These combined sites defined a clear vision of what thriving meant to them and how to work together to achieve this. Moreover, they understood the various threats, cultivated the critical consciousness, and took collective action to defend against it. The discussion that follows shows how these tenets of Critical Well-Being played out through a few cases.



Kia Aroha College, a public secondary school (Grades 6–12) located in Otara in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, serves primarily students from Māori and the Pacific Islands. The school is named for the concept of Kia Aroha, meaning “through authentic love and care.” This concept serves as the cornerstone of the school community, which calls itself a whānau or family. The school was designed as a special-character school *with* the community; that is, the community defined the mission and the vision of the school, which then influences everything from job descriptions to the rubrics teachers use to develop lesson plans. This co-designed definition of student success prioritizes developing students who are not just proficient in literacy and numeracy, but are also

bilingual, critically conscious, able to sustain their culture, and contribute to deep advocacy work for their community (the school uses the term Warrior Scholars to encapsulate this focus). To achieve this goal, Maori and Pasifika ways of knowing influence everything from the physical environment, to pedagogy, to the curriculum, and to relationships to create a school environment that affirms and cultivates a strong student cultural identity. At Kia Aroha College, students don't have to adjust to fit in because the school is inherently part of their community and family. Students see themselves reflected in the cultural practices of the school and in the hiring of the staff, including the types of curriculum used.

Kia Aroha focuses its curriculum on helping students develop a critical analysis of the historical and present realities that impact their lives. This experience empowers students with the knowledge and skill to “read the word and the world,” and to understand their role in displacing oppressive policies and practices with more liberating and humanizing ones. These efforts that engage students in culturally sustaining ways not only allow them to engage in rigorous academic discourse but allow them to become self-confident in their identity as individuals and as a community. This collectivist cultural ethic is further cultivated as students learn in small groups with different ages grouped together, often with teaching taking place in their native Maori, Tongan, or Samoan languages. Assessments of student learning are differentiated based on their Maori, Samoan, or Tongan cultural and community backgrounds. At all grade levels, students conduct action research where they collect and analyze data on a problem that they have identified and offer their solutions or recommendations regarding these issues. Grades 10–12 students have offered their research and recommendations to the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, to national academic research and principals' association conferences, and even at international educational conferences such as AERA (American Educational Research Association).

Kia Aroha College has created a school culture of love and compassion aimed at students thriving (as defined by the community) that has continued despite the global pandemic. Since COVID-19, Kia Aroha College has been working to ensure that people in the local community have sufficient food and access to physical and mental health care. This has taken the form of administrators calling families and doing house visits. Haley Milne, Principal of Kia Aroha College said, “We found out quickly that families

were not eating properly during the quarantine so we reallocated our school funds to make sure they had enough to eat.” Through the actions of this school, Kia Aroha has demonstrated that you cannot become part of this community and not have your basic needs met. This unified yet diversified community that some may call a beloved community, proves that the focus of achieving self and community actualization comes from having a foundation where meeting everyone’s basic needs in this community is a given. This focus on nurturing well-being and tying academic rigor to solving community problems both pre-COVID and during COVID was also present in other school communities like Native American Community Academy also known as NACA.



NACA is a school community located in Albuquerque, New Mexico that serves over 60 different tribes. At its core, the school focuses on an academic curriculum aimed at college success, a holistic wellness philosophy, and intentionally anchoring learning in Native Culture and language. Unique to the school’s approach is its focus on engaging students’ minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits using a model they call the NACA Wellness Wheel. The wellness wheel serves as a guiding metaphor derived from native traditions that also call it the medicine wheel. Although many native tribes utilize this concept, it draws primarily from the Lakota ideas of the four directions and applies it to the four dimensions of being human (mind, body, heart, soul). Moreover, NACA uses the wellness wheel model in its interaction with staff and students. With the understanding that the school cannot attend to all aspects of staff and student well-being, the school partners with other community-based organizations to aid in meeting these needs. For example, doctors and dentists offer services to students and

their families at the school through an on-site school-based health center. These partnerships also include connections to organizations that provide access to sweat lodges, and organizations that support students cultivating creative sparks such as writing poetry and engaging in community organizing. Evidence of the school-communities sustainability is that over 30% of the staff consists of alumni that graduated from the school. Other evidence suggests that even if not employed at the school, alumni continue to engage in nurturing community well-being.

One example of the regenerative impact of NACA's model is a 2020 graduate named Jonathan Juarez who started an organization called Fight For Our Lives (FFOL), and since COVID-19 the organization has helped raise money to feed and to provide hygiene products to over 11,000 people all over New Mexico. Other students engage in weekly webinars sharing resources and ideas to help nurture community well-being. NACA helps support families impacted by COVID-19, modeling the idea that a threat to any part of the educational ecosystem threatens all of it. The collective community ethos champions self-actualization in students, enabling them to help their communities become actualized and sustained. This concept continues to build throughout the students' educational experience and by graduation it becomes ingrained in their lifestyle and in their way of being. When I asked education leader Mahpiya Black Elk how the school community created an environment for healing, I was taken aback with his response. He said, "I don't like the word healing because it sounds like a one-time thing and it is over and not needed again. Our people get hurt all the time from the pictures they portray of us on the TV, the policies, and inequities. I prefer the term well-being or wellness, because we need to take care of ourselves and each other in an ongoing way." Whether COVID-19 or some other pandemic or threat facing this community, it has created an ecosystem of growth and thriving worthy of learning from.

