Hope and Healing in Urban Education proposes a new movement of healing justice to repair the damage done by the erosion of hope resulting from structural violence in urban communities. Drawing on ethnographic case studies from around the country, this book chronicles how teacher activists employ healing strategies in stressed schools and community organizations, and work to reverse negative impacts on academic achievement and civic engagement, supporting their students to become powerful civic actors. The book argues that healing a community is a form of political action, and emphasizes the need to place healing and hope at the center of our educational and political strategies. At once a bold, revealing, and nuanced look at troubled urban communities as well as the teacher activists and community members working to reverse the damage done by generations of oppression, Hope and Healing in Urban Education examines how social change can be enacted from within to restore a sense of hope to besieged communities and counteract the effects of poverty, violence, and hopelessness.

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HOPE AND HEALING IN URBAN EDUCATION

How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart

Shawn Ginwright
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It is much more exciting to begin writing a book than it is to actually complete one. The journey for this book came after I had returned home from New York and I mentioned to my wife Nedra that I was considering starting a book project that would highlight the convergence of healing and activism. “Let someone else write it”, she replied, “your last book took too much from our family time”. She was correct, as she usually is, but I am hardheaded, and sometimes I ignore her well-intentioned advice.

This book was made possible by a team of people in my life that listened to me discuss these ideas with them, even when I knew they simply wanted to finish their glass of pinot noir without complicated conversations. Julio Cammarota, my friend, comrade, and intellectual fitness coach listened to me and provided brilliant advice even as he finished his glass of pinot noir. Thanks, Julio, for sharpening my ideas. Many of the ideas discussed in this book came from debates, conversations, and discussion with my very good friend Macheo Payne. There probably is no other person in the country who knows more about how to reach the hearts and minds of African American youth than brotha Macheo! Thanks, Macheo, for always listening and talking about what is really important. My “chief negotiator” and good friend Antwi Akom affirmed my ideas and strengthened my confidence at times when I wavered and was unsure about my thinking. Thanks to brother Jeff Duncan Andrade, my renegade academic who tells the truth no matter what and, in my view, is America’s thought leader when it comes to urban teaching. And to the entire family at the Institute for Sustainable Educational, Environmental and Economic Design (ISEEED), who allowed me to occupy their offices to write when I needed to get away from my home office.
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This book is dedicated to Jerry Logans.
The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through the vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose site of its purpose, which is after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

(Baldwin 1985)

My mother would often share warm, wonderful stories with my brothers and me about her own childhood growing up in Trenton, Florida, a small town near Gainesville. Her stories were so vivid that we could easily transport ourselves into the wonders of playing hide—and—go—seek at dawn, eating mangos off of the neighbor’s tree, and spending lazy hot afternoons on the porch. She only needed to utter a few words to invoke our imagination about her safe magical world she simply called “home”.

Her stories allowed my brothers and me to imagine a world different from our own working—class neighborhood, where growing up in the 1970s, the sounds of police sirens were as common as hearing the familiar tune of the ice—cream truck making its way down our streets. Her stories about growing up in the rural South stood in contrast to urban violence, despair, and poverty that had consumed our neighborhood.

When she would describe her house, I imagined a small cozy house, with bright yellow flowers in front, lining the walkway to the porch. She would smile with nostalgic pleasure as she described to us every detail of this small house. Not too long ago, I traveled to Trenton with my mother. To be honest, I was excited to see the place that had only existed in my imagination. We visited with her old friends, and relatives. As we walked through the small town, we approached the old home she had described for years, and I was shocked. The small house was not what I had imagined. The old rickety, shotgun style dwelling had been vacant
for years, and should have been demolished because weeds had overtaken it, the wood was deteriorating, and the tin roof had rusted throughout. Seeing the house humbled me, because only then did I realize how poor she had been as a child.

But my mother saw something entirely different. Standing there in the hot, humid Florida sun, she smiled with the excitement of a child. It was as if being there had transported her back to her childhood. For her, the house was the birthplace of her hopes and dreams. As we walked slowly through the house, she retold each story and painstakingly walked me to every corner, pointing out all the little things that she remembered from her childhood. Standing there, in this beloved, ramshackle little house, I realized that she had been raised to imagine a world beyond the present. This sense of hope in those four walls nurtured in my mother the capacity to understand oppression, but not to be defined by it.

***

I suspect that hope and the capacity to dream of a world beyond the present has always been at the heart of social justice movements. Hope, in and of itself, is an important form of resistance, both political and personal, and reaffirms what is possible, and worth fighting for. However, unlike the mass Civil Rights movement of the 1960s that ushered in groundbreaking legislation, today requires a new movement that is both inwardly focused on healing from the wounds inflicted from structural oppression, and outwardly focused on social change. This dual focus represents a new way of movement building by engaging a collective conversation about the power of hope and the meaning it holds for each of us.

This book is about hope, and how teachers, community activists, and youth development professionals are responding to the crisis of hopelessness among youth of color in urban American. The central premise of this book is that both organizing and healing are required for lasting community change. Both strategies, braided together, make a more complete and durable fabric in our efforts to transform oppression, and hold the power to restore a more humane and redemptive process toward community change. I advance three ideas in this regard:

1. Structural oppression harms hope.
2. Healing is a critical component in building hope.
3. Building hope is important political activity.

There is no doubt that poverty, increasing gun violence, and lack of employment have taken a toll on those who live and work in urban neighborhoods. We all shudder at the statistics: from 2006 to 2010, homicide was the leading cause of death for African Americans males between the ages of 10 and 24, and for Latinos of the same age, it was the second cause of death (Bryant and Phillips 2013). As many as one third of children in urban neighborhoods have witnessed a
homicide (Buka et al. 2001). Many Black and Hispanic students in urban schools fear for their safety in school and choose to simply stay away (Roberts et al. 2013). Notably, emerging research shows that after African American children have been exposed to violence, their achievement tests scores drop significantly below scores of other children (Sharkey 2010).

On a broader canvas, violence can also be understood as actions from systems that injure young people (Farmer 2004). For example, police departments’ stop-and-frisk practices, and zero tolerance policies in schools disproportionally criminalize young men of color for “willful defiance” and all have negative impact on young people’s social emotional health (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice [CJCJ] 1999). Young people in urban settings who have fallen prey to these discriminatory practices often have few opportunities to address the psychosocial harm resulting from persistent exposure to an ‘ecosystem of violence’. Their experiences are not only traumatizing, but often have a profound negative impact on their sense of efficacy and agency. In most cases of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), among youth of color are actually ongoing, and persistent. Trauma for these young people, therefore, needs to be diagnosed within a Persistent Traumatic Stress Environment (PTSE), which more accurately focuses on both the individual and the environmental context in which trauma occurs.

This means that we have to view structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, underfunded schools, incarceration, lack of access to quality health care, and poor quality housing as the root causes of violence and causes of trauma. Violence, and its root causes, are not simply experienced as individual phenomenon, but rather they represent collective experience shared by young people and their families. These structural issues contribute to socially toxic environments (Garbarino 1995). Socially toxic environments are environments like neighborhoods and schools where lack of opportunities, blocked access, constrained resources, unclear pathways to a better life can erode trusting relationships and severely constrain collective action and agency (Ginwright 2010a, 2010b). Similarly, Paul Farmer (2004) uses the term structural violence to describe how structural oppression destroys and harms communities. He accurately highlights the ways in which racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, and other forms of systemic exclusion are embedded in social institutions and structures, and harm communities and groups in our society.

If unaddressed, exposure to an ecosystem of socially toxic environments can have a debilitating impact on young people’s healthy development. For example, youth who have been exposed to trauma from violence have displayed mental health symptoms ranging from emotional numbing, to difficulties with sleep or concentration (Rich 2009). Researchers have found that untreated trauma can predict lower total verbal and IQ scores on standardized achievement tests (Sharkey 2010) and impede brain development.
However, the most significant impact of structural violence is how it erodes young people’s sense of hope (Bolland et al. 2001). One important study conducted by Alvin Poussaint (Poussaint and Alexander 2000) found that poverty, community violence, racial discrimination in employment, and unreported police brutality often result in unresolved rage, aggression, depression, and fatalism. He pointed out that among black youth, suicides increased 114 percent. Other studies have shown that youth in urban environments, structural violence not only impedes productive development, but also poses serious threats to their social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Garbarino 1995; Furstenberg and Hughes 1997; Hart and Atkins 2002).

Young people who witness or experience violence often experience stress, depression, and anxiety, all of which severely impacts academic achievement and healthy development. These dire social conditions also breed a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness, which also impact academic achievement and civic engagement. As a result of these seemingly intractable problems, young people and those who support them, including teachers, their families, and community organizations, struggle to engage young people in meaningful ways.

In light of these bleak realities, youth development and civic engagement strategies designed to engage America’s most disconnected young people will only be successful to the extent that they address hopelessness (Wilson et al. 2005). Unfortunately, these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that teachers and youth development professionals have few options available to support young people in ways that restore hope and well-being. Simply put, traditional youth development and civic engagement approaches to supporting youth of color from stressed urban schools and neighborhoods have been ineffective in combatting the deep and multilayered level of stress and trauma many young people bring to school. While the impact of these conditions on education and mental and physical health is well documented (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Stern et al. 1999; Mazza and Overstreet 2000; Xanthos 2008), we understand very little about how teachers and activists can effectively support young people of color in such dire social conditions. For those who seek effective strategies to combat these conditions, we are compelled to ask important questions: (1) How do teachers and activists effectively respond to hopelessness in ways that restore human dignity, meaning, and possibility? (2) How can these responses inform broader structural changes in civic engagement, education, and public safety? (3) What are the ingredients to transformative school and community change?

There is growing recognition among teachers and activists that hope and healing are critical to academic achievement and civic engagement (Duncan–Andrade 2009). Duncan–Andrade (2009) accurately points to various forms of hope that build the political consciousness among young people that is necessary to address material conditions of their lives. He offers three forms of hope among teachers. Material Hope—Quality teaching that connects
the harsh reality of community conditions with new possibilities. Socratic Hope—Requires educators and students to painfully examine their own lives and actions to discover new ways of living. Audacious Hope—Healing from oppression in order to transform it.

Increasingly, teachers and activists have come to recognize the profound impact that trauma has had on their students’ capacity to hope, and see the world beyond the present, something my mother was able to do even when all the evidence suggested otherwise. They share a common vision that so many young people in urban communities who have been physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually harmed must receive support from their schools and communities so that they can heal from trauma. I call these teachers and activists “soul rebels”, because they are challenging conventional educational and political strategies and embarking on their own journeys that allow them to discover practices that heal and transform their classrooms, organizations, and communities. In doing so, these rebels are seeking out an alternative vision for their communities—one based on healing and love rather than hopelessness and fatalism.

An important parallel can be made here. Just as health and well-being are not defined solely by the absence of disease, justice is more that the absence of oppression. Similarly, creating hope in schools and neighborhoods involves more than violence-reduction tactics, such as cease-fires and gang truces. These strategies create temporary reductions in violence at best, but these are not characteristics of hope and peace itself. Building hope among youth of color in urban schools requires that educators rethink what is most important and come to recognize that healing and well-being are critical social justice ingredients.

Tanya’s Turmoil

“There has to be another way, Shawn”, she said over the phone. I was silent simply because I didn’t know what to say. But the silence was not uncomfortable. It just gave me the space to reflect on what she had just shared with me. Tanya was a former student whom I had mentored and worked closely with in the Bayview Hunters Point community. She is perhaps one of my brightest students, not because of her profound knowledge of social theory, nor expansive understanding of public policy. She is brilliant because she challenges social theory and public policy, and she’s well aware of the problems and challenges of our society because she grew up in San Francisco’s gritty Bayview Hunters Point community. Tanya is rough around the edges, yet never apologizes for her fluent and unrefined urban swagger. At 25 years old, she has seen more than her share of trauma and violence. In the past, she has organized teen girls and worked closely with them to build their leadership skills and prepare them for college. She is passionate and committed to creating educational opportunities, building leadership pathways, and training “her girls” for political organizing in San Francisco.
Tanya often spoke with pride about her younger brother, whom she helped raise, and when he went to college, she acted like a proud parent. This week’s update on her brother, however, was different from all the others. Her brother had returned home for spring break when he was shot and killed near their home in Bayview Hunters Point. The pain of losing her brother forced her to question everything she had been working for. “Why should I continue this work, if I cannot even save my own brother?” she lamented. “I’m done! I’m leaving this neighborhood, and never returning! I’m also done with this nonprofit, social justice bullshit! I just don’t know if I can work with youth anymore!” Tanya’s next few months were spent in deep depression, sleeping most of the day, neglecting to clean her small apartment, and failing to pay rent which nearly ended with her being evicted.

Unfortunately, Tanya’s story is not uncommon for those of us who work in communities ravaged by violence and loss. It’s difficult sometimes to understand the psycho–spiritual costs of working in highly distressed communities. Researchers have mounted considerable evidence about the toll of environmental stressors on mental and physical health, optimism and hope among communities of color (Smith et al. 2011). More specifically, the hardships of poverty, racism, lack of employment opportunities, and neighborhood decay, over time, wear away at both our mental and physical health (Smith et al. 2011). Environmental stressors from exposure to violence, lack of economic resources, and discrimination disproportionately injure the well-being of people who live and work in low-income neighborhoods. Over time, chronic stress also erodes hope, sense of agency, and the ability to see a brighter future.

Hope, healing, and well-being, however, are not fixed to social conditions and therefore can be strengthened through practices, programs, and policies. Research suggests that hopefulness is the function of agency, the belief that one can change things, and pathways, opportunities to act to achieve a desired goal (Snyder 2000; Snyder et al. 2003). The fact that we can foster hope and healing allows us to consider how community power, public policy, and educational strategies can support this process in schools and communities.

Healing justice is one way to examine how teachers and activists can foster healing, hope, and well-being through a social justice lens. Healing justice is based on the clear understanding that injustice and oppression don’t simply block opportunities, but also cause psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical harm to individuals and communities. The perspective also identifies how teachers and activists can “respond and intervene on generational trauma and violence and bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression” on physical, psychological, and emotional health (Page 2010).

The tragic loss of Tanya’s brother to violence and her ensuing depression marked a turning point in her thinking about the needs of San Francisco’s Bayview community. Her employer graciously allowed her to take time off to rest
for a few weeks, which allowed her to reflect on her life and figure out what she wanted to do next. Two years before the loss of her brother, she had been inspired by Jeffery Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, and began to imagine what it would look like to create a healing zone in San Francisco. She was not exactly sure what a healing zone would look like, but just the thought reignited in her a sense of hope and possibility.

It didn’t take long for Tanya to join a community-wide effort to draft a plan for a healing zone for Bayview Hunters Point, a 7.5 square mile neighborhood of San Francisco with 70,000 residents. She recognized that this community disproportionally experienced far more homicides, and residents suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) more than any other neighborhood in the city. Despite these urgent health needs, she also learned that other San Francisco neighborhoods, with far fewer mental health needs, received significantly more financial support from county and city agencies than the Bayview community. Armed with hope and a conviction to bring healing to the Bayview community, Tanya worked with other community activists and launched a campaign to saturate the community with healing and health opportunities focusing on young people. Tanya’s campaign galvanized community residents, city officials, and philanthropic stakeholders to support the community’s bold vision. The healing zone was designed to bring to scale opportunities to enhance the well-being and civic engagement among Bayview residents; the healing zone campaign involved much more than conventional violence reduction strategies. Rather, the campaign focused on saturating the neighborhood with activities and places that would enhance well-being. This involved investments in community based mental health interventions, yoga classes, mental health education in schools, meditation centers, establishing neighborhood therapeutic spas and places to experience deep relaxation. For Tanya, it was her sense of hope that reignited in her the passion to heal her community.

**A Framework for Healing Justice**

Healing justice involves (1) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place (Wallace 2012), (2) collectively healing and building hope. This transformation requires us to address the institutional causes of trauma, while simultaneously building practices in schools and communities that promote well-being. As such, healing justice focuses on both the systemic consequences of oppression on hope, as well as how communities can heal and be restored to vibrant, healthy communities. Healing justice practitioners are acutely aware of the ways in which stress, lack of resources, violence, and prolonged exposure to trauma all present tremendous challenges in creating community and/or social change. Similar to environmental justice activists who view policies that harm the earth as political issues, healing justice activists view policies
that harm individual and community well-being as political as well. For example, environmental justice activists view policies that promote pollution and fossil fuels as harmful to the earth and our environment. Much of their activism focuses on protecting the environment from harm created by lack of awareness or concern for the natural environment. Similarly, healing justice activists view policies that promote violence, stress, and hopelessness in schools and communities as harmful to our collective well-being, human dignity, and hope. Rather than viewing well-being as an individual act of self care, healing justice advocates view healing as political action. Healing is political because those that focus on healing in urban communities recognize how structural oppression threatens the well-being of individuals and communities, and understands well-being as a collective necessity, rather than individual choice. Additionally, healing justice advocates understand that community organizing and acting in ways that improve communities builds a sense of control, agency, and self-determination, which are important for collective well-being.

I have used the term radical healing in prior writing on social justice, community change, and youth engagement (Ginwright 2010a). Radical healing refers to a process that builds the capacity of people to act upon their environment in ways that contribute to well-being for the common good. This process contributes to individual well-being, community health, and broader social justice where people can act on behalf others with hope, joy, and a sense of possibility.

Healing justice is the broader framework; radical healing is the specific process that restores individual and collective well-being. There is a subtle, yet important distinction between radical healing and practices focused on social emotional learning. First, unlike social emotional learning, radical healing has an explicit political focus. In other words, radical healing defines well-being as a function of the environments and the capacity of communities to respond to injustice. This definition highlights how agency and collective engagement are focused on a common good, rather than individual traits. Second, radical healing is collective in nature, focusing on collective identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation. Healing is the result of building a healthy identity and a sense of belonging. For youth of color, these forms of healing are not explicitly addressed in current formulation of social emotional research. Third, social emotional practices rarely focus on building awareness, consciousness, and actions that address the social conditions that threaten social emotional health in the first place. Poverty, violence, stress, racism, and homophobia are all significant threats to social emotional health for young people. Without an analysis of these issues, young people often internalize and blame themselves for lack of confidence or suboptimal social emotional states. Finally, radical healing is political because it recognizes the collective nature of well-being, and moves away from individualistic notions of health, and views health and illness as the result of political priorities and decisions. Additionally, radical healing recognizes the healing power of agency, voice,
and belonging. These features of radical healing promote meaning and purpose, all which contribute to both individual and collective well-being.

The healing justice framework requires that we conceptualize oppression as a form of social and collective trauma. This view of oppression allows us to identify and name the cultural, social, and spiritual consequences of trauma for oppressed communities. Trauma conveys the idea that oppression and injustice inflict collective harm. Effectively responding to oppression, therefore, requires a process that restores individuals and communities to a state of well-being.

The healing justice framework is also supported by research in public health, which has linked structural inequality to poor health outcomes in low-income neighborhood and communities. Researchers and practitioners have increasingly adopted a broader understanding of those social and environmental factors that promote or inhibit health (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Edley and Velasco 2010).

The healing justice framework rests on the theoretical premise that well-being is a function of social justice. Optimal conditions of social justice, such as control over life circumstances, sense of hope, and ability to pursue dreams, facilitates greater overall well-being. Injustice, however, results in suffering, the psycho-social consequence of oppression (Prilleltensky 2012). Prilleltensky theorizes that well-being as a function of social conditions, social capital, and social inequality. Prilleltensky’s major contribution to healing justice is the premise that well-being is connected and determined by quality of life, rather than individual choices and behavior. While this may not be new for public health professionals, it gets to the heart of what healing justice activists have always known. When people exercise their power to change conditions in their lives, they are more hopeful, which in turn contributes to overall well-being (Lbersöhn 2012; Prilleltensky 2012). However, in communities of color ravaged by violence, crime, and poverty, there are significant barriers to hope, and challenging environments for community change.

These practices are not new to black activism. The black church has in many ways served as a sanctuary for activists who find power in healing through faith, gospel music, testifying, and congregating. Black churches played a significant role in the civil rights movement by harnessing hope and healing psychic wounds of racial oppression. Historically, these healing communities have sustained black life in the form of quilumbos, maroon communities where Africans would physically, emotionally, and spiritually resist the brutality of slavery.

Social Change From the Inside Out

These barriers require a new strategy in schools and community organizations. Nicole Lee, Executive Director of Urban Peace Movement in Oakland, California, commented that we often think of social change occurring from the top down (i.e. government programs) or from the bottom up (i.e. grassroots community organizing). However, the conditions in urban communities of color also
require that we address the long-term exposure to social trauma. This means social change from the inside out by working on self-transformation, healing, hopefulness, and fostering a general sense of well-being. By and large, these practices do not exist in urban schools and community organizations, as we now know it. As a result, their absence has been the Achilles’ heel of modern organizing’s effort to engage constituencies in a deeper way. Inside-out social change simply means examining both the root causes of barriers to building effective, healthy, and vibrant communities, and focusing on caring for our individual mental and physical health. Healing justice advocates examine the process that contributes to individual well-being, community health, and broader social justice.

Nicole Lee is a long-time community organizer in Oakland, and after years of front line organizing, she recognized that healing from years of exposure to toxic public policy was also key for community change. She commented that sometimes she wondered if the young people of color would be able to “absorb” the benefits of the policy wins for which they worked. In her poignant paper on healing-centered organizing (Lee 2014), she wrote:

I heard environmental author Paul Hawken use the metaphor of a healthy watershed in a speech about creating sustainable local economies. He said that in a healthy watershed, fertile soil absorbs rain when it falls, and the rain feeds the whole ecosystem. The local environment flourishes as a result. However, environmental degradation has left many places around the world with dry, cracked soil. In these places, the rains seldom come. But, even when they do, the soil is so damaged that it can’t absorb the rain. The water runs off elsewhere. Hawken described this as a metaphor to illustrate issues surrounding local economies, but I found it just as helpful when thinking about my work with Oakland’s young people. I wondered and worried whether the youth I worked with would be ready to take whatever green jobs we helped create. Did they even know what a “green job” was or why it was important? I came to understand that . . . the policy wins that we seek are the rain, and the youth are the soil. The soil has to be tended to and cared for so that it can absorb the rain.

Increasingly, social change advocates are focusing on healing and building hopeful, healthy relationships in order to absorb the rain from policy wins. This book highlights the how community advocates seek policy change and also create healing opportunities for the young people whose lives are made difficult as a result of policies that punish rather than restore.

**Book Overview**

The purpose of the book is to illustrate how community leaders are changing their communities from the inside out. My hope is that the case studies in this
book will ignite a new conversation about what constitutes justice and how we should go about achieving it in urban schools and communities. The purpose of the book is threefold. First, is to examine a growing effort among urban teacher/activists to support young people with healing. Recognizing how the urban conditions harm the educational and civic well-being among young people, community activists are creating innovative strategies to build hope and strengthen civic engagement. *Hope and Healing in Urban Education* examines how community teacher/activists are successfully using healing justice strategies to support young people in classrooms, afterschool programs, and community-based organizations. Second, the case studies in this book illustrate how a focus on healing advances both educational and civic engagement strategies among the most disconnected young people. By fostering hope in schools and community organizations, young people will blossom into powerful civic actors. Third, this book provides practical recommendations to activists, teachers, school administrators, youth development professionals, as well as local, state, and federal policy-makers, on ways that public policy can more effectively support these important forms of civic action.

The term *urban education* as used in the title of this book extends far beyond the confines of schools. Schools are a function of the political, economic, cultural, and social environment in which they exist. Discipline, attendance, academic performance, civic engagement are all, in varying degrees, influenced by the struggles and triumphs in urban environments. The analysis in this book highlights how of community organizations, schools, teachers, and activists comprise an ecosystem of possibilities for building hope on among young people. I also use the term *teacher/activists* to highlight the idea that the case studies in this book blur the distinctions between these two professional activities. Using the term teacher/activist allows us to understand the thin line between schools and the communities in which they exist.

Over a three-year period, I interviewed and observed teachers, activists, and community residents across the country. In many of my encounters, I simply listened to their stories and was overwhelmed by the depth of compassion and wells of fatigue many of these rebels shared with me. As I listened, I began to see similar patterns in their stories, despite the variations in settings and contexts. These settings ranged from urban schools dealing with daily fighting and sometimes shootings among students, to community organizations struggling to compete for funding to keep the doors open. I wanted to document the strategies they used aimed at restoring hope among young people in urban schools, and explore the role of hope in young people’s academic and civic activities. Although I have spoken to dozens of activists, teachers, and community residents, I choose to focus on activists of color. My conversations involved in-depth questions about the nuances of their experiences, and I attempted to identify and describe their own restorative strategies in classrooms and community organizations. Each of these case studies are also situated within a broader social justice framework. In other words, I examine the political, economic, and cultural dynamics that give
structure and background to each case study. This involved approximately a total 420 hours of participant observation across all the sites. Each of the following chapters provides a textured understanding and analysis of how teacher/activists have focused on healing as a central educational and political strategy in each of their respective settings.

Chapter 2 extends the radical healing framework and argues that teachers and organizers are responding to hopelessness among disconnected urban youth in innovative ways. These teachers and organizers share the idea that hope and healing is a political act. In their classrooms, community organizations, and campaigns, they all understand that acting in community to build and sustain well-being requires that we move beyond mere problem reduction strategies to enact a courageous vision about how we should live. I underscore features of radical healing, and illustrate how these principles are embedded in organizational practices. Chapter 2 builds from existing literature that highlights the how urban environments threaten hope among young people, and provides examples of how transformative organizing, healing circles, restorative justice, and mindfulness practices all are aimed at collectively repairing harm and fostering well-being.

What does it look like to build hope among young men who are most at risk? Chapter 3 examines a project to build hope and healing with a group of formerly incarcerated, unemployed, and frequently homeless young men in Oakland, California. Over a two-year period, we worked closely with this group of young men to better understand what constitutes hope and to learn how our collective efforts could build it. Through weekly healing circles we learned that despite these young men’s external conditions, they remained hopeful. Chapter 3 offers a rich description of how to build hope, as well as its pitfalls and challenges. The ethnographic account of our project highlighted the story of one of the young men who powerfully illustrates that isolation breeds despair, while community heals it.

Chapter 4 examines a community’s effort to create a healing zone in San Francisco’s Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood. Chapter 4 explores how organizing rich networks of social, emotional, and spiritual support builds hopeful community action. Building from critical social capital theory, Chapter 4 explores how Lena Miller discovered a new way to organizing that focused on healing, hopefulness, and well-being. Her new consciousness fueled a campaign to create healing zones, which are neighborhoods saturated with health opportunities and pathways, in San Francisco’s most dangerous neighborhoods.

How might forgiveness and uncommon love contribute to reconciliation and healing in schools and community organizations? Chapter 5 explores the conditions that compel activists to take up radical healing practices in their social change strategies. Rudy Corpus, a community leader in San Francisco, was forced to abandon his old ways of handling conflict. There was a time when someone
damaged something he cared about, ruthless retaliation would ensue. However, his own spiritual journey of healing compelled him to build and organization around the principles of compassion, forgiveness, and justice.

Chapter 6 illustrates what healing looks like for young men who carry guns to school. Richmond, California, is home to some of the most violent neighborhoods in California. For DeVone Boggan, the Director the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety, the level of neighborhood violence had to be treated as a public health issue, not a criminal justice strategy. Using his years of knowledge about how to reach some of the most difficult and armed young men, he decided the single goal of his office was to stop young men from pulling the trigger of a loaded weapon. Making the unprecedented move to hire formerly incarcerated men from the neighborhood to intervene in potentially dangerous turf conflicts, his office has discovered that healing, relationships, and support are the critical ingredients to transforming the lives of Richmond’s forgotten young men.

What is healing and what role does culture play in civic engagement and social change? How can activists in urban communities shift attention inward in order to heal from the stress brought on by trauma; build hope; and sustain health and well-being? What are some practices and strategies that activists of color use to foster healing? These questions form the basis of Chapter 7, which highlights the role of culture in healing Latino and African American boys and young men in Oakland.

In the concluding chapter, healing justice is anchored in public policy. I raise the question: How can healing justice inform, direct, and shape public policy? The concluding chapter brings together examples of activism and healing: local policy in Oakland, California, that adopted restorative justice in public schools to reduce suspensions; and national policy in South Africa that created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that healed a nation, restored hope, and ignited a vision of new possibilities among South Africans. These examples serve as the basis to envision how healing justice can support local community change efforts and revive civic life in urban America.

The ability to see a better world when all the evidence suggest otherwise is not easy. My mother, in her southern wisdom, somehow envisioned a world for me deeply rooted in her vivid hopes and dreams. Her own activism may not have sparked mass marches in her small town in Trenton, Florida, nor was it a catalyst for broad policy change in Florida. Rather, her activism was rooted in a spiritual reality that guided her, which she passed along to me, a quiet and powerful sense of purpose, healing, and well-being.

Note

1 See Appendix for a more complete discussion of the research methodology for this study.
References


Generally, I’m a happy, optimistic, and hopeful person. I have a tendency to look for the good in most things; however, I am skeptical about the many recent research findings that have called attention to the impact of stressors on the development of children and young people. It’s not the overly zealous conclusions researchers make about human brain development based on the study of rats and mice that bothers me. Rather it’s the nearly unanimous conclusion that what really matters in the “secret sauce” to healthy development and learning is better parenting, no excuses teaching, and more robust character traits among children and youth (Babcock 2014). There is an eerie silence among some educators and researchers when confronted with the question “what are the root causes of stress for young people in low-wealth communities in the first place?” What is needed is more balanced attention to both the policies that create and sustain poverty and therefore stress, as well as the biological, psycho-spiritual consequences of living in poverty.

Having worked for over 20 years with young people in urban schools and community organizations, I have seen the limitations of arguments that singularly attribute learning and development to what boils down to “individual” efforts despite the magnitude, complexity, and scope of the challenges many working poor people face. Writers like Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2014) and Paul Tough (2012) accurately point out how environmental stress threatens brain development by creating high and consistent doses of cortisol in the body. However, rather than identifying how to transform the root causes of stress from underfunded schools, violence, and joblessness, these writers (and others) overly rely on individual character development and social emotional learning as the antidote to building healthy, strong young people. How might key features of social emotional learning such as grit, gratitude, and purpose support learning...
when kids come to school hungry in the morning, dodge bullets during lunch, and fear the police as they walk home in the afternoon? How much grit actually makes a difference when nothing changes around you? I’m a fan of Bobby McFerrin’s song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” and Pharrel’s catchy tune “Happy” because they simply make me feel good. But these songs are emblematic of a broader trend that suggests the solution to the woes of the poor can be realized through miraculous individual effort.

I recalled watching the documentary Happy with my family at the recommendation of a colleague. The basic premise of the movie is that happiness is something that can be cultivated and sustained regardless of the external conditions of our lives. The film shows inspiring examples of this, such as poor families from the Mississippi delta enjoying the simple life eating crawfish on the porch with family and friends, or a man in India finding solace in spending time with his wife and children in a shack. These stories are compelling but incomplete. We don’t see what happens when the man in the Mississippi delta gets sick and cannot afford the medical care he needs. Nor do we see the man from India having to tell his children that there is no food for the fourth night in a row.

Well-being is both a function of external opportunities such as access to jobs, good education, quality health care, and our capacity to hope for a more equitable, inclusive, and fair society. Both are intimately tied to one another, creating an inextricable fabric of possibility. While I applaud advances in brain research that shed light on the consequences of stress and positive psychology’s study of character strengths, we cannot oversimplify the ways in which long-term structural conditions such as poverty severely limit people’s sense of hope for a promising future.

No amount of happiness, grit, or gratitude can alone counter policies and practices that lock undocumented immigrants out of health care, justify police homicides, and dislocate longtime residents from gentrifying neighborhoods. We need both a policy that empowers young people in schools and communities, and a policy that fosters healthy development and more robust learning, which will lead to informed and engaged young people.

What are the conditions necessary for community to thrive? In what ways do communities confront misery and transform the structural constrains in their neighborhoods? How might schools serve as incubators of political possibilities for young people? These questions are not new of course. Historically, the black church understood that refusing to languish in misery and merely survive was a significant step in social change. For years, the black church has inoculated activist communities with the revolutionary power of faith, hope, and love in their efforts to protect against the vicious toxicity of racism. Robin Kelley (2002) reminds us that the movement was “more than just sit-ins at lunch counters, voter registration campaigns, and freedom rides; it was about self-transformation, changing the way we think, love and handle pain” (p. 11). Religious scholar Howard Thurman in the 1940s boldly recognized that “out of the heart are the issues of life and
that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit” (Thurman 1996, p. 21).

Similarly, African American music has historically served as a sanctuary to restore the spirit to go out and fight another day. Jazz music, gospel, soul, and hip hop all speak to the experience of suffering, and in doing so give us permission to heal, hope, and fight to change things. These ideas, however, are not only limited to the confines of the church, theology, or African American music traditions. Increasingly, social justice advocates and teachers are creating ways to rebuild hope, improve health, and make learning more possible in schools. But what happened to hope among young people of color in the first place?

Ethnographic portrayals of young people of color in urban settings often suggest that poverty and lack of opportunities in urban environments are the root causes of hopelessness and risky behaviors among young people of color. For example, Jay Macleod’s study of two groups of teenage young men—one white, the other African American—concluded that culture, values, and beliefs among the two groups of working-class young teenagers play significant roles in reproducing and reinforcing their working-class status. The white teens, “Hallway Hangers”, express little hope about their future. Conversely, despite the fact that the African American group of teens expressed aspirations and hope, they largely remained poor and working class. In one interview, MacLeod asks a young man about what his life would look like in 20 years. The teenager responded, “Hard to say, I could be dead tomorrow. Around here, you gotta take life day by day” (MacLeod 1985).

Even more disturbing are the ethnographic accounts of how limited opportunities impact hope. Kotlowitz provides a poignant example how such conditions destroy hope in his description of Diante, a nine-year-old boy caught in a crossfire between rival gangs while he was playing on the playground swing. Despite pleas from his friends to run and take cover, he kept swinging responding to his friends plea saying, “I want to die, I want to die” (Kotlowitz 1991). His response pointed to his knowledge that death came at an early age and perhaps he simply wanted to get it over with.

Similarly, Rich (2009) provides vivid insight into how violence, which is a result of limited opportunities, numbs emotions and ultimately breeds indifference and fatalism. David Simpson, a young man Rich had interviewed, was shot and his cousin was killed in the Green Street Housing Development in Roxbury. After his recovery he shared with Rich, “This thing really fucked me up. It really changed me . . . its like they took some emotions that I used to have. That nervous feeling, that scared feeling? It’s gone . . . I lost emotions. I think my heart got a little stone in it now” (p. 93). For David, violence had destroyed his ability to feel, and had been replaced by indifference and emotional numbness.

Victor Rios’s ethnographic account of young African American and Latino young men growing up in Oakland describes his conversation with Slick, a
15-year-old Latino teen (Rios 2011). As they walked to 23rd and International, a known hot-spot for violence, Slick commented, “at any given moment something could jump off, fools could roll up and shit could go down... just the other day, mothafuckers rolled up on me an pulled out a strap to my head... Fuck it, today is my day... so I threw up my [gang] sign and said Fuck you” (Rios 2011, p. 4). Luckily the gun was jammed and Slick lived to see another day. Rios commented that Slick pretended not to show signs of trauma, fatalism, and hopelessness despite the fact that he could tell Slick had been deeply spiritually wounded by the traumatic event.

In California, fatalism and hopelessness among young people are the results of long-term disinvestments in urban communities of color, and gross investments in incarceration and punishment. Peter Schrag (2004) insightfully chronicles California’s shift from an exuberant support for public education, to dramatic cuts in public education funding. To further the assault on young people in California, during the mid 1990s, California voters launched a barrage of measures focused on restricting and punishing young people. For example, in 2000, California enacted measure ballot Proposition 21 (officially known as the Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act of 1998), which resulted in youth being adjudicated as adults for even minor offenses. Since Prop 21, there has been an increase in the number of youth transferred to adult court. Additionally, three strikes laws provide courts greater discretion on sentencing people with two prior felonies. For example, if a person with prior violent felonies is charged with a third felony (violent or non-violent), the person can be sentenced up to 25 years to life in prison. Moreover, state-sanctioned violence in the form of police departments’ stop-and-frisk practices, police brutality, increasing deportations, mass incarceration, and zero tolerance policies in schools disproportionately criminalize young boys and men of color (Skiba and Knesting 2001; We Interrupt This Message 2001). These policies constitute structural violence not only because they limit opportunities and criminalize young people of color, but over time these conditions erode hope, which is critical for effective political and civic engagement.

Navigating Trauma and Hope

These ethnographic accounts provide important insights into how structural conditions in neighborhoods erode hope. There is no shortage of data about the relationship between poverty’s impact on the psychosocial, physical, emotional, and spiritual health of young people in urban communities (Ortiz et al. 2008; Rich 2009; Sharkey 2010; Bryant and Phillips 2013; Ladson-Billings 2014). Some researchers have examined how structural conditions such as poverty contribute to violence and trauma (Bolland 2003; Landis et al. 2007). In some cases, trauma resulting from traumatic experiences has been labeled Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), originally attributed to soldiers who had been traumatized by the...
The ravages of war. More recently, however, scholars have recognized that conventional Post Traumatic Stress Disorder simply fails to capture the complexity and ongoing nature of trauma commonly experienced by youth of color in urban communities. Reoccurring and long-term exposure to violence, and physical assaults, has been labeled complex trauma, which recognizes that trauma is not always confined to a single event. Research shows that living in urban low-income neighborhoods increases the risk of exposure to violence. In one study of urban children and youth, 75 percent had heard gunshots, 18 percent had seen a dead body, and 10 percent had seen a shooting or stabbing at home (Buka et al. 2001). Similarly, a Chicago-based study found that 25 percent of black children reported witnessing a person shot and 29 percent indicated that they had seen a stabbing (Tough 2008).

There is a relationship between the structure of opportunity in urban communities, and collective well-being. Toxic policies and practices like zero tolerance in schools and stop-and-frisk police practices result in accumulated trauma and ultimately erode young people’s sense of hope. An example would be a young man is wounded while he witnesses the shooting of his best friend (trauma 1). While in the hospital recovering from his injury, he is approached, questioned, and accused by the police of being responsible for the shooting (trauma 2). Angry at the accusation, and still grieving the loss of his friend, he returns to school and gets in an altercation with his teacher for refusing to remove his hat in the classroom. As a result of the altercation, he is suspended from school and escorted off campus by the police in handcuffs (trauma 3). He internalizes his grief and anger and loses hope and concludes that he simply does not care about life or what people think about him (trauma 4). In the attempt to ease his stress, he self-medicates with marijuana, is arrested for possession of drugs, and incarcerated (trauma 5). And so the scenario is built, deeply embedded in structural inequality and ineffective draconian policies, all of which threaten this young man’s sense of hope.

The resulting accumulated trauma among African American and Latino youth has been dramatic. First, research suggests that both chronic and acute exposure to traumatic stressors erode young people’s aspirations. The ability and capacity to envision a promising future is fundamental to having hope. Without hope, young people are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and hostility and resort to substance abuse and are more prone to engage in violent behavior. These negative behavioral traits also cascade into schools and classrooms. Research has illustrated how exposure to traumatic and high-stress environments often leads to behavioral challenges in schools.

Yet, the presence of hope is one of the most significant factors to evoke social and community change. When people build a sense of collective hope, they are more likely to engage in activities that will improve their neighborhoods, schools, and cities. Community gardens, street fairs, youth poetry slams all are critical hope-building civic activities. Social movement researchers have explored
concepts as cognitive liberation, political awareness, and critical consciousness, all of which focus on a collective understanding of how inequality is created and maintained, as well as how to go about transforming the systems that created it.

Hope for the most part, however, has been treated as an individual and psychological phenomenon among researchers. This is because researchers in the field of psychology have done the most extensive research on the topic. However, hope is also a social phenomenon that should be studied through institutions, communities, networks, and social settings. From this perspective we understand hope as a function of the shared opportunity structure, collective experiences, and mutual meaning communities share about the future. Hope from a sociological point of view involves shifting from an individual perspective toward an understanding of hope that is shaped by social and environmental systems, institutions, and opportunities. Hope involves acting on collective possibility where community members envision the change they seek. Pedersen and Syme (2009) commented that “efforts to address hope need to account for how the environment (social, cultural, political) acts to facilitate or constrain hope” (p. 7). Hope must be understood as situated within opportunities and constraints found in schools, neighborhoods, and relationships.

Hope understood as a collective phenomenon is not simply the aggregate of individual hopefulness. Rather, collective hope is a shared vision of what could be, with a shared commitment and determination to make it a reality. Collective hope can be likened to the soul of the community as it bolsters and protects the existential dimensions of community life, its faith, purpose, meaning, and collective imagination.

Faith-based institutions like churches, mosques, and temples have historically served this purpose, but support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous also provide a rich resource to foster and support collective hope. Unlike social capital defined as “features of social organization such as trust, norms, networks that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993, p. 36), collective hope focuses on those aspects of community life that provide meaning, purpose, happiness, and joy. More importantly, collective hope is more than simply a protective factor in the calculus of understanding resilience in challenging social settings. Rather, collective hope is the psycho-spiritual fuel that drives community efforts toward the struggle for a higher quality of life.

Two ethnographic examples highlight this point. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) examined the ways in which African American churches influence community action and civic engagement. Her study of how black churches facilitate collective action in Groveland, Chicago, found that black churches serve as an important conduit of faith which in turn contributed to political ideas and community change within African American communities. Similarly, Akom (2003) illustrated how the Nation of Islam served as a key mediator of faith, hope, and identity among black youth in his ethnographic study of a Philadelphia high school. He described
how black youth members of the Nation of Islam develop black achievement ideology where working to improve community conditions served as the basis for political socialization and academic success. In short, the theological foundations of the Nation of Islam provided a reservoir of faith, hope, and vision to propel them to achieve in school.

On a broader scale, South African researchers have also examined how communities in South Africa sustained hope during the country’s apartheid government and in the context of limited opportunities and violence (Lbersöhn 2012; Isaacs and Savahl 2014). In this context, hope was shaped within a cultural values system called Ubuntu, which means valuing the collective human interconnected nature of society. That is, hope is interconnected where all members of a community share a common relatedness, forged by existential supports such as faith and meaning.

**Toward Collective Hope**

Similar to the concept Ubuntu, collective hope in the United States has been at the root of efforts to transform schools, change social policy, and create opportunities for young people. Collective hope involves at least three features. First, are *shared experiences* from the conditions of everyday life. For example, young people in low-income communities share common experiences with run-ins with police, teachers, and exposure to violence. These shared experiences provide a collective view about school, neighborhood conditions, and how these conditions influence perceptions of what is fair and unfair. A growing body of research indicates that neighborhood conditions play a significant role in shaping perceptions of injustice (Hagan et al. 2005; MacDonald et al. 2007). Much of this literature focuses on the attitudes toward police (Fine et al. 2003), school authority, and experiences with racial discrimination (Seaton and Yip 2009). For example, in their survey of 3,000 residents in 53 Cincinnati neighborhoods, MacDonald et al. (2007) found that black respondents experience a disproportionate burden of both experiencing crime and increased contact with the police in their neighborhoods. This contact increased negative attitudes and perceptions of unfair treatment by police. Similarly, Hagan et al. (2005) examined ethnic differences in perceived injustice among 18,000 students in Chicago public schools. They found that African American students reported more frequent contact with police than white and Latino students. They also found that increased contact with the police was positively associated with perceptions of injustice. This body of research demonstrates that negative interactions and experiences in neighborhood and school settings influence young people’s perception of injustice. These conclusions are also supported by Sanchez-Jankowski (2002), who argued that systemic discrimination in courts, daily negative experiences of racial profiling by the police, and negative media portrayals of youth in low-income communities have all contributed to racial solidarity, and ethically based civic and political activity.
The second feature of collective hope is a shared radical imagination about freedom, peace, and justice (Kelley 2002). Generally, shared radical imagination is the result of a collective agreement about why injustice has occurred and a shared vision that ruptures our day-to-day life, propelling us toward seeking a more just and fulfilling way of living. The phrase “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” conveys the idea; that living in sustained misery is no longer an option. In short, radical imagination is our collective dreaming about how things should be.

The role of imagination and hope in relationship to activism has been explored among social science researchers. For example, researchers suggest that assessments of injustice are also based on how individuals within a group perceive their relative quality of life compared to other groups (Davis 1959; Corning 2000). Researchers have demonstrated how assessments about injustice can serve as a catalyst for social action (Davis 1959; Corning 2000). A solid body of social psychological research asserts that feeling aggrieved as a group is a necessary first step for people to engage in social action (Klandermans 1984; Tyler and Smith 1999; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Social psychologists have examined the role of group-based emotions, such as anger and perceptions of injustice, as a motivating force for collective action (Stürmer and Simon 2009).

There are numerous examples of radical imagination in the community responses to the not guilty verdicts where race clearly played a significant role in the deliberations. Trayvon Martin’s case in Florida, Oscar Grant’s case in Oakland, California, and numerous others provide good examples of collective moral outrage that compelled communities to take action in response to injustice. Radical imagination alone however will not create community hope. Typically, when people experience hardships and even trauma, they blame God or they blame themselves. Freire reminds us of this in his discussion of magical and naïve consciousness (Freire 1974) where people attribute their quality of life as to God’s will or the lack of their own individual efforts.

The third feature of collective hope therefore is critical action. Critical action occurs when community members perceive the conditions, traumas of daily life as both wrong and subject to redress. Community members must see the conditions as unjust, nonpermanent, and changeable. It appears that critical action has a powerful impact on hope. When community members act to achieve a specific goal, they foster a sense of control over their future and sense of engagement with society. The sense of control over future events is perhaps one of the most important features of collective hope because it requires the community to share collective vision of their future. Working together for a common goal through critical action involves collective agreement and action to achieve the stated goal. The sense of control strengthens future orientation, which is central to developing hope. Therefore, critical action builds a sense of control, which in turn supports collective hopefulness. If social conditions are mutable, then collective hope can facilitate positive change in the community and schools.
Collective hope exists between the experience of neighborhood conditions, collective understanding of those conditions, and actions to change the conditions. Collective hope also contributes to well-being. That is, when residents, young people, or community groups act to improve the quality of life for the group as a whole, the process of movement toward the shared goal engenders existential outcomes such as purpose, imagination, meaning, and faith. Even in situations where groups are defeated, the worthy act of trying to change something that is meaningful sometimes buffers the emotional low that comes from defeat.

Neighborhood conditions, without actions to change those conditions, constitute suffering—the internal state of powerless misery. It might seem obvious to say that suffering has a considerable impact on collective well-being, but research has documented the relationships between health and perceived helplessness. This area of research focuses on the extent to which people have influence and involvement in the issues that affect their lives. Well-being is a function of control and power young people have in their schools and communities (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2006; Morsillo and Prilleltensky 2007). These studies focus on concepts such as such as liberation, emancipation, oppression, and social justice among activist groups and suggests that building an awareness of justice and inequality, combined with social action such as protests, community organizing, and/or school walk-outs, may contribute to overall well-being, hopefulness, optimism and positive development (Potts 2003; Prilleltensky 2003; Prilleltensky 2008).

Table 2.1 illustrates the relationships between social justice and social conditions and well-being along a continuum. Persisting injustice (i.e. structural barriers to opportunities) contribute to suffering that is the internalization of powerlessness. According to Prilleltensky, well-being is commensurate with the conditions in which it is located. These conditions of justice, however, are not static and can change with collective hope. Arguably, the most significant factor in determining hopefulness is the structure of opportunities and the expectation that results from having access to these opportunities. Simply put, when people can reasonably expect to achieve a desired outcome, they are generally more hopeful. Conversely, when there are few opportunities, individuals are less likely to be hopeful.

For Prilleltensky, the concepts of well-being and social justice are woven together and influence one another. Well-being is a function of social conditions, social capital, and social inequality. Prilleltensky’s major contribution to healing justice is that well-being is connected and determined by quality of life, rather than individual choices and behavior.

Collective hope also suggests a shift from pathogenic analysis of collective and individual behavior that focus almost entirely on individual problem behavior and is viewed as a condition to overcome. The pathogenic perspective leaves no room for agency, collective action, and transformation. Rather, collective hope embraces a salutogenic analysis of community which focuses on collective strengths and possibility, and views communities, groups, and collective action as key to well-being.
Transforming Trauma

Collective hope and commensurate action challenges much of the current focus on social emotional learning. Scholars and educators sometimes mistakenly attribute educational success entirely to character traits such as grit, meaning, and self restraint. Current efforts that focus on social emotional learning and character development may be necessary but are grossly insufficient because these efforts rarely address the underlying structural, political, and economic conditions that create and sustain young people’s quality of life. Without attention to the policies and practices that disrupt young people’s social emotional well-being in the first place, we will simply fall into the seductive temptation to view the psychological states of young people as the only factor required to foster healthy schools and neighborhoods.

Based on the case studies in this book, I have revised an earlier model on radical healing. This revised model focuses on five features of healing I found among teachers and activists. I call these features CARMA, which stands for Culture, Agency, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement\(^1\) (see Table 2.2). These characteristics are:

- **CULTURE**: Culture serves as an anchor to connect young people to a racial and ethnic identity that is both historical grounded and contemporarily relevant. This view of culture embraces the importance of a healthy ethnic identity for youth of color while at the same time celebrates the vibrancy and ingenuity of urban youth culture.
- **AGENCY**: Agency is the individual and collective ability to act, create, and change external and personal issues. Agency compels youth to explore their personal power to transform problems into possibilities.
- **RELATIONSHIPS**: Relationships are the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others. Relationships build a deep sense of

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**TABLE 2.1** Collective Well-Being in Response to Conditions of Justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Suffering</th>
<th>Surviving</th>
<th>Challenging</th>
<th>Thriving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of powerlessness</td>
<td>Adaptation to circumstances</td>
<td>Critical consciousness</td>
<td>Control of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of hope</td>
<td>Navigating conditions</td>
<td>Collective action</td>
<td>Collective power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized oppression</td>
<td>Acceptance of status quo</td>
<td>Rejection of status quo</td>
<td>Pursuit of dreams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of collective power &amp; hope</td>
<td>Collective responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of collective peace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conditions of Justice

*Source: Adapted from (Prilleltensky 2008) Justice Continuum.*
connection and prepares youth to know themselves as part of a long history of struggle and triumph.

- **MEANING**: Meaning is discovering our purpose and building an awareness of our role in advancing justice. Meaning builds an awareness of the intersections of personal and political life by pushing youth to understand how personal struggles have profound political explanations.

- **ACHIEVEMENT**: Achievement illuminates life’s possibilities and acknowledges movement toward explicit goals. Achievement means to understand oppression but not be defined by it and encourages youth to explore possibilities for their lives, and work toward personal and collective advancement.

### TABLE 2.2 Revised Radical Healing Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CARMA Five Elements</th>
<th>Radical Healing Practices</th>
<th>Radical Healing Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURE</strong></td>
<td>• Affirm and celebrate cultural and indigenous practices.</td>
<td><strong>SOCIAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture serves as an anchor to connect young people to a racial and ethnic identity that is both historical grounded and contemporarily relevant.</td>
<td>• Integrate cultural practices into school and organizational rituals.</td>
<td>• Cultural awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create space for youth voice</td>
<td>• Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage political reflection of root causes of social issues.</td>
<td>• Collective identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identify ways for young people to address community issues.</td>
<td>• Ethnic pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create opportunities to learn about others beyond their titles.</td>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use activities that encourage young people and adults to share their story.</td>
<td>• Community well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create healing circles where members share their interests, fears, and hopes.</td>
<td>• Collective consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have conversations about what gives life meaning. Create discussions that foster self discovery.</td>
<td>• Community power, civic action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td>• Recognize and celebrate small and large victories.</td>
<td>• Relationships, trust, social capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning is discovering our purpose, and building an awareness of our role in advancing justice.</td>
<td>• Build knowledge and skills about individual assets and aspirations.</td>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGENCY</strong></td>
<td>• Healing</td>
<td>• Hope and optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency is the individual and collective ability to act in order to create desired outcomes and transform external conditions.</td>
<td>• Sense of purpose</td>
<td>• Sense of accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RELATIONSHIPS</strong></td>
<td>• Community well-being</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others.</td>
<td>• Collective consciousness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMITMENT</strong></td>
<td>• Community power, civic action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL</strong></td>
<td>• Relationships, trust, social capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Justice Practice vs. Healing

There is a growing recognition among social justice practitioners and community organizers that there is a need to bridge their community organizing with practices that facilitate well-being. Most social justice organizing has been outwardly focused on building coalitions and community power, and advocating for policy change. Typically, the efforts of organizers and social justice practitioners have been pragmatic in focusing on short- and medium-term change. While these approaches have created significant community change, its outward focus rarely prepares people to turn inward in order to focus on their own health, well-being, and happiness.

There are two challenges, however, with bridging social justice and healing. First, some organizers simply don’t view healing as an important component of organizing. There is the perception, among some activists of color, that healing and well-being is not the “real” work needed in communities. This perception is supported by the idea that real organizing is about resisting oppression, fighting for justice, and winning important local campaigns. Healing and well-being strategies are sometimes seen by activists of color as the agenda of white progressives, and therefore healing often takes a back seat, if considered at all. Activists of color sometimes critique healing for its inability to address social and community problems. “We can’t meditate the social ills of the world away”, the critique goes. “No amount of mindfulness will create access to quality housing and access to medical care in poor communities”.

Second, much of the work and research related to healing and well-being generally lacks a social justice framework or action. This is largely because healing has been conceptualized as an individual practice, separate from broader social issues, context, and environment. For example, much of the emerging research on mindfulness in schools is generally focuses on fostering mindfulness skills among teachers and students. Mindfulness practices are generally concerned with the cultivation of individual focus, non-judgmental attention, and awareness. While important, mindfulness education rarely is concerned with issues related to poverty, violence, racism, and inequality. In fact, non-judgmental attention to these issues may do little to address these social problems. (Hicks and Furlotte 2009). Similarly, in schools, research on character development and social emotional learning which focus on emotional regulation, grit, and conflict resolution among young people in low-income communities simply fail to examine social conditions, and don’t address the structural realities of young people’s lives (Duckworth and Gross 2014).

While there is some truth to both of these critiques, there is a need for a convergence of these two seemingly separate approaches to change. The healing justice framework provides a useful way to bridge organizing and healing. Healing justice calls attention to the distinctions between oppression and suffering.
On one hand, outwardly focused social justice organizing movements have organized communities to fight for systemic changes to remove barriers to access to opportunities. Outwardly focused organizing views oppression stemming from racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and others generally as structured through the political, legal, and economic systems. These unjust systems limit opportunities, restrict freedoms, and constrain liberties for marginalized groups. Oppression is a function of the ways in which our society is structured which provides access and privilege based on race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, social class, and so on.

Suffering, on the other hand, “is a way to describe the anxiety, fear, stress, disappointment, self loathing and other psychological and emotional conditions that show up in people’s lives. The social justice movement is not generally well equipped to deal with suffering” (Social Justice Leadership 2010). The key distinction to be made here is that suffering is the internal consequence of oppression. Suffering is the result of the psycho-spiritual injury resulting from oppression.

Increasingly, activists are seeking strategies that both address oppression (racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty) and suffering (anxiety, fear, stress, despair). These strategies are directed at fostering social change by shifting how individuals, organizations, and communities relate to one another as they envision a new way of creating collective hope.

There are at least four approaches to healing justice that have gained momentum in the past decade that attempt to resolve the tensions between structural change and healing. While each approach shares similarities, each has a distinctive set of practices that support the well-being of individuals and communities. First, transformative organizing views social change as an ongoing process of personal reflection, individual and collective growth, communal healing, and personal transformation. Transformative organizing views healing and personal transformation as necessary steps to building healthy relationships, that ultimately breeds transformative leaders who work to transform systems and structures in our society. The second, restorative justice, focus on repairing the harm, as opposed to punishing people who violated rules, agreements, and trust within a community. Third, healing circles allow young people to discuss and collectively understand how trauma shapes their behaviors and attitudes and provides opportunities for healing, compassion, and support from other young people. The fourth approach is contemplative practices where activists use meditation and mindfulness as ways to strengthen and build their individual and collective capacity to engage and sustain social change work. Contemplative practices involves preparing the mind, body, and spirit in order to facilitate well-being to individuals and communities. Practices like meditation, mindfulness, and yoga all prepare strengthen individuals’ capacity to stay centered in turbulent times in order to make decisions, and lead from a place of compassion and love.
Transformative Organizing

During the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit, nearly 300 organizers packed into Cobo Hall in Detroit’s convention center to attend a workshop for organizers about a topic that deeply resonated with them, but few had actual language to describe. Eric Mann, director of the Strategy Center in Los Angeles, and N’gethe Maina, Director of Social Justice Leadership in New York, eloquently codified the issue and provided a new way to think about organizing. N’gethe Maina opened with this statement: “How do we make a process that transforms society, and people? It is something of a gamble to invest all our efforts in transforming the systems and structures, without attention on addressing the toxicity that is imbedded within us”. Capitalism is not simply an economic system that blocks opportunities, he explained, but rather a cultural, spiritual values system that injures and harms how we relate with one another. Focusing on transformation of the system alone is not enough to heal us from the injury capitalism continues to create.

Transformative organizing is not an entirely new idea. There are numerous leaders from past movements for justice who have taught us that social change first begins with shifts in how we relate to others and treat the world. Cesar Chavez, Gandhi, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X all taught us that social change is the result of deep healing and spiritual practice. Gandhi’s satyagraha movement was rooted in using inner truth, love, and faith in order to transform oppressive economic and political systems.

Transformative organizing is a term used to convey the idea that social change is the result of individual and collective transformation of how we treat ourselves and relate to one another. The broad goal of transformative organizing is to reimagine ways to restructure our economic, political, and judicial systems in ways that create justice, democracy, and equality. This process requires that we first develop an awareness of how these structures influence our relationships, our values, and behaviors. For example, the idea that we live in a ‘dog eat dog’ world means that we live in a world that encourages people to fight and do harm to others in order to pursue their own interests. This idea comes from a capitalist culture which justifies and rewards values and behaviors that promote individual gain at the expense of others. This idea is also played out in political battles where individuals blame immigrants, poor people, African Americans, gays, and lesbians for a host of social problems.

Transformative organizing focuses on changing this mind-set in order to build a society that is inclusive and based in justice and equality. Through self-awareness and daily practices that promote healthy values and fostering a vision for our world, transformative organizers build mass movements by encouraging ideological shifts toward healing our relationships and building healthy organizations and communities. Transformative organizing activists share similar strategies
to environmentalists who (1) develop an awareness of how the environment is harmed, (2) develop daily practices like recycling in order to repair the harm, and (3) develop a vision of a more green and healthy and sustainable environment. Similarly transformative organizing activists first build an awareness about how current values, beliefs, and behaviors are harmful to both themselves and society in general.

Restorative Justice

On Tuesday, May 14, 2013, the Los Angeles Unified School District School Board (LAUSD) voted to approve the School Climate Bill of Rights and roll back ‘zero tolerance’ discipline in all Los Angeles schools. The decision was the result of organizing work of Brothers, Sons, Selves, a coalition of LA community organizations who developed the School Climate Bill of Rights, which outlines policies that promote student achievement and healthy school environments conducive to learning. The decision to adopt the School Climate Bill of Rights in LAUSD marked the first district in California to bar willful defiance as criteria for suspension. Willful defiance is a rather vague category of behaviors ranging from dress code violations, refusing to complete classwork, or disrespecting a teacher. Researchers have found that willful defiance was largely responsible for disproportionate suspensions of African American and Latino students in urban districts like Los Angeles. These zero tolerance practices gained momentum in the late 1990s in response to school shootings, and was rooted in the assumption that young people’s behavior could be “improved” and modified by adopting zero tolerance for unwanted behaviors; these policies ultimately meant harsh punishment for violations of adult expectations of good behavior. Restorative justice represents an alternative to zero tolerance policies and will use restorative justice programs that use peer support groups, group agreements to resolve conflicts between students, and students and teachers.

Restorative justice commonly refers to a set of principles aimed at repairing harm inflicted to victims of crime. Rather than focusing on punishment as a sole means to correct the crime or harm, restorative justice focuses on repairing harm caused by a crime or violation of an agreement. Restorative justice is also a philosophical framework that shifts organizational, institutional, and social values toward healing damaged relationships and community bonds. Restorative justice defines crime as an injury to victims and the community peace. This important shift allows for both the victim and offender to consider how to heal the harm in the relationship. Repairing the harm often involves the offender accepting responsibility for the harm created, and agreeing to some form of restitution and/or compensation to the victim.

There are several types of restorative models that are increasingly being adopted in schools around the country as an alternative to zero tolerance
practices and its focus on punishment. First, peer mediation is an restorative intervention where students mediate conflicts between their peers. This process is aimed at reducing violence that may escalate if there is no immediate intervention. Second, restorative support circles allow for the offender and the victim and others affected by the harm to sit in a group circle where they are given the opportunity to share and speak about the impact of the harm as well as express how it has impacted their lives. This technique has roots in indigenous practices where community members would sit in a circle and pass around a talking stick, which signifies that all circle members respect the power of each person’s stories and words. Restorative circles are spaces where circle members can be honest and testify and listen to young people, staff members, and other community stakeholders.

While there are numerous restorative justice strategies, what is important is how we understand restorative justice. Significantly, restorative justice is an important strategy in the broader movement toward healing, particularly among communities of color. Not only do restorative justice strategies represent a fundamental shift in policies and practices in urban schools, they also provide important spaces and opportunities for young people and adults to prioritize healing and wellness, and place these values at the very center of classroom and school practices. Within school environments, restorative justice encourages administrators, teachers, and students to ask different questions. For example, rather than asking how might we stop fights at our school, a restorative approach might ask, “How might we increase and enhance peaceful interactions and solutions among students, teachers, and the broader school environment?” Given the ways in which punishment-focused zero tolerance policies have disproportionately harmed African American youth and their communities, restorative justice strategies offer an important alternative to building peace, healing, and justice.

**Healing Circles**

I felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off of my back after our circle. I didn’t even realize that I was carrying all that stuff. But I’m so glad that I got to talk about this and folks really heard me and felt what I was saying cuz they going through the same shit as me.

*Interview with Duane, healing circle participant, August 2013*

Duane, a 16-year-old youth participant in Oakland’s Joven Noble program, commented about his participation in the a series of healing circles at his school. The program is designed for men and boys of color ages 10–24 and offers healing circles as one strategy to support the development of healthy young men.

Healing circles represent yet another healing justice strategy that are increasingly practiced in schools and community organizations. Healing circles are often
based in African, indigenous, or other cultural practices where members of a community gather in a circle in order to share their stories, experiences, and feelings among community. Healing circles are often led by a community elder who guides member through the process of creating safety, tells his/her own story as an example of how to share with honesty and truthfulness, and provides each member of the circle the opportunity to share their story without judgment from other members. These circles are based in deep trust and a willingness among members to move beyond surface issues, and allow for deep contemplation, honesty, and trust. When others testify and share personal, and often sensitive, stories, it gives group members permission to be vulnerable to share in a deeper way.

Sharing the story of what happened or what is happening is one of the keys to the healing circle. Sharing and being supported allows for group members to see the humanity and depth of their peers’ lives. Healing circles are not simply group therapy in the conventional sense because these circles can be informal and without trained professionals. Healing circles calls for a shift in conventional strategies that view individuals as pathological, sick, or dangerous, to harmed or injured. By understanding that trauma causes harm, practitioners use healing circles that restore injury or harm.

Similar to trauma-informed practices, healing circles are organized around three elements: (1) realizing the prevalence of trauma; (2) recognizing how trauma affects all individuals involved with the program, organization, or system; (3) using cultural practices that contribute to healing and well-being. There are numerous programs that share these elements of healing circles but perhaps one that is worth highlighting is the Truth in Trauma program at Chicago State University. Under the direction of Dr. Troy Harden, the Truth in Trauma program uses culturally based strategies to promote healing and well-being among African American youth in Chicago’s South Side. Fundamental to their approach to working with youth is the idea that healing from exposure to violence and other forms of trauma is a critical social change strategy. Their aim is to create opportunities through art, digital media, dialogue, and youth development that promote healthy decision making, and provides insights to the root causes of neighborhood community problems.

**Mindfulness Practices**

*I had never seen anything like it! In an urban middle school, where violence and crime were unfortunately commonplace, everyone in the entire school, including every teacher, administrator, student, custodial staff, and security guard at precisely 8:35 a.m. sat for 20 mins in complete and absolute silence. I learned that several schools in San Francisco had adopted mindfulness education as a strategy to build healthy schools and classrooms, raise test scores, and promote the general well-being of everyone in the school and the results are promising!*
My field notes came from a visit to Visitacion Valley middle school in San Francisco, California. I had recently learned from one of my students that several schools in San Francisco were using mindfulness education in some of the lowest performing schools. My student was a teaching assistant at Visitacion Valley Middle School and was taking my class about urban issues in the development of African American youth. We had just completed a unit that explored how social toxicity and social possibility exists side by side in urban neighborhoods. I wanted the students to understand that the developmental context in which African American urban young people reside is complex, and I encouraged them to relentlessly search, journey, and explore how and where possibilities for healing exist even in the midst of highly toxic environments. After class, she approached me and explained how the school where she worked had stumbled upon an innovative possibility that was on the opposite spectrum of popular zero tolerance strategies being promoted and lauded in so many urban schools.

To be honest, after she explained to me that the entire school meditated twice every day I was a bit suspicious. She explained, “We hear the morning mediation bell at 8:35 in the morning and sit for 20 minutes in silence. That gets us ready for the day. Then at precisely 3:05, the afternoon meditation bell we meditate before going home.” I might have believed her if she was working at a small private school in Mill Valley where privileged kids get exposed to all sorts of innovative learning opportunities. But she was working at Visitacion Valley Middle School, where the homicide rate had soared, and fights were not uncommon at the school. James Dirke, the principal of the school at the time, commented,

The students come from neighborhoods that experience violence almost weekly. They have lost loved ones, they are frightened and they are stressed. We needed to do something here that could give each student something to cope, heal and hopefully thrive academically. So we tried it! It wasn’t easy at first, but as you can see, its now part of our school climate and everyone is involved.

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to thoughts, feelings, body sensations, emotions, and other sensory experiences as they arise moment to moment. When used in educational settings, there are generally two basic approaches (1) indirect—where the teacher develops and practices mindfulness as they teach throughout the school day, (2) direct—programs that teach students mindfulness techniques like the project at Visitacion Valley Middle School. A third approach is using a combination of indirect and direct approaches in the school.

Mindfulness education as a strategy to build classroom well-being, healing, and hope has generated impressive results. A growing body of research suggests that practicing mindfulness regularly increases focus, attention, emotional regulation, caring relationships, motivation, and a host of benefits to the body such as stress
reduction (Waechter and Wekerle 2015). In fact, some schools have witnessed dramatic reductions in fights, suspensions, and increases in attendance, academic performance, and high school graduation rates (Zenner et al. 2014). Additionally, research also suggests that given high teacher burn-out and stress, particularly in urban school settings, mindfulness education has shown to be a cost-effective way for schools to train and support teachers with disruptive classroom behaviors, conflicts with peers, and build better relationships with parents.

Mindfulness education is not a panacea, and mindfulness education without an aim to transforming inequality can be dangerous and counterproductive. It is worth restating that while social emotional learning and character development are important in healthy development, these efforts must also consider how the broader environment promotes and/or inhibits social emotional growth and development. In short, social emotional learning and development is incomplete without engaging young people in actions to improve the conditions necessary to improve quality of life.

Ben Kirshner, a researcher and professor who has examined how learning occurs in the context of youth activist activities, highlights this in his book *Youth Activism*, while social emotional skills are valuable, they are not sufficient for young people in environments that simply make it more difficult to achieve and sustain these social emotional features of learning. Kirshner (2015) accurately calls out the limits of social emotional development:

> Although a rare few will develop the kinds of resilient stances required to persist in hostile school . . . self determination by definition does not get at the roots of the structural contradictions that many young people face. Cultivation of grit helps youth defy the odds, but not challenge or change them, particularly in an era when social mobility is stagnant and income inequality is growing. (p. 45)

He accurately points to the contradiction inherent in much of the social emotional research that suggests an individual approach to learn to ‘endure’ social conditions and perhaps one day overcome these conditions. Kirshner, quoting Mike Rose, claims, “imagine the outcry if, let’s say, on old toxic dump was discovered near Scarsdale or Beverly Hills and the National Institutes of Health undertook a program to teach kids strategies to lessen the effects of the toxins but didn’t do anything to address the toxic dump itself?” (p. 43).

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Healing justice strategies respond to both the collective harm resulting from exposure to socially toxic communities and schools, as well as the systemic issues that create collective harm. Together, these strategies seek to eliminate toxic policies and replace them with policies, programs, and structures that restore community well-being.
Table 2.3 outlines healing justice approaches, including the four approaches discussed here, as well as additional practices including faith-based activities, cultural practices, and arts activism, all of which provide important avenues to bridge social change and healing. The information in Table 2.3 is not intended to be exhaustive of all healing justice approaches. Rather, this table offers an attempt to articulate the features, practices, and overarching values that define each approach. These approaches are tied together by a shared vision of the role of healing and well-being in the broader systems and the structural change terrain.

### TABLE 2.3 Practices and Approaches to Healing Justice in Schools and Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Activities</th>
<th>View on System Change</th>
<th>View Healing and Well-being</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative Organizing</strong></td>
<td>Somatic practices and mindful, contemplative practices integrated to conventional organizing activities that contribute to awareness about how to organize.</td>
<td>Systems change when individuals within them change how they relate to one another. Is about the transformation of both individuals and systems by confronting power and winning. When we transform how we related to one another, view the world as possibility, and foster well-being, then we are more effective at sustainable systems change. Social change work creates burnout and threatens movement building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restorative Justice</strong></td>
<td>Conversations and circles that restore group trust and fairness in cases where conflict occurs. May include one-on-ones to identify harmed and restoration. Awareness of how one’s behavior influences others and consequences of behavior.</td>
<td>Systems such as schools and judicial and legal systems typically harm individuals and communities. Harm can be avoided and/or restored if these systems integrate a process that is fair to both the parties involved in the grievance.</td>
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Table 2.3 Continued

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<th>Key Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching and deliberation on how to restore harm in various settings. Circles that identify harm and negotiate how to repair damaged relationships between victim and perpetrator. Youth-centered circles where young people lead restorative practices and circles as facilitators.</td>
<td>Institutions like schools rarely provides spaces and opportunities for individuals to heal, share, listen, and learn from one another. Without these opportunities, individuals and communities carry with them unresolved pain and injury that often causes harm to others. Healing individuals and communities contributes to healthier relationships and institutions. Social change work creates burnout and threatens movement building.</td>
<td>Healing the harm builds humane and life-affirming ways to deal with conflict. Healing occurs at the individual and collective levels that are connected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healing Circles</td>
<td>Creating group safety necessary for group members to share their experience and opinions. <em>Talking piece allows one person to share at a time.</em> <em>Everyone speaks sitting a circle.</em> <em>Elders provide guidance and direction.</em> <em>Participants listen carefully, without judgment.</em></td>
<td>Systems change comes from individuals practicing and engaging in the types of change they wish to see in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplative Practices</td>
<td>Practices provide pathways to healthy and vibrant ways to see the world. <em>Mindfulness</em> <em>Meditation</em> <em>Positive psychology</em> <em>Somatic practices</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Key Activities</td>
<td>View on System Change</td>
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<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>Change is the result of faithful action rooted in the idea that a higher authority will lead and guide individual and collective change.</td>
<td>Practicing faith, devotion to a higher authority. Justice is the ultimate expression of faith.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and indigenous practices</td>
<td>Social and systemic change is the result of re-establishing the cultural disruption experienced by people of color.</td>
<td>Healing and well-being stems from consistent engagement and practicing cultural values. Collective consciousness and cultural values restore and facilitate well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist Art</td>
<td>Through the creation of radical culture, whether in the form of texts, movement, images, film, music, or performance, art is used as an effective medium and powerful tool for systemic change and transformation.</td>
<td>Expression is the key to healing.</td>
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**A Concluding Note on Healing vs. Well-being**

I have been using the terms *healing* and *well-being* interchangeably; however, I would like to offer some conceptual clarity about my use of these terms in order to more precisely identify the empirical qualities of healing justice in the subsequent case studies. First, I refer to healing as a process to restore health resulting from harm or injury. Harm can be either psychological, physical, or both. Healing in this sense focuses on a recognition that harm results in a psychological, spiritual, cultural injury. Healing is an explicit process for restoring individuals...
and communities back to optimal health. Well-being, on the other hand, refers to practices that sustain, maintain, and expand health. In this sense, “healing” asks, what caused the harm and how do we repair the injury? Well-being, however, asks how do we maintain and sustain health and hope? While the distinctions between these two concepts are subtle, clarity in my use of these terms will illuminate how the subsequent case studies engage young people in healing justice.

This chapter highlighted features of healing justice and provided examples of several healing justice approaches. The goal of this chapter was to illustrate both conceptually and empirically the healing justice terrain, examining common approaches, rationales, goals, strategies, and views of healing and achieving justice. First, the chapter outlined the causes of injury and harm that is prevalent in urban communities of color. I illustrated how trauma in urban environments has resulted in harm at the individual, institutional, and collective dimensions of community life. Second, I argued that collective hope, the shared experiences, vision of the world, and actions to work toward that vision, are the common thread weaving together the colorful, eclectic healing justice mosaic.

What does it mean to really live, rather than simply survive? How activists, teachers, and youth workers respond to these questions reveals the brilliance, hopefulness, and promise of new and not so new strategies to civic life. Social change begins in the heart, when teachers and activists declare an unapologetic and radical love for their communities and their young people. The worthy pursuit of justice has always been fueled by love, and driven by a powerful civic vision. What is important here, however, is that the complexity, depth, and breath of social conditions call and beckon for merging new and old ways to change our lives and our communities.

The following case studies in this book are focused not so much on the conditions, as they do the response to these conditions. These case studies highlight innovative practices and thoughtful processes all rooted in restoring community life. My intent is to share these lessons in hopes of strengthening and expanding healing justice strategies in schools and community organizations. Ultimately, these case studies illustrate how school policy, philanthropic strategies, and organizing tactics all can be rooted in hope, restoration, and love.

Notes
1 This acronym was adopted from Martin Seligman’s PERMA model articulated in his book *Flourish* (2011).
2 The zero-tolerance approach to school discipline originated from the federal Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandated that schools expel students found with firearms or lose federal funding. As this law has been implemented local, zero-tolerance policies have varied considerably from district to district, and many districts have frequently extended zero-tolerance beyond any federal definitions in existence (Skiba and Knesting, 2001).
References


We Interrupt This Message (2001). *Soundbites and Cellblocks: Analysis of the Juvenile Justice Media Debate & A Case Study of California’s Proposition 21*. San Francisco, We Interrupt This Message.

Dominique called me today at about 1:30 and told me that his brother had been shot in the head and his sister had been shot in the back. It happened near Lake Merritt. The story was covered in the news briefly. He called me from the hospital, deeply saddened and troubled about what had happened to his family. He said he called to let me know that he wouldn’t be at our healing group meeting tonight. I could tell he was frightened, and needed someone to talk to, so we chatted for awhile.

(Field notes January 2013)

Even as we boarded on the bus, I wasn’t sure of the outcome of our retreat. Each young man took his seat on the bus silently, with their head phones deeply implanted into their ears as if each pulsating beat transported all of them somewhere else. To be sure that their transport would be complete, many of them sealed off any contact with the real world by donning a perfectly placed hoody over their heads. So, as I watched each young man step onto the bus and sink into his own special disappearing ritual, I wondered how our weekend retreat would bring them back from wherever they had journeyed.

Phil, however, simply refused to take place in this disappearing ritual opting instead to inquire about where we were going, what a “retreat center” actually was, and precisely what was the purpose of our trip? I immediately liked Phil’s energy and comic disposition. He is funny and has a witty quick response to everything. Without missing a beat, Phil reached into his luggage to reveal a one-page resume. He shouted to the other young men in his natural Chris Tucker–like comedic voice “If anybody knows about any jobs, holla at a brotha!” waving his resume with pride. “I got my janitorial license, forklift operation license, and I’m just about ready to get my auto mechanic certification”, he explained.

Like the other 10 young men who were participating in our project, Phil had been recently released from jail and was on probation in Alameda County.
Our project, the Young Men’s Healing Circle, aimed to support African American young men on probation by providing them life skills and fostering healing and encouraging civic engagement. Healing is personal and political work. It requires a process that creates safety for sharing, honesty, and guided discussion to move young people who have been harmed to understand that their personal experiences are the result of broader political issues. We wanted to understand how our healing process could also facilitate political awareness and serve as an intervention strategy for young African American men with a high probability of recidivism.

I served as the evaluator and researcher on a team of three people. I was responsible for collecting data and evaluating the program’s impact over a two-year period. Using quiet sitting and healing circles, the project aimed to strengthen the capacity of African American transition-aged males (16 to 25) on probation to manage their stressors, improve their ability to make a successful transition to family and community, and develop and implement meaningful life goals; the ultimate goal was to reduce the overall rate of re-offending and recidivism.

Phil was one of thousands of young men in Alameda County locked in the probation system. In fact, in July 2013 there were more than 13,000 probationers in Alameda County, the vast majority African American and male between the ages of 15 and 25. Unlike probation sentencing in other counties in California, which typically offers probation sentences to young people of 2 to 3 years, Alameda County courts, according to probation officials, assign five years probation as a “cultural norm”, regardless of the infraction. Being on probation is in many ways worse than physical incarceration. During an interview with several Alameda County probation officials, they commented that probation simply means incarceration without the costs associated with operating the physical jail. The young men are still required to be under the jurisdiction of the probation department but are free to physically go about their day. This isn’t freedom however, because the inability to integrate into civil society takes a psychological toll on hopes of getting a job and turning their lives around. For example, young men on probation cannot find work due to their probation status. However, they are free to move about the city, live where they wish, and have limited interaction with peers. However, these young men need housing, transportation, food, and clothing, all of which require them to work. Without a viable opportunity to work to earn money, the young men find themselves in the dangerous conundrum between choosing between the illegal economy where there is guaranteed money with the chance of returning to jail, or continue to look for work without much chance of employment.

Traveling past idyllic green pastures, majestic redwood groves, we could finally feel the cool pacific breezes as we entered Point Reyes, California. Our first night together was spent learning about each other, sharing stories from our past, and generally getting to know each other. The young men, to my surprise, removed their hoodies, removed their ear phones, and returned from their journey to listen and learn from each other. This retreat was the first step on our nearly two-year journey together. During our first evening together, we learned that many of these young men simply wanted a second chance on life.
I learned a great deal about healing, justice, and transformative change in the context of young men’s lives over this two-year period. Typically, contemplative practices, like yoga, mediation, and somatics, are found in quaint Starbucks-speckled middle-class neighborhoods, where women dart in and out of yoga studios wearing their newest yoga pants and carrying brightly colored mats. Our contemplative work stood in stark contrast to this convention. There were no yoga mats, no spiritual music in the background to guide our meditation, and, of course, no yoga pants. There was only baggy jeans, sneakers, plastic blue chairs, and lots of pizza. For the next 24 months, we would gather on Wednesday nights from 6:00 to 9:00 in a student lounge at the local community college to share, explore, and learn about each other’s lives.

This chapter illustrates the role of healing among 10 formerly incarcerated African American young men. This chapter focuses on how the healing circle supported the social, emotional, and political growth and development of these young men. Specifically, this chapter presents an honest look at how healing circles can provide important safe spaces necessary for social, emotional, and political growth and development, but also the challenges and limits of contemplative practices with African American young men. Through the stories of two young men in particular, this chapter also illustrates how healing justice compels these young men into civic and political engagement.

Electroshock Therapy: How Probation Harms Young Men

David Muhammed is a long-time advocate for revolutionizing the juvenile justice system. His years of experience working in juvenile probation has convinced him that the justice system harms young people and exacerbates the trauma they have already experienced. To make this point even more poignant, he points to the use of electroshock therapy as a means to treat schizophrenia. Commonly used in the 1950s, electroshock therapy has been proven to be ineffective. In a recent keynote address he passionately stated:

It would seem odd at best, and irresponsible at worse, if mental health professionals used electroshock therapy as tool to treat schizophrenia. All the research is conclusive that the 1950s treatment that pushed pulses of electricity into the brain created more harm to patients than good. There are also numerous, more effective techniques to treat this disorder available now. Why on earth would professionals use a technique that harms, while they could use a more cost effective technique that actually helps? No one uses this treatment anymore because we know that it is not only ineffective, but it actually inflicts harm to patients and in many cases exacerbates the illness. The juvenile justice system in many states, however, uses techniques that are proven to harm young people, are grossly ineffective, and expensive. Young people in these systems need support and development not punishment!
His powerful analogy points to a shocking truth about the mental health needs of young people who are on probation. Reports show that approximately 2 million youth each year in the United States will be diagnosed with one or more mental health disorders, and as much as 70 percent of the young people who are in the juvenile justice system have suffered from some form of mental illness (Hammond 2007). If unaddressed, mental health illness can lead to criminal behavior forming a cycle of delinquency. The Center for Mental Health Services estimates that one in eight adolescents struggle with depression, anxiety, and other potentially debilitating disorders. However, only 8 percent received treatment in their communities, and only 15 percent received support while incarcerated.

Environmental stressors that damage social emotional health among young men of color often go undiagnosed and therefore untreated. In a recent study conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the researchers reported that 93 percent of all the study’s participants had experienced one or more traumas in their lives (Teplin et al. 2013). The toxic elixir of undiagnosed mental health among young men of color experience can also be lethal. African American and Latino young men are more than four times more likely than the general population to be a homicide victim after leaving jail or probation. In Northern California, these numbers are even more shocking. From 2005 to 2007, African American males had the highest mental health hospitalizations in Alameda county (Witt et al. 2010).

This is not surprising since adolescent African American males in face major challenges to their psychological development and well-being. In addition to dealing with the physical, mental, and emotional issues typically experienced during adolescence, adolescent African American males are confronted with unique social and environmental stressors; they must frequently cope with racism and its associated stressors, including family stressors, educational stressors, and urban stressors.

At the same time, the social and environmental stressors which affect adolescent African-American males are compounded by barriers to accessing quality mental health services. Indeed, adolescent African American males may be among the most underserved populations with respect to mental health services (Xanthos 2008). Adolescent African American males who are in Alameda County’s Juvenile Justice System and now on probation carry an additional stressor. They carry the stigma of being ex-offenders struggling to transition out of the juvenile justice system, and assume a meaningful role in family and community. Far too many of them are unprepared for this challenge and are not successful in making this vital transition.

Phil’s Story

The name “Sunnydale” for a neighborhood invokes idyllic tree-lined streets, white picket fences, with neighbors waving hello as they pull into their neatly manicured homes. However, there is nothing bright, safe, and sunny in San Francisco’s
Sunnydale projects. Located in the southeastern sector of San Francisco, Sunnydale has been San Francisco’s most violent neighborhood. Complete with all the accouterments of drugs, violence, and unemployment ushered on by Reaganomics during the 1980s, Sunnydale resembles hundreds of other urban housing developments in the United States. Phil was born and raised in the Sunnydale projects, and like millions of other African American young men, he learned very early about the perils of growing up black and poor in urban America.

Phil’s childhood was no crystal stair. His mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia after she was found late one freezing night roaming the streets with her baby boy. He was raised by his grandmother, and on occasion his mother would visit him to see how he was doing. When he was seven years old, she visited him and upon her departure, she looked him in his gentle and innocent soft eyes and told him that this would be her last visit, and then vanished from his life.

Phil grew up angry; in reflection he recalls that he was mostly angry because he felt abandoned by his mother and neglected by his father. At 10 years old he began to have increasingly violent thoughts.

I was angry as a child! I was upset about not having my father around, and not having my mom being present in my life. You know your dad is supposed to take you to the park to play basketball with you, teach you how to throw a baseball and play catch, teach you how to play football, teach you how to box, stuff like that. I was always angry, so one day I told my social worker that I was going to kill everyone at my neighborhood, my school, then I was going to kill myself.

Social workers are trained of course not to take such threats lightly. Even before the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook, the threat of school shootings was something that required massive attention and intervention. Phil explained,

Man, I told her that you better do something cuz I’m gonna kill all them muthafuckas cuz I just didn’t care no more! I could sometimes see myself with a knife stabbing someone with it! I was really unstable at that time as a kid, I was not in a good place.

At 10 years old, Phil was placed in a children’s mental facility and was diagnosed with a host of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Man I was taking lots of stuff like Zoloft, Xanax, and Zyprexa but I convinced them to take me off all that shit when I was about 15. But then I would still end up getting depressed. Sometimes I would be thinking shit you know, like I’ll kill myself right now if came down to it! What the hell
I’m wanna stay here for? Ain’t nobody gonna miss me! Going from group home to group home, having to fight everyday, getting my ass beat all the time, going to foster homes and having to deal with all of that I realized that it wasn’t worth living.

Eventually, Phil returned to his medications but his living situation didn’t change, it worsened. He continued to move from foster home to foster home. When he was 17, he ran away from one of his foster home placements only to return a few weeks later. When he turned 18, however, he no longer qualified for assistance and financial support and found himself homeless on his 18th birthday:

When I was in foster care, the day of my birthday, they called me into the kitchen and said yo ass got to go! They kicked me out on my 18th birthday! I couldn’t go back home to my grandmother’s house because I had fucked up, and they refused to let me stay there anymore. So I was like fuck it! I ended up homeless, living in a shed behind San Leandro Bart Station. I would go to Safeway grocery store, and go to the deli to fill up a container of hot soup and leave without paying.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t Phil’s first time being homeless. On occasion he would run away from his group home or foster home for weeks at a time. During that time, he would stay with friends, sleeping on whatever couch they had available. If the weather was cold, he would ride BART or the bus most of the night. In fact, when I met Phil in the fall of 2012, he was homeless. He was living with a friend in East Oakland and would move to another friend’s couch every couple of weeks.

On one occasion, I received an urgent plea from Phil. He and his roommate had gotten in an argument, and his roommate demanded that he move out immediately. He had nowhere to go, so he had called me for help. I showed up later that evening to a small un-kept triplex in the Fruitvale neighborhood in Oakland. To my surprise, Phil was calm, even as he complained about how his friend and his girlfriend were unfairly kicking him out. My concern was not so much that he was being kicked out, but where we were going to take the dozen or so dark green trash bags loaded with clothing, boxes of cereal, tuna fish, and shoes! He asked that I take him to his church, and if I could, keep a few bags until he got settled.

The stress and uncertainty, particularly brought on by housing vulnerability among young African American men such as Phil, is grossly understudied. This is perhaps because homelessness is a much more difficult to examine when (1) black young people simply don’t consider themselves homeless, (2) don’t look homeless and therefore blend in with the rest of the population, (3) are young and attend school, (4) not easily identified in shelters because they rarely use them. The stress of housing vulnerability is yet another factor that erodes mental health and hope
for one’s future. Phil’s nightly struggle’s to eat, stay safe, and survive made it difficult for him to see beyond the immediate future. Not having a place to live and no one really to guide him made it easier for him to take greater risks. Finally, after living on the streets for a period of time, his uncle took him in and immediately introduced him to crime.

We would be sitting at the house smoking weed, and he said man I got a cold hustle. We started, robbing muthafuckas, hitting housing and lots of shit like that. So we would wait for folks to go to work and find a cracked window and sneak up in there and spring clean they house! We’d take TVs, computers, and all food! If we had a U-Haul we would take couches, refrigerators, whatever, we was like fuck it! All the weed and drugs made me not care what I was doing.

Turns out that Phil was never arrested for burglarizing homes and robberies. Instead he was arrested for another offence: his uncle and girlfriend frequently fought in the apartment and one night she called the police and filed charges against both of them for kidnapping. It was Phil’s uncle’s third strike, which landed him in prison for 20 years. Phil was given 1 year in jail, and 5 years felony probation. After his release, he found a homeless shelter and enrolled in several automotive classes at Los Medanos Community College.

When I was sleeping on the street it made me think a lot about where I want to be 5 years from now, what is the next step. I would always read my bible cuz I was raised in the church and I would just be guided by God. I would wash off at my friends houses, or go to the shelter to clean up. It wasn’t fun but it made me look for another way.

He was looking for a way to turn his life around when his probation officer referred him to our healing circle. Phil was motivated to attend our Wednesday night healing circle sessions more than the other young men. Perhaps it was his experience on the streets that brought him to our circles with enthusiasm, and on time. But every young man in our circle had their own story to tell. Despite the fact that they were required and rewarded to attend the circle, every young man had their own reasons for participating in our healing journey.

**Healing Justice One Circle at a Time**

On an unusually warm September afternoon following our weekend retreat, each of the young men filed into our room at Laney Community College in Oakland. They were happy to reconnect, and greeted each other with a vigorous and loud handshake, followed by a one armed “brotha hug” embrace. They were now
familiar with sitting in a circle, so we didn’t need to remind them that our circle was a place for them to be honest, to share and listen.

Our circles were generally structured around three activities. First, we would provide time for each of the young men to simply check in by responding to a question about how things were going for them. Second, we would provide a topic for discussion, such as: What is real power? What is a man? What wouldn’t you do for $100 million? These questions were simply meant to ignite conversation about a set of ideas that would guide the lesson and discussion. Last, we would provide the opportunity for 20 minutes of quiet sitting. Two African American men, both in their early to mid-sixties, facilitated each of our healing circles. Both had spent years working with young men in jail and juvenile hall, and brought two contrasting strategies to our healing circle. Dr. D was a seasoned therapist and activist in the San Francisco Bay Area who had agreed to support the project because he cared deeply about young men and had years of success with improving the mental health of African American young men. Woody Carter was a director of a prominent community organization and had practiced meditation for over 25 years. Dr. D focused on discussions and helped draw key take-home lessons from each of our discussions. Woody focused on building each of the young men’s skills in meditation by providing different techniques each session.

We began with a check-in, which was a relatively light-hearted update on how things were going. John, the youngest of the group, had developed a rather sophisticated informal automotive sales business. He would purchase a car from a local tow shop or Craigslist for $500 to $1,000 and then fix the car just enough to resell it with a nice profit!

Terrell’s check-in was not as light. He shared with the group that his cousin had been shot and killed over the weekend near the Coliseum Bart station. As he quietly checked in with us, his despondent, soft energy centered the group to reflect on loved ones they had lost. Each of the young men offered their own version of condolences, in phrases like “man that’s crazy”, “sorry to hear that”, “hey man stay strong”. We witnessed that sometimes the space to share, be heard, and supported is enough to feel affirmed.

It’s Too Dangerous to Care Out Here!

We understood that violence, death, and loss was a tragic and ongoing experience in their daily lives. We didn’t know that discussing violence, death, and loss would reveal more about our adult ignorance than provide solutions to the struggles they faced. We hoped that by discussing loss openly, we could provide them with tools to cope, remove self-blame, and heal from the trauma of violence and loss. We also understood that for many young men, these issues were not often discussed among friends and family. Often young men are simply not given the permission to grieve and therefore find their own ways to process their feelings of loss.
One of our early discussions focused on caring and healing, and we wanted to understand if they had experienced loss in their lives. Many of young men resisted having the conversation and vehemently challenged Dr. D and Woody and I about how they experienced death differently than most people. Phil, one of the more outspoken young men, commented;

When you are young like us seeing someone shot and killed is a lot different than seeing someone die of cancer. When you [referring to myself, Dr. D, and Woody] experience loss, its usually because someone died, when we experience loss its usually because someone was killed. That’s a lot different and enrages me to makes me want to hurt who did it and take revenge.

This was a difficult discussion, not because the topic was complex, but simply because we knew very little about their experience of death. In these young men’s experience, death was frequent and unjustifiable. In fact, when I asked if they knew anyone who had “died”, they could not think of one person who had died from something other than violence. For them, the people they know were “killed”, and that’s a different experience of death because it is preventable. We often homogenize death and dying without critical attention to the psycho-spiritual impact and consequence of loss. So a shooting is simply another shooting, without much attention to the reverberating impact it has on those who know the victim and/or witness the act.

Phil’s comment, “When you are young like us seeing someone shot and killed is a lot different than seeing someone die of cancer”, it caused me to reflect on the distinction between dying versus being killed. As an adult, I can point to several family members and friends who have died. Poignantly, however, I realized that the people I knew who had been killed were all young people under 20 years old. Phil’s distinction was correct.

Their moving and candid discussion of their experiences during our healing circle revealed both the depth and breath of how they experienced the world. A group like this offers a rare opportunity for these young men to take and to reconcile, confront and heal from psychic wounds. However, these spaces are often misunderstood and grossly undertheorized. Rather than expressing their feelings about loss, they expressed resentment toward Dr. D, myself, and Woody for bringing the subject up in the first place. For example, Chris, a mildly annoyed and sharp-witted 19 year old, said that the conversation was irrelevant and, with his head down on the table, commented:

You are asking us to express our feelings but that makes it much more dangerous for us . . . we become a target for someone to come and take advantage of when we show that we care about shit.
For these young men, caring and feeling seemed to be a privilege that they did not have. Survival was the most important daily activity and if they are dealing with a crisis or problem, expressing feelings other than anger was pointless. The streets had taught them that focusing on their emotions, such as fear, uncertainty, and sorrow made them vulnerable to the dangers of street life. Our goal was for these young men to understand that African American men have been socialized to never show emotions, never cry, never show feelings. Display a cool pose at all costs. However, we wanted them to know that holding in feelings and not caring was toxic and damaged their ability to move forward. Chris slowly raised his head from the table, and after listening to the conversation dropped his own bit of wisdom into our discussion.

When you don’t have regular food, it’s hard to make logical decisions! It’s hard trying to do something good, stay out of crime when you are hungry! Would you say Aladdin [from the movie] was a thief, or just trying to survive? Remember he stole some bread, and was running hoping he could eat. Then he saw two little hungry kids and gave the bread to them. Just like Aladdin, its survival for me man! I don’t want to do wrong at all! I swear to God if I had a place to go home at night, take a shower, lay my head down, change my cloths and eat all the basic shit I would for sure do right, and do something more productive. But if I’m surviving every night trying to figure out where I’m gonna lay my head its hard to think about where I’m gonna be in five years, when I don’t know where I’m gonna be in five days, or five hours from now!

Daily survival was a significant challenge for many of the young men in our circle. The daily challenges to earn money, find shelter and food informed our understanding of the healing process. While they dismissed the significance of their emotions and feelings about their living situations, we learned a great deal about their fears, insecurities, doubts, sadness, power, and triumph. For example, John commented, “I do feel like giving up sometimes, or sad and sometimes scared as shit, but I would never tell anyone that!” When I asked them who do they talk to about how they feel, none of them could name someone that they shared how they felt about things. John continued, “Certain things I can talk to certain people about, like I trust talking to my brother about money, but I wouldn’t trust him with my feeling because he doesn’t have a good understanding of his own feelings!”

Despite the fact that they said they had little time and space to express their feelings, the circle provided the opportunity to name their experience, explore their feelings about their struggles, and testify about their triumphs. Phil pretended not to really care about the ensuing conversation, but he couldn’t resist deploying his gift for using parables and analogies to highlight his point.
When you watch those animal shows about lions, on the plains of Africa. You see those lions running after all these antelope and finally it catches one! You will never see the rest of the antelope stop, turn around and say to the antelope that got caught “hey man are you alright”! They just keep on running for their lives! They don’t express feelings for the antelope that just got killed by the lion! That’s how I feel. We are antelope and we gotta keep running as fast as we can!

The intensity of the constant threat of violence, harassment on the part of the police, and struggle to survive convinced them that they had to turn off their ability to feel and care. Our weekly healing circles, however, ruptured their weekly survival routine and created space for them to openly confront their struggles. Our goal was to move the groups’ dialogue from an awareness of personal experiences to a political awareness of collective experiences.

Scholar and activist Julio Cammarota noted that young people of color can transform their view of the world from fixed and permanent “to one that is constantly produced and reproduced by human machinations”. This critical consciousness helps young people see the real purpose of an uneven social order and encourages them to see how the dominant group arranges social structures to make certain the subordinated continue to experience exploitation. Borrowing from Brazilian scholar, Paulo Freire, Cammarota argues that reflection and dialogue are key processes to attain critical consciousness and “praxis”—critical reflection and action.

He argues that praxis contributes to both internal and external forms of transformation contributing to the development of critical consciousness. “The internal form involves the Self reflecting on a particular situation and then transforming the perception of the reality driving this situation, leading to knowledge of how to implement change. Internal transformation requires a movement of thought, a Self-action so to speak” (Cammarota and Romero 2009).

There were many issues these young men discussed that could be used to develop critical consciousness about their personal struggles. During another healing circle session, we learned even more about the graphic details of these young men's struggle to survive. Phil shared that he was homeless again, and expressed frustration that his daily struggles made it difficult to be hopeful for the future because he was only focused on day-to-day survival.

Like its 7:15 right now! When I leave here I’m going to be walking to the bus and ask myself, where am I going? What female’s apartment can I stay for a night, which partner’s can I go smoke with and stay at his house so can I sleep for tonight? I deal with this every night! What’s really crazy is when it comes to hygiene! I can’t be around females when I smell because I don’t have a place to wash up. When I don’t smell, I don’t have money to
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take a female anywhere! When I don’t have a place to stay I just go to Diamond Park. One time when I was sleeping in the park, the police came and flashed a light in my face and told me that I could get arrested for trespassing because the park was closed after 10:00 p.m.! Its easy to say that even if you are on probation you can get a job, but when I’m dealing with where I’m gonna stay at night and everything its hella stressful! I need to know how to keep my composure and attitude with all that I’m facing!

I wondered if Phil’s comments expressed resentment for encouraging them to “spill their guts” without giving them much support for the things they really needed like work, food, and shelter. These basic needs were real and made it difficult for them to resist the seduction of quick money through crime. Phil commented:

There are times that I want to go back to hustling, selling dope, robbing muthafuckas cuz I gotta eat! We do crime not cuz we want to, but sometimes we don’t have any options! I have “motivational stagnation”, which means I have no motivation, nothing except jail to keep me from doing crime. I want to have a normal job, but that means I gotta be broke and hungry!

These ethical dilemmas simply added to the stress that many of the young men grappled with. They were not hopeless, but rather the circumstances of their lives made it difficult to see anything else. They wanted good jobs, stable housing, and a way to build their lives but the condition of probation made life intensely difficult to sustain their most basic needs.

Nonetheless, the healing that occurred in our group session also provided the young men with tools and practical strategies they could use to manage their stress. We knew from mindfulness research that breathing and quiet sitting could support these young men, manage their stress, and clarify their decision-making. Our aim was to offer techniques that the young men could use as a way to build hope, political awareness, and encourage political action. Healing justice is the result of both personal and political agency. Healing circles provide spaces for young people to both reflect on the wounds resulting from their personal struggles, and be supported and guided to a political understanding and action.

Social Change From the Inside Out

Healing, in this sense, is a distinct departure from social emotional intelligence, which has recently gained currency among educators. Few researchers would disagree that the conditions of a young person’s social settings such as poverty, violence, and unemployment can have a negative impact on their development.
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(Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Mazza and Overstreet 2000; Ortiz et al. 2008; Sharkey 2010; Stoddard et al. 2011). In Phil’s case, as it is with millions of other young men who are left to navigate life on their own with few if any resources, the daily struggle to survive has brewed a toxic elixir of hopelessness, where they have no opportunities to reflect and heal. Current research, too focused on character traits and social emotional learning, simply fails to tackle this issue head on, favoring instead psychological research on brain development. Their main thesis is that young people can overcome the constraints of poverty if they had more robust opportunities to build grit, perseverance, gratitude in their schools.

I don’t entirely discount the significance of social emotional health for young people who have been wounded by trauma. My point is that character development alone is simply insufficient because it rarely compels young people to confront the very conditions that caused the harm in the first place. I recall a similar educational debate years ago about the importance of resilience, which is the ability for young people to “bounce back” from adverse experiences. Resilience research seeks to understand the qualities and conditions that allow some young people to excel despite difficult experiences. My colleague commented, “Imagine that someone has their foot on your neck and it is very difficult to stand up! Resilience is like saying to young people that I’m going to make your neck stronger, rather than focusing on how to get it off my neck in the first place!”

In some ways, the current clamoring over character development and social emotional health resembles this argument. Why haven’t researchers raised questions about the causes of poverty in the first place and explored examples where schools, teachers, parents, and community residents collectively challenged, and thereby changed, the very conditions that cause harm to young people (Noguera et al. 2006; Cammarota and Ginwright 2007; Warren and Mapp 2011; Kirshner 2015). For young people and their parents in low wealth communities, engagement in the fight to change conditions that shape life outcomes is perhaps the most potent and relevant form of social emotional health and character development. Paul Tough (2012) is correct to raise questions about neighborhood conditions and their impact on the healthy development of young people; however, he may have simply focused on a small part of a broader question, namely, how do teachers, schools, students, and their parents confront threats to social emotional health in the first place?

The question then becomes: What constitutes social emotional health in the context of poverty? How can schools and community organizations bolster these strategies? The answer rests in understanding how to move young people’s individual experiences, to a collective awareness, to collective action. Our healing circles and many others have provided a space for each of the young men to share his experiences and build a collective consciousness about their shared experience. But healing circles are not simply about focusing on how we think and fostering an awareness of social issues. They are about putting...
matters of the heart out in the open and collectively wrestling with difficult issues of the soul.

Our project focused on discussions that highlighted the young men’s collective experiences. This meant some of our healing circles focused on the young men sharing their experiences on the streets, with young women, at school, and even in jail! During one of our circles, the young men all reminisced about the rare pleasure of eating “spreads”, a mix of noodles, hot sauce, and vegetables while they were in jail. Our goal was to build their imaginations by asking piercing questions about what type of person they wanted to be and create opportunities that align with that vision. Our circles also focused on fostering their radical imaginations about their lives and future. For example, we asked the young men one night, “some of you have daughters, and some of you will have daughter one day. Our question is, would you want your daughter to marry someone just like you?” The response was a unanimous “hell no!”. The question was designed to invoke deep reflection among each of the young men. When probed about their response, one young man commented, “Why would I want her to be with someone who don’t respect women, been to jail and aint working! Hell no she better not bring someone home like me!”

Even If We Are Wounded, We Still Have to March On! How Breathing Builds Activists

None of us in the circle actually understood what Woody meant when he said, “we are going to focus on our breath”. While I was familiar with meditation, quiet sitting, and mindfulness practices, quite honestly I am not much of a practitioner. I wake up early to get the kids ready for school, go exercise, and then off to work for the rest of the day. By the end of the day, either I’m simply too tired to “sit and focus on my breath” and would much rather peruse the meaningless landscape of Facebook posts on my iPad, informing and amusing myself with images of sandwiches, puppies, or the latest exercise equipment. Woody, on the other hand, had been meditating for over 30 years and was an avid teacher of mindfulness. He led our circles through each mindfulness exercise beginning with a simple 5 minute activity where he asked us to focus on our breath. Each session was designed to bring awareness to our thoughts. Our goal was to provide the young men a tool that would allow them to reflect inward, lower their stress, and ultimately act in ways that addressed some of the issues they faced.

We were not the first to recognize how mindfulness could support vulnerable young people in urban neighborhoods. In fact, Oakland, California, has become the epicenter for mindfulness in schools with several organizations working both in the school district and in juvenile hall (Brown 2007). As noted earlier, Visitation Valley Middle School had used quiet sitting and several other schools in San Francisco reported promising results.
Our first attempt went much better than I had anticipated. Woody’s instructions were simple, “sit with your feet planted, back straight and simply pay close attention to your breathing. When you feel your thoughts wonder off to something else, just return to focusing on your breath”. Phil, and the other young men were less than eager to participate, but sat up in their chairs, closed their eyes, and sat quietly. Sometimes Woody’s calm voice would provide us with a guided meditation, inserting imagery of white sand beaches, green forests, or the tranquility of a babbling river. “Breath in, and exhale. As you exhale feel your body relax, and focus on your breath”.

Afterward, our discussion of the breathing activity were usually mixed. When Woody asked what we thought about the activity, Phil, usually the first to comment, explained that he had practiced meditation before while in juvenile hall.

Yeah I liked it [the meditation activity] because I used to do this when I was locked up. We would use drums and rhythms and it kind of calmed me down. So I liked it and I’m gonna try to use it when I’m at home.

To my surprise, most of the young men had prior experience with meditation. John, who was often the most skeptical of the group, was concerned that we were introducing them to a religious practice. Dr. D was indeed a member of a Christian church and had used terms like “faith”, “salvation”, and “holy spirit” on occasion during our weekly sessions. John questioned the purpose of our “quiet sitting” activities and wondered how the practice of paying attention to his breath would actually help him with issues he was dealing with. He commented, “We can be calm all we want, but if we are still broke and hungry howz this gonna help me?” John raised an important point, and when he asked this, it raised doubts in my mind that we had simply strayed too far away from our aim to support these young men with daily life decisions, and prepare them in political activities. Woody responded, “These practices help us with our worry, and allow us to be clear in our decision making”. Woody’s response added emotional fuel to the fire! John immediately responded with irritation: “How the hell are we suppose to go through life without worry? That’s just not possible and I’m not sure anyone can do it. Can you, Woody?”

Their exchange revealed an important debate about mindfulness, and its limits and possibilities in toxic urban communities. Research, on one hand, has demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness practices on stress reduction, self-efficacy, optimism, and goal orientation for young people. However, much of this research does not include young people of color. Questions about culturally specific mindfulness practices and how to make these practices appropriate for the urban young people are virtually absent in the research literature. Therefore, on the other hand, it is unclear how to adapt, modify, and retrofit mindfulness practices in ways that are culturally relevant and responsive to the environmental conditions in young people’s neighborhoods.
John, still frustrated by the direction of the conversation, continued to push Woody for an answer to his question, “life is more complicated than that, it’s not as simple as be calm and let go of your worries! Life is fill with a lot of ifs, and I have to take what life throws at me seriously!” Woody’s point was to challenge the young men to consider how their circumstances were significant barriers, but to consider that each of young men had the power to respond to these circumstances in life affirming ways. Woody shared a story about a young Vietnamese woman who had moved to Oakland without any family and worked as a waitress in a restaurant. She didn’t speak English so he had to point to the items on the menu that he wanted to order. However, over the period of about a year, she had learned English and had enrolled in the local community college. He explained to the young men:

As I left the restaurant, I was walking to my car I was waiting on the corner and I noticed an Black woman about the same age who looked homeless, and using some type of drug. I could tell she saw no opportunity, she was gone! She was a victim of the culture we live in! The young Vietnamese woman, who could barely speak English, saw only opportunity. What is the difference between these two women?

Phil responded to his question, “its their mindset”, and Woody responded “exactly”. I felt very uncomfortable with such a simplified conclusion. I am all too familiar with the research that suggests that if blacks somehow were more like Asian immigrants, and saw the United States as full of opportunity, they would be educationally successful and upwardly mobile (Ogbu 1990). Similarly, there is a perception among the general public, and even President Obama, that personal responsibility is the single most important factor contributing to the social ills African Americans face (Obama Stresses 2013)

I knew instinctively that this was not Woody’s conclusion, and he explained to the young men that:

What it is going to come down to is that you have to be in tune with the moment, how you are feeling, what you are thinking so that you don’t just react in ways that keep you in danger. Once you are aware of your thoughts, then you can ask what is the best choice for me? But if you keep living on the impulse control responding to whatever pops into your head we never grow.

Each time we practiced quiet sitting, the young men discussed the idea being mindful of their choices, rather than controlled by their environment. Over time, the conversations and insights the young men shared illustrated subtle shifts in their sense of agency, power, and perception of the world. During one session Phil
commented about the power of choice. “Don’t nobody say I’m gonna put this pound of coke on the table, and put a gun to your head and say you gotta sell this! You got a choice to sell this or not”. The conversations revealed their own stories and experiences with the power of choice and the consequences of their choices.

The quiet sitting, combined with our subsequent discussions, opened opportunities for the young men to reflect on larger political issues, and how these issues constrained or opened possibilities for their own choices.

The way the world is right now, is the only way it knows how to function. There has to be those people in jail, there has to be those poor ass mutherfuckas, those rich ass people, and people in the middle. You can’t really change it, you just got be above it. Like they can lock me in jail, but they can’t lock my mind up.

Building political consciousness doesn’t come from mindful quiet sitting alone. Rather, it is created by making space to reflect and develop an awareness of how and what we think. Each of the young men shared stories about their choices, and more importantly the power of being intentionally aware of their thoughts in ways that sparked political awareness.

Political awareness, however, highlights an obvious and important tension among researchers and practitioners of mindfulness. The tension rests on the idea that mindfulness requires focused non-judgmental attention, yet political awareness requires judgment and opinion. For example, it would be counterproductive for us if we encouraged the young men to be aware of their thoughts about police brutality, but not develop an opinion or judgment about police misconduct. Conversely, there is also a tendency among those who study activism and political/civic engagement to only examine the more obvious empirical qualities of civic life, without much attention focused on the emotional, spiritual dimensions of social and community change. Researchers focus on documenting the development of organizing campaigns, how communities confront and change local policy, or how students recruit others to join their cause. In fact, my earlier research on youth activism generally focused on these issues (Ginwright & James 2002).

But in fact the convergence of mindfulness and political awareness and action is much closer than it appears.

There are at least two areas where we can more fully understand the intersections between mindfulness and activism. First, Freire’s discussion of “false consciousness” suggests that people are simply unaware and believe myths about how the world works. These myths reinforce debilitating ideas about the causes of the conditions of their lives. False consciousness is adverse to political awareness and action because it also concludes that social conditions are immutable. Similarly, mindfulness suggests that in many ways people are slaves to their thoughts. Hence people are controlled by forces of which they are simply unaware, which
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reproduces social structures. Mindfulness awareness offers people a practice that separates and therefore offers freedom from limiting thoughts and debilitating emotions. “In other words, mindfulness practice provide the opportunity for a pause, which enables us to increase our awareness of our feelings and to have opportunities to make decisions in a more thoughtful, less reactive fashion. . . . It suggests that practices of self-reflection that increase our awareness of our internal state can help to challenge the ‘powerlessness’ that comes from oppression (Todd 2009). Second, Freire reminds us that praxis, the duality of reflection and action, allows us to build knowledge about ourselves in relation to the world. Praxis also creates an opportunity to recognize that social structures are not permanent and can in fact be changed. In a similar way, mindfulness encourages living in the present moment, with careful attention and observation of our emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Given the future orientation of community change, mindfulness values creating peace in every moment.

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“Tonight we are going to take a trip”, Woody explained to the group. “We are going to build from our prior week’s breathing exercises, but this time we are going to allow our thoughts to go where we want them to go”. Rather than the difficult task of focusing on my breathing, this time Woody led us on a vivid walk on the beach! He asked us to smell the ocean, feel the warm sun on our faces, imagine the warm sand give way under our feet, and listen to the waves crash against the rocks. He asked us to imagine that we were all standing there, together on the beach, and to pay attention to how we felt standing there together. We all opened our eyes, and I listened to each of the yount men share feelings of safety, calm, tranquility. Not everyone shared these feelings, Phil commented during our reflection of the activity. “Shit I wasn’t done! I wanna go back to that beach, I saw a sistah walking on the beach with a red bikini! She was hella fine!”

The group erupted with laughter at Phil’s comment but I sensed that everyone appreciated a tool that had been given to them.

I was unsure if the young men actually used the breathing techniques when they left our healing circles. It wasn’t until later in the program where I began to see these lessons come to life in the young men’s daily routines. In early October, Phil showed up to our circle with a fresh haircut, new shoes, and a new outfit! When I asked Phil about his new look, he told me he had secured a job a local Goodwill store. He explained that after weeks of calling the manager to inquire about a job he had seen posted, he finally went down to the store to speak to the manager. Turns out that he was hired the next day and began working shortly thereafter. His job was to sort through the thousands of donated shoes, matching up pairs, and throwing away items that could not be sold. Phil explained:

“Yeah man I sort shoes for 8 hours a day! That shit gets tiring but I’m glad my ass got a job now cuz I can pay rent and keep money in my pocket”. He was
proud of his accomplishment, and everyone in our group congratulated him. I could see the pride in his face as he explained to us how he acquired his new shoes. “I got these shoes because I see all the best stuff before anyone else! So I just put these to the side, and paid only 10 dollars for these!” His supervisor, however, was difficult to work with and during a shift last week he explained a situation that could have placed him back in jail.

Last week I was sorting shoes minding my own business with my headphones on. I must have not heard Mark [the supervisor] call me so he just walked up on me, he was hella mad and he damn near snatched my headphones out! When I saw him, he was all in my face pointing his finger at me. So man I was just about to fuck his shit up, but I walked in the breakroom and I breathed. Like big deep inhales and exhales a few times cuz I was heated. After that, I wasn’t mad anymore because I just thought it was funny. So when I saw him I was cool, and I just told him, “hey man I’m sorry I must have not heard you with my headphones on”, but I was thinking the whole time this shit is funny and not that big of a deal.

This incident also caused me reflect on our earlier discussions about mindfulness and if they could actually use breathing when they really need it. His comments also suggested to me that our conversations, nudging, and encouragement give him new tools to choose how to respond to his supervisor. Also our group had also sparked his persistence to seek the job in the first place. His experiences at work and discussions during our healing circles also supported Phil’s thinking about broader political issues related to his employment. For example, we discussed the stigma associated with having a felony conviction, and how the conviction limited employment opportunities. During one session, we showed a video of Michelle Alexander discussing her book *New Jim Crow*. Phil and the other young men were surprisingly engaged with video and, afterward, launched into a rich discussion about their own experiences with trying to find employment with a felony conviction. John had taken off his Oakland A’s hat and passionately explained to the group. “I’m sure we all have been turned down from a job, but after awhile that shit gets to you and you wanna just say fuck it! Even though I wanna work, they not gonna hire a convicted felon! So I gotta be real about how people see me. They don’t just see John, they see a felon! That’s not right and they should make a decision based on me, not my criminal record”.

**Starting Over Strong! Political Advocacy and Change**

As John so poignantly demonstrated, one of the most significant barriers the group of young men faced was challenges resulting from their probationary status.
Even though many of them had completed their conditions of probation, such as repaying fees, jail time, and not reoffending, they simply had to wait until their probationary period ended which in some cases were an additional 2 to 3 years. This meant they had to check “yes” on job applications when asked, “have you ever been convicted of a crime?” The question virtually eliminates applicants with a conviction from being considered to hire due to the stigma of having been involved with the justice system.

Turns out that John and Phil were already having conversations about how laws should be changed. Michelle Alexander’s video about mass incarceration had spawned in John and Phil a political acuity about their experience with work, incarceration, and their future. “We out here trying to survive and the government has been robbin’ us for years! It’s really just set up for us to stay in the system cuz people get paid! That shit ain’t right, and we need to change that”. Phil’s emotional pleas were met with shaking heads and nods as if to say we all agree brotha!

While it wasn’t a part of our original plan, we wanted to advocate for the young men to be released from probation after the completion of our program. In some cases, if we were successful, this move would reduce the terms of their probation by 2 to 3 years. In February 2013, Woody contacted several agencies in the Bay Area that could support the young men to have their criminal records expunged or reduced to misdemeanors. During our negotiations with the office county probation, we learned that there were several campaigns to eliminate criminal conviction questions from government employment applications. The campaign, “ban the box”, was part of a national movement of progressive legal organizations like the National Employment Law Project, Pico California, and others, to create legislation that would ban state, county, and city government agencies from including a question about prior convictions on job applications.

We attended several meetings, and after only two weeks, Phil joined the ban the box campaign and worked to organize other young men to support the bill. If signed by the governor, the bill would remove a significant roadblock to employment for thousands of young men in California. Phil commented,

Even though they weren’t able to help me with my record because of the type of crime I was convicted of, I still wanted to help because I know what its like to check that box and know that your application is gonna be in the garbage! So I wanted to help get the laws passed that would help other people like me with a record.

Phil explained that he would listen to young men explain how the laws made it nearly impossible to work, which in turn made it easier to seek out illegal activities. Eventually, he was asked to join the Bay Area Community Law Center
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in Sacramento to testify and lobby for a bill that would eliminate questions about past criminal convictions. He shared his experience with the group:

When we were in Sacramento, we all just told our story about trying to find work, and how hard it is with a criminal record. About 30 of us talked to the lawmakers, and I really started to understand the process of changing that law. It felt powerful because I was working with other folks who experienced the same thing I did.

Phil’s efforts, along with voices, stories, and heartfelt words of thousands of other young men, compelled Governor Brown to sign into law Assembly Bill 218, which effectively banned criminal history questions from government applications. Other cities around the country have also extended this to private companies as well. Phil commented, “I feel strong that I was a part of something like this, even though I’m not a political person, I know I can change things for other brothas like me.”

Phil was not a conventional activist or organizer because he simply didn’t fit the typical social justice profile. He had a criminal record, he had little formal education, and he was highly doubtful that his opinion mattered to anyone, let alone could lead to positive legislative change. What is important to note here, however, is not simply the political outcome, but rather the healing process that evoked the political activism. That is, the safety and trust that were created in our healing circle provided a space for the young men to envision another future, and specific concrete ways they could achieve it.

We cannot underestimate the ways in which the daily struggles of life erode the foundation of possibility for young men of color. The daily struggle to find work, navigate violence, and find stable housing make it difficult for these and thousands of other young men to courageously march toward the light of meaning and purpose. The light of hope is not as bright. Sometimes, however, as we witnessed in our group of 10 young men, it just takes a flicker and a nudge to send them on their journey.

Teacher activists and youth workers recognize that healing is an important ingredient in the gumbo of social change. No one element (community organizing, political education, civic engagement) alone can create the complexity, richness, and texture for the bowl of justice for which we all yearn. Justice, in this sense, is not simply the outcome of a campaign, or the result of policy organizing, but rather it is the process of rediscovering hope.

Our journey began with 10 young men, and ended with 8. None of these young men have reoffended, and we successfully reduced the probation for three of them. Phil continues to work odd jobs for several temp agencies and calls me regularly to check in. Most of the young men continue to contact
each other by group text messages. About once or twice a month, I receive a random text message from someone in the group. “Lets hook up for dinner shawn!”, “yeah let’s meet at Chili’s this time, gotta get them buffalo wings”. I usually find a time and day when I’m not on campus to meet, “how about next Thursday at 6:00, Chilis is cool- see yall there!” When we meet, we check in about jobs, girl friends, money, and a host of other things. Most importantly, we simply connect.

Notes
1 These comments were from a keynote address “A New Vision For Justice” delivered at the Richmond Community Foundation’s 2014 Summit on Building A Just Society, Transforming Lives and Creating Equity for Young Men and Boys of Color.
2 Each of the young men were required to attend each session for one year as a condition of their probation. They were provided $50 stipends every month if they had 100 percent attendance.
3 For a more elaborate discussion of how mindfulness and social justice practices converge and depart, see Hicks and Furlotte (2009) and Todd (2009).

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CREATING A HEALING ZONE IN SAN FRANCISCO

Our power to heal has been disrupted by slavery, poverty, and now violence. We have simply forgotten that its our birthright is to be well, to thrive and to fully live! Our solutions to these problems have been bound by the very conditions that created them. Our goal is to disrupt our conditioning, to reimagine things that we were told were impossible and to act courageously, without apology, to heal those that need it most.

Lena Miller, Co-Director Hunters Point Family
San Francisco, California

October in the San Francisco Bay Area is without question the most splendid time of year. The warm breezes from the east that have been brewing all summer finally arrives back into our lives and politely demands that the cool grey skies surrender to its yellow brilliant glory. I have the early morning shift in our family routine. I wake up the kids, prepare a quick breakfast, and drop them off at their respective schools in Oakland. On days like these, I like to take the long route back to our home to enjoy the sun, and just watch people going about their morning. Every morning, at precisely 7:15 the 77 bus pulls up to the bus stop, and a large brother probably in his early thirties (6’2”, 300 lbs.) exits the bus with his three-year-old son. He usually wears jeans, a hoody, or a black jacket. Together they walk side by side to the preschool located in the church about a block away. As soon as his son enters the parking lot of the church, the father gives his son a kiss, and let’s him know its ok for him to run to the playground and jump on the freshly planted grass to join the other children. He stands to watch his son for awhile, waves goodbye, and hops on the next bus.

On the other side of the San Francisco Bay, Lena Miller also begins her morning ritual. She pulls herself out of bed and gets her son ready for school. Today
was not different from any other day, except that she needed to get to work a bit earlier than usual because she had an important funding meeting at her office in Bayview Hunters Point San Francisco. I’ve known Lena for over 10 years through our mutual work with African American youth in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Born and raised in the same neighborhood where she works, she embodies every ounce of San Francisco style sistah swagger. Her mannerisms, vernacular, and even her vocal quality compelled me to place her on the lighter side of the skin tone spectrum of African Americans. (There are thousands of African Americans who simply don’t look black). It wasn’t until recently that I learned that she has no African ancestry, but growing up white in a working poor black neighborhood is what has given Lena her edge, insight, and brilliance. Her parents were hippies, and denounced the middle-class privileges (excellent schools, plethora of high-quality grocery stores, manicured parks) that white America took for granted; they moved into the Hunters Point neighborhood in the mid-1960s when Lena was just two years old. Her political savvy, street sensibilities, and intelligence didn’t come from her degree from University of California Berkeley. Rather, these gifts emerged from her years growing up in a predominately black working-class neighborhood having to navigate, defend, and explore the complexity of race, privilege, and poverty at an early age. This experience has also given Lena keen insight and courage to confront San Francisco’s political elite in order to improve San Francisco’s most underserved communities.

This chapter highlights how organizers harness the power of organizing to bring healing opportunities San Francisco’s most violent and trauma-producing neighborhoods. Having first-hand experience with growing up in a Bayview Hunters Point, and witnessing how violence and poverty create a toxic elixir of hopelessness, Lena Miller launched a powerful campaign to shift city resources toward healing and wellness opportunities in Bayview Hunters Point. Driven by the principles of healing justice, this chapter illustrates how healing and organizing respond to community needs.

How to Heal a Troubled Community

Every year, millions of tourists from all over the world clamor onto San Francisco trolleys cars and double decker buses to take in the visual delights of America’s favorite city. San Francisco’s history is as rich and complex as its people, and every neighborhood can tell its own story. The Chinese in Chinatown, Italians in North Beach, Latinos in the Mission, LGBT in the Castro, and hippies in Haight-Ashbury find pride in San Francisco’s neighborhoods where race and place are sometimes synonymous. These neighborhoods all have thriving business, solid schools, growing property values, and a general sense of safety not easily found in large cities. There is, however, another neighborhood in San Francisco that is rarely included in tourist brochures and self-guided walking tours. Bayview Hunters Point is San Francisco’s black neighborhood and stands in stark contrast
to other neighborhoods in the city. Most black families migrated to the Bayview Hunters Point community from Louisiana, Texas, and other southern states in search of work required for the war-time economy in the mid 1940s. The shipyards in Bayview Hunters Point offered well-paying jobs to blacks that allowed many families to purchase homes and open small neighborhood businesses.

However, by 1960s the shipyards were no longer central to the war economy and began closing, leaving hundreds of black families without employment. Like many other black neighborhoods in America, Bayview Hunters Point experienced rapid economic decline, and by the 1980s the crack epidemic transformed the community into San Francisco’s most violent communities. Perhaps the most devastating impact of the crack economy was its impact on the family structure that made up the social fabric of the neighborhood. Lena describes her first-hand experience of the introduction of crack into the neighborhood:

The affect on the children was not necessarily the prenatal exposure to the drug, but the overexposure to drug addict behaviors and drug influenced home environments. Many children had witnessed their mothers prostituting themselves or doing other degrading things to get the drugs. A lack of discipline and structure pervaded these children's home lives and a distrust and disdain for adults grew within the hearts of many of these children. Even when their parents stopped using drugs and became clean/sober, many still hesitated to chastise or set boundaries for their children, as they were overwhelmed with guilt and shame for their behaviors during their addiction. While some young people were drawn to selling drugs for the promise of quick money and prestige, most young men reported that they began selling drugs to prevent their mothers from buying it on the streets where they would be subject to constant degradation; and the young person would be humiliated by taunts from other young men about what their mother had done to get drugs from them. By supplying their mothers with drugs they could at least prevent her from being abused in the streets; however, this often created another dynamic where the child/parent relationship was skewed and where their mothers or other family members with addictions would manipulate and steal from them. All of these dysfunctional dynamics soon ate away at the social fabric of the community.

(Hunters Point Family 2011)

Despite the outmigration of African American families in San Francisco, today Bayview Hunters Point is home to 85 percent of San Francisco’s African American population and is one of the last remaining African American communities in the city. The impact of the crack epidemic, however, continues to weigh on the spirit and psychological health of the community. Bayview Hunters Point also has San Francisco’s highest unemployment rates, four times the city’s average, and the lowest educational attainment, with nearly 37 percent of its residents having
no high school diploma. Nearly half of all the city’s homicide victims are black residents for Bayview Hunters Point even though African Americans make up less than 8 percent of the city’s population.

For Lena Miller, it was a difficult time.

That was a painful time for me. In high school in the mid 1980s my own family began to self-destruct which made me hang out with my friends’ family to escape my own family situation. It was cool because they always welcomed me and I loved the stability of watching TV, eating dinner and having grandmothers watch out for me. The mothers or grandmothers in the nearby homes cooked and shared freely, a bed was always left open for me and I was made to feel like part of the family, giving me a much needed feeling of connectedness. But even these families that provided me an oasis from my own family fell into disarray when crack entered their homes. My childhood friend’s mother was a strong Police woman who looked like the movie Superhero, Coffee Brown, became a hard-core crack addict and her life and her family’s life went spiraling downward. By the time I began attending high school, it seemed that the whole neighborhood had succumbed to the grip of the crack epidemic. I lost friends and neighbors to drug- and turf-related homicides, once every two weeks. The pain and devastation of the neighborhood was palpable. I was determined to go out into the world to find the ‘medicine’ to heal my community.

Lena’s quest to find the medicine to heal her community inspired her to ultimately create a community organization that focused on working with young people from the most difficult and challenging environments in San Francisco housing projects. In 1998, while in graduate school at San Francisco State University, she founded GIRLS 2000, which later became a program of the Hunters Point Family. The organization was created and driven by Lena’s vision to create a loving family environment where young people who experienced trauma in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools could heal.

She commented,

The model for GIRLS 2000 was to mix my childhood experiences and my group home days. I tried to create a place for young people to go who have a lot of crazy stuff going on at home. It was a safe place to go where they felt loved and had a connection with people. And particularly because of the times; the problems had changed. So it was a time where the kids weren’t getting basic parenting. No one felt like a ‘group home kid’. I was trying to make the program hip. Something that they could be proud of and want to be a part of. So it’s not about someone not loving you and sending you away, but close to home we started a family. No one was there because they were identified or stigmatized as being dysfunctional. It was a celebration of
pride in the community and taking what was beautiful in the community. So much stuff that was going on was about degrading the spirit. So our program was about uplifting.

(Hunters Point Family 2011, p. 15)

Over the years, Hunters Point Family has grown into a well-known and respected youth serving institutions in the Bayview neighborhood. Today, Hunters Point Family serves young people from the community’s public housing. In a questionnaire that was distributed to participants in Hunters Point Family programs indicate the pervasive presence of violence in the young people they serve. The table below provides a snapshot of how young people experience growing up in Bayview Hunters Point.

The fact that 100% of the young people surveyed indicated that they “know someone who has been shot” is profoundly disturbing and raised questions for Lena about the social emotional health of the young people they served. We targeted specific outreach to youth living in public and subsidized housing, who were at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of homicide and violent crime; arrest and incarceration; sexual exploitation; and premature parenthood. Many of our youth in this program had mothers who were taking drugs and alcohol during their pregnancy; had witnessed sexual and/or physical abuse by family members/caretakers; and had experienced neglect due to parental substance abuse or diminished mental health. In fact, most of their young people had been exposed to multiple risk factors.

These issues required a programming approach that conventional youth development, youth organizing, and school-based academic support simply failed to address. At first, Lena and the new Program Director, Takai Tyler, were hesitant to share with funders that loving the children was the secret sauce to their programs. After all “love” as a program strategy didn’t fit nicely into theory of change models, evaluation protocols, and outcome metrics. So rather than touting that “love” was what they really believed made a difference in the lives of the young people they served, they placed youth development terms in foundation reports and requests for funding like “meaningful relationships”, “leadership”, “mentoring”.

### TABLE 4.1 Survey of Hunters Point Family Youth Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of kids who have:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. . . known someone who has been shot (n = 36)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . been involved in a physical altercation (n = 37)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . known someone who has been killed (n = 34)</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . seen someone being beat up, jumped, or robbed (n = 37)</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . seen someone get shot (n = 36)</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . been shot or shot at (n = 35)</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . been jumped or robbed (n = 37)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . seen someone get killed (n = 32)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Program directors and youth workers during the early to mid 1990s simply didn’t have the theory or language to point to concepts like love, spirituality, hope, and faith that are more frequently used today (Jackson et al. 2014). During the early to mid 1990s, youth development theory and practices dominated the youth funding and therefore programming landscape. Much of what we know about adolescents is therefore based on psychological models of development. Although this theoretical work has informed our knowledge of youth, its central focus was on identifying youth problems such as delinquency, substance abuse, and violence. This was particularly the case with research on African American and Latino youth, where numerous studies attempted to explain or show the causes contributing to high drug use, dropout rates, violence, early sexual activity, and other behaviors that jeopardize their healthy development.

In the early 1990s, the youth development field began to promote youth assets, rather than focusing on youth problems. By promoting youth assets, scholars reconceptualized policy and practice by placing an emphasis on emotional health, empowerment, and exploration. Additionally, youth development practitioners and researchers reframed their most basic assumptions about youth in ways that viewed them as agents and acknowledged their self-worth and self-awareness.

While this shift in thinking about young people from problems to be solved to positive developmental opportunities was important, youth development approaches didn’t seem to capture the fullness nor complexity of the work people were actually doing. For youth workers deeply engaged in work with young people of color in toxic neighborhoods and schools, the youth development strategies remained disconnected and contextually distant (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Ginwright and James 2002; Ginwright 2010).

Lena understood that Hunters Point Family didn’t have the luxury of clinging to the sterile and disconnected concepts associated with youth development strategies used in afterschool programs and community centers in the suburbs. Lena and Takai described their beliefs about working with young people in Bayview Hunters Point:

We are in a new millennium and there are some new things going on that have never happened before. The question is how do human beings raise our young? How are we shaping and informing ourselves and who we become over time. Our children are watching and waiting to see. Things are crazy. The whole world has changed. So we [HPF] go back to the basics: People who have love enough for everybody. You can see this and measure it. That is what can be replicated. We are confirming for people that despite the madness and the generations that have been destroyed by bad food, failing mental health, semi-automatic weapons, irresponsible media, chemicals, and an overall feeling of hopelessness, it is love that will save us. It always has been. Our [HPF] love is so big. We believe that we can heal our children
and help them grow through that big big love and we aren’t afraid to share it with them. We can give it freely.”

Turns out that considerable research shows that parental love and care can be an important antidote to stress among young people who grow up in stressful neighborhoods (Meaney 2001). Michael Meaney and his team of researchers at McGill University in Quebec, Canada, have tested this thesis and produced compelling evidence about the power of love in building healthy youth people and communities. Combining biology and psychology, Meaney claims that nurturing and caring mothers can protect against harsh and stressful environments. His experiment that pups (baby and adolescent rats) who were licked and groomed more frequently by their adult mothers produced lower levels of stress hormone and were able to deal with challenging situations. In other words, parental nurturing, care, and love is a significant feature in developing well-being among children.

Lena, however, wasn’t familiar with research on social emotional learning, maternal care, or biology and stress. Rather, she knew that caring for young people required more than what youth development professionals and practitioners were talking about. “Our job was to love these children who had suffered so much and witnessed the dehumanization of the closest and dearest people in their lives. We had to love and nurture them so that they could move past the pain and the personal story of failure and disappointment to embrace their higher purpose”.

**A Dangerous Safe Haven**

Despite the culture of love and family that was created among program participants, their work was still plagued by community violence. The culture of violence followed many young people into the very programs that were aimed at creating peace. For example, young men from different neighborhoods would come to the gym seeking refuge from the streets only to find young men from a rival neighborhood ready to fight. Sometimes there were fights, even shootings both inside and outside of the gym. It wasn’t uncommon for Lena to receive phone calls in the middle of the night informing her that one of the participants had been shot. On one occasion, the organization’s van was shot up when an adult in the program was taking young people home from an agency Christmas party and had passed through a “hostile” neighborhood. The van was surrounded by a group of gang affiliated young people who sprayed the van full of bullets. One of the bullets penetrated the hood of the van and killed the engine, forcing the nine passengers to escape out of the back window and flee on foot.

The stress of losing young people, personal challenges with her own children, combined with a feeling of hopelessness, Lena began to question whether or not her work was making a difference. She raised concerns about the effectiveness of the program and simply needed to see another possibility in the work.
On January 12, 2009, Terrell Rogers, Lena’s good friend and a well respected, youth worker, and employee of Hunters Point Family, was murdered outside of his daughter’s high school basketball game. Terrell’s murder came on the heels of the death of four Hunters Point Family participants in 2008. News of Terrell’s death stopped everyone in the agency in their tracks. Who would kill Terrell? He was a fun loving, friend to everyone, respected by all, and the visionary behind a program called Peacekeeper, which worked with the communities most hard to reach young people in Bayview’s housing projects. What everyone felt deeply on their hearts, but refused to say, was that they were terrified. Takai commented about the staff’s response to Terrell’s murder.

We felt that if Terrell could be murdered, what would stop any of us from being murdered? The issues were deep, and the problem was complex and we simply could see through I mean we were stuck emotionally, spiritually in every way. We adults on the staff also realized that this is what our youth had felt most of their lives. This thick pain, draped in fear, and dread. We felt like there was no light at the end of the tunnel, only more tragedy, more pain, more loss, more disappointment. There was no tunnel, only a long, lonely, dark pit.

Terrell was murdered on a Saturday night. The following Monday, staff and community members gathered at the Hunters Point Family headquarters to discuss his murder. It wasn’t much of a discussion, however, because people wanted to grieve, to share their feelings, and to be comforted. During the meeting, Lena learned that a local drug addict had walked into their headquarters while everyone was upstairs, and stole the new Mac computers that had been donated to the program for the youth to begin a new technology project. Lena, still distraught and emotionally full from the meeting, was called downstairs to provide a report of the stolen items to the police. While giving the report to the police, her 11-year old son called her in a panic. He explained to Lena that on his way to the after-school program, a young man followed him off the bus and robbed him at gun point.

Lena had reached her emotional breaking point and she knew that without help, she could slide into a deep depression. The Board of Directors granted her a three-month sabbatical where she began looking for another job where she didn’t have to worry about the lives of her staff and her own children’s safety.

I really wanted to just get away from all the things that were causing me stress. When the board granted me a sabbatical it probably saved my life because I was able to breath, slow down and reflect on all the shit that was depressing me.

I found myself reading different types of spiritual books, I started gardening and talking walks in the park near my house. During my walks, I would think positive about negative things. Like, ‘please don’t let a
shooting happen again today’, or ‘please let one of our kids live’. This is how deep and depressed I was! Even when I wanted to think positive, it was still about some really negative shit! I was in such a dark place when all that happened. I think that all that happened forced me to ask questions about my purpose, you know like why am I really here. So I really started thinking about that and I read everything that I could about how to do this! I listen to audiobooks by Deepak Chopra, Napoleon Hill’s think and grow rich, all types of stuff that pushed me to think differently about what was happening.

Lena came to the realization that business as usual was insufficient when it came to transforming the magnitude of the issues that faced in Bayview Hunters Point. She realized that more important than providing programming, a way of thinking, living, and relating to one another, the culture of violence had to be shifted toward peace. During one of her walks, she recalled a moment where she simply was tired of feeling like a martyr. It dawned on her that she simply wanted to be happy, without fear, guilt, or anger, just happy.

It was like a light went off inside me that I was tired of the depression so I choose happiness, despite what ever is happening around me. It was a powerful because it gave me the power and control rather than all the bad stuff that can happen in our community. This is also want I wanted for our young people, and our community!

Over time Lena slowly realized that if we could change how we viewed the world and our circumstances, we could be happier, more vibrant, and effective to make changes in our communities. Her reading, daily meditation, and conversations with friends clarified questions about her sense of purpose, distilled a more vivid vision for her life, and fueled a sense of power make the vision a reality.

I knew if I was going to go back into this work, I would need to do it differently, with a different vision and mindset. What I learned was that we all have the power within us to change how and what we see. Changing this can make all the difference in the world in our work where it’s easy to be consumed by all the negativity. So helping young people with homework, providing afterschool activities, and even being great mentors would never fundamentally shift the destructive climate in our community.

Lena’s observations point to a key tension about healing and well-being in the context of social justice work. Can we sustain a self-centered, individualistic pursuit of happiness, by simply refusing to acknowledge or engage in addressing the root causes of people’s economic, social, educational problems?
Barbara Ehrenreich has raised questions about what she called the “growth of a thriving industry in the kind of thought reform that supposedly overcomes negative thinking” (Ehrenreich 2009, p. 1). She argued that capitalist forces encourage a focus on happiness and the tenants of positive psychology simply because it requires that we ignore how corporate America’s profits collide and the government’s blind eye together create most people’s misery. Its not individual outlook, rather its structural reality!

Lena, however, wasn’t concerned about theoretical debates about happiness and the field’s relationships to corporate America. All she knew from her personal experience that her staff and the young people in her community needed something that could fundamentally improve the quality of their lives.

Bring the Medicine: A Campaign to Heal the Community

Lena returned to work with a vision and inspiration to meet the needs of Hunter Point’s young people by focusing on their need to heal. She was convinced that her own journey with trauma was precisely what many young people were dealing with in their schools and homes.

It was obvious to me that trauma was not really being addressed, or even talked about in many youth programs, and schools. But given what I went through, I know that your young people must be dealing with this stuff as well. This is our most critical issue. When I talk to people in the community, they tell me that they need mental health, but not like laying down on a therapist couch, but more relevant to the issues people are dealing with.

In fact, a report conducted by the San Francisco Department of Public Health in 2006 found that nearly 20 percent of the city’s African American, mostly low-income neighborhoods, reported needing support with mental and or emotional health. Moreover, gun violence has contributed to disproportionate rates of exposure to trauma, anxiety, and depression among Bayview Hunters Point residents located in District 10 of San Francisco. According to data compiled by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (DPH), in March 2013, over 44.33 percent of District 10 residents who have come to a clinic for services reported that they have been exposed to at least one trauma, versus 36.45 percent in other areas of the city. There was also a significantly higher incidence of both PTSD and exposure to trauma in D10 as compared to other areas of the city. The incidence of PTSD was 17.70 percent for residents of D10 as compared to 14.20 percent in other San Francisco neighborhoods. It is important to note that these numbers only represent data from those people who have come in for services provided by a County Clinic or by a Community Based Organization.
Creating a Healing Zone

(CBO) (Miller 2013). It is likely that the actual impact and number of people exposed to trauma, community wide, is actually significantly higher (Israel 2013).

For young people in the neighborhood, the numbers were even more bleak. According to data from the City and County of San Francisco’s Community Behavioral Health System, 64 percent of children and youth in the Southeast sector have been exposed to at least one type of trauma, and more than one-third more than one-third of all child and youth clients have exposure to multiple types of traumatic events (38% and 36%, respectively). Because PTSD is a specific diagnosis with specific symptoms, it does not fully account for the number of people exposed to trauma that experience other symptoms. Often times, exposure to trauma results in a myriad of other symptoms such as depression, anxiety, stress, and substance abuse.

Lena’s vision was to ultimately raise the attention about the need for mental health and healing in the community in order to direct greater resources where they are most needed. Given her years of community work, she had developed a rather sophisticated knowledge of how to navigate San Francisco’s politics.

I knew that we couldn’t create the healing opportunities alone, so we began to organize residents, youth, and other key stakeholders, like folks from the San Francisco Department of Public Health, community organizations, and academics. We needed everyone to take this on and get behind it!

On November 13, 2012, public health department officials, city council representatives, neighborhood residents, and several community-based organizations came together for the Southeast Trauma Summit in order to learn more about the widespread exposure to trauma and the relatively limited response on the part of community organizations and San Francisco’s Department of Public Health.

As we walked into the lower multipurpose room located in Providence Baptist Church, a funeral was just beginning in the sanctuary above the multipurpose room. Through the ceiling above, we could barely hear the preaching and the music but it reminded everyone at the meeting how serious and widespread the problem had become. Lena had personally invited nearly all 50 of the participants to the community meeting and was unusually nervous about having so many allies, and sometimes adversaries in the same room at the same time. No one could tell she was nervous, of course, as she confidently opened the meeting thanking everyone for coming to learn about how to contribute to a safer, healthier community. She commented;

We put a lot of work into pulling this meeting together and we hope that when you leave today, that you have a better understanding about the issue of trauma, how it is impacting our young people, and what you can do about it.
Creating a Healing Zone

The one-day summit was only a starting point for a longer-term campaign aimed at building a system of healing opportunities for the Bayview Hunters Point community. “The goal of the Southeast Trauma Summit was to gather the foremost experts in community violence and trauma within the Southeast sector to develop a systematic plan to shift resources to reliable service providers, who utilize best practices to treat and heal community members that are most impacted by community violence” (Miller 2013). The specific purpose of the summit was to:

1. Identify best practices for trauma related to community violence in the Bayview Hunters Point community.
2. Identify service providers within the Bayview Hunters Point community to provide healing and treatment for youth and families impacted by trauma related to community violence.
3. Develop strategies to shift city funding to culturally competent providers within the Bayview Hunters Point community to provide treatment and healing services for trauma related to community violence.

During the day, experts discussed the impact of trauma on community residents, and we discussed how our respective organizations and institutions were directly or indirectly supporting young people who had been trauma exposed. Listening to the various small groups, it was clear that no systemic approach was in place and that some institutions had no program at all that supported mental health of trauma-exposed youth. For example, the schools in the neighborhood provided mental health support only while students were at school, once every two weeks. Furthermore, African American students are least likely to seek counseling and mental health services.

Shortly after the meeting, a group of community organizations called the African American Healing Alliance (AAHA) began meeting about the issue to develop a plan and strategy to move forward. The groups’ first task was to gather as much information as possible about where mental health resources were directed in the city. Working with students and the public health department, the group developed a geographical mapping of mental health needs in the city, and neighborhoods where the mental health dollars were directed.

The map provided a powerful illustration about disparities in mental health funding where resources were directed into neighborhoods without much need. Despite the fact that District 10, including the Bayview Hunters Point community, had the highest mental health need in the city, there were only a few providers. Conversely, neighborhoods with moderate to low mental health need were virtually saturated with providers and mental health funding. Lena commented:

We weren’t shocked when we saw the map because we already knew that the dollars weren’t directed toward our community. Some people were
saying that public health dollars were already being spent for mental health in district 10 but we simply didn’t know where the dollars were going, or who was providing the services. If you look at the map, you see a few big red areas that shows high mental health need with few white dots that represent mental health access. Then you see all these white dots in areas of the city where there really isn’t much need. So our goal was to move the white dots! Like if the red areas are the infection, then the white dots can be the medicine!

FIGURE 4.1 Map of Mental Health Provider Locations and Mental Health Client Density
Source: City & County of San Francisco Department of Public Health. Produced 10/20/2008.
The idea to developed a “healing zone” was inspired by Jeffery Canada’s Harlem’s Children Zone that focuses on improving educational outcomes and transforming poverty by providing a pipeline of educational opportunities (cradle to college) for parents and children in 97 blocks in Harlem. The strategy has been lauded by educational experts, and promoted as a model to be scaled in nationally. Lena and AAHA weren’t concerned with notoriety and scaling their model. They simply understood that in order to attack the problem and shift the culture, the solution couldn’t simply provide more of the same. Rather, AAHA wanted to saturate the community with healing opportunities by creating a zone where young residents could go to enjoy the benefits of health, well-being, and thriving. Lena commented:

Everyone has gifts. Some can sing, others can dance. I, for one, can see! Just like there are zones, like blocks in a city where you go to shop, or a collection of certain types of restaurants, or night clubs. Well I think we can have a zone with all types of healing opportunities like day spas, mental health providers, yoga studios, places to meditate, gardens! I can see that right here in the community! That’s what we need.

AAHA’s leadership was comprised of an impressive group of long-time community health leaders and community organizations. Jimmy Loyce, for example, was a retired director of public health in San Francisco and had pioneered the city’s first crisis response strategy and ushered forth the first community-based mental health centers. His relationships with city officials, allowed AAHA to leverage a $150,000 planning grant from the public health department to design a specific response to District 10’s mental health needs. His political savvy and sophisticated knowledge of San Francisco’s rather complicated mental health resources also presented a unique opportunity for AAHA to advocate for access to decision making regarding where health dollars were being wasted. Mr. Loyce commented:

Healing is critical to the overall health of District 10 and the entire city of San Francisco. What we are doing at AAHA, building a healing zone, is both political and therapeutic. It is political because health for people in District 10 can be improved if the public health department used the resources in an equitable way. African Americans are about 3% of San Francisco’s population but are overrepresented in every negative health statistic! We overutilizers of a system that is not set up to meet our needs. This is as much a political matter as it is a health problem.

Loyce’s comments point to the heart of healing justice, which is that healing is political act. Healing justice involves the process of communities responding to the conditions that threaten health and well-being; and acting in ways that restore
community, by building systems that heal. These efforts go far deeper than merely offering cosmetic fixes or surface solutions. Loyce was more familiar with social service systems in San Francisco as anyone, which provided him with clarity about his vision of a healing zone.

My vision is to have health centers located in public housing so that people don’t have to travel across town to get services that should be in their neighborhood. I want to see professional therapists in the public housing units provide residents with top quality mental health and healing opportunities. For me a healing zone will be when we institutionalize healing in public institutions like juvenile probation, health and human services, child welfare, and education. Any system that we are currently in needs to be a part of this effort and that’s what we are working to make happen.

The mental health system required residents in public housing in the southeast sector to travel across town to receive mental health services. Despite the fact that the public health department was well aware that residents in public housing were in greatest need of mental health services, little effort had been made to place health centers in closer proximity to residents in the Bayview neighborhood. Loyce understood the health department’s logic. He commented:

I think the logic among health officials is that black folks wouldn’t utilize a mental health facility in the neighborhood because of the stigma attached to treatment. But there is anecdotal evidence that needs to be unpacked that people do want these services, and there is evidence of a growing number of people seeking these services.

Lena Miller and James Loyce were not alone in their crusade to build a healing zone in the southeast sector of San Francisco. In fact, Dr. Nadine Burke, founder and CEO of the Center for Youth Wellness, in Bayview Hunters Point had been treating young people with symptoms related to chronic stress since 2007. Her center received considerable media attention resulting from Paul Tough’s case study of the center’s focus on trauma and exploration of healing techniques for young people in the surrounding community (Tough 2011). The notoriety that resulted in Burke’s work, in combination with the efforts of several community organization, had raised the profile of trauma among San Francisco public officials.

Organizing for Health or Healing?

Dr. Abner Bowles was friends with James Loyce and was clinical therapist who had spent years working with African American families in Bayview Hunters Point. His formal therapeutic training, knowledge about the mental health issues
in Bayview Hunters Point, and political savvy about how to maneuver San Francisco politics made him a natural leader within AAHA. He had worked in San Francisco’s first community health center that focused on African American communities and had spent his professional career building systems, strategies, and practices to enhance African American’s mental health. Bowles had concluded that systemic racism was the root cause of the health issues facing community members in the Bayview. He believed that a critical step to rectify the deeply embedded problem was to organize community residents to confront the systems that didn’t meet their needs.

It’s not just getting mentors and role models in the community but we need lifetime guides to help people navigate all the stuff in their lives. This is what we need to get people on a path to healing. Because we all have suffered and continue to suffer from the effects of racism, which is really what we are talking about. All the problems we see in black communities are by design.

Dr. Bowles was also familiar with some of the challenges working with community organizations in the Bayview Hunters Point community. For example, in the mid to late 1990s the organizations in Bayview had been largely left out of planning efforts among city agencies, and generally under-resourced by local foundations because the community leaders had been perceived as combative, hostile to work with, and largely ineffective. In fact, in my own personal experience, I had facilitated two community meetings that were simply derailed by one or two community members shouting at me, or simply refusing to participate in the process we had outlined during the session. It is important to recognize, however, that these tensions are not the result of mean-spirited individuals, but rather a collective frustration of not being heard, and sometimes not taken seriously by civic officials.

When Dr. Bowles began facilitating AAHA meetings, he was well aware of the history, pain, and institutional trauma that each individual brought into the room. He knew from his experience that their efforts at building a healing zone would only be successful if the members of AAHA were not only committed to the vision, but also deeply engaged in the own collective healing process. His strategy to create healing among the AAHA members was simple. He simply held one-on-one meetings with each person, to listen to their concerns; hear their vision, and thoughts about others in the group; and hear about the value that each person brought to the group. He commented:

I talked to each person one on one so that I could understand where people were coming from, understand their motivations and hear their concerns. All of this is helpful to building a coalition. It’s a strategy that builds an
individual to effectively work in a coalition. For me a coalition is a group where all members operate and act as one. Some of our meetings have been amazing given the challenges with past coalitions like this in the community.

Dr. Bowles highlighted another key aspect in healing justice that is a more intentional focus on relational versus technical aspects of coalition building. Building community and relationships sustains people. It presumes that individuals come to meetings, join groups, and engage in planning activities without fully uncovering, undoing, and healing the multitude of wounds that unknowingly carry with us. Without explicit attention to healing from these wounds, group members may find it difficult to trust others, value other people’s opinions, welcome new ideas all of which are necessary for healthy coalitions. Bowles noted:

People had not been given the opportunity to express their issues, concerns, and challenges. So what happens in community meetings, they have the floor and everyone listening so the community meetings have been their opportunity to be heard. That’s why the individual one-on-one was critical to reduce the need for folks to compete to for their voice to be heard. For example, I didn’t put any parameters on how long we talked, or how many times we talked. I just wanted to give them the opportunity to be heard. One member we talked three times, for three hours each! That’s what she needed that to tell me the value she felt she added to our group. So now when I facilitate meetings and she makes a comment, I have the context, background, and the story to know the intent of where the comment stems from.

Turns out that Dr. Bowles strategy was correct. The first challenge came when AHA needed to determine their mission, vision, and how they would describe the coalition’s work to the broader community. Bowles commented:

One of the major issues we had to address when we first gathered was to determine, what are we about? The central question was whether we were about systemic change, that builds an entity that has power, authority, and clout to determine how resources are spent, or are providing services. There wasn’t consensus and everyone had different ideas about the work that we should be doing. Some folks were saying that the $150,000 should be spent supporting people on the ground, while others said that amount was a drop in the bucket and couldn’t make any substantial change by using it for services and programs. There were those who wanted to go after the millions of dollars that are given to people who are not from the community to provide health opportunities. So we needed to come together on this issue, and we did.
The conversations were not easy because there were some members who were direct providers, and felt passionately about the urgent need to use the resources for direct support for families and individuals who need urgent help. On the other hand, there were also people in the group who wanted to focus on systems change, and advocated for the need to use the funds to plan and build a plan that could ultimately control millions of dollars that could support health and well-being in the Bayview community. The members who advocated for systems change argued that $150,000 would not make a significant impact on the bigger issue that AAHA sought to solve. After several meetings, the group was able to come to consensus on using the funds for planning and strategy development for systems change that would grant them control over larger dollars and ultimately greater impact on the health of Bayview residents.

The one-on-one conversations that Dr. Bowles had with each member is an important lesson about what healing justice looks like in organizational practices. Generally there are two ways that are used to transform organizations and schools. First, and perhaps the most common, involve technical approaches, which almost entirely focus on decision making protocols, organizational charts, system efficiency, curriculum, and evaluation. The second involve relational approaches, which focus on fostering healthy relationships through dialogue, respect and value of each member of the group, and opportunities for each member to be heard and affirmed. The technical approach to organizational and school change are externally focused on producing desired results without much attention to the relationships required to produce them. Technical approach in schools may focus on better evaluations and testing tools, curriculum, and how decisions are made. Community groups like AAHA may focus on electing a president, forming committees, and drafting agendas and outcomes with benchmarks that evaluate progress toward the agreed upon goal. While technical approaches to organizations are important, these approaches alone are limited in their capacity to resolve relational group dynamics: for example, when some group members feel alienated and silenced, or conflict emerges, or when someone feels disrespected, or one group member vehemently disagrees with another’s personal values. These issues ultimately thwart organizational effectiveness because conflict and lack of trust among members take emotional energy, making it more difficult to stay connected to the process. Often leaders underestimate the significance of healing and how individuals bring past issues into the workplace. The technical approach borrows from corporate culture that almost entirely focuses on results, products, and outcomes. As such, there is an overwhelming tendency to ignore how our humanity shows up at work, and our interactions with co-workers. The relational approach, however, encourages us to focus on building connections with others.

Bowles understood that if AAHA was to organize to shift resources for healing in Bayview, the group itself had to embody healing, and reject the toxic ways groups had come together in the past. Ultimately, the group agreed that their best
strategy was to use resource that could impact access and availability of a variety of healing and health services to the community. Bowles commented:

Everyone was able to say where they stood on the issue, and why they took a particular position. People listened to each others’ perspective, everyone had the opportunity to talk about it. As our deliberation continued, I was able to guide the group to a decision. We wanted to impact services to the community. So we knew that ultimately we wanted to have the greatest impact was to build a coalition that has structure, and power to oversee and leverage resources.

There were several similar items that the group had to work through but ultimately the members were able to use the relational process to build consensus on a range of topics. For example, the group needed to decide which agency would serve as the fiscal management of the resources. There disagreement on which agency would manage the initial $150,000 that would be used as seed funding to support AAHA. Some members of the group simply had lacked trust in some of the participating organizations due to past experience. So again, the group needed to determine who would manage and accept the initial funds.

So we actually collectively developed criteria for everyone to consider when making the decision about who would manage the dollars. Based on the criteria, we came to consensus about which organizations best could meet our criteria. We stayed focus on the criteria rather than attacking individuals in the organizations. We didn’t need to air each others’ dirty laundry. Because we had the criteria, and the relationships we were able to talk this through.

Abner Bowles, Lena Miller, James Loyce, and the other members understood the significance of both the inside game (relationships) and the outside game (political strategy). The relational approaches to AAHA allowed the members of the coalition to not only to stay focused, but also provided them with a place to feel affirmed and heard. Everyone in the group understood the significance of the relational approach but he also knew that the group would need to navigate San Francisco’s deep and murky political landscape (the outside game). Miller, Loyce, and Bowles set up meetings with political power brokers and leveraged the AAHA’s collective power to move their plan from concept to implementation.

The Plan for a Healing Zone

The actual plan of the healing zone called for resources to build and strengthen AAHA’s coalition by staffing two coordinators and a director who would oversee
the coordination of the coalition’s activities. The plan also called for specific activities, such as conducting an asset map of District 10 and creating a sustainability plan. Bowles commented:

We knew that in order for us to keep the momentum, we needed someone to continue to build the relationships in our coalition. We also have a political strategy that involves demanding oversight of the resources that public health and other departments already control. This will be a tender spot for agencies who are currently receiving funding, and will perceive our oversight as a potential loss of resources for their work.

Overall, AAHA’s goal was to weed out services that fail to meet the needs of residents, and to build power to exercise control over resources in order to improve and create pathways to healing and well-being for Bayview residents. As a result of AAHA’s work, there would be both access to healing services, but also power among residents and providers to determine what they need to create and sustain their well-being. AAHA estimates that over $50 million are being directed into District 10 with little accountability, creativity, or effectiveness. The plan’s goals focused on conventional access issues such as expanding access to health care, reducing instances of trauma, and expanding community-based health services. But it also included unconventional strategies like expanding healing circles among community agencies, increasing access to wellness practices such as yoga, meditation, and acupuncture.

The healing zone is still under construction and thus we do not yet know the impact it will have on residents in District 10. However, as a result of AAHA’s work, there are already efforts underway to pilot a project to place a mental health therapist in one of San Francisco’s public housing sites. This is a significant move on the part of San Francisco’s public health department because the department now recognizes that their prior assumptions about the community’s needs were ill-informed and in fact their program design made it more difficult to receive mental health services.

Lena’s vision was to create a healing zone that would create and expand opportunities for healing and wellness for Bayview residents. What she created, however, could be even more powerful than the healing zone itself. Dr. Bowles summarized it best when he said: “What we really are building is a machine that is accountable to the community’s well-being, and can dole out what the community needs to achieve it”. Healing is about justice, and justice is best achieved when community residents, young people, and organizational stakeholders share a common vision about the future and take action to achieve it.

Healing justice was the driving ideological force behind AAHA. All its members were fueled by a deep sense of injustice, and inspired by the possibility of creating a coalition that could usher in new ideas, promising strategies, and effective
decision making into the community. Lena’s vision is a compelling one, and AAHA’s case provides a rich example of how the convergence of healing and justice can address a community’s needs, and by doing so, bring hope back into the community. Through both personal trauma and transformation, Lena was forced to reimagine and rethink her work in the community.

References


5
RADICALLY HEALING SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Healing-Centered Pedagogy and Forgiveness

On June 1, 2013, a group of community activists rallied outside of San Francisco’s City Hall to usher peace into San Francisco’s most violent neighborhoods. On a loud speaker, the activists could hear Tupac’s popular song “Changes” on repeat. At the top of the stairs leading into City Hall, two young people proudly held up a large white canvas banner that read in red letters “Healing the Hood”. The annual “Silence the Violence” rally and march began in Oakland in 2006 when the city’s homicide rate had reached its highest in years. Nicole Lee, a long-time community organizing and founder and Executive Director of Urban Peace Movement, located in Oakland, California, wanted to honor those that had been killed from violence, while also raise the awareness of the importance of peace rather simply violence reduction. Nicole’s idea was simply to coordinate simultaneous vigils in Oakland calling for an end to violence, and honoring those who had lost their lives to violence. What was supposed to be a simple idea soon caught on to other cities around the county and is now a national vigil held in cities across the country.

Nicole’s soft-spoken voice and small stature seems to be unconventional for such a powerful and skilled organizer. But Nicole is a bold risk taker willing to say what’s on her mind, and will convince anyone who is in earshot of listening to the virtuosity of her ideas. Nicole joined forces with her friend and colleague Rudy Corpus, an activist organizer in San Francisco, to create “Silence the Violence” marches in both Oakland and San Francisco. Rudy is the executive director for United Playaz, a community-based organization that focuses on addressing or mitigating violence among youth. Rudy is someone who you are immediately drawn to because of his honesty, passion, and humor. He is also an articulate and passionate community leader and gifted storyteller. One can’t help but be inspired as he shares his many life stories of struggle, transformation, activism, and hope.
His two long braids that drape his back are all that is left over from his days in prison. He is proud of being Filipino, and he wears that pride with artfully crafted tattoos on his arms, and he even has the map of the Philippine islands tattooed on his back. It’s also hard to tell that his love for young people was only made possible through several violent life-altering moments in his life. During our interview, Rudy was busy swatting flies with his electric tennis racket. The scene had us all laughing because he spoke to us, while at the same time, swatting at flies. He spoke about his life transformation with such ease and without any shame about his life journey. It is precisely his ability to share his story that so candidly allows him to connect with some of the most marginalized youth—youth who can see themselves reflected in Rudy.

Rudy’s story is not unlike many young of color in urban communities. He had just been released from prison in 1993 when he began his work with young people in San Francisco. Upon his release he was looking for a job, and without any skills, he ended up selling drugs and was arrested shortly thereafter. When he faced the judge, he was given an option. Either he could choose to spend 6 months in jail, or he could serve 90 days and be referred to an educational program that could help him to get on the right track. Rudy is a straight talker and has learned from his days of hustling on the streets of San Francisco, that power is a state of mind. So when the judge gave him the option it wasn’t hard for him to weigh his options. He commented:

So I weighed my options, I said shit, I can be with 5,000 men for six months, or I could be with 5,000 women on a college campus. So I said, I’m going to college! So I went to San Francisco City College!

With the help of counselors, he enrolled into school and was given a part-time job recruiting other underrepresented students to the Equal Opportunity Programs and Services (EOP), a federally funded program designed to increase the number of low-income students enrolling and completing college. One day as he walked into the EOP office at San Francisco City College, he saw a job description for a gang counselor for an organization off campus. He didn’t really know what a “gang counselor” actually was, but it required the person to be Filipino and familiar with several neighborhoods in San Francisco. Turns out that 1994, Balboa High School was struggling with weekly race riots and the Bernal Heights Recreation Center was called into the high school to intervene between the Filipinos and black tensions that had erupted at the school. Rudy knew some of the key young people involved, and because of his solid reputation and relationships with Filipinos and Blacks he could bring everyone together. Rudy approached the school with an idea for a roundtable discussion among students as a way to come together and attempt to resolve the problems.
So the school gave me 6 months with no training, no books nothing at all! All I had was what I had learned from the streets. I had to get 25 kids to who were shooting at each other to sit at the same table together. To work out their problems, change their life, to get jobs, and stop banging.

During their lunch time meetings at the school, Rudy and a couple adults from the school facilitated a conversation about the causes of the riots, and discussed how the school could support the groups with preventing future violence. With nearly 60 young people in the high school's cafeteria, the group of youth began to identify the challenges at the school, as well as solutions they felt would help end the violent clashes. Rudy didn’t have any formal conflict resolution training, nor knowledge about how to conduct restorative justice circles. Rudy recalled how he was able to work through some of the difficult discussion.

There were no police, no school staff only me and a few adults from Bernal Heights Recreation Center. So I was at the chalkboard but I didn’t know what I was doing, I just know from jail how to stop violence, and that was to let the people speak. Like when we had truces, we had to talk. I know we had to give the group the power to express what they were feeling and experiencing. So I used the same strategies I was exposed to when I was locked up, you have to give the people the power to speak. So that’s what we did.

The young people made simple requests about creating activities at their school. They believed that the root of the problem had been the school’s lack of activities and engagement with the Filipino and black students. The students asked for football games, basketball games, talent show, art, and simple activities. Rudy used these activities as a strategy to rebuild, reconnect, and heal the harm that had been inflicted resulting from the race riots. He also could sense that they wanted to heal the rift and come together for something larger.

The school administrators were convinced that whatever Rudy was doing was working because after bringing the groups together, there was a dramatic reduction in racially motivated fights and conflict at the school. Soon afterward, Rudy expanded the table to Samoans and Latinos who had learned of about the new activities at the school and wanted to join the group’s efforts.

This was Rudy’s first of many successful attempts to bring healing across racial barriers to San Francisco’s young people. His engagement with San Francisco’s young people provides several key lessons in our understanding of healing justice in schools and community organizations.

Rudy had no formal training as a teacher, in conflict resolution, nor culturally relevant pedagogy. Yet, how was Rudy so successful in bringing different racial groups together, when the school personnel had failed? How did he engage the young people at the school and form remarkable connections with students that ultimately contributed to a reduction in racial conflict?
Toward Radical Healing Pedagogy

Scores of research have indicated that effective engagement with young people is a function of cultural relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching. While culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary to advance learning among students of color, this approach alone is not entirely sufficient to facilitate healing among students. Ladson-Billings’ seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogy accurately and powerfully demonstrates how effective teachers engage African American students. Based on Ladson-Billings’ solid research and insights, researchers and practitioners share an understanding about what constitutes culturally responsive pedagogy and the strategies necessary to sustain culturally responsive practices in the classroom. Billings identifies three domains of successful teaching of African American students: first, a focus on academic success that highlights the ways in which teachers facilitate the intellectual growth that students experience as a result of teaching; second, cultural competence, or the capacity to help students appreciate and celebrate their culture, as well as an appreciation of other cultural and ethnic groups; and third, sociopolitical consciousness that focuses on applying learning to real-world problems, and developing skills to identify, analyze root causes, and address causes of problems in their lives (Ladson-Billings 2014). Building from her work, scholars and practitioners focus on practices that contribute to learning among African American students and have updated the concept of culturally responsive teaching to respond to more dynamic, flexible formulations of youth identity and culture (Ladson-Billings 2014; Paris and Alim 2014).

Knowledge alone (culturally relevant, critical, political), however, is simply not enough to rupture normative practices in schools in ways that can usher healing to young people. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a function of the teachers’ knowledge, understanding, and consciousness of how culture can mediate or inhibit learning for students. However, these cognitive processes are only half of the equation. What is remaining are the affective processes that effective adults possess (care, love, hope, joy, humility, faith, courage, forgiveness) that are equally as important in effective teaching and learning, particularly if healing is an outcome of the learning process. These affective domains of engagement with young people are more than knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Rather they focus on those qualities of human interaction and engagement that place our deeply held emotions, feelings, and fears at the center of pedagogy. This requires a conceptual shift in thinking about what we need to know, to who we need to be to best support young people.

Technical vs. Relational Pedagogy

This marks a dramatic shift in thinking from technical pedagogy, which focuses on what teachers should know and what teachers should do, to relational pedagogy, which focuses on who teachers should be, and on removing psycho-spiritual obstacles that prevent teachers from establishing quality relationships with young
people. This idea is supported by Freire’s (1998) declaration that relational teaching is established by building caring relationships, and that teachers embrace an educational strategy that places emotion, love, and care at the pedagogical center of teaching. He comments, “It is not possible to be a teacher without loving one’s students” (p. 15). In Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach, Freire (1998) offers the qualities necessary for teachers to build relational strategies. These strategies are not so much a set of skills and knowledge as much as they are about human qualities that make a difference in solid relationships. Freire suggests that humility, courage, tolerance, and lovingness are virtues that help teachers dignify the educational process.

Freire explains that humility involves “listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level because it is a human duty that helps us identify with democracy and not with elitism. Courage is also a necessary quality because it helps us conquer the fears that limit and control us. Tolerance allows education to be progressive because it teaches us to live and work with those who are different” (pp. 39–42), and lovingness, says Freire, gives our work meaning.

These qualities require introspection and reflection among teachers, and all people who work with youth. Relational pedagogy focuses on the psycho-social needs of adults to more effectively build healthy relationships with young people. This teaching modality starts with the assumption that all adults have psycho-social needs and that teachers and youth workers then seek to foster a worldview that encourages self-exploration, healing, and the articulation of a clear socio-political vision for their work. This process requires that we commit to examining, grappling, and illuminating those aspects of our lives that get in the way of forming genuine connections with young people.

In 2014, I was conducting a workshop with a group of high school administrators in New Orleans. The goals of the day-long workshop were to introduce the concepts of relational pedagogy, and provide techniques that could be implemented by teachers, and then evaluate the progress their teachers were making toward building these relationships. Most of the group’s members were African American or Latino. We began with a general discussion about shifting from a technical to relational pedagogy and to demonstrate the point, I offered an example of how internalized racism—how people of color come to internalize toxic and damaging beliefs about their own racial and ethnic group—might show up and prevent us from building healthy relationships with young people of color. We used an activity where we separated the room into small groups and prompted the participants to reflect on their own ideas about their identity, and honestly and candidly share their insights with others in the group. During the small group discussion, I noticed a young Korean woman emotionally sharing with the group. She was crying and clearly something had provoked her. When we all came back together, she shared that she had grown frustrated with various teaching strategies because her attempts at culturally relevant pedagogy, for example, hadn’t improved her student’s grades, nor had she improved the quality of her relationships with her students.
She confessed that she now realizes that its wasn’t the curriculum, nor was it her teaching strategy, but rather, it was the fact that “I have shame about being Korean, and my shame and insecurity gets in the way of my relationships with students of color”. Her realization invited an awareness about how her own deeply held beliefs about her racial identity made it difficult for her to be effective in her classroom.

Although this Korean teacher’s realization was cathartic, relational pedagogy is an ongoing process where personal transformation, on the part of adults, is a prerequisite for effective relationships with youth and, ultimately, social change. Similar to Freire’s (1998) concept of conscientizacao, which is an awareness that the challenges of everyday life are not permanent, but can be transformed; an awareness that the interdependence between personal actions and social change is a critical component of relational pedagogy.

My own experiences with this personal realization and transformation occurred during a difficult group session that I was leading with both youth and adults in 1998. During that time in my life, I was having difficulty balancing care of my newborn child, raising money for Leadership Excellence, my non-profit organization, and transitioning to a new career as an assistant professor. As a result of these personal pressures, I was unable to focus on the training that I was conducting during that session. I was unaware that many of the youth in the group had noticed my level of stress when one young person asked me, “What’s wrong?” Until that moment, I had believed that my role as an adult community leader, founder, and executive director was to be a role model to young people by showing them a “trouble free” adult. In response to her question, I immediately put on the adult, “problem free” face, and responded that there was nothing wrong with me. After they continued to probe me about why I seemed so stressed out, I finally confessed my troubles. I began describing my fears of not having raised enough money to keep the doors of my organization open. I told them how these financial issues would impact my family and new child. I also expressed my thoughts about leaving the organization altogether. After my emotional confession to the group, I was concerned that I had transgressed the boundaries of the adult professional role by violating the unspoken rule that you should separate your personal life from professional activities, but to my surprise, several youth commented, “hey man, you got problems just like me!”, or “I thought you had life all figured out, that’s cool that you got issues to deal with”. Redefining my role as an adult partner contributed to an unanticipated outcome: I learned that by being vulnerable, the young people could support me by listening just as I had listened to them. My vulnerability actually deepened their respect for me because I was honest with them about something as important as my own life. I am not advocating that all youth development professionals should make their personal lives available to the young people with whom they work. The lesson I draw from this experience is that relational teaching requires that we create greater space in our work environment to allow for the stressors in our personal lives. Being intentional about how we deal with stress will make us stronger partners in
intergenerational efforts. While scores of research has established that the ability for teachers to build relationships with students is a significant feature of effective teachers, where do teachers learn these more affective relational skills? What does vulnerability look like in a classroom setting?

**Rudy’s Relational Pedagogy**

Rudy’s work with young people demonstrated perhaps one of the most important lessons about relational pedagogy, which is that our effectiveness in building healthy relationships with young people is contingent upon our own vulnerability, honesty, and courage. Rudy’s capacity to engage youth of color involved both his ability to connect culturally, but also, his profound capacity to care.

But his road to healing didn’t come easy. As a young adult, Rudy was deeply involved with Filipino gangs in San Francisco. In his early years, he was known for his ruthless and calculated ability to fight. His reputation followed him to prison where his street credibility and propensity for violence eventually led to him being placed in solitary confinement. Upon his release from prison, his expansive knowledge of how to navigate the street allowed him to reach some of San Francisco’s hardest to reach young people. This knowledge, experience, and dedication is what has contributed to the growth of his organization United Playaz.

![Rudy Corpus Organizing at a Silence the Violence Rally at City Hall in San Francisco](image)
“It takes the hood, to save the hood” is United Playaz slogan, and their work is driven by idea that young people are the solution to violence in San Francisco. By 2013, Rudy had left his gang life behind him and founded his own thriving community organization. Located in the South of Market neighborhood, United Playaz had developed solid relationships with schools, established city contracts, and provided guidance and support to young people in several high schools in San Francisco.

Rudy has many stories to tell, but this one I find particularly poignant and relevant here. Around 6:00 a.m. on a cool foggy morning in September 2014, Rudy was awaken by a strange phone call. “They tagged our mural man! You won’t believe this”. At Rudy’s suggestion, the young people at the United Playaz youth center had created a mural celebrating social justice heroes in their lives. The mural was painted on the front of the United Playaz building, which is a large (10 foot high and nearly 30 feet in length) wall. The mural is beautiful, complete with colorful textured images of Cesar Chavez, Ella Baker, Mother Teresa, Oscar Grant, Malcolm X. The mural was nearly complete when Rudy received the call. As he drove through traffic to his building, he was hoping that they artists had protected the completed portion of the mural by applying a coat of graffiti resistant paint so that the graffiti can be simply wiped off. When he arrived, he was shocked at the magnitude of the damage to their mural.

You know when somebody tagged our wall, I’m thinking somebody put a little tag or something. When I got the call they said, you got to come down and look at this for yourself. I came down, and walked over, and I looked on our wall which is enormous. Somebody blasted over the whole mural! I looked at that and that shit hurt my heart man.

Many of Rudy’s closest friends and youth in the community immediately expected Rudy to locate the culprit and retaliate as he would undoubtedly had done before his prison days. Rudy recalled several conversations with adults in the community who anxiously awaited Rudy’s command to seek out the culprit. Rudy commented:

Well I wanted to break his arm, and most of the adults and the people I know wanted to help me. They said, “hey man we’ll find his ass, fuck him up for you and take pictures of his broken arm. What you want us to do?” I told them to just wait because I wanted to send a message out, “don’t nobody touch this mural.” I realized that we have cameras that filmed the whole thing. So I watched him doing it, and he was taking his time. But I could tell he’s drunk, I mean fucked up because he’s staggering. So I wrestled with what I should do, and I prayed and then god said something to me, “you don’t hurt him, you help him”. I knew I had to help this dude, and not fuck him up. So I told my staff, and folks in the community that
I understand that everybody is angry about this, and I’m angry as hell too. But spiritually there is another way of doing this because we have to set examples because we are for violence prevention. I practice non-violence, and some adults in the community was like, “I hear you Rudy”. But I could tell some of them didn’t want to hear that. I could tell that they felt like, “oh this one gettin’ soft.” I could see it in their faces. One dude was like “you gettin’ weak man. We should break his hand or something.” But I wanted to stick to . . . you know how they say, “practice what you preach.” I wanted to do that and so I prayed.

Rudy’s conviction to set a non-violent example for the young people was more than a teaching strategy, or good youth development practice. Rather, his struggle to decide how to handle the situation required an ethical compass, which Rudy demonstrated to community members, staff, and the young people. This compass needed to resolve diametrically opposed problems. First, he needed to find a way to bring justice to the young people who felt violated and disrespected for painting over their mural. Second, he needed to find a way to create a healing opportunity for the young man who was responsible for the damage. The accusations that he was “getting soft, and weak” deeply bothered him, and he felt an urge to make the sort of phone calls from his past that could have swiftly addressed the situation through violence. But something more important guided Rudy’s decision not to use violence to retaliate. He cared deeply about his young people, and he knew this was his opportunity to show them a different way to handle conflict.

It didn’t take long before the word hit the street that Rudy was looking for the culprit who tagged their wall. Word had gotten back to the young man responsible for painting over the mural that he had tagged the wrong mural, and Rudy was looking for him. Concerned for his safety, the culprit left town, but knew that he still had to face Rudy. Rudy recounted what happened next:

Then he called me out of the blue. It was 808 number and I wondered who could be calling me from Hawaii. When I answered, I said “this is Rudy, who is this?” The dude said, “this is Yolo”. I was shocked that he had called so I said, “how you doin’ brother?” I called him brother on purpose. I asked him if he was from the Bay, and he said he was from Hawaii. He said, “yah I’m out here right now, because I heard you was looking for me so I left.” He said, “hey man I know, I feel really bad about what I did, you know all my friends, I’m Hawaiian, my Filipino friends they would be disappointed.” I told Yolo, first of all, nobody’s going to hurt you or harm you as long as you check in with me, I give you my word. But you gotta come see me first. Because the word is out on you. He was like, “ahh man, thanks, thanks, thanks.” I asked him, why did you do it? He started saying, “I’m going through a hard time in my life because my father just died. When my father died that’s when I kind of lost it. Sometimes man I get
drunk, so fucked up that I passed out and I can’t remember what I did. When I looked at all my pictures, and I seen your mural and I felt bad, and I knew I was going to have repercussions.” When he began telling me his story, I was sympathetic to him. That’s when I told him that I wanted to meet him when he returned to San Francisco. I wanted him to come explain, and sit with our young people and staff. I said, “I just want to let you know. I forgive you bro.” He started crying. He was in pain, man. I said, “I don’t want to hurt you, I want to help you. You know I heard you got a drinking problem. Maybe I can help get into some classes.” He said, “I’m already putting myself into some. But if you can help me.” It was like we were talking now as friends.

On a sunny spring day in April, Yolo called Rudy and arranged to visit Rudy and come face to face with the young people at United Playaz. He was young like most of the youth workers at the center, and was uneasy about how they would respond to him. Rudy asked him to join the staff meeting that had already begun. Yolo began by apologizing to the staff about his mistake and asked them to simply listen to him without judgment. Rudy interrupted Yolo’s comments,

When we talked on the phone, you told me you were sorry because you painted over the wrong mural. But you know what, you didn’t paint over the wrong mural! You painted over the right mural! We are here to help you brotha, but you have to pay us back brotha, for the wrongs that you did. How can we help you to restore your life? When I said that, he broke down and started crying in right in front of all of us.

The staff meeting had transformed into a restorative healing circle. The young people shared their feelings with Yolo, and ultimately everyone agreed upon a plan that would allow Yolo to repay his debt to United Playaz and restore the mural. Yolo agreed to repay $1,000 and to return to help the group repair the mural. Every month he gives the group $200, and he agreed to return and share his story with other young people.

**Critical Reflection**

Rudy’s case illustrates three key lessons about relational pedagogy for teachers and youth workers. First, Rudy’s response to this difficult dilemma didn’t come from scripted youth development protocols, nor manuals about conflict resolution strategies. Rather his response came from *critical reflection* about the most important lessons he wanted the young people to learn. He wasn’t entirely sure how to respond, yet by reflecting on the situation he was able to arrive at an alternative outcome that avoided violence, demonstrated another path for the young people, and illustrated peaceful ways to settle conflict within the community. *Critical*
reflection is the process of careful consideration of the spiritual, social, and political forces that shape our decisions. Critical reflection also provides a lens by which to filter, examine, and consider possible outcomes. By spiritual, I mean the ability to consistently act from a place of humility, faith, and love. These are not cognitive processes, but rather ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of relational pedagogy that contribute to establishing healthy relationships with young people.

Rudy’s comment, “So I wrestled with what I should do, and I prayed and then god said something to me, ‘you don’t hurt him, you help him’” illustrates how critical reflection integrates spiritual, social, and political factors into decision making. Rudy’s critical reflection allowed him to understand that Yolo’s actions were the result of his inability to reconcile the trauma and pain he had experienced in his life. He realized that “Yolo was hurting just like all of us, and harming him was also harm to ourselves”.

There is a long and rich tradition of critical reflection in social justice movements and community change efforts. One only needs to examine the civil rights movement’s emphasis on nonviolent protest, and the role that critical reflection played in key moments in the movement. Black community change, in fact, has been rooted in a moral ethic to confront injustice with a spiritual consciousness, and informed by a social and political understanding. Rudy’s awareness about how to respond to Yolo was also rooted in this tradition. He viewed justice, in this sense, as not the simple restoration of the young people’s mural, but understood that Yolo’s fate was inextricably tied to their own.

Janie Ward has called attention to the significance of a critical reflection as moral education (Ward 1991). She and others have argued that justice for teachers and activists concerns a process of liberating others from injustice and orienting oneself away from biases, and moving toward an ethic of universal fairness. Rudy’s reflections allowed him to move from seeing the incident from the perspective that would position Yolo as the bad guy, and created an environment that fostered an understanding about the need to address our collective pain.

He didn’t fuck up with the wrong man, he fucked up with the right man! Now that I look back at this situation, if all the people on the mural that he painted over were alive, each one of them would have told me the same thing, “don’t hurt him, help him”. Because all of the people on the mural were non-violent. It was like the mural forced us to be more humane, to walk the walk.

Forgiveness

The power of forgiveness is perhaps one of the most transformative practices in relational pedagogy because it opens the possibility to establish humane connections with young people. Forgiveness is the practice of recognizing and honoring
that we all have vulnerabilities, imperfections, and mistakes; this practice requires patience and no judgment. The concept of forgiveness is more commonly discussed in faith-based scholarship, and rarely have educators examined forgiveness in the context of schools. However, the practice of forgiveness in schools can be a powerful policy response to the draconian zero tolerance climate that has shaped how schools interact and engage young people. Forgiveness in schools is both a practice and a policy.

Rudy’s case illustrates that forgiveness, the practices of recognizing that we all have vulnerabilities, imperfections, and mistakes, opens new possibilities of how young people, adults, and community members can relate to one another. Rudy was able to see beyond the confines of his own organization, and in doing so he understood his responsibility was to not only forgive, but to provide a humane, and just response to Yolo, while also recognizing that the young people in his organization felt violated.

Practicing forgiveness is not an easy task when emotional pain from being harmed urges us to retaliate and punish those responsible. Yet, research suggests that punitive organizational practices rarely produce the outcomes schools want to achieve (Pink 2009). School policy that is driven by forgiveness seeks restoration and repairs the harm caused as a result others’ imperfection. Rudy was well aware of his own imperfectness and therefore his ability to forgive perhaps came more easily to him. What is important, is that his central motivation for forgiving Yolo was to establish trust and to provide a model for young people to reimagine how to respond to difficult conflict.

The act of forgiveness removes our inner struggle to search for appropriate punishment, and allows us to respond to challenges in ways where both parties, the harmed and the transgressor, can build a closer relationship and grow from the experience. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we relinquish accountability and appropriate responses to challenges we face. Quite the contrary, forgiveness in schools requires that teachers, educational leaders, and students shift their focus away from punishment toward practices that restore and build relationships.

Rudy was intentional about using the experience to establish a relationship with Yolo that was healing for both Yolo and United Playaz. Rudy’s comment, “I just wanted to let you know, I forgive you bro” pierced through Yolo’s tough exterior and injected him with a healthy dose of humanity rarely exchanged among young men of color.

Forgiveness is also an important policy direction, particularly for urban schools that struggle to find effective discipline strategies. Discipline strategies in schools simply don’t work. They may make the adults in schools feel a sense of control when a student violates a rule, but discipline-driven policies in schools rarely produce the desirable behaviors they seek (Payne 2013; Skiba 2013; Skiba 2014; Skiba et al. 2014). In fact, these harsh discipline practices harm students more than they help. Forgiveness-informed policy recognizes that teaching is...
more than a particular skills set, but it also requires that teachers be cognizant of their own emotional states and encourages practices, strategies, and rituals in schools that facilitate healing and restoration. Forgiveness-informed policy requires a shared culture of humility, courage, and vulnerability in a school where adults and young people learn together in order to co-create vibrant and healthy school culture.

Policy can change everything and nothing at the same time. Policy without a culture of forgiveness in schools, ultimately defaults to implementation strategies, procedures, protocols, and evaluation metrics aimed at measuring progress. These external shifts in technical aspects of how schools go about their daily business, however, does little to address the deeper need to transform people’s hearts.

Since 2007, Oakland Unified School District has shifted away from disciplinary strategies toward more restorative approaches in schools. Suspensions and expulsions among black students had reached nearly 70 percent despite the fact they only comprised about 35 percent of the total students in the district. Restorative justice is a set of principles and practices based on the idea that a school climate is created when conflict resolution is used over swift and harsh punishment.

Despite this policy, however, some schools still struggle with what actually happens on a daily basis. The policy changed what should happen at the school without much consideration of how to transform teachers’ anxiety, fears, and racist notion of black and brown students. One teacher commented:

> We have the policy here in Oakland that we cannot suspend or expel a student for willful defiance. But black students are still being suspended by other practices. Like the principal at this school will ask a parent to come and pick the student up from school and not record it as a suspension. We have the policy but what is also needed is a deeper change among teachers. We need our kids to feel the change, not just understand there was a policy win.

Forgiveness-informed policy means that school changes occurs on three levels—policy, implementation, and transformation. Typically, transformation—a dramatic shift in awareness, and internal commitment to change—is rarely integrated into school change efforts.

**Restoration**

The third lesson we draw from Rudy’s encounter is restoration, the practice of repairing harm and rebuilding hope. Restoration doesn’t mean that adults abdicate holding individuals accountable for the harm they created. Rudy understood that despite the fact that he had empathy for Yolo, he had to restore both the damage to the mural and the relationships that were harmed as a result of his painting
over the students’ artwork. Rudy explained to Yolo what he would need to do in order to make things right. They walked outside to view the mural that Yolo had damaged. Standing in front of the mural, on the sidewalk it was hard to hear Rudy talk because the traffic was heavy, and a fire truck was speeding off nearby. Rudy asked Yolo, “how much damage do you think this is, how much will it cost to fix it?” Staring at the mural, Yolo estimated that it might cost as much as $1,000 to fix. “Then you gotta pay us back bruh, you have to pay for the wrongs that you did”. Yolo agreed, and the young people also asked Yolo to come to the center once a month to teach them about his art and share lessons about his life.

Restorative justice is not simply about repairing harm, but more importantly the process is about rupturing outdated and ineffective discipline practices and saturating schools and communities with new pathways to hope. Restorative practices are gaining currency in schools throughout the United States. In California, the Judicial Council of California adopted restorative practices in family courts and joined a broader movement around the country to replace harsh and ineffective zero tolerance policies with practices that restore and heal those harmed from the crime.

Since 2007, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) has been supporting schools with reducing suspension rates and increasing academic achievement, and with RJOY now in nearly 30 schools throughout Oakland, schools have experienced a dramatic 87 percent reduction in suspensions (Davis 2014). Restorative principles are important policy guidelines, but what matters most is how teachers, principals, and youth workers like Rudy lead from both their heads and their hearts. Restorative principles find meaning in the complexity and often messiness of human conflict. Successfully navigating these murky waters requires more than knowledge about restorative principles, but also clarity about the importance of relationships, healing, and hope.

Healing in Urban Schools and Classrooms

“So what do you do when a kid is so upset that they pick up a chair and try to throw it at you, Dr. Ginwright? How do you use healing and restoration when the kid threatens you, and then punches a wall?” The teacher’s question was so full of emotion, frustration, and doubt, that I found myself a bit uneasy about trying to search and articulate for this teacher precisely the “right” answer to his emotional and honest question. Like a chorus that harmonically follows the lead singer’s solo, the other teachers followed suit adding their own concerns, doubts, and frustrations about how to respond to disrespectful and dangerous students.1 “I understand that students come to us wounded, but I’m not a therapist. I teach science and math. So tell me what I need to do to get my students to sit quietly and learn”. One by one, they shared their concerns with me, so I listened carefully and learned.
In my conversation with one of the African American teachers at one of the schools, she told me that she was about to quit her job, but she loves the children and can’t blame them for their behavior. She felt that the faculty, especially the white older faculty members, did not respect her. They made decisions about black students, ignoring her opinion, as if she was not in the room or the school, and it was “business as usual” instead of looking for alternatives to harsh punishments. She explained how a teacher had called the police on one student last year, and she felt helpless and could not stop it from happening. She was only informed about the incident after the police had arrived to the school. The child was in handcuffs and crying, and the police was taking her out of the school. No one intervened, not even the principal. The child’s mother was not called until later, and the teacher who had called the police refused to talk to her about the incident. She said there is too much work to be done with a faculty who is reluctant to change their ways of dealing with discipline issues with black and brown students.

Upon listening to incidents like this, I felt angry and discouraged that we could move the dial on these issues at any of the schools. I explained to her that we were going to support the school’s leadership and a small group of teachers who could hopefully influence their peers around these issues. After one of our meetings, a Filipina teacher shared that she wanted feedback about how she was dealing with her students.

Some of my students are very angry, they use profanity but my reaction is to ask him/her what was wrong? What was going on, and why was he/she so angry? My colleagues disapprove of the way I treat my students, and they tell me that I am too permissive and that I needed to report and punish these students. I feel that the students respond to me when this happens but there is no support, and there is so much division. Everyone has their own way of dealing with students and its mostly about punishment.

Another teacher shared a recent story about a principal’s intervention in a school fight. The teacher explained how the principal was impressed to see that students who watched the fight didn’t cheer and instigate the situation. One student had actually intervened to stop the fight. The principal videotaped the incident and was so proud of the student’s actions that he showed it to the intervening student’s mother. Upon seeing the video, she immediately responded to the principal with anger for allowing her son to put himself in danger by intervening. She was furious at the principal, but he couldn’t understand why she reacted with such anger.

**Critical Inquiry Group of Teachers**

During the fall of 2010, I was asked by the San Francisco Unified School District to provide training to several schools with disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of African American students. The district had been interested in
alternatives to suspensions and was interested in restorative practices. Despite the fact that African American students were only 8 percent of the student population, they comprised roughly 53 percent of the suspensions and expulsions in the district. I gathered a team and designed a series of professional development trainings focused on improving and strengthening relational pedagogy in the classroom, increasing healing opportunities throughout the school day.

The project involved regular meetings with the school’s leadership team to develop and implement specific school change activities. Our work with the schools involved approximately 12 face-to-face trainings and/or meetings (approximately 2 per month), 1 to 2 hours each. Each training or meeting involved activities designed to facilitate relational pedagogy, healing, and improved school climate. Our goal was for the schools to adopt and implement healing strategies that included healing circles, restorative practices, youth leadership engagement, and morning community circles. Some meetings included parents and healing circles with teachers and school leadership. These were difficult sessions because they often involved difficult and emotional discussions about what to do when a student threatened the entire school wide climate.

In other school sites we supported the school’s leadership team with a series of professional development trainings focused on healing unconscious racial bias, and its impact on school climate. This was accomplished by forming a “critical inquiry group” which is a self-selected group of teachers and administrators who lead activities, trainings, and conversations about healing, race, and culturally responsive teaching. The critical inquiry group consisted of 5 to 10 teachers who had expressed interest in learning more about racism, unconscious racial bias and equity issues, and the impact on student performance. The goal of the critical inquiry group was to support a teacher-driven facilitation group that allow teachers to reflect and dialogue and improve their practices related to healing and relational pedagogy.

The critical inquiry group met approximately twice per month to learn the principles and strategies with healing and relational pedagogy. Our goal was for the critical inquiry group to ultimately to conduct a subsequent school-wide professional development and to debrief about what was learned during the training. During each session of the critical inquiry group we prepared the teachers to facilitate conversations to other teachers throughout the school. Each meeting involved activities, discussions, and problem solving issues related to healing and relational pedagogy.

**Goals of the Critical Inquiry Healing Group**

We identified seven goals for the critical inquiry group:

- More collaborative relationships between parents, teachers, and students.
- More ownership of diversity practices at the schools.
• Implementing morning “community circles” to check in with students and set the tone for the week or day.
• Developing a student handbook that articulates school values, practices, and curricular strategies that facilitate healing and improve school climate.
• Documenting school values that are reflected in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, rules.
• Increasing student involvement via student council.
• Establishing more collaborative relationships between parents, teachers, and students.

During my first visit to one of the schools, I wanted to better understand the school culture, learn more about the teachers’ strengths and identify key challenges that could be addressed in our collaborative work with the school. By arriving early in the day, I wanted to observe the school’s rituals, how teacher’s greeted students, how students’ arrived to school, how the school felt, and precisely what made it feel that way. The principal greeted me and eagerly ushered me to his office. He explained that his teachers often complained a lot and he wanted to avoid getting bogged down by their issues.

Most of the classes at one school had surprisingly small class sizes. The class sizes ranged from about 3 to 10 students across six classrooms. I entered an English class where a young white teacher was teaching a class of approximately 10–12 students. Key themes in the book Moby Dick. The teacher asked, “In what ways can we see defiance in Ishmael, and what examples can you show us from the book?” The students were inattentive and mostly talking to each other. As I walked around, I noticed that a group of boys in the back were looking at pornography on a cell phone. When the teacher asked them to put it away, one of them replied, “fuck we can’t do nothing in here, this is boring!”. The teacher simply looked at me, as to say, “see what we mean when we say students are disrespectful?” During the day, I experienced several other classrooms incidents where students where simply checked out of the class discussion, and defiantly cursed openly to their teachers.

On my way out, the principal asked me to visit two additional classes before I left for the day. The first class was an history class taught by Ms. Jennings, a white veteran teacher who seemed to command respect from her students. She had short brown hair and dressed like a San Francisco artsy hipster. Just underneath her white hipster veneer, there was an authenticity to her, no fake shit, and the students could feel that realness as she talked with them.

That day she was teaching the students the significance of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). Ms. Jennings had developed an activity where each student learned about the celebration that honored life, and those that had passed away. Each student was asked to create a real mask that represented something or someone significant in their lives that is no longer with us. Music played in the
background as students quietly contemplated the question and calmly painted their masks.

Ms. J had also asked that each student sit in a circle to share with the class what their mask represented. I could tell that they had been working on this project for a few weeks because the classroom walls were decorated with brightly colored masks. Some of the masks were funny, others were dark and menacing, but I could tell that the students had taken this assignment seriously. In a circle, each student shared the meaning behind the symbols on their mask. Some shared stories of the pain from losing a parent, others shared horrific stories of violence both in the home and on the streets. What was amazing was how students listened and respected the confidentiality of what was shared.

“I haven’t seen my dad since I was 8 years old”, one young man confessed. “He went to jail but my mom and grandmother never really told me the full story of what happened. So these bars right here on the mask represents where my dad is, and this basketball on this side of the mask reminds me when we used to play basketball when I was younger”.

These masks were in essence a portal that gave each student the permission to be honest and vulnerable. This class discussion was in stark contrast to the other classes I had observed. Some of the same students who had been disruptive in other classes, sat quietly in Ms. Jennings class and listened to their peers without distraction. “Our students need to be given the permission to heal, and to share what is going on in their lives”, Ms. Jennings commented.

When we do lessons like this I always look for opportunities for them to share and listen to each other. I think we build trust when we do that, and its clear that they learn because the lessons are real for them! When you hear how your friend is struggling there is an exchange of empathy.

I also visited Ms. Woods’ class, located in an portable in the back of the school. We had to walk down the stairs, past the cafeteria, through a hallway to finally find our way to the asphalt basketball courts that couldn’t be used because the real estate was being used to house five portables for extra classrooms.

Ms. Wood was a retired postal worker who had decided that she wanted to work with students after she retired. In her late sixties, her warm smile and age made her somewhat an oddity at the school. Her classroom was not like the chaotic and disconnected teaching I had witnessed in other classrooms. Again, I observed how the same students who had cursed at their teacher earlier were sitting quietly, completing their homework in various subjects. After class, I calmly asked her to explain why some of the same students who were acting out in the earlier classes were on task, quiet, and not being disrespectful. She explained to me that, “oh I don’t allow them to speak to me like that”. When I probed further, she explained that, “well I’ve known most of these kids parents and grandparents
most of their lives. If they do something disrespectful I know they mommas, and grandmothers because I see them at church, or at the store, or at the community center”. As I talked with her, she began to establish a complex, multigenerational mapping of how she had relationships with many of the students. She also explained that she knew “what was going on at home”.

Ms. Woods’s relational pedagogy worked because she had established relationships that extended beyond the confines of the classroom and the school, and into the community. She was respected outside of the context of the school among the student’s because their own mothers, fathers, uncles, and aunties knew Ms. Woods. She was simply leveraging her relational capital in the classroom. She knew that if some of the students acted up, it wouldn’t be long before their family would know.

These examples illustrate two important points about healing and relational pedagogy in schools. First, when healing opportunities are integrated into classroom lessons, they can transform how students and teachers relate to one another. Empathy exchange, the act of sharing, listening, and feeling affirmed establishes relationships that simply are difficult to establish with conventional technical content-based pedagogy. Relational pedagogy explores opportunities to integrate discussions that matter to students’ daily experiences. Second, there is not one formulaic process that establishes relational pedagogy. For some teachers, relational pedagogy is established by building trust, honesty, and vulnerability in class lessons. For others, it may be built by nurturing and fostering relationships outside the classroom with students’ extended family. What is key, however, is that relational pedagogy creates a rapport and respect between students and their teachers, and builds a reservoir of capital that can be spent in ways that ultimately improve the quality of the school day.

Building Healing-Centered Pedagogy

Our team highlighted the lessons we had learned from Ms. Jennings’ and Ms. Woods’ classes which served as concrete examples that healing-centered pedagogy was possible even in schools where the broader school climate was dysfunctional. Working closely with the principals at each of the schools, we identified a “core” group of approximately 7–10 teachers that formed critical inquiry groups at each school. Each session focused on activities, discussions that prompted the teachers to share pieces of themselves that rarely are integrated into professional development training. I explained to them that one of the challenges with changing systems, schools, and other institutions was that these strategies often focused entirely on policies, rules, regulations, and practices that rarely changed people’s hearts. Our critical inquiry groups were going to explore how the false binary between “personal vs. professional” limited our ability to connect and build
relationships. Twice per month for about a year we collectively explored their identities, their dreams, their fears, triumphs, and challenges. Each group also focused on how to integrate activities, lessons, and healing strategies into their classrooms and discussed challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned resulting from their efforts.

We began with simple activities that allowed them to share with each other aspects of their own backgrounds. We used an activity called the “I AM FROM” poem, which is a series of beginning phrases of a poem that prompts participants to reflect on his/her own unique response to a question. When the prompts are complete, each participant has created a poem about what makes them who they are. The poem is then shared and discussed among the group. For example:

- I am from (three objects from around your childhood home)
- I am from (three objects from your backyard or near your house)
- I am from (three places near your neighborhood)
- I am from (family member)
- I am from (a phrase that you remember from your childhood)
- I am from (food that you had while growing up)
- I am from (some special event or experiences that define who you are today)

I offer an example from my own poem:

I am from . . .
Green shag carpet, linoleum floors, and cabinets stacked with spam.
I am from . . .
Broken fences, rusty swing sets, and glow in the dark toys.
I am from . . .
Green cat liquor store, Lincoln High School, and Castle Park.
I am from . . .
Momma and Poppa G, Auntie and MJ.
I am from . . .
You betta be home when the street lights come on!
I am from . . .
Grits, collard greens, and hot water cornbread.
I am from . . .
The shiny proud eyes of my mother and father when they watched me graduate from college.

These poems created humanizing moments, where each person began to see the other not simply as Mr. Brown, but rather the young boy who grew up in Boise Idaho and loves the smell of a field after a good rain. In addition, these early
activities created safety for subsequent and often more difficult discussions. We also assessed each of the groups’ perceptions about their readiness to discuss and engage in equity issues in their respective classrooms. In other words, we wanted to gauge how ready each group was to explore a range of topics such as racism, sexism, loss, forgiveness, hope, etc. We administered the “Social Justice Readiness” survey in order to establish benchmarks on each group’s capacity to engage these issues in their respective classrooms.²

**TABLE 5.1** Readiness for Social Justice and Healing-Centered Pedagogy Survey: Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSESSMENT SUPPORT</th>
<th>1–5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the climate in your school/department for addressing social justice issues with students?</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of personal support do you have from colleagues and friends? Do you know other teachers who are addressing these issues with students?</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have people with whom you are allies in your social/professional life who can act as “identity/cultural advisors” and to whom you are accountable?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe students are capable of embracing social justice concepts in their lives?</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessment of Personal Passion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment of Personal Passion</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to you to address social justice issues with students?</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you articulate a clear rationale to yourself and others for why these issues need to be addressed?</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you willing to risk being the center of controversy if there is a student, colleague, community objection?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you considered how addressing these issues will affect students’ perceptions of you (positively and negatively)?</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable are you discussing social justice issues?</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Assessment of Knowledge**

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<tr>
<th>Assessment of Knowledge</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What information do you have about different forms of oppression?</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about your own forms of social privilege and target identities?</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessment of Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment of Skills</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What leadership skills do you have for leading student discussions?</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable are you with students expressing a variety of conflicting beliefs during class discussion?</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you listen to prejudiced comments in class discussions without becoming emotionally “triggered” or expressing anger?</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you comfortable disclosing some of your own fears and uncertainties as a way to model this behavior for students?</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey asked questions such as:

- What is the climate in your school/department for addressing social justice issues with students?
- How important is it to you to address social justice issues with students?
- Can you articulate a clear rationale to yourself and others for why these issues need to be addressed?
- Are you comfortable disclosing some of your own fears and uncertainties as a way to model this behavior for students?
- How comfortable are you with students expressing a variety of conflicting beliefs during class discussion?

The results indicated that while faculty and staff believed that they were ready individually, they were less confident that they could address these issues collectively as a group. Notably, none of the groups felt that their overall school climate was solidly in place for addressing these issue with students, and few had personal support from friends or colleagues about addressing these issues with students. The most revealing data we received was their own comfort level at revealing their own insecurities and fears regarding racial and social justice issues in their classrooms.

In addition to reviewing the Social Justice Readiness data, we also gathered and reviewed school site suspension and “D & F” grade list data and disaggregated the data by race. The data illustrated disproportionate suspension and D and F grades among African American and Latino Students. Of the students who had been suspended, 45 percent were African American, while they only comprised about 8 percent of the school population. The students receiving a D or F was even more revealing, nearly 88 percent of the students receiving a D or F for the semester were black or Latino. The data were used to illicit reflection and conversations about each of the teacher’s classroom practices related to the data. I simply asked the group, “How do you explain the differences in suspensions, and D and F grades?” During our first meetings with our groups of teachers, several of the teachers vigorously challenged the data, arguing that it wasn’t accurate and did not reflect the teaching practices and school-wide policy related to suspension and academic performance.

Teacher #1: I completely disagree with the whole statistics on the findings on numbers of black children suspended. These numbers are misleading!

Researcher: These numbers came from your staff, not the district. This is what you all reported. We have simply pulled the numbers together.

Principal: We don’t do everything we need to do for all students. Some black students are loud, they like to call out. And the staff has no cultural relevancy. Teachers don’t include student’s
individual cultural ethnic in their lessons beside teaching about Martin Luther King, etc.

Teacher #3: The black students are being labeled as bad, but not really the Chinese or other students.

In response to Teacher #3’s comments I asked:

Researcher: Is it that African American students don’t like to follow rules or teachers don’t like African American students and want them to be suspended?
Teacher #3: Well honestly, there are teachers in this school that don’t like to deal with African American students.
Principal: I know we are having an honest conversation and as a principal I’m concerned that comments I or any of us make might get out of this room. But I have to say, that I have been here for nearly 10 years and have been unable to address or change the environment of the school. I feel defeated.

The data was shocking, and the teacher’s response to the data required honesty, trust, and vulnerability to admit and share their own responsibility in creating the gross disproportionality at the school.

Teacher #2: I was looking at my grades list and realized that all my Latino students are getting an F this semester. It is the students’ and their parents’ faults; I have done everything to explain to them what they need to do in order not to fail my class!
Principal: (In a quiet voice) How about putting the blame on yourself for failing these students?
Teacher #2: I am determined not to change because I have done everything for them.

Our first goal was to move the group to a place of emotional honesty about the performance of their students. These discussions allowed for the teachers to be honest and vulnerable about their classroom practices and removed the guilt, shame, and embarrassment that often are obstacles to healing.

We began to see different strategies among the teachers as they attempted to implement healing-centered pedagogy in their classrooms. We encouraged each of the critical inquiry groups to integrate a few activities into their classroom lessons that opened space for students to share feelings and experiences related to race and racism. As indicated on our readiness survey, most of the teachers didn’t feel confident that they could create an environment where students could openly discuss these issues. However, allowing the teachers to share their own fears, insecurities, and concerns about race in the safe confines of the critical inquiry group,
they were more open to discussing these issues in their classrooms. Our group also focused on each of the teachers’ awareness of how their implicit bias influenced how they treat students differently. One Chinese American teacher who had previously seemed unaware of race, but deeply aware of black student misbehavior commented:

There was a conflict in my class between a black student and a Chinese student. The Chinese student was not following directions and then the black student was doing the same as the Chinese student. I told the black student that I was going to report his conduct. After class I was confronted by the same Chinese student and black student who pointed out that they both would need to be reported since both were undisciplined in my class. They pointed out to me!

The teacher’s activities with her students about race not only made her aware of her own bias, but conversations about race also created opportunities for her students to discuss their experiences and concerns about racial tensions at the school and in her classroom. Healing-centered pedagogy meant supporting the teachers with facilitating explicit race conscious conversations in their schools. As teachers felt more confident to have productive conversations about race in their classrooms, students who had previously experienced racial hostility could speak about their experience, rather than harboring their emotions and feelings, which led to their acting out in ways that disrupted the school environment. During one of our critical inquiry sessions, the teachers reflected on the conversations they were having in class. They also discussed techniques, activities, and strategies that provided an environment of safety within which their students would feel comfortable enough to share their true feelings. One teacher commented,

There was a Latino student who was talking about a racial incident in my class, when two Chinese students started talking in Chinese among themselves. The Latino boy felt offended because he thought they were talking about him. So I stopped the Chinese boys and asked if they had been talking about the Latino student and they said they were not. The Latino boy apologized for his reaction but expressed how he felt when he didn’t understand their language. The conversation between the two groups of students lasted twenty minutes and the rest of the class cheered the conversation. It was really honest and healing for everyone to hear that!

During our conversation, another teacher commented that often students use their native language to bad mouth or talk about others students. Therefore the Latino boy assumed the Chinese students were talking about him. The Latino boy was pissed off at first, but felt good at the end of the conversation because he was
able to communicate that he felt that the white and Chinese students are favored over others. The ability for him to share this openly with the entire class was healing for him and the teacher. His comment of being treated unfairly as a Latino was one of her triggers, those touchy issues that spark immediate emotional response. The discussions and activities during our critical inquiry circle, however, made her realize and identify her triggers so that when they came up in the classroom, she could respond more openly. She commented how she resisted wanting to jump in, and “correct” the student’s comments.

I know that I don’t treat students differently by their race, so I wanted him to understand that. Often times, the Latino or black student will be talking, and the other students are quietly working but my response is not based on race, its based on the fact that some students are quiet, others are not! I wanted to correct him, but instead I just listened to him and the other students talk about how they felt about these issues. It is important to have these conversations with students instead of them harboring it and letting it brew outside the classroom for the ripe moment for it to erupt. Once a students brings it out, others have heard it just listening, and having conversation is sort of healing for all of us.

These conversations did not provide a complete antidote for solving the schools’ racial tensions. Rather, the critical inquiry groups opened a space to repair both the harm inflicted by racial bias among the teachers, and the harm from being silenced to talk about how it felt. Just being heard, supported, and listened to can be an important component in healing and restoring well-being. However, critical inquiry circles were not simply cognitive, content-based skill development, but rather we focused on the often underdeveloped affective dimensions of classrooms and schools.

Building a Radically Healing Strategy in Schools and Communities

Our project focused on strategies to support teachers’ healing process in order for them to facilitate healing in their classrooms. These conversations, activities, and strategies rupture normative practices at schools that might contribute to poor school climate by creating humane spaces where teachers and students share, listen, and learn about matters of the heart. The following year, in one of the schools in our project, the number of suspensions among African American and Latino students had dramatically decreased. The other schools only showed a slight improvement, despite the fact that the district had adopted restorative justice policy.
Often, discussion about policy issues related to schools and communities start from 30,000 feet altitude. Far above the fray of daily interactions, attitudes, and relationships, policy stakeholders assume that outcomes in schools, neighborhoods, and even cities are entirely the results of better rules, guidelines, protocols, laws, and more efficient implementation and enforcement. While important, this approach to change grossly minimizes the most significant aspects of institutional and social change—the inner motivations, aspirations, and desires of those within the systems we seek to change.

Radical healing encourages teachers, activists, and youth stakeholders to consider that the results that we seek are a function of the quality of our relationships and the clarity of our consciousness and way of being. Successful policy change and interventions that create healing, improve school climate, and improve learning depends on the interior condition of both the adults and the young people in the communities and schools we seek to transform. Change is not only a function of what we do, what we know, but it is also about who we are on the inside.

Notes
1 Many of the teachers’ comments were stoked by recent reports in the news about how uncontrollable and unruly urban students take advantage of lenient disciplinary rules in schools. Zero tolerance policies began in response to the fear that schools had become too accommodating in regards to school discipline and safety.
2 Our survey was adapted from Griffen (1997).

References


Joe and Sam were nervous. Both had just pulled their cars up to two small apartments in the neighborhoods that were at war with one another. The latest shooting in an endless series of gun warfare had caused both Joe and Sam to abandon any conventional forms of intervention, throwing everything they knew about violence prevention, youth development, and community outreach out of the window. Too many young people were needlessly dying on the streets of Richmond. So Joe and Sam were unsure if taking two young men who had shot at each other the week before on an airplane to attend a conference across country was a good idea. It had been difficult to bring the young men from North and Central Richmond together to figure out how to resolve the conflicts that had escalated to warfare. Distrust, suspicion, and fear from years of hostilities had established deep barriers that made it nearly impossible for these young men to come together safely.

Richmond is a relatively small city, with approximately 100,000 mostly working-class residents. Located east of San Francisco, Richmond was once a bustling working- and middle-class community for African American families who had migrated from the South looking for stable, solid paying jobs in the Kaiser shipyards during World War II. However, after the war, much of the shipbuilding and wartime industries became obsolete, leaving a significant number of African American families with few job opportunities. During the late 1980s, Richmond experienced a dramatic shift in the fabric of community life. Richmond was a city where working-class and middle-class families enjoyed family gatherings at the local parks, children riding their bikes freely on their neighborhood streets, and the schools competed for bragging rights for the best football team. By the mid-1990s, like many urban cities throughout the United States, drugs and its economy and culture began to erode many of the civic pleasures and bonds that make communities safe.
On a warm October afternoon, I rode with Joe and Sam as they made their rounds through Richmond’s neighborhoods. Driving slowly through each of the well-paved streets, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of normalcy that reminded me of the type of neighborhood in which I was raised. These neighborhoods were not the infamous vertical ghettos found in Chicago’s South Side, but rather, single-family homes, with groomed lawns, flower beds, and well-lit, brightly colored residences.

North Richmond was somewhat different and reminded me of the rural South where people sit outside on their porches and mingle at local corner markets. We would stop the car from time to time. Joe rolled down the window to have a casual conversation with a young man on the street who had previously asked Joe if he could connect him to any jobs. Another young man asked Joe about getting a driver’s license. During our ride, both Joe and Sam recalled their own childhood experiences in the neighborhood, remarking on how safe the community was during their own adolescent years.

But these neighborhoods had began a dramatically change in the late 1980s. In the two-year span from 1988 to 1990, Richmond had experienced a dramatic 71% rise in handgun-related homicides. Since 1990, the homicide rate continued to grow and by 2007 the city ranked ninth in America’s most dangerous cities. Even though Richmond has just over 100,000 residents, the city has averaged about 34 homicides a year during the last decade, far above the state average. From 2003 to 2007, there were approximately 200 handgun-related homicides in the city. The majority of these homicides are located in two neighborhoods in Richmond, North Richmond, and Central Richmond, located only a few miles apart but years of unresolved hostilities between the neighborhoods have escalated to all out war.

FIGURE 6.1 Richmond Homicides 1980–2006

Source: California State Department of Justice Crime Statistics, Richmond California.
One of the most tragic casualties of Richmond’s violence, however, was its attack on hope among young people. The sense that nothing could be done to address the violence had spread to schools, and retaliation from violence among young people had become the norm: “If you shoot and kill one of us, we are going to shoot and kill one of yours”. The City Council nor the police had developed a strategy to address the growing violence. In 2006, the City Council debated a number of strategies ranging from greater police enforcement to increasing services and opportunities for young people in the city.

In 2007, DeVone Boggan, a seasoned, trusted, and savvy director of a youth organization in Oakland, introduced to Richmond City Council an innovative and provocative idea. What if we could pay young people to stop shooting? His years of experience working in Oakland had taught him that increasing law enforcement and strengthening anti-crime tactics were insufficient to address the root of what was Richmond’s violence. Rather, these types of tactics often just exacerbated the problem. Boggan, using a mix of data mining to identify the most vulnerable and likely young men to engage in gun violence, who would therefore have the most to gain from positive supports from youth development and mentoring, created the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), which is a public private partnership to reduce violence in Richmond with the sole aim of keeping young men alive and free. He explored strategies from the Cease Fire model that seeks to interrupt violence using intervention from street workers. Boggan’s strategy was to hire men who had experienced violence and who intimately understood Richmond’s complex and volatile geopolitical terrain. Then he identified approximately 50 young men who were most likely to shoot someone, or to be shot themselves. The program provides support to the young men, offers employment, educational, and travel opportunities, and guides them on completing goals the young men identify, and provides a stipend if the young men are successful.

Joe and Sam were outreach workers for the Office of Neighborhood Safety and both were born and raised in Richmond and were well respected and known in Richmond’s streets. When Joe and Sam drove up to the apartments to introduce two identified young men to the program, they knew that what they had to offer could change these young men’s lives. Joe, commented about his introduction to the ONS team.

I had met DeVone through a friend who encouraged me to meet him, but at the time I really didn’t want to have anything to with Richmond. We sat down and had lunch together and man it was like this brotha had a halo over his head! His thinking and vision was so powerful that I knew I wanted to get down with this brotha, I want to be on this dude’s team and I can learn from him!

The team of street outreach workers were given the specific mission to stop young men from shooting. Joe was well known and respected in North
Richmond, and Sal, the oldest member of the team, was widely known as “Uncle Sal” among many of the young men who were identified as shooters in Central Richmond. Joe commented:

We are somebody in these neighborhoods! Everyone respected us. So when we first we told to get out there and stop young men from shooting, I was scared to go into Central (Richmond) because of our history. I would only go into Central with Sal no one else. I knew that if I was with Sal no blood would be shed. So because we knew these young men, we were able to talk to them to at least create a pause in the shooting, and to stop hunting.

“Hunting” was a term the team used to describe the activities of the young men in Richmond who would strategically, and sometimes casually, enter the rival’s neighborhood to randomly shoot other young men who lived there. Joe and Sal were successful in creating Richmond’s first truce. But unfortunately, this truce was ended because one young man was “determine to shoot and kill everybody in Central”.

The ONS team had learned an important lesson about how to respond to interrupt and address violence in Richmond. Rather than using the harsh punishment tactics used by other violence prevention strategies, they would saturate the young men with caring, loving relationships, a revolutionary move in an environment that only valued punishment. All of the outreach workers had an extraordinary ability to identify and establish relationships among the young men and determine the best way to intervene in their lives.

For example, during one meeting, the team was discussing a homicide that had just occurred in one of the neighborhoods. Each member of the team had an extraordinary encyclopedic knowledge of each of the young men they discussed. They knew family members, cousins, and parents, and special events that created an elaborate genealogical, geographic, and political map of each young man. For example, the team discussed one of the young men’s current dilemmas that could spark him to engage in violence.

Well, Mark’s cousin Gina was at a party last year and the guys from North were bothering her. She told Mark, and he got mad at her for not telling him sooner. But he was ready to locate the guys from North when we talked to him about what he needed to get his life on track. All he really wanted was to get his driver’s license so he could drive. So I told him that I would help him get his driver’s license if he agreed not to go hunting. He agreed and he is still safe.

Each team member knew how to leverage their relationships with the young men in order to influence their decision to engage in violence. Each day each of
the team members get numerous calls from the young men in the program asking for support with a multitude of things. Joe commented:

Every day is different because we get so many calls from the young men on a daily basis of some crisis they are in or something that they need help with. Basically, how we support them is we just love on them! We show them that we love them. If they get caught with a gun, and are out on bail, we still show them that we love them. I’m not going to treat you any different because you messed up. I might scolded them because I know them like a father, or brother but I still love them and they know it! We don’t turn our backs on them! We had one young man that was out there shooting and had been shot like three different times. He was like an intern in our program and acting like he was turning his life around but we knew he was still out there. But we didn’t turn our backs on him. It took a couple of years but now he has moved away and is in a community college getting his life together in another state! We didn’t turn our back on him!

Establishing and nurturing these relationships is one of the most significant and transformative strategies employed by ONS. Every day, the outreach team checks into the main office to listen to voicemails and attend to other administrative tasks, but they are not in the office for long. Equipped with cars and ONS hats and jackets, the outreach team hits the streets of Richmond. For naïve observers, it may appear that the team members are just “hanging out”, stopping on street corners to chat with young men, or dropping by a local park to see who is there. But, in fact, there is much more strategy, and deliberate surgical intention that may not be evident to the casual observer. The team spends countless hours deliberating on who is most at risk, and who is ready to “come off the porch”, a term used to convey that a young man is ready to jump into the life of the streets, and engage in “gun play” for his neighborhood. What is most remarkable about ONS’s strategy is how they strategically and intentionally inject positive and loving support to each of the young men in which they interact.

Keeping Young Men Alive and Free

The single most important civil rights issue facing black working poor families in America, is not jobs, education, or even health care, but rather it is safety. ONS knows this, and they are guided by their mantra, which is to keep young men alive and free. Their work stands in stark contrast to the conventional strategies that generally views black men in the United States as both victim and victimizer. Common troupes of young black men as strong, non-feeling, and hypersexualized are propagated by the media; they lay the groundwork for public policy and have served as a justification for harsh punishment and laws that disproportionately
incarcerate African American young men (Alexander 2010). In addition, social science research has not entirely departed from the assumption that black men should only be conceptualized through this prism. Social science research has often conceptualized relationships among black men as contentious and defined by tough postures, potential violence, and maladaptive behaviors, all of which fails to capture the mosaic of experiences and textured realities of black young men’s lives. Unfortunately, these discussions about black men’s lives remain restricted to static conceptualizations of masculinity, rigid frames about work and family life, and distorted notions of behavior. Black masculinity is defined through behaviors that reflect tough postures, potential violence, and maladaptive behaviors (Anderson 1999).

Joe, Sam, and the other outreach workers understood that the young men in Richmond were not damaged beyond repair and that by using love, support, and care, they could reach these young men. By doing this, they established a more humane and complete conceptualizations of these young men that informed their strategy, and opened the possibility for them to understand how black men, despite their troubled histories, could love and care for one another.

Rarely have researchers examined how black young men care, support, and love one another. One exception is Yaser Arafat Payne and Hanaa Hamdi’s research on street love among African American men (Payne and Hamdi 2009), which explored how young men love, support, and care for one another in the context of urban poverty. The researchers found that young men provided unconditional, caring positive support to one another in the form of personal advise, lending money, providing employment, offering positive words of encouragement. They argued, “Street love is not simply defined as material offerings, but the men also regard acts of mutual respect as a demonstration of street love as well. It should be noted that for an act to be regarding as offering of ‘love’, it must be perceived to be genuine, or done from the heart” (p. 38). They found that street love was central to the daily lives of the group of men they studied. In fact, these men considered street love to be a defining feature that comprised their identity.

ONS strategy also provides us insight into more progressive forms of black masculinity. Much of our understanding of masculinity from feminist theorizing has rightfully critiqued patriarchal masculinity, but has not articulated a vision of what an affirming masculinity might look like. “Often the only alternative to patriarchal masculinity presented by feminist movement . . . was a vision of men becoming more ‘feminine’” (hooks 2000, p. 70). This is largely due to the fact that feminist theorizing almost exclusively focus how power and domination shape our notions of black masculinity. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (2006) suggests, “Definitions of black masculinity in the Unites States reflects a narrow cluster of controlling images situated within a broader framework . . . arrayed along a continuum, virtually all of the representations of black masculinity pivot on questions of weakness” (p. 75). On one end of the spectrum are representations
of black masculinity of moral weakness: unable to control sexual urges, emotions, and self-discipline. On the other end of the continuum are forms of black masculinity that emulate violence, aggression, privilege, and dominance. Joe commented about the program’s views on masculinity.

We are trying to show these young men that what they think is normal is actually abnormal. Men are suppose to hug each other, men can say “I love you”. We can say I love you dude. I love you and I don’t want nothing to happen to you. I tell these young men I love them every time I see them, and to be safe. They see me as uncle Joe. Not all of the young men respond, the knuckle heads don’t want nothing to do with us, but I still tell them, “Hey man I love you and if you need anything, I’m here for you.”

The offers of love, care, and support offered by the ONS outreach workers illustrate a humane and more life-affirming understanding of black young men. These practices require us to include the characteristics of care, love, imagination, and hope and the ability to dream in our conceptualizations of black men. By expanding the spectrum of what constitutes black masculinities we can build a masculine affirming and humane understanding of black men. Drac, another member of the ONS team, commented about how he communicates love, care, and hope to the young men on Richmond’s streets:

I know the word is overused, often abused but love is wanting something for somebody else more than you want for yourself! I want them to have more than I had! So every conversation I have ends with “hey man, you know I love you man!”. Some of them are uncomfortable when I say it, some of them say “I love you too bro”. But I tell these youngstas all the time, the truest sense of being a man is being able to express your love and affection for another man, in a brotherly type way. Like I don’t want nothing from you dude, I just want you to be better. I want you to be alive and free!

By challenging static and toxic notions of black masculinity, the ONS outreach workers illustrate to the young men on Richmond’s streets a healthier and more holistic form of masculinity. These forms of masculinity are driven by an unselfish desire to support, care, and instill hope in each young man. Transparency, honesty, consistency, and the desire for the young men to have rich, fulfilling lives are the driving forces that undergird their work. A set of values also guides and directs the ONS staff and their work with young men. Their values highlight the power of hope, healing, love, and relationships that they believe can transform the lives of the young men in which they work. It may seem odd that soft warm concepts like these might have the power to transform cold hard gun violence.
• Victims and perpetrators of gun violence and their family members are people of value and worth.
• The power of love and listening can turn lives around.
• Trusting relationships can heal people.
• Good will influences behavior.
• The relationship is the intervention, and the intervention is the relationship.

Sam, a passionate long-time outreach worker, emphasized how the staff use these values to influence the young men with which they work.

I went to a training the other day and the trainer was talking about the untouchables in India. They are the ones who are begging on the streets. No one is paying them any attention, and no one cares about them. Then someone comes and says you matter. Mother Teresa treated the untouchables as human beings. When these young folks in Richmond see that we care about them and they know that we not afraid of you! You don’t scare me cuz you got a weapon. You are a child and I’m a grown ass man. So when you break out of that way of thinking, it matters to young people.

Sam’s comments provide insights into how the ONS outreach workers view their work with young men. Each of the outreach workers places their good intent to care about these young men at the center of their interactions. This form of care allows them to see beneath the young men’s tough veneer and reestablishing a relationship from a place of hope, rather than fear.

These young men know that we care about them in a way most adults don’t. The young people respect the fact that you respect them! Just enough to give a damn and that’s a minimal amount of respect! Like I’m gonna go out of my way to see if I can get you a job, or I’m gonna take your momma some food because she is sick and you don’t have any money. You are not just paying attention to me but you are pouring some love and resources into me! That’s a debt that these young men don’t think they can pay back! So the only way they can pay it back is just trying to respect you in some ways like a surrogate father or uncle.

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Sam’s comments about how the outreach workers leverage their caring relationships to address violence in Richmond points to recent theorizing about social capital in black civic life. In communities where families’ vibrant community life and civic organizations have been ravaged by drugs, violence, and poverty, establishing networks of care and support are some of the most powerful and effective political acts. This is because establishing care relationships among those
community members most on the margins, can be converted to opportunities that contribute to healthy vibrant forms of civic life.

The destruction of a healthy political infrastructure in black communities across America has in many ways threatened modes of care and justice which historically have played an important role of black social networks and activism. Care has become particularly important given that state and local government, who once provided basic social services, has failed to address these issues in black communities (Wacquant 1998). In response to the state’s neglect of facilitating basic social welfare, some community organizations have sprung up to serve as a buffer to mitigate what Wacquant (2001) refers to as the penal state—the omnipresent influence of state institutions such as police, schools, and prisons who in concert encroach upon urban life through surveillance, zero tolerance policies, imprisