

Like Water to a Rose: Relational Accountability and Holistic Education for Historically Oppressed Peoples in Settler Spaces

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Abstract

This paper considers the theoretical and practice-based implications for *repurposing* mainstream schools in settler colonial societies into community responsive learning institutions capable of providing holistic education for historically oppressed peoples. Drawing from a critical ethnographic case study of the Roses in Concrete Community School (RiC) in East Oakland, California, the article centers the school's educational program, theory of change, and use of critical relationality and relational accountability as core principles for student learning and institutional operations. Using interviews with school stakeholders, observations, and document analysis, the article attempts to highlight lessons for educators who hope to forward similar goals.

Keywords: *holistic education, roses in concrete, community healing, settler colonialism, racial justice, relational accountability, relationality, community responsive education, case study, urban education, social justice, transformation, healing-centered engagement*

*Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack
in the concrete*

*Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk
without having feet*

Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams

It learned 2 breathe fresh air

Long live the rose that grew from concrete

When no one else even cared!

-Tupac Amaru Shakur (1999)

Introduction

Holistic education has been defined as “educating the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—within the context of an interconnecting world” (Miller, 2019a). In what ways, then, does the holistic educator's task shift when working with individuals from historically oppressed or marginalized communities? Though practitioners and scholars may think of holistic education as being in the general interest of creating a more just world, the relationship of holistic education to wider issues of injustice in society and the world remains nebulous. This article attempts to respond

to this lack of specificity by presenting one community's approach to holistic education as a response to the normalization of social and cultural inequity and injustice in education.

In the forward to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), Richard Shaull famously stated that

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present systems and brings about conformity to it, *or* it becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

By this logic, for holistic education to function as a practice of freedom, as opposed to a practice of domination, it cannot ignore situations of oppression. Instead, efforts to forward holistic education must recognize the causes of oppression and take actions that make the pursuit of a fuller humanity possible.

Though liberal democracies extol equality and freedom, it is still common for historically oppressed communities living in such societies to continue to be impacted by systematized inequity in society and in schooling, resulting in a greater likelihood of experiencing poverty and both poorer health and education (Bowleg, 2012; Carter, 2003; McGibbon, 2021; Rothstein, 2017; Quadagno, 1994). In such cases, practices and pedagogies that are utilized to engage students in holistic learning may still be valuable, yet their use may need to be informed by deeper knowledge of community contexts and student needs to have their desired effect. For example, using meditation to support mindfulness may still be appropriate in an impoverished community, yet addressing student

hunger, or other basic needs, is an important precursor to a meditation activity. Ignoring hunger, or other unmet needs, can not only undermine the potential impact of meditation practices but also turn a seemingly helpful practice like meditation into a distraction or even a cruel form of band-aid to a more pressing issue.

According to UNICEF (2023), the child poverty rate from 2019-2021 for school-age children in the U.S. was 26.2%, which resulted in the United States being ranked 35th out of the 39 wealthiest countries. Yet, there is little willingness to address poverty or devise new strategies to alleviate the issues that accompany it on the national level. Instead, since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, school reform has been the primary national strategy used to combat poverty, and schools remain the only institutions charged with providing access to all children regardless of their backgrounds (P.A. Noguera, 2016).

One would think that this dynamic would serve as a compelling reason for schools to adopt holistic approaches to educating the nation's youth. However, most educational reform in the U.S. since NCLB have been rooted in a neoliberal paradigm that de-values the need for public services in healthcare, transportation, and education, and valorizes the benefits of privatization (Hursh, 2007; P.A. Noguera, 2011). These reforms have not encouraged holistic approaches to education and instead have led to an increased emphasis on literacy and mathematics, which are now treated as leading indicators of student success (Foley et al., 2008).

Alongside dominant education reform strategies exist alternative movements that suggest holistic strategies that are attentive to the social, cultural, psychological, and material lives of youth are necessary to meet individual and collective needs. Among these are calls for use of ecological

frameworks to understand and support student safety (Edwards, 2021); greater attentiveness to students' social and emotional needs (Jones & Kahn, 2017), including trauma and out-of-school contexts (Howard et al., 2019); advances in neurobiology that suggest human beings are "biologically cultural" because cultural learning and social-emotional experiences play a critical role in our development throughout our lives, leading to calls for greater intentionality when responding to the biopsychosocial contexts of learning (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019); calls for culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994), culturally responsive (Gay, 2000), and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) approaches to curriculum and pedagogy; calls for the expansion of Ethnic Studies and greater appreciation for the narratives, experiences, and wellbeing of communities of color (Sleeter, 2011; Tintiango-Cubales, 2015); and calls to increase access to linguistically responsive learning, including Indigenous language immersion programs which promote language and culture revitalization alongside education equity, self-determination, and community well-being (McCarty et al., 2021). Far from an exhaustive list, these calls for educational change are linked to research that suggest holistic shifts in U.S. schools would improve educational experiences for historically oppressed and underserved student groups.

With consideration for these calls, how might we then conceptualize holistic education for historically oppressed peoples in societies where longstanding social and cultural inequities persist? This article attempts to identify important considerations for those who hope to answer these questions, specifically in the context of settler colonial societies, like the United States. The purpose of this article is to present findings from a case study of a school, the Roses in Concrete Community School (RiC), which was established to forward holistic education for historically

oppressed peoples, and consider lessons that the school and the study can provide those who hope to advance holistic education for historically oppressed communities in settler colonial societies.

For the sake of this special issue on social justice, equity, and healing as intentional outcomes of holistic education, the project of RiC provides a useful case study from which to explore an attempt to institutionalize holistic education for historically oppressed peoples in settler spaces at the start of the 21st century. Relationality and relational accountability were core principles that shaped RiC's operations, engagement with students, and the school's vision for success. Thus, the case study of RiC is an opportunity to explore the value and practice of relational accountability in holistic education for social justice, and considers the importance and possibility of forwarding anti/decolonial learning through holistic education. Finally, RiC was also an attempt to *repurpose* a mainstream U.S. school into a community responsive learning institution for critical wellbeing, revitalization, and transformation, and therefore an example of holistic and social justice education sharing a common purpose and vision. The central questions guiding this analysis are: 1) How did the RiC conceptualize holistic education for the students and communities it served? 2) How was relationality and relational accountability understood and operationalized at RiC to support holistic learning for students? 3) What lessons does RiC's theory of change provide educators who hope to forward similar goals?

I begin with a literature review of settler colonialism to illustrate the normalization of racialized violence and "dis-membering" (Thiong'o, 2009) in settler spaces and schools. This is followed by a conceptual framework on relationality and relational accountability, concepts that, operationalized through education, can support "re-membering" (Thiong'o, 2009). I then introduce the movement to create RiC as a

community intervention for student and community well-being and a counterapproach to dominant patterns in educational reform. Next, I describe the RiC project and site, and introduce the research study, explaining the methodology and data gathering strategies. In the main findings, I present RiC's framework for holistic engagement and show how the school operationalized relationality and relational accountability to support holistic learning for students. The discussion section considers the viability of applying lessons from RiC to support holistic learning for other historically oppressed communities in settler spaces and contexts.

Race, Violence, and Settler Schooling

In this section, I define and describe settler colonialism and characteristics of settler colonial schooling, which continue to shape patterns in the educational experiences of students in the U.S. today. As noted by Leonardo et al., (2023), for many in the U.S. "the notion that education is part of the colonial project sounds either like an exaggeration or old-fashioned at best. Even worse, suggesting that colonialism *continues* in contemporary schooling becomes a non-starter for many otherwise well-meaning educators and scholars" (p. 103). This is not surprising since most people schooled in the U.S. are not thoroughly educated about colonialism during their K-12 learning experiences and it is uncommon for educator preparation programs to prioritize the topic.

Nonetheless, widespread ignorance of settler colonialism does not negate the status of the U.S. as a settler colonial society. On the contrary, ignorance and denial of the nation's history and origins is a recognized characteristic of settler colonialism: "settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production" (Veracini, 2010, p. 14). I argue that those who intend to educate students "within the context of an interconnecting

world" (Miller, 2019a) (i.e., holistic education), particularly within oppressed and marginalized communities, must understand settler colonialism as a structure and continuing process that reproduces violence toward the very individuals and communities they hope to serve if they are to facilitate holistic learning, healing, or growth.

Settler colonial societies have been described as racial and gendered projects because "they harness race and gender to construct a hierarchy of humankind" (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 60). Also referred to as white settler colonial societies, these nation-states are established through the displacement and erasure of Indigenous peoples, appropriation of Indigenous land (Wolfe, 1999), and at least as far as the past 500 years are concerned, they are carried out by Europeans on non-European soil (Razack, 2002). As both a structure and a continuing process that racializes peoples, settler colonialism has been described as "an inclusive taxonomy" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387) that adjusts and collapses to accommodate and protect the interests and desires of white settlers. Thus, racism and colonialism are inextricably linked, such that "when we explain colonial processes, we really mean the *racio-colonial predicament*" (Leonardo et al., 2023, p. 103).

Settler colonialism normalizes land theft and Indigenous erasure (Wolfe, 2006), typically through ethnic cleansing, genocide, and systems of racialization that are structured by white supremacy and racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000). As Nakano Glenn (2015) wrote in her analysis of settler colonialism as an ongoing structure, racialization has been important for "resolving the contradiction between settler ideologies of freedom, equality, and progress and the unfreedom, inequality, and denial of mobility and citizenship rights" to people of color (p. 70). Those racialized as white would forfeit their ethnic and national identities to participate in and benefit from colonial whiteness and the racial projects that are settler

societies. Importantly, Indigenous erasure also took place through the racialization of Indigenous African peoples, who were enslaved and assigned a location in the racial hierarchy of the settler societies they were trafficked to, thereby “robbed” of their indigeneity (Kelley, 2017, p. 268) and perpetually robbed of belonging. Similarly, Indigenous erasure also took place for peoples in regions colonized by Spanish colonial powers, who would later be labeled Latino/a/x/e or Hispanic. Today, peoples of color continue to be viewed through the narrow lens of the *white settler gaze* (Morrison, 1998; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Paris, 2019), informed by deficit views and negative stereotypes of their cultures, practices, and people. In settler societies, race, especially Blackness, remains a powerful determinant for relationships to the state, land, geography, institutions, and other people (Muhammad, 2019; Smallwood, 2019; Wilkerson, 2020), informing a logic of belonging and entitlement to space, including schools.

Frontier Education

Throughout U.S. history, communities of color have had limited access to education and have experienced unequal and inadequate schooling. For much of the nation’s history, laws were adopted that made it a crime to educate Black people (Banks, 1996) and for hundreds of years, boarding schools were used to assimilate Indigenous peoples through schooling that facilitated cultural erasure (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Racialized schooling has been central to settler colonial projects as a mechanism of “dis-membering” (Thiong’o, 2009) for individuals and communities. In their book, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, Paris and Alim (2017) describe state-sanctioned schooling in the U.S. as a system that has forwarded “the largely assimilationist and often violent white imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in

order to achieve in schools” (p. 1). This cultural and linguistic “dis-membering” has dislocated people from the epistemologies (ways of knowing)¹ ontologies (ways of being), and axiologies (ethics) of their heritage communities, forcibly confining them to an environment that privileges European and Euro-centric—but more specifically, white settler colonial—memory and knowledge. As Fanon (1963) made clear,

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (p. 20)

These characteristics are features of what I have previously (J. Noguera, 2020) referred to as *Frontier Education*, a name for settler colonial schooling systems, structures, practices, processes, and cultures, which operationalize dominant ideologies of the state, sustain and naturalize the settler colonial project and white settler worldview, and function as a form of racecraft (Fields & Fields, 2022) for racial capitalism. Frontier Education is informed by unequal power relations and deficit views of people of color and their communities. The name is inspired by the role of the frontier, a colonial construct, in history and settler societies (Hargreaves, 1982; Naum, 2010; Turner, 2008) and a concept used to justify violence and the dehumanization of non-white people. The frontier is also spatially relevant as frontier spaces have been perceived to be wild and in need of being domesticated and controlled. Not just an historical foundation for schooling in settler societies, I argue that Frontier Education dynamics are continually recreated through hegemonic strains on individuals and the social systems that schools exist within. Frontier Education explains classrooms and schools as frontier sites—spaces of

¹ Epistemology is more accurately understood as a “system of knowing” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257).

conflict where practices that forward the reproductive function of schools are deployed.

Educators who hope to forward holistic education for individuals and communities from historically oppressed backgrounds must understand how schools in settler spaces continue to function as institutions of injustice for communities of color and others who have been the targets of structural, cultural, and direct violence (Galtung, 1990). The normalization of violence toward communities of color in settler colonial societies contributes to a *naturalization* of inequity such that the status quo is one of undeserved suffering for some and unearned privilege for others. Thus, one way that holistic education with the historically oppressed is advanced is by denaturalizing oppression and countering “dis-membering” with processes of

“re-membering,” which requires *critical*² analysis of the status quo. Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) introduced the concept of re-membering in the context of Africa's recovery from colonialism. Re-membering efforts are decolonizing and anticolonial, seeking wholeness and prioritizing recovery, healing, self-determination, and freedom from the colonial gaze. I argue that re-membering in education involves creating conditions where students reconnect with their own minds, bodies, spirits, cultures, and communities. To do so, educators must contend with the crisis of connection (Way et al., 2018)—within people and across communities—produced and sustained by racial capitalism and settler colonial relationships.

I now turn toward Indigenous conceptualizations of relationality and relational accountability, which surfaced as a core theme in the study of RiC, and which the school utilized to remedy the harms of

² In this context, the term “critical” is in alignment with critical theory, which seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave us; to decrease domination and increase freedom (Bohman, 2005). It is also a reminder that not all theories or theorists are critical.

individual and collective dismemberment in their approach to holistic education.

Conceptual Framework: Relationality and Relational Accountability

Relationality is a concept that is present in many Indigenous epistemologies and refers to the belief that reality is constructed from our many relationships and all life is connected and interdependent (McCarty et al., 2022, p. 425). Relationality explains “how the universe is held together” (Wilson & Wilson, 1998, p. 157), because “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality (Wilson, 2008, p. 7). As stated by Moreton-Robinson (2000), “relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self” (p. 16).

Relationality has been described as a way of understanding one's place in the universe, yet a relational stance or worldview is inclusive and accepting of diversity, not oppositional or binary (Martin & Mirraoopa, 2003). Many Indigenous scholars insist this is learned in community through practices of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, cooperation, and social memory (Brayboy et al., 2012; McCarty et al., 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Verbos & Humphries, 2014). As a worldview, relationality calls for connections to be respected and honored and carries implications for how we conduct ourselves; it is a call to be accountable to our relationships. Thus, relational accountability implies living with respect for all our relations, not only *with* awareness of our relationships, but with accountability *to* our relationships. Relationality is a pathway for transforming “the exploitative and damaging outcomes of the prevailing commercial mode of development” (Verbos & Humphries, 2014, p. 2). In a world stricken by hyper-individualism and disregard for people, land, and other living beings—the fragmentation that John Miller (2019b) describes as “permeating

everything” (p. 5)—relationality and relational accountability is a remedy for repair.

Site Description

In 2015, the Roses in Concrete Community School (RiC) opened its doors to students and families in East Oakland, California. The school was founded by education activists who believed that if they could create a school capable of meeting the holistic needs of students, it would act as a catalyst in the transformation and healing of Oakland and inspire educators and schools throughout the country or even the world to take up similar strategies. The school was founded to be a model of education that

no longer requires urban youth and families to escape their communities in order to live, learn, work, and thrive... built with justice and equity at the core of its philosophy and practice,” which was treated as a central component in “breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, racism, violence, and hopelessness facing many students and families in our most economically deprived neighborhoods. (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 19)

The school’s name was inspired by the metaphor of a rose growing in concrete made popular by a poem and book of poetry written by legendary hip hop artist Tupac Amaru Shakur (1999). The founders believed that a rose growing in the lifeless concrete was a perfect metaphor for the living and schooling conditions of their future students. It was also an indication of the kind of mindset and analysis that the founders believed educators must bring into learning spaces if they are to provide the kind of education that the school’s predominantly working-class and poor Black and Latinx students deserve.

According to the school’s charter petition, the founders spent “years meeting with local families,

community leaders and educators in East Oakland, as well as national urban education experts to design a school that will serve as a model to meet the needs of East Oakland and other urban communities” (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 20). They also collaborated with the Alameda County Public Health Department to identify the boundaries of Oakland’s highest need neighborhoods because children and families from those communities were the target population they hoped to serve. This analysis took them to East Oakland, “where a compounding of negative socioeconomic health factors plagued the community,” including 41% of children living in poverty (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 2).

A K-8 school with a student population that grew from fewer than 200 students, in its first year, to approximately 320 students in year five, RiC was granted space on the campus of a school that had been closed many years before. Renovation of the campus and repopulating it with faculty and staff committed to the RiC vision reinforced the school’s founders’ belief that they were not just opening a new school, they were “re-purposing” a traditional school into a community responsive learning center for healing and wellbeing.

In the days prior to the opening of RiC, the staff gathered to prepare the space with smudging and communal prayer to set intentions and call on ancestors for blessings and protection. I was present for the first day staff were allowed inside the building and participated in the circle gathering that lasted more than three hours. In that circle, staff shared their backgrounds, experiences of hurt in traditional schools as students and teachers, and their hopes for the rose garden that RiC was intended to become. When RiC opened in August 2015, a ceremony was held to honor the Indigenous peoples of the area and elders from the African American community. Libations and prayer were offered, and the staff were introduced to students and families. These practices and

ceremonies served as the foundation of RiC's holistic and anti-hegemonic school, seeds of transformation, and a direct counter approach to Frontier Education.

Research Methods of the Study

From 2014 to 2020, I conducted a critical ethnographic case study of the RiC to examine the efforts and practices of the faculty, staff, and leaders. This work began as a pilot study that focused on the intentions of the school's founders when the school was still in its design stage. Afterward, I conducted a dissertation study on RiC, which sought to answer the following research questions: How does a school that is deliberately designed to counter the adverse conditions in a low-income urban community meet the social-emotional and academic needs of the students and communities it serves? What did the work look like in practice for teachers and school leaders? What systems, structures, practices, and processes were used? What obstacles were encountered as they emerged within and outside of the school?

Methodological considerations for the overall study drew from Decolonizing Methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (Brayboy et al., 2012), and Critical Race Methodologies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A thorough discussion of the implications that these methodologies carry is beyond the scope of this article, however each prioritizes decolonization, healing, relationships, reciprocity, and values the experiential knowledge of oppressed and marginalized peoples while challenging dominant ideologies to forward social justice.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection methods used in this study included interviews with the school's founders, leaders, teachers, parents, and other community

members; observations throughout the school, including in classroom lessons, school assemblies and community gatherings, as well as faculty and staff meetings; document analysis; and review of online data on the school. Fieldwork was carried out as a participant-observer, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used with school stakeholders. Analysis of school planning, instructional, and organizational documents, including the school's charter petition, Local Educational Agency (LEA), and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), also inform the analysis in this study.

Several theoretical frames were used in the larger study. For this article, I use healing-centered engagement (HCE) (Ginwright, 2018) to interpret data. A framework for promoting healing and wellbeing, HCE is:

1. Explicitly political, rather than clinical, since well-being is a function of the control and power a person has in their life, building awareness of justice and inequality and providing support to take social action can contribute to overall wellbeing, hopefulness, and optimism.
2. Culturally grounded while intentionally recentering culture as a central feature of wellness, HCE views healing as the restoration of identity. Healing-centered engagement embraces a holistic view of wellbeing, including spiritual domains of health, self-perceptions, racial/ethnic identity, and a sense of belonging.
3. Asset driven and acknowledges that people are more than the worst thing that happened to them. Healing-centered engagement advances a collective view of healing
4. Supports adult providers with their own healing and wellbeing by focusing on

restoring and sustaining those who attempt to serve youth; a heal the healers approach (Ginwright, 2018).

By analyzing RiC data through the lens of HCE, three broad themes emerged, each associated with concepts that I center in the findings below. Relationality and relational accountability were identified across all findings, which formed the basis of this article's assertion that these concepts are important for those who hope to forward holistic education for historically oppressed peoples.

Findings

Turning to the findings of this study, I begin with interview data from the school's founders on their conceptualization of holistic education, their goals for the school, key characteristics of RiC's educational program, and the school's framework for holistic engagement. Next, I show where the strategy that informed RiC's theory of change was learned and argue that it both challenges conventional knowledge on the leading and lagging indicators of student success and reflects the school's effort to facilitate re-membering. Finally, I draw from a framework that was introduced to faculty at RiC during professional development trainings, which critiques the psychological theory known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (1943). I refer to this perspective, which critiques settler patterns of Indigenous erasure and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, as "Maslow's Thievery." The findings are grouped by themes and concepts identified through the coding process. These include a) holistic well-being (theme): educational program (concept); b) anti/decolonial re-membering (theme): leading and lagging indicators (concept); and c) community-responsiveness (theme): Maslow's Thievery (concept).

Holistic Well-Being: The Educational Program

RiC's prioritization of holistic well-being is evident through examination of the intentions of the school's founders, the school's official vision statement, and their framework for engagement with students, all of which make up and inform the school's educational program. During interviews conducted one year before the school opened, I asked members of the school's design team about the meaning of holistic education and its significance to the RiC project. One founder responded:

If you're going to talk about holistic... Indigenous traditions describe the four directions—childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood. They also describe east, west, north, south. The medicine wheel. These are omnipresent in virtually every historical set of Indigenous teachings and the way in which you raise children or train them. For me, holistic education is a simultaneous holding of your attention to the child's mind and emotions, body, and the child's spirit. And every day when you are inside of that institution, all of those things should be nourished (interview, February 28, 2014).

Another founder stated that holistic education involves "attending to the physical, mental, emotional, and psychological components of wellbeing for our students." When asked about its importance, they explained:

It's non-negotiable. There's no way I could only attend to one of them. But again, we're teaching children, not just subjects. And if you're teaching children, as opposed to teaching chemistry or math or reading, then there's a different way of looking at your practice, and practicing. Children are

whole beings. It would be a gross injustice and disservice if I weren't attempting to pay attention to and attend to their whole being. We are attending to children that are whole beings, who operate in different spaces, live in and have been in different contexts and spaces, who are complicated beings... who are evolving beings (interview, February 13, 2014).

A third founder argued that holistic learning involves "removing the hurdles to even get to a place where you can self-actualize." They continued:

Providing safety, shelter, food... once that's all taken care of, then providing an environment where I'm eager to learn, I can go at a healthy pace, and I'm with people that I really like to be around. I see RiC as holistic because we will remove the obstacles that prevent students from focusing and having educators who really believe in the students (interview, February 11, 2014).

When the school's charter was approved, aspects of the ideas articulated by the founders were captured in the school's vision statement. Though I have included a portion of the school's vision in the site description section of this article, the full vision statement provides additional details of RiC's approach to holistic education:

We believe that learning best occurs when students and families feel a sense of safety, stability and agency... schools should be centers of health in our community, [and] we intend to provide an environment that addresses our community's basic physiological and safety needs... and by developing meaningful partnerships that are able to fill basic needs gaps for our students and their families; providing food, shelter, medical care and counseling to secure the

baseline conditions that promote academic achievement, creativity, hope and community health (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 19-20).

A response to patterns of need in the East Oakland community they chose to target, RiC's vision goes on to describe how their approach is operationalized in the classroom:

To translate our vision into the context of school and classroom, we are committed to aligning our practice with Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" ... To do this, we center our vision for instruction and school culture around "Five R's" (Resources, Relationships, Relevance, Rigor, and Responsibility). These five strategies are designed to cultivate students who understand their individual and collective responsibility to be warriors for the cause of equity and justice in our community and the broader global society... This approach to educating urban youth with a critically conscious purpose of transforming our communities is one that research and practice, time and time again, bear out as an essential component of sustained and purposeful instruction (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 20).

The extended vision statement addresses relationships, responsibilities, and relational accountability for students. It also communicates RiC's clear effort to confront inequities and injustices in society and education.

The curriculum for the school emphasized social and emotional support for students, integrated Ethnic Studies into all subjects, embraced a Spanish-English dual immersion structure, maintained a clear emphasis on social justice and well-being, and was strengthened by a robust visual and performing arts program. By bringing together these features, the schools' founders and

educators hoped to cultivate a “culturally and community responsive curriculum” (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 64) and ensure that students are “exposed to images and experiences that reflect and are attentive to their prior knowledge, interests, community, language, and demographics,” (p. 64). These formed part of the school’s strategy for “disrupting hopelessness” and ensuring that students “see themselves as having a more robust sense of self and identity” (p. 64). As one Ethnic Studies teacher explained, “Everything about this class is about socially constructing knowledge and information, which is a cornerstone for Ethnic Studies. You have knowledge via your experience, and your perspective on that experience is knowledge. That is a counter-discourse. It is a key element of Ethnic Studies, which is knowledge of self” (interview, April 16, 2018).

Finally, the RiC strategy for effective student engagement and student achievement was aligned with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need (Figure 1), and specific strategies were identified for each level of the framework.

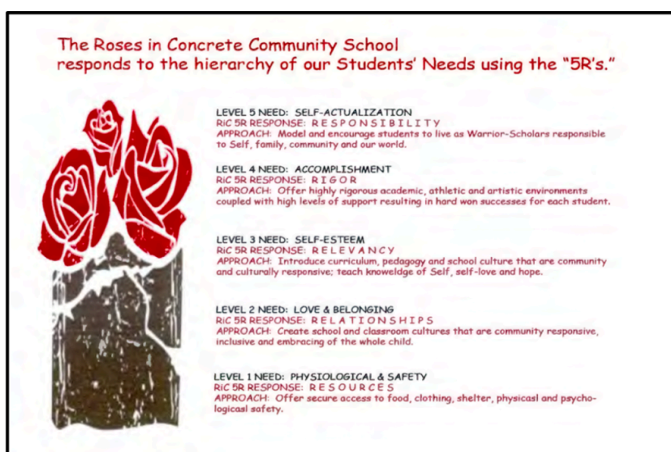


Figure 1

Note: RiC’s visual representation of how RiC responds to student needs using the 5Rs (RiC Charter Petition, 2014), the five core elements of school culture and instruction that align with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Level 1, physiological and safety needs, is associated with resources and basic needs, which are understood through trust and familiarity with families and students, an active community presence, and robust community partnerships. Level 2, love and belonging, is associated with caring relationships with students and attentiveness to the wellbeing and desires of families. RiC hired teachers who were committed to cultural and community responsiveness and parents were empowered to be decision-makers. Level 3, self-esteem needs, is associated with relevancy and was made possible through cultural and community-responsive curricula and pedagogy, as well as through the integration of social-emotional learning strategies. RiC also utilized a feedback system that enabled parents, students, teachers, and administrators to contribute to teacher evaluations. Level 4, accomplishment needs, are associated with rigor. Level 4 was thought to be made possible by addressing the first three levels, which could be leveraged to support students to feel comfortable and confident in rigorous academic environments. Level 5, self-actualization, is associated with responsibility and the spirit of the *warrior scholar*. One of the school’s founders described the warrior scholar as one who develops and utilizes “tools to be successful under this current system, the traditional measures of academic success and achievement, and simultaneously developing and utilizing the tools to question, challenge, and subvert that system” (interview, February 23, 2014). Students would grow into warrior scholars through youth participatory action research (YPAR), presenting the findings from their studies to the community council, and “understanding the importance of education in ‘social justice’ (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 4)

The RiC educational program emphasizes relationality and relational accountability and presents a counter to Frontier Education practices. The educational program, including the vision for

success, their framework and strategy for meeting student and community needs, curricular structures and pedagogical expectations, and the concept of the warrior scholars all comprise the school's approach to community responsive holistic education for East Oakland.

Anti/Decolonial Re-membering: Leading and Lagging Indicators of Student Success

Interviews with RiC's founders revealed that the school was inspired by time spent in a school community in Aotearoa (New Zealand), another settler colonial nation, called Kia Aroha College (KAC). KAC is a school dedicated to serving Māori and Pasifika students and families through a culturally sustaining and community responsive model of education (Milne, 2017). Collaboration between the founders of RiC and KAO led to the two schools becoming 'sister schools,' or *ukukura*, a Māori word to describe two schools in solidarity with one another in the struggle for educational autonomy.

Both schools were established with the understanding that their mission was part of a movement to reclaim space and repurpose education for oppressed communities in societies with long traditions of systematized inequity. Reclaiming space for oppressed peoples provides opportunities for self-recovery and self-determination (hooks, 1989) free from settler colonial norms and the white gaze (or white settler gaze) (Morrison, 1998; Paris, 2019).

KAC is a "culturally-located, bilingual learning model based in a secure cultural identity, stable positive relationships, and aroha (authentic caring and love)" (Milne, 2017, p. 5). RiC's founders were inspired by KAC's theory of change, which is based on the relationship they found between students' cultural identity development and student achievement. Through analysis of student achievement data, KAC has shown that the growth of self-knowledge coincides with increased

academic performance (Milne, 2017). Applying this approach at RiC took the form of no longer treating literacy and math as leading indicators of student success, and instead centering student wellness, relationships to community, and cultural knowledge as the most reliable indicators of student success. Similarly, a study in Canada (another settler colonial nation) found that learning one's Indigenous language corresponded strongly with the health and well-being of Indigenous youth (Hallet et al., 2007)³. In this way, culture was medicine.

Adopting this approach and applying it to the predominantly Black and Latinx students in East Oakland, California required adjustments and accommodations to a very different context. Instead of learning Māori, Black and Latinx students were immersed in a Spanish-English dual immersion setting that was said to support "Black and Brown unity" (interview, April 24, 2018). RiC students were assessed for their effort and achievement in Ethnic Studies, cultural knowledge and cultural pride, display of strong relationships, effort and display of cooperation and interdependence, independence, responsibility, respect, mindfulness, and leadership. These constitute success criteria for student growth and are grounded in a theory of change that challenges conventional understandings of student success, aiming to build both competence and confidence in students. .

Across grades and classrooms, the pedagogical implications for this work looked differently. For example, in kindergarten classrooms, students experimented with paint to create colors that matched their skin-tones, then created life-sized self-portraits with them, and wrote poetry about the beauty of their skin color and where they and their

³ The study found that teen suicide rates went as low as zero in Indigenous communities where a significant portion of community members spoke their ancestral language (see also Chandler & Christopher, 2009).

people come from. Families were then invited to school so that students could share their work, practice and experience collective care and appreciation, and receive feedback. The poetry and storytelling, as well as their revision through the incorporation of feedback, and the presentation of the work enhanced student literacy skills and knowledge, but the unit's primary goal was to deepen student appreciation and knowledge of individual, family, and community gifts and assets. In second grade, teachers noticed that many of the second-grade girls were regularly experiencing social conflict with their peers. In response, the teachers began a sisterhood circle that met once a week to explore and process social and emotional interactions. It began as a restorative strategy in response to conflicts, but then it grew into "an affinity space for 2nd grade girls to love, protect, and heal each other" (interview, May 23, 2018). Participants would engage in activities to help them process individual and collective experiences, patterns and trends in society and culture—for example, the group was given the opportunity to put forth arguments about "American beauty standards" and what they say about society's beliefs before exploring their own beliefs and considering the impact of dominant representations on their self-esteem and need for self-love—as well "affirmation showers" and celebrations of "sister of the week."

Similarly, middle school teachers created a young men's group where students were permitted to "invite someone or a part of themselves" into the sacred circle at the start of the gathering in an attempt to teach them the power of wholeness, vulnerability, and to reflect on healthy relationships as boys and future men. For example, a student might invite their grandmother, who had passed away, but whom the student expressed a longing to see, and they will share what they remember about her and why. Students might also invite parts of themselves that they conceal from others. As one boy expressed, "A part of myself I want to bring

into this is why I lie so much," which resonated with many of those present who then invited the parts of themselves that lie into the circle as well, making for a very honest discussion on lying. On another occasion, a student stated, "I'm going to bring my dad into the circle because the last time I talked to him was two years ago and I've been wondering if he's going to get to see me when I go to ninth grade" (fieldnote, April 23, 2018). This permitted the boy to courageously "speak to his father" in a way that he had not been able to before the circle, and process that experience in an affirming environment. In the young men's group, participants learned about the use of sage, water, fire, and smoke for cleansing, the sacredness of asking permission, and the interconnection of social and emotional experiences.

Addressing this theory of change, one parent passionately explained to me: "If my sons can read and they don't know who they are and where they come from, they're going to be sick...I know if my sons know who they are and where they come from... it's only a matter of time before they learn to read" (interview, April 2, 2020). This theory of change is also a form of healing and an anticolonial/decolonial approach to re-membering through its emphasis on cultural knowledge and relational accountability as key to healthy growth.

Community Responsiveness: Maslow's Thievery

Transactional ways of being and cultural association of roses with romance has clouded important truths about roses. First, roses have thorns. If we purchase roses from stores, the thorns are often removed. However, wild roses bear thorns and the unsuspecting or forgetful person who grabs one will pay a painful price. Similarly, the defense mechanisms and methods of self-preservation used by students and families of color (and historically oppressed peoples in general) are pathologized and often criminalized in settler spaces. Second, roses come from other

roses. During the time I spent at RiC, I often heard teachers and other school staff refer to students as “roses,” which was a pleasant and healthy shift from the negative discourse that is so common in schools throughout the U.S. One day, while I was on campus, someone that I had gone to grade school with as a child walked into RiC. They were dropping off their own child who was a RiC student. I realized that, decades before, if we had gone to RiC, we would have been referred to as “roses.” At that moment, I realized that even an old rose is still a rose, and the experience helped me to understand that the term “roses” at RiC, while typically a reference to students, could also be extended to parents, relatives, and other family members. “Roses in concrete” is a threshold concept—one that, once understood, changes the way a person thinks about a topic (Meyer & Land, 2006). “Roses in concrete” is a concept that, when understood more fully, is not only about appreciation for individuals living in difficult circumstances; it teaches about the importance of and brings awareness to the collective.

This point was made frequently at RiC. During the summer of 2017, while the faculty and staff were assembled for professional development and preparation for the new school year, one of the school’s founders delivered a presentation on the school’s theory of change and approach to meeting student needs. After sharing a visual representation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need, the presenter included another slide of Breath of Life theory (Blackstock, 2011), an Indigenous reinterpretation of Maslow’s framework.

According to Blackstock (2011), Abraham Maslow’s work was informed by the time he spent with the Blackfoot Nation in Canada. Blackstock asserts that “although Maslow emphasized the interconnection of needs, he also believed that some human needs were more foundational than others and that both the identified needs and hierarchical importance of those needs were valid

across cultures” (p. 3). However, Maslow’s study attempted to appropriate Blackfoot knowledge and experience with important omissions. He “did not fully incorporate Indigenous understandings of ancestral knowledge, spirituality, and multiple dimensions of reality, nor did he fully situate the individual within the context of community” (p. 4). If he had, his model would have “centered on multi-generational community actualization,” and not individual self-actualization. In essence, Maslow “dis-membered” the individual from the community, as if the goal were to help an isolated person without regard for the people and places they come from. Typical of settler colonial logics and practices of Indigenous erasure, since Maslow did not credit the Indigenous peoples he learned from, I refer to his distortion of knowledge related to human needs as “Maslow’s Thievery.”

For the faculty and staff at RiC, the presentation and subsequent discussion centered around the importance of community responsiveness and collective well-being: “Students must know who and whose they are” (fieldnote, August 10, 2018). It is a rejection of the white settler gaze which teaches us to view people as individuals, but not as people who are important parts of larger collectives that are critical to their identity, well-being, and survival. As the school’s charter document states, “instead of designing a model that plucks out the individual roses that find their way through the few cracks in the concrete, the RiC will break up the concrete so that entire rose gardens can blossom in our highest need neighborhoods” (RiC Charter Petition, 2014, p. 1).

Through my coding of data from RiC, I came to see that a healing-centered approach that is holistic is responsive to two different kinds of harm: the lasting harm caused by structural and historic forces of violence that shape collective and individual identity within a community, *wounds*, and the *day-to-day hurt* experienced by individuals. Individuals may or may not be

conscious of the wounds they carry, since the harms they are exposed to are often normalized. I also learned that unresolved hurt from a person's past can become a wound if healing does not take place and if the harm from that experience acts as a barrier to the person's growth or well-being over time. Some hurt can become internalized, shift a person's identity, and become a wound. Holistic education in the context of historically oppressed people rejects the logics of Maslow's Thievery and is intentionally responsive to both wounds *and* day-to-day hurt.

Discussion

RiC was a project and movement to repurpose the traditional settler colonial school into a community responsive center for learning and critical well-being, an anti/decolonizing project through culturally sustaining and healing-centered engagement, and a site where critical relationality and relational accountability were operationalized to forward re-membering for individuals and collectives. Returning to the guiding research questions for this article, the educational program (vision, curriculum, and framework for student engagement), anti/decolonial remembering, and community responsive engagement all embody aspects of how holistic education was both conceptualized and operationalized. Critical relationality and relational accountability were organizing principles for the school, for countering Frontier Education, and for engagement with students, families, and other stakeholders. The case study of RiC provides numerous lessons on the limits and possibilities of advancing holistic education within and for historically oppressed communities in settler colonial spaces.

Educators who hope to forward similar goals may consider the tension between a view of justice that is rooted in individualistic sensibilities and contrast it with a focus on individual and community well-being. What would it mean for your school,

learning organization, or educational program to prioritize cultural knowledge and pride, strong relationships, and well-being as key pathways to student success? Across the U.S. and in many parts of the world, entire school communities are held hostage by the limited and limiting visions of educational leaders, and yet we know that leaders play an important role in driving and protecting change efforts (Hart et al., 2020). What supports are needed for educators to adopt a praxis rooted in critical relational accountability? What does your community need to better understand and respond to community wounds through pedagogy and relationships? What systems, skills, and knowledge are needed to address community and individual wounds or day-to-day hurt? Are we intentionally challenging stereotypes and the white settler gaze? How are we supporting students and communities to re-member and what does disrupting hopelessness mean in our context?

Conclusion

RiC closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually merged with another school that was suffering from declining enrollment. Today it operates under a different name. Still, for five years, the students and families of RiC engaged in a collective practice of self-determination and re-membering by repurposing a traditional school into a community responsive learning center that cultivated warrior scholars. In an interview conducted at the start of the pandemic, one of the founders explained that they "want people to look at Roses and dream again about what's possible for our communities... we're just a chapter in a book, and that chapter is not done being written yet" (interview, April 2, 2020). Indeed, RiC is but one recent example of a traditional school being *repurposed* into a community responsive center of learning for well-being. It is my hope that this study of roses will provide those who seek to advance holistic education for historically oppressed peoples in settler spaces with tools,

resources, and inspiration to leverage their existing work, and break up the concrete so that entire rose gardens can blossom in our most underserved communities.

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