Another school we encountered as being an exemplary school community was Kanu O Ka 'Āina New Century Public Charter School (NCPCS) located in Waimea on Hawai'i Island. The school has become more mainstream since its founder and director Dr. Kū Kahakalau left in 2010; however, during her tenure, she was able to procure a full six-year accreditation and built its first platinum LEED certified building. After interviewing several of the alumni of the school and understanding the model that it embodied, we realized that this school might hold the key to deep insights from which

school communities around the world could learn, especially in a time of virtual learning.



Kanu O Ka 'Āina NCPCS was designed to serve students of Native Hawaiian descent from preschool through high school graduation. The school, founded on a Pedagogy of Aloha, is based on unconditional familial love and inclusion being extended to everyone the school serves. Students exhibited this by referring to their teachers not at “Mr.” and “Mrs.” but rather as “Uncle” and “Auntie.” Kanu O Ka 'Āina NCPCS and its forerunner Kanu O Ka 'Āina Hawaiian Academy, a 9–12 school-within-a-public-school, were designed to expose students to a rigorous, culturally-driven curriculum that ties lessons to students’ realities and helps them to develop a strong cultural identity, proficiency in the English and Hawaiian languages, and connection to the land. This includes family and community members teaching master classes to students where they learn traditional Hawaiian songs, dances, and foster other forms of navigational capital. One unique aspect of the school during the 13 years that Dr. Kahakalau served as its director was that more than 50% of the learning happened outside the walls of the school building in remote valleys, on the ocean, utilizing the natural environment, including rivers and estuaries as outdoor learning laboratories.

Kanu O Ka 'Āina graduate Dr. Emalani Case recounted one lesson where the class journeyed to another island to learn the traditional Hawaiian way of sailing from an elder who was a master of this approach. In addition to learning how to sail a double-hulled canoe, students learned the history of their culture, worked together in groups, prepared meals together, and learned songs that enhanced their cultural and linguistic identities. Emalani added that she remembers every single song and lesson taught. I found this statement astounding especially as I was exposed recently to a study suggesting that students being taught to the test were conversely proven to remember only a very small portion of the content after a six month follow up, and in contrast Emalani remembered songs many years after graduating.

Kanu O Ka 'Āina's Pedagogy of Aloha evolved over several decades of action research by Dr. Kahakalau and hundreds of Native Hawaiian co-researchers, including students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members, who identified aloha or reciprocal care and affection as the primary change agent. In addition to familial relations among all stakeholders, Pedagogy of Aloha asserts that the curriculum must be relevant, engaging students in interdisciplinary projects that solve real problems in their community, enabling them to demonstrate proficiencies in literacy, including literacy of the land, numeracy, and cultural identity. This means that students do not learn for learning's sake, but understand their responsibility in applying what they learn to creating stronger families, more resilient communities, and a more sustainable ecosystem.

For example, after more than 7 years of learning in tents, refurbished shipping containers, and other temporary structures, students from preschool to Grade 12 participated in the planning and construction of their first brick and mortar building. This state-of-the-art teaching facility became Hawai'i's first Platinum LEED-certified education building, reflecting the highest standards in "green" building technology. They attained this status by listening to the native elders of the community who wanted the building to reflect Hawaiian culture, a sense of place, and Hawaiian values revolving around sustainability. Students participated in everything from fundraisers, to meetings with architects, to teaching general contractors how to gather rocks following traditional protocol. Students in kindergarten conducted a waste audit to assess the amount and kind of garbage the school created. High schoolers then used that data to create products from the waste. For example, since paper comprised a

sizable amount of waste, they involved the entire school in creating papercrete stepping-stones for their community-accessible food and medicine gardens. With milk being the second most discarded waste, they created milk-based paint, colored with native turmeric dye, which was used to paint the interior of the school – without any toxic smell. In addition to solving problems at their school and in their community, student learning also focused on global issues. Graduates like Naomi Tachera recounted how in science class she learned that popular sunscreens adversely impacted the coral systems in the oceans. This motivated her to create and market a product that was not only chemical-free, but was economical and ecologically sustainable. Students also learned about their history and culture and started to develop a critical consciousness that empowered them to challenge racist policies on the island, with many Kanu graduates known as “civil rights” leaders of their time. Since Kanu O Ka ‘Āina’s start-up in 2000 as the first Hawaiian-focused charter school, Hawai‘i’s charter school law has become more rigid and inflexible, forcing innovative schools like Kanu O Ka ‘Āina to align with irrelevant standards and educational practices that have never worked for its population. Yet efforts continue to provide students a quality education that focuses on contemporary and traditional rigor relevant to student learning styles, needs, and cultural propensities and is fun – an aspect often criticized by mainstream educators who accuse Kanu O Ka ‘Āina students of laughing too much.

Current disengagement of students from a traditional model of schooling focused solely on preparing them for a test, especially during virtual learning, proves ineffective given the 80% who report being disengaged according to the America’s Promise Alliance COVID Report. Further, the assumption that students and their communities don’t hold any knowledge or experience that is relevant to learning is clearly a missed opportunity for engagement and transformation. What if the approach modeled by Kanu O Ka ‘Āina NCPCS holds the key to disrupting this trend of disengagement and replacing it with a more effective model? For example, what if virtual engagement of students was not seen as the sole focus of the “game” of teaching and learning (using a metaphor from football) but rather was seen as the huddle? Many have called for what is coined a “flipped classroom” in which to learn but often this model doesn’t connect to cultivating student voice to promote racial equity. What if the focus of engaging students called for them to identify root issues impacting the well-being of their community and using their cultural knowledge and community assets to

address these issues collaboratively and creatively? What if learning was happening outside in the community and the reflection for further support for action took place online? Some suggest that the creation and reflection of projects that have real world meaning might be a more effective way to assess student learning than standardized tests. What if these standards for academic success could be co-created with the community? In addition, what if community members were invited to share their cultural knowledge and experiences with students (in ways of course that were socially distant and safe)? Further, what if students were involved in creating new institutions that contextualized their learning in real world application and allowed them to experience the tangible work of creating equitable organizations and ecosystems? What if the approach towards reversing the trend of 80% disengagement from online learning was to revamp the goals of teaching and learning and focus on helping students and families rebuild their community ecosystems to champion equity and thriving of all?

Broader Implications for Policy and Practice

- **Students, families, and communities need to be the architects of their own futures. This requires privileging community stories, lived experiences, knowledge, and cultural capital embodied by communities. Districts and schools must ensure that families and communities have space to engage in “socially dreaming” or collectively imagining what education, communal well-being, and critical solidarities look like and must be supported in co-designing these community-based solutions and assessments into independent and existing educational systems.**
- **In addition to engaging student and community voice, districts need to engage community-based organizations and other social service institutions in developing an ecosystem that nurtures the critical well-being of the community. Fueled by a cyclical process of data collection, reflection, planning, and action, these collectives should work in iterative ways that measure “what matters,” and action should be aligned with community accountability structures. In this time of COVID-19, special support needs to be extended to families experiencing economic hardship.**

- Educators must be equipped to engage students with an “Aloha” pedagogy or a *Companero* or familial love that helps them cultivate a critical consciousness of systemic racism, while connecting academic content to curriculum that cultivates a positive cultural identity and promotes community action projects. Educators need to be trained on how to not only help students cope and heal from racial injustice, but engage in critical well-being that addresses and displaces the roots that cause these racial traumas.
- Funding for police and “crime reduction” initiatives at state and local levels needs to be repurposed to fund health, mental health, and youth enrichment programs that are culturally sustaining and empowering to youth and communities.
- There needs to be an increase in investments in school learning resources to ensure that students from under-resourced communities have access to electronic devices and high speed Internet essential for virtual learning.
- Funding for k-12 systems need to be re-imagined so that relying on geographically based tax revenues for public schools doesn’t create the grossly inequitable systems of funding that currently exist.
- School district leaders need to be trained in better understanding trauma and the connections to racial equity and social justice. Districts should articulate an anti-racist resolution (co-developed by community) that can be used to hold it accountable to being applied across all policies, adopted-programs, and other efforts.

Conclusion

We began this year scanning the globe for school communities that demonstrated signs of post-traumatic growth and thriving despite facing extreme challenges; little did we know how relevant these insights could be to public education in this time of extreme crisis. What if the impact of COVID-19 and the current racial injustices was a traumatic experience that could be turned into a post-traumatic growth opportunity for school communities serving students of color? Schools like NACA, Kia Aroha College, and Kanu O Ka ‘Āina NCPCS model something that public education needs to learn from and now is the time to create a movement that shifts from a program to a paradigm change. This change begins with engaging students in ways that intrinsically motivates,

nurtures well-being, sustains culture, and with deep relevance in eradicating racial inequities in their communities and in the world. What if schools understood and practiced the notion that schools exist to serve the communities in which they are located? Does parent and community engagement become an afterthought or the starting point? Do opportunities that foster student voice become programs available for 30 minutes twice a month or does it become part of the core curriculum infused with every lesson that is taught? Stephen J. Gould once asked, “What good is intelligence if not the ability to solve long standing issues creatively?” What if indigenous education offers insights into an ancient model of learning and thriving that holds relevant insights into this contemporary moment? What if this current crisis allows the systems of public education to turn towards the assets and cultural capital present in the students and communities they represent, and what if this is the medicine that public education needs to remedy the inequities it has been perpetuating for centuries? Helping students like Eva to not only heal but to be empowered to transform their environment is a paradigm shift that public education needs to make and never has there been a better time than the present.

Indigenous Education

Racial Equity

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