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Re-thinking Schools, Re-thinking Metaphors

A dialogue from Fielding Graduate University's Doctoral class, Rethinking Schools

Jamillah Richmond, Sharon James, Roel Krabbendam, and Kailina Mills

E-mail: jrichmond@email.fielding.edu, sjames@email.fielding.edu, hkrabbendam@email.fielding.edu, kmills@email.fielding.edu

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Abstract

This article is a transcript from a doctoral class at Fielding Graduate University's Leadership for Change program in a class called "Rethinking Schools." In this session, the students explore the central metaphors and core tenets that undergird our educational paradigms and try to come up with their own pedagogy based on their own unique skills and knowledge. Through dialogue, they move from a mechanistic and linear model to one rooted in circles and spirals and eventually to the ecological and agricultural metaphor of the corn plant.

Keywords: *rethinking schools, metaphors, Indigenous education*

Jamillah Richmond: Welcome, everyone! Thank you all. I guess we're gonna be talking through this and creating our pedagogy. I'm so excited. I've been talking about it all week.

Roel Krabbendam: So how do y'all wanna do this? I was kind of unsure of what we would talk about, so I wrote some stuff. I don't even know if that's helpful since it isn't really about pedagogy. How do you guys want to proceed? Is there an outline or bullet points or something about which topic that could lead us forward?

Jamillah: I mean, I think that we can start with revisiting and having a conversation because I think the question that I posed originally was: What would a pedagogy look like with all of our minds involved? And you, Roel, have the perspective of the structural aspect of it, right? That's how you're rethinking schools. You're not rethinking schools from the perspective of, you know, curriculum. So, what's that? What does it look like? What would a pedagogy look like from each of our perspectives and how we can weave those into one another to create something that would be transformational for schools. Perhaps let's start with what we think is important in the educational environment. How about we go there?

Roel: I'll offer something. There's something in *Teaching Truly* about – it's actually on page 73 – "…there are distinctive Indian styles of thought and communication." And I thought "Woah!" That's pretty profound that people would think differently. We think school is all about what to do differently, and it's made me wonder what that distinctive style of thought was. Then this morning I had this little back and forth with Four Arrows about the idea of 'Mu' and you and the idea of Mu is that it's neither black or white, and it doesn't settle for gray as a compromise – it imagines color. So, there's some kind of synergy that happens. I know I relate those 2 thoughts – that a distinctive style of thought, Indian thought, might somehow relate to the notion of Mu. Four Arrows sent us an article about non-binary thinking, or the dangers of binary thinking. I

think somehow at the heart of that is this idea, that with accepting both binaries instead of going to one or the other, there's this is possibility of synergy, or Mu–of finding something which he calls complimentary, but which, I think is somehow surmounting the limits of the problem.

Jamillah: Okay, so what does that mean to you when you think about space?

Roel: So ... actually, that is a really profound question. I'm not even sure that I've taken that on in that paper I just sent to you all. The paper I just sent you all was more about: How do you make learning experiences more powerful? And now you've given me a really hard question that I have to go away and chew on for a long time. Ugh! I love it!

Jamillah: I mean, it's kind of like the same question though. 'Cause you can create, in your architectural mind, there are spaces that you can design that intentionally separate people. Right? We know this. There are structural ways, structural design ways, to keep people apart and to keep them independent of one another. So, what does that look like? What does that mean for you in structure?

Roel: Well, in the paper, I compare adherence to the straight line and the grid and matrix with the geometry of the circle. Somehow it begins there – this idea that relationship is found in the geometry of the circle, or community is found in the geometry of the circle. It's very hard to find community in the geometry of a matrix. Most schools that we know, and certainly the ones I grew up in, were found on the premise of the grid and on the line. Straight corridors and chairs are arranged in a grid and square classrooms with hard edges, and all of that was… it reinforced a particular relationship between teacher and student. It actually violently countered the idea that students might form a community and that they might learn in community. So, that's the beginning of that thinking – for me, an Indigenous architecture would begin with the circle.

Jamillah: And look at that. You said that was a hard question. You had that shit down in like, 5 seconds. Perfect.

Roel: And that relates directly to the idea of Mu – the idea of, you know, taking binaries, and finding some synergy in it, but anyway.

Kailina Mills (she/her): Well, I think a lot of alternative pedagogies have a center of the building, which might not literally be a circle in terms of physical space, but it's a place in the center. Like in the Reggio approach, in schools that are truly Reggio Emilia, they have their art spaces, which is called the atelier, in the center. All of the other rooms can see and access the atelier from where they are. It's this idea of "We can always go make something to express and communicate our ideas." So that's just one approach, but they have this center, this is the thing that grounds us and brings us all together in the middle and there are all these other ways to break out from there.

Roel: Awesome! That's awesome.

Sharon James: I think to add on if we're talking about, you know, different venues of thought and we're thinking about different outlets… I know Roel mentioned the Indigenous way of thinking, and it's not just one way, and it's not just a straight line, and we think in circular motions. It's continuous. We're allowing students to occupy those spaces, and that's where my dissertation is moving: How do we occupy spaces in this world that we live in now? And how are we allowing students to occupy spaces with self-identity because a lot of that is missing. If you think about it a lot of students are walking in a straight line and what happens if they get off that line, or if they get off track? They never get back on that line. But what would happen if we allowed them to occupy spaces in a circular phase? You know? If they get off track, then they can get back on because that circle is continuous. So, how are we providing that space for them to expand their knowledge? Expand their thinking? And if we're thinking about critical thinking – critical thinking is not one size fits all. Critical thinking is providing different venues for our students. So, with that kind of thinking, you know we always go back to the cornstalk because with the roots of the corn stock – that's us. That's teachers, educators, mentors and then the community. Because we are thinking – as it takes a community to raise a child, it takes a community to educate a child and, you know, trying to get everybody to be part of that root system, that foundation. Then the cornstalk grows, and then the child can be on any kind of track. Providing opportunity, giving opportunity, rather than saying, you know, 'it has to be this way,' or 'you don't have an A in this class, so you're not smart enough.' What would happen if we allowed them to shift any direction they want to go? Then the top will be the *tadidiin* – that's what we call the corn pollen. Once that corn pollen is ready to harvest, it regenerates its leaves, and then that's the child – that's the teachings. It comes out from the *tadidiin*, then it goes back into the earth, and it replants. So

it's a circular process of learning for the child. That's really what we're trying to emphasize with the Indigenous community. I think occupying spaces is a huge part of it because not all students are able to make that space, to take that space, because they're not allowed to. So just kind of opening up that conversation.

Roel: The image of every person being almost like a fount of future seeds – it was really powerful, like there's no waste there. There's no loss there. There's no line there, really, except upward. It's just everyone as a source of future thriving and that is so counter to the idea that you've got to flagellate yourself in order to somehow become someone of accomplishment and worthy of, you know, teaching – or worthy of sowing seeds. That strikes me as an image that we could all really find some nourishment in, especially for this little project.

Sharon: And if you think about it, the corn that comes from the corn – all the harvesting, all the growing – it is used for nourishment. So, there's a place for everybody to be nourished and we're providing that nourishment. And then Indigenous thought is, we're not just thinking about Indigenous children. If you think about it, corn can be nourishing to lots of people of all races, people of all color, people of all backgrounds, people of all different kinds of thinking, so that corn is providing that for everybody else around because it's not just one space. That corn is able to go wherever it needs to. The corn pollen flows wherever it needs to. It's kind of like a big abundance, but it's nourishment for everybody.

Roel: I think it's so interesting that the image comes out of farming and not out of nature. That's sort of…I don't know if that distinction is important, but it is surprising to me. We keep talking about Indigenous culture as nature based. But, in fact, the story that strikes me as a very profound one is not nature based – it's agriculture based, which is a kind of…I don't know. Maybe that is a Mu stance between nature as wild and the human urge/need/whatever to build, create, plan, find order, or establish order. It almost feels that it's sort of a Mu position, like, a kind of synergy between that kind of humanistic perspective and a natural perspective.

Sharon: I think, for, you know, Indigenous people, we always honor the earth and the sky, and if you're thinking about it, the roots come from the earth. That's a huge part of nature. That's the Indigenous world view of that, but then the Western view of thought is that nothing grows on it. So therefore, seeds have to be planted. Seeds have to be nurtured in order for them to germinate and grow – kind of merging those two together.

Roel: Now you have to buy the seeds from Monsanto, I believe. Reproduce on their end.

Jamillah: Not in Mexico! They banned GMO seeds for corn.

Roel: I was in Bhutan a few years ago, and there was a whole conference of people, farmers, from Canada that came to make the case against GMOs.

Jamillah: So, when I think of education... I think I live in all of these realms, right? So, when I think of education, when I think of 'What does my school look like? What does my school feel like? What is its smell and taste? What is it?'

Roel: I think it smells like school paste?

Jamillah: No! Domes come to mind, but then, the visual for me is hexagons – I'm really, really emotionally attached to the 5 points.

Roel: Six.

Jamillah: Yes, the six connections and art. I homeschooled my kids and we did Reggio Emilia. So I say, "art is my daughter's first language," and art is everywhere in my home, everywhere. It is the thing that pulls and it is the thing that draws her into other things. So, our connection in our community and our learning is grounded in creativity, and grounded in community, and seeing each person as someone who's meant to give her something, to allow her to be nurtured, and learn and evolve and become this person she's designed to be, right? That also means that her education – she's in public school now – but that also means that her educational experience I have really really really fought to, amidst these boxy structures in the school system, to preserve, and nurture, and allow for her to thrive as an individual within the collective.

Roel: That's really challenging.

Jamillah: It's ... I'm arguing and fighting every single day.

Roel: The idea of assimilation at that age is very powerful.

Jamillah: We push and it doesn't even – it starts very, very early, this idea of assimilation and melting pot, and I fucking despise the melting pot thing that people use. But, yeah, to me when I'm looking at the notes of what everybody is saying, I think hexagons. I don't think in circles because I don't think that we come back. I don't think we start at a point and return back to that point. I think that we start at a point, and we go somewhere, above that, and it's like weaving a tapestry to me, if that makes sense.

Kailina: That's how I think about teaching as well and in the curriculum development work that I do. And that for me that comes out of my work in outdoor education and experiential education because spirals are a huge part of the experiential process. It's about the cycles of the seasons, which is a circular pattern, but each winter you've learned more. And so, you're at this same point in the cycle, but you're deeper in your knowing and each time you spiral you get deeper and closer to whatever it is we're moving towards. You just get deeper. You spiral right? So, it's circular, but it layers on top of each other. That's how I think about teaching, too. I agree with you also, Jamillah, like creativity is the number one thing for me. For critical thinking, that's where it starts, right? As an early childhood teacher who specializes in Reggio Emilia, art, and music, and the '100 languages of children,' all of these ways of expressing are the number one thing because we can have this collective, and yet each person is expressing themselves differently out of the same experience, which is really beautiful. In terms of the space, I love hexagons as well, but also in the classroom that I had the most freedom to physically change, I painted all the walls chalkboard paint, and we made big things that went from ceiling to floor. There were high ceilings in that classroom. Like, we just had no boundaries, right? No, "You can't draw on the walls," or "You can't do this." It was like I wanted every surface and every tool in the classroom to be usable for expression and exploration.

Jamillah: We used to live in a family house. My family owns a property in New York and in our tradition, everybody lives in the same house, so my grandfather died in that house. I remember my daughter's face when I was homeschooling and doing the Reggio stuff. Everything was like a canvas for her – everything and I did not limit that. The girl would like – the oven would get hot, from cooking or whatever, then she would go and she'd get her crayons, and she'd color on it and she'd watch the crayons melt and create this thing on there, and it would trigger the shit out of my family. "Oh, my God!" Or she would get some sharpies, and she would draw on the walls, or use paint and paint on the walls, and they're like, "Oh, my God!" I'm like "You know what? A can of paint is literally like 5 fucking dollars. I don't know why you are all panicking and crayon is washable." Very hilarious. But I think, going into the nature based, I'd never thought of seasons as a circle. I've always thought of it as like... we have 4 seasons technically, or do we? Because each year the seasons are never the same. There is an autumn, but autumn is not the same this year as it was last year. There is a winter, but winter is not the same this year, as it will be next year. So, to me, even in the seasons, it is a spiral, because you are learning something new about or are having a different experience with that season every single day, every single year. To me there are hundreds of seasons, not just the core four that people really cycle through. I love what we're talking about, and I'm just writing down trends of things that I'm hearing.

Sharon: I really like this spiral thinking because that kind of opened up my eyes and, you know, with the Indigenous thinking, it's circular. But what happens? And everybody is talking about things transfer and things change, things evolve, and it's always in a spiral if you really think about it, so that kind of opened up my eyes. I like that, taking the concept from a circle to a spiral, and letting that evolution happen within that spiral, because that's what it is, you know, we spiral in everything.

Kailina: I think that's also a good balance between the Indigenous and the dominant worldviews, right? Dominant worldview views time as linear and Indigenous worldview views time as cyclical. But a spiral is cyclical, it moves in a circular fashion, and since it's layered on top, there's only one direction you can go, so it's kind of linear. I feel like it takes into account both of those things – like the returning piece from Indigenous worldview, and the progression piece from dominant worldview.

Sharon: I like that. It's like we're merging that. Jamillah brought up something about art and I know Kailina did, too. With our program here, because we've had, I don't know if I've mentioned, we've had like a... from where I came, and what I'm inheriting now, the students weren't doing so good. They were burdened with these Fs, Cs, Ds, and Is and a lot of them are wanting to drop out. The advisors are tracking the graduation checklist and finding that the students didn't successfully pass, like Navajo philosophy or Navajo language. So now we're finding out the pieces of the foundational courses that they should have passed, and were allowed to

pass, because they should have been given more chances to pass that, more opportunities. We're saying that that has something to do with identity. Now we're talking about offering courses to teach Navajo language, sort of like immersion courses but without taking the phonological part of it, the grammatical part of it not having them read or write, just conversating: open, welcoming, comfortable conversations where they're allowed to make mistakes, and they're not scolded, and they're not told that they don't talk right, they don't speak right. Just allowing them to do that. Then also with Navajo culture, teaching traditions without religion or without saying, 'This is how you're supposed to be. This is how you should pray,' taking all of that out and giving them more freedom to find their own identity. So that's kind of the conversations that we're having. We're saying that what we're starting to find out is that our students are really talented. So now we're offering weaving courses, moccasin making courses, silver smoking courses, painting courses, and they're free. So, you know, kind of activating that interest for our students. I think it has a lot to do with the arts, too and in these art courses, it'll be infused with some culture and some language, but not too much. So, it's kind of what I thought about while we were talking, but I really like the spiral entirely.

Kailina: I think, too, you saying the courses are free is really important to me because part of the reason people freak out, like your family, Jamillah, when things get destroyed, it's a conditioning of capitalism, right? We exist in this particular economic structure where damaging property is seen as absolutely one of the worst things you can do. And so, thinking about space – offering classes for free and thinking about space is something we can use to help us create to challenge that capitalist paradigm, right? And says, 'This is what humans should be doing with stuff.' Stuff is meant for creation and human development, not for the purpose of being stuff.

Jamillah: Right. Yes. This whole capitalism thing is such, it's really quite a violent thing if you think about it, because paint really is $5 a can. Or like last week my daughter drew on some of her plush characters on her chair at school and the teacher was in a tizzy about it. I was like, 'All it takes is some alcohol. It's a sharpie. Alcohol will get rid of the fucking thing if we're really that panicked about it.' But also, she's going to be sitting in this chair until May, so how about we just leave her the fuck alone, and I'll make sure that she comes in and she cleans it before the end of school. How about we just do that? Like it really isn't like that hard. I think that there's a lot of this capitalism in this creation, this false sense of rigidity. There isn't resilience in these structures, and that's like a funny thing to have these conversations about. I'm again recalling another conversation I had with a teacher 2 weeks ago, because my daughter told him "no," and he's like "I'm 50 years old, and I've been teaching for 30 years, and nobody's ever told me no and been defiant like that," and I was like "Well, now you've met my daughter. She's 10, and she will tell you no all the fucking time." And he's like "But what I was asking her to do wasn't unreasonable." They wanted her to leave the library to go and drop off her computer and come back down to go to the music room. She didn't see the sense in that. It made no sense. It wasn't logical to her, and so she said, "No," because she's like, "Why do I have to go upstairs to come back downstairs. Why can I just bring my computer with me and put it to the corner or set it aside somewhere where it's safe, right? We're going to the music right next door." And he's like, "So I was asking her to do something reasonable. Just go put her computer away," but it wasn't reasonable to her. You're asking her to climb 2 flights of stairs in full winter gear and come back down to go to a class. Does that make sense? He's like "Nobody's ever told me no!" I was like "You've met my child, and she will tell you no. And you keep using this word 'reasonable' as if your perception of 'reasonable' is the only thing that matters, and it doesn't. And I realize that that is hard for you as a 50-year-old man being addressed by a 10-year-old child. But also, I think there's opportunity for growth for all of us, even when you're fucking 50." So, there's a lot of unnecessary rigidity involved, and he threatened to put her in the office for that, too, by the way, which goes into this whole other thing of discipline, right? And what they talk about when they are reviewing the concept of the school to prison pipeline, and how we are forcing and enforcing our rigidity onto these kids with the expectation of their assimilation, and them just shutting up and doing what we tell them to do because we said so because we're older than them, without acknowledging them as people with their own fucking ideas, their own perceptions, their own definitions of what is or is not reasonable.

Roel: Hey Sharon, what's your perspective on discipline?

Sharon: I think with discipline, it's the way we look at it, that it's something that's necessary because we have teachings. We have teachings on the blessing way train of thought, and we also have the teaching of the enemy way thinking of thought and so those two come together. I think for us, we

don't look at it as punishment, we look at it as discipline. I think a lot of us were really raised with strict morals, and that had a lot to do with how we grew up. I know a lot of the older generation, they were brought up really strict where there was punishment. I think now, with this generation, my generation, it's not as strict. I think punishment for people my age is looked at as a negative thing versus back then, like the older generation, they look at it as a positive thing, because they have strict morals and they still stick to those morals. I think if we try to look at it as discipline rather than punishment, I think that's something that we still need. For my own household, you know, we have discipline. My husband and I have discipline within our home, even with each other in our marriage. I think that's how we have a really good system going – discipline is necessary because it's part of the molding process, and that's just how I was raised, I see that with my parents and how they raised us. My dad always said, "Discipline is necessary for ways of knowing in ways of being." Because you can be disciplined in a negative or positive way. The negative is saying, "You're going to grow up to be this. You know you're going to grow up to be successful. If you're not successful, you don't have a space. You don't have a place." But if you're doing it in a positive way, that discipline is making sure that you say your prayers, you are learning your teachings or learning your language, and it's to lead with positive reinforcement of your morals and your upbringing. So that's how I think about it and I think for me discipline is necessary, because it really benefits me. Now, where I'm at with that discipline I don't look at it, as "my parents punished me," or you know, "my father's teachings punished me in a way." It was part of that molding process that's necessary.

Roel: Discipline is sort of proactive.

Kailina: I'm hearing, and correct me if I'm wrong, you're meaning 'discipline' like commitment. That's how I'm hearing it. Like, you are committed to doing your prayers every day, or whatever you've committed to and so, you're disciplined in doing that practice. Is that what you mean?

Sharon: Yeah.

Kailina: Okay. Yeah, it's hard because 'discipline' in our culture in America has been so conflated with the word 'punishment' right? Like, they're almost synonyms. Yesterday I was in Worcester, Massachusetts and I was facilitating the antiracism team's workshop for the New England Lutheran Synod, which was really interesting. And there were people there talking about how you need disciplined prayer. And so, that is just the theme of this weekend, apparently, for me, is thinking about discipline as a committed practice rather than as behavior management or punishment, which is what it's so often conflated with.

Sharon: Yes, I agree. Thank you for pointing that out.

Roel: It's a kind of strength. It's strength building in a way.

Jamillah: Yeah, discipline as punishment is, I think, where a lot of people are with that. But I also think that we need to rethink discipline...what does that mean? And what does that look like? Because discipline, if I'm just looking at the dictionary, because I wanted to read it verbatim, it says, "the practice of training people to obey rules or code or behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience."

Roel: Bleh!

Jamillah: That is not the origin. It's not the original meaning of that word. The Latin term disciplines means student or learner, and I think that we approach it from the–

Roel: That's like 'disciple.'

Jamillah: Yeah, so I think when we approach discipline, we're approaching it from this place of "now," as opposed to seeing that person. But I'm gonna use my kid again: in that moment, in that situation, did she need to get sent to the office? Or was there an opportunity for learning and finding a common understanding? And I think the missed opportunity was that he assumed that because she was younger than him, that she had nothing to teach him, or that there was no room for him to develop any sense of understanding in regard to how she thinks about things. And I think that a lot of times our children are being put into or thrust into situations and environments and people where they see them as people who have no value to add and that they have no contribution. I am vehemently against the idea that our children, simply because they are younger people, do not have something to contribute, or something to give, or something to teach to older people.

Kailina: I agree 100%. And I fight this fight a lot in school with teachers who – yeah, that's their view and it's ageism. We often talk about ageism in this country as discriminatory against the elderly, but I think it works as discrimination against children, too. I've tried to remove language from my

practice, like to any reference that's like, "That's what babies do," right? Or like a school that I know of in Portland, Maine says to their early childhood students who are 3, 4, 5-years-old, they're in preschool, they say, like "This is not a toddler school. This is a school for grown up students." And just like those sorts of things that diminish the value that younger people from babies to toddlers and older bring to community, right? I think that's why I love liberatory education so much and I'm on the Reggio track of that, but I feel like all forms of liberatory education are about self-directed learning and inquiry-based learning instead of the teacher deciding everything. It's like, "You tell me, what do you need to learn about?" That's a broad oversimplification of how it works, but I'm always letting the students brainstorm what they want to study and what they want to do that day. We vote on things, right? I try to make it like I schedule times for things, and they pick as much as possible what to do with that time. Like if it's reading time, it's like "Okay, are we going to do book groups today? Are we gonna do independent reading?" Like letting students drive themselves. Then they also get to practice the skills of decision making, which, because we don't let kids make decisions in the classroom in many schools, we have these people coming out of the K-12 pipeline at 18 years old who have never made a decision for themselves and have no idea what to do. They just flounder around as if they're completely incapable of making a decision. That reminds me of when I went to work in a rural public school here in Maine, I was taking my kindergarten class outside, and it was the first week of school, and we were going to be using this outdoor classroom that I had put together all the time. It was just one of those first week of school routine building activity. We sat in the space. I told them the boundaries of the space, and the basic rules – like we're not gonna hit each other with sticks, and all of those. Then I said, "For the next 30 min since it's our first time in the Fox Woods, you can go out and just explore and see what's here." And all of these kindergarteners just stared at me. And then finally one of them said, "Well, what do we do?" These 5-year-olds! These kindergarteners have already been so conditioned to just do what they're told to do that they did not have the skills, mindset, or ability at that moment to just go play. It was wild to me, so we had to build those skills. I was like, "Well, we can build a fort, or we can build a fairy house, or we can play a game of hide and seek." So, we slowly built those skills and by the end of that school year, their kindergarten year, they had created their own society: there was their own form of currency in the woods, there was a taco shop, there was a spice shop that traded with the taco shop, there were people who went and collected the spices, etc. One day I wrote in my notes that the 2 girls who were collecting the spices for the owner of the spice shop were like "We have to do all the work, and she sits there and does nothing. And what do we get for it?" And in my head, I was like, "Yes! Unionize!" And I just let the kids be. They are capable. They are so freaking capable, and we don't view them that way. I just love seeing what they come up with on their own because it makes me a better person and it makes me think more creatively and helps me to unlearn my own conditioning.

Sharon: It reminds me, Kailina, of the experience I had when I was teaching. These kids had so many routines literally every minute. We only had two 5-minute breaks for restroom and water, but other than that, every single minute was allocated to something. These students were just so…they were like robots. We had no recess blocks, and so I had to sit down with the leadership team and tell them that Arizona has a recess law. We're breaking laws if we're not allowing students to have recess time. There were a lot of teachers, and I was like, "Everybody needs to come and make this argument with me. We're defending our students because they need that play. They need that break. They need that time for themselves." There were only 2 teachers out of like 37 - only 2 teachers that made that argument with me. So what happened was they did their research, they talked to the district, and turns out they needed that recess time. It was neat because then we were able to do 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon. Even during that time my first grader would come up to me, "Miss James, how do I play? What can I do? What do I do?" That's because they weren't allowed to have that freedom, to have that free time. It was really sad. And I'd have to be like, "Go jump on that. Go play on this. Go talk to each other."

Roel: But is it because their environment was so deprived of inspiration? I mean I think about some of these schools in Denmark, where they give them junkyards. Where they literally just have areas filled with, I don't know, 'junk' is the only word I know, and it's an inspiration to curiosity and to exploration. I think nature does the same thing. I see so many schools of just paved parking lots for playgrounds, especially in California. It's horrible. And there's no inspiration there. I can imagine the question, "Now, what do I do?" Because there's just no impetus to do anything. It's horrible. There's nothing there, but a movement to naturalize the playground has really changed how kids

behave outside. They begin to explore. They begin to use nature.

Sharon: Yeah, and it was neat because we saw a difference – we saw a difference in the students when they would come in from recess. They were more energized and more alert. They didn't have so much of a burnout. Then, when I left the district, they went into moving that hour of recess. So, in the morning after they have breakfast, they push them outside to play and then after lunch. They kind of merged it with the breakfast time and the lunch time, but these students, they won't eat in a minute. They won't eat in 5 minutes – they'll eat in 10 or 15 minutes, then they go outside. So technically they're not having that whole 30 min of play, but that was their way of making sure that it didn't interfere with those blocks again, which isn't fair. That was their argument of, you know, "Oh, we're allowing them to do it. We're allowing time for them. They have recess. It's in their breakfast and lunch block." But you know what happens to the students who take 20 min to eat? That happened after I left. I don't know if I make that my fight again. I don't know, but it's really unfortunate for these students. And a lot of them, they really take it as "Oh, we deserve this. We deserve 5-minutes. We deserve 10-minutes." They shouldn't be thinking that way.

Jamillah: Not to mention how detrimental that is on your digestive system to fucking rush to eat so you can go play.

Sharon: Mhm…there's literally teachers that will stand there and say "No. Go back in there and eat." Or they'll be standing where their students put their trays and say, "No. Now go, drink some more milk." So it's…there's a lot.

Kailina: There's a ton of research in addition to the type of play space, like you were talking about, Roel, which is super important. There's also a ton of research about length of time for play, right? Kids don't reach imaginative play – like the dramatic play that they developmentally need and that they need for them to develop critical thinking – until they've been playing for at least half an hour. And then they get to that stage, right? So there's all kinds of research that shows if you really want to promote creativity and critical thinking skills, you need to have a full, uninterrupted hour of play, so even half an hour isn't... it might get their bodies moving, which is good for their ability to learn, but it's not moving them to that imaginative state. In terms of the play space, too, can they imagine that space? On all playgrounds, they'll get to that imaginative space, but some playgrounds prompt it faster than others, right? Natural playgrounds, like you were saying Roel, do that. In outdoor education we call it small parts play where we'll just have maybe some wheelbarrows, or maybe just some sticks, or some logs, or some rocks. They have these small parts that they can manipulate and a stick can be anything, it can be a wand, a stick can be a plane –

Sharon: A sword.

Kailina: A stick can be a doll, a spoon to stir, a stick can be anything. It makes kids…especially in this digital era where our kids are on screens so much more, it really challenges them to imagine in ways that students today aren't challenged. I think that comes back to that creativity, critical thinking piece that we started with at the beginning.

Roel: Kailina, do you have a source for that 1 hour to half hour requirement?[1]

Sharon: It reminds me of the time I broke the rule, and I had my students outside for 50-minutes, which was closer to the bus time and within that 50-minutes, I had a whole marriage take place. So, you're thinking about these kids, allowing them that time to be imaginative.

Jamillah: And get married.

Sharon: And get married! There was a whole wedding. So, I believe that. I can be a source for Kailina with the 'it takes 30-minutes to start activating that imaginative space.'

Roel: You know, what's amazing to me is that among all of us, there is already a very clear idea about what kind of school would be transformational.

Jamillah: Yeah, you know it's funny, because growing up I had a junkyard right next to my house that was in the woods. This is weird. Like it was a wooded area that was unmanaged and unkept, and people just threw their shit into it. And so, us kids would go in there and just do all kinds of incredible things. I remember building. I remember building a treehouse only from resourced materials from the

[1]Louv, Richard. 2008. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books

Hanscom, Angela J. 2016. *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

woods, including rotten nails. I would repurpose nails and wood, and I built a treehouse that you could actually sit on and not fall out of. There was a broken porcelain toilet that was used for something. There are parks like that in New York where they purposefully – well, of course they are a little bit more managed than the one I had, the one I had was like "Don't die. Bye." – but nowadays they have parks like that in New York and they have people there just to make sure the kids don't die. And yeah, it's really common to have things like that in certain parts of Europe. Kids in Indigenous lands all over the world are still playing like this – kids in Africa, kids in Guatemala, kids in Mexico, kids, you know, wherever. There are still children who are playing like this and thinking like this, and creating like this all over the world. Anyway, this has been a really beautiful conversation, and there's been a lot of dancing with these different concepts, and I wonder: how do we move forward with everything and create an incredible pedagogy that thinks about the holistic picture of what our school is, or what a school would look like, and what would the experience would be?

Sharon: I have a question really quick. We're talking about providing space, providing opportunities, freedom to think, to feel, to imagine. So, what would happen if we moved from behavior management to character building or character development. What might that look like for all of us?

Kailina: Well, and I think that term is loaded too. Like, I think we all know what we mean by that in this small group, but that's the term often used by far-right people, right? Punishment is a big part of character development in their view, right?

Roel: But discipline is the same thing, which I don't think we were arguing against. But fine line there, Kailina. I love that.

Jamillah: I am arguing against the current definition of discipline.

Sharon: I think we all are.

Jamillah: So, like 'behavior management' is something that is a loaded fucking term that is used really interestingly. And, oddly enough, behavior is only something that they want to build and develop for other people's kids, not their own. Their kids can do whatever they want and they're victims, and they're innocent, and nothing is wrong with them, but other people's kids need to have stricter enforcement of everything because they want their child to have a bubble where they're safe, and no one else is. But yeah, so what does this look like? What do we do? Where do we go from here?

Kailina: I'm feeling...I'm sensing like two different core things. But I'm feeling like there's the physical space piece which we've talked about and then there's...it feels like the schedule almost? Like, we need to be scheduling plenty of, like, play time and creativity time, or opportunities in our structure for kids to access those, even if it's not on the schedule. I don't know the specifics, but I'm feeling like maybe next week we could talk about more specifically like one of those pieces. And start saying "Okay, we all agree that they need time – unstructured time and creative time. What does that look like? What does the course of a day look like for these students?"

Jamillah: Yes, all right. So what other elements do we want to have here? So far, I've got physical space and a schedule. What other elements are we thinking about?

Roel: We could talk about roles. The way that, you know, what does a parent do? What does a teacher do? What does an administrator do in a place like this that allows it to succeed? And what don't they do?

Sharon: Good open up. We could open up a space for identity, too, because a lot of our conversations were somewhat geared towards identity.

Roel: Sharon, what does that mean? You mean the identity of the child, or the identity development, or where are you headed with that?

Sharon: That could be something that we all agree on, because like we're saying, we give students these spaces, right? They have opportunities for these spaces, but they don't know what to do. They don't know who they are and what they're allowed to do.

Roel: So how to be a student?

Sharon: How to be self-sufficient, not necessarily how to be a student, but "Who am I before I'm a student?"

Jamillah: So, I want to.... Who am I before I'm a student? I think that lives in the conversation that we were having about children being inherently knowledgeable and having their own wisdom and understandings and contributions to the environment, to the instruction, so perhaps that can live in curriculum.

Roel: Wait. There's something really cool here – because Jamillah, what you're saying is the cornstalk will develop on its own in its own way, but we've also talked about discipline and purpose and what is the goal of school? And is there an image of 'right being' that we are striving for culturally? And I think there's a lot to unpack there actually.

Kailina: Well, that brought to mind…this whole agriculture metaphor that we've sprinkled throughout this conversation reminds me of this book that I don't really like, but it's a common thing in education. I forget who wrote it, but it's called, like, *The Gardener and The Carpenter* and the idea is to assess: are you, as a parent or a teacher, a gardener or a carpenter? Are you making it the size of shape you want by cutting it into shape like a carpenter? Or are you tending and nurturing it like a gardener? And it can grow however it grows, which I think is maybe what you're kind of getting at, Roel.

Roel: Now tell me why you don't like it.

Kailina: Well, the book just sucks. I don't mind the metaphor necessarily, but with agriculture, like we've talked about Monsanto and GMOs, we as humans have shaped and directed how things grow. We can predict how our seeds will grow. Like corn as we know it, that's not anything like the wild plant looks like before it was domesticated through our agriculture, right? And that's the same for almost all produce that we eat, like a wild banana looks nothing like the bananas we eat, right? I think that is a good question for us to keep exploring. What are we trying to achieve? I think all of us would probably land more in the gardener category, than the carpenter, but–

Roel: I'm an architect, come on!

Kailina: So, the question is like within the process of letting them grow, how much are we directing and controlling that growth? Are we modifying their genetic code to make GMO bananas? Or are we letting them grow wild? Like how much of a say are we looking to have?

Jamillah: And also – what does that look like? Because I think I've heard all of us, I've given examples, but I think I've heard all of us say that what we think or what we want, rather, as 'discipline' isn't what 'discipline' is today. There is a way to support a child – nurture them and water them. Water them so they can grow, and pollinate, and bear their gifts that also give them guiding principles and ways of looking at perspective. Again, it's easier for me when I think about my human and the 600 humans I teach. I don't go into the library and read these kids' books because I want them to do what the person in the book does or think the way that person does. I just want them to expand themselves into the diverse perspectives that exist and allow what they come in with to be part of that conversation and part of their thinking.

I read a book this week to my fifth graders, called *Magnolia Flower* and it's about an Afro-Cherokee woman and her husband, who's Afro-Indigenous of Africa, and they came together after slavery and the storyteller in this book is the river. I asked the kids, "What do you know about enslavement? What do you know about African Peoples? What do you know about Indigenous Peoples? What do you think about these two – the intersectionality of these 2? First of all, they had no fucking idea what intersectionality meant as fifth graders, and no idea what intersectionality was, so I had to frontload and kind of build that in. Now, "So what do you think about the togetherness of this?" And they said "Oh, well, we know slavery happened. We know the trail of tears, but we don't know anything about the in-between here." One kid out of 75 kids said that Indigenous tribes here owned slaves. One. And so okay, I'm like "Let's now talk about 'slave' versus 'enslaved.' What does that mean? What are we giving, and what are we taking? Let's talk about what else exists. Because you're right, there were tribes that enslaved African Peoples, right? And what else? What more?" Then I introduced that book. It was a whole conversation about people coming together to create freedom and liberation and love one another amidst all of this turmoil and stuff. It was just interesting watching their brains move and weave in their current experiences and their lives into the conversation, and how many of them were like, "I've never heard the perspective of the river, and like thinking about the river as our elder," right? The ocean and the water are our elder, and trees as our elder, and what that means for you being a good ancestor, and you being a good steward for future generations because the water we have today is the water that existed 400 years ago. What does that mean? So, we had a really incredible conversation

with these little people. I think that was a really long-fucking-winded way of me saying that I have 600 kids, and I do not assume that they came with nothing, and so who they are is a part of my instruction, what they know is a part of my instruction, and that is both affirming and challenging. I'm teaching them to cultivate the resilience to be able to see outside of themselves which a lot of kids do not know how to do and I don't know how to boil things down.

Sharon: And it sounds to me, Jamillah, like you know how we, as educators, we're taught to activate background knowledge, activate prior knowledge, but are we really doing that? You know, If we take out the academia, then how are we activating? How are we responding to their prior knowledge? That's kind of what came to my mind.

Sharon: And I like how Kailina put in the Zoom chat "What kind of seed am I? Based on that, in what ways can I grow and thrive?" I love that. I like that analogy of a seed. We're all seeds.

Kailina: Yeah. I mean, I took that from you, Sharon. You said: "Who am I before my role?" Right? And it's like that's the seed, right? That's the potential of you unconditioned. I do think there is conditioning, I mean, we can't help it, that's just being human. You're in a group, whatever group that is. We're going to socialize kids one way or another.

Jamillah: It's inherent to the world they live in.

Kailina: Yeah, so it's like – I want to make my little corn seed the best little corn sprout it can be, and I want to make my little poppy seed the best little poppy flower it can be, right? I don't think, at least for me as an educator, that I have a universal end goal for all of the seeds I tend, all of the children I help nurture. I just want you to be the best of you that you can be, whatever that seed is.

Sharon: And that seed can be a tree. It can be a tomato. It can be a flower. It could be anything it wants to be.

Roel: That's where the idea of carpenter really breaks down because a carpenter is making something in their own image. A gardener is creating the circumstances for whatever that seed is to grow into what it wants to be. It's hard to justify carpenter in that context.

Sharon: I think we should make our class a podcast.

Author Bio

Roel Krabbendam was born in the Netherlands and raised in the United States. A graduate of Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), he is an architect on over $400M of educational projects spanning preschool, K-12 and higher education. He has worked all over the world, including the Sahara Desert of Algeria, the Himalayan foothills of Bhutan and the Amazon Jungle of Peru. With his book *School* (2018, Ludovicus), he proposed a powerful and innovative new approach to public school facilities, and that work is now the basis for his doctoral dissertation at Fielding Graduate University.

Kailina Mills is a doctoral student at Fielding Graduate University in the Leadership for Change program. She received an individualized bachelor's degree from Goddard College with a focus on early childhood education, social justice education, and outdoor & experiential education. She received her M.Ed from Antioch University New England in Early Childhood & Elementary Education. She is interested in liberatory education for early childhood, the Reggio Emilia approach, and place-based education.

Mrs. Sharon James, (Diné), Navajo, is of the Meadows by the Water Edge clan, born for the Mountain Cove Clan, her maternal grandfather is of the Red House Clan, and her paternal grandfather is of the Mexican people Clan. She is a new faculty member of the School of Diné Studies and Education at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona. She is an instructor of Bilingual Education, Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education. She holds an Associates of Arts Degree in Elementary Education with Diné College. She also holds a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education with an emphasis in Navajo Culture and Navajo Language with Diné College. She received a Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education from Arizona State University. She also received a second Masters of Education Degree in ESL and Bilingual Education with an emphasis in Multicultural Education from Northern Arizona University. She is currently a doctoral student in the Leadership for Change program with Fielding Graduate University. Sharon intends to continue to learn traditional ceremonial practices, songs, and prayers to revitalize Navajo teachings, language, and culture. With a balanced integration and continuous learning of Diné and Western education, she aspires to empower, teach, mold,

and guide Diné/Indigenous students, youth, and future generations to sustain and attain traditional knowledge, healing, and academic achievement.

Jamillah Richmond is an Afro-Indigenous mother raising her 10-year-old daughter in Colorado. She has a BA in Education and is currently enrolled at Fielding Graduate University for her EdD in Leadership for Change. She has been influential in developing policies to reduce and address disparities for non-white students within Boulder Valley School District in Boulder, Colorado, including initiatives to remove police officers from schools. She has consulted with schools and school districts to create instructional practices and curricula that are both culturally competent and multicultural. Jamillah is also an activist and advocates for students and their families to help address instances of racism within public schools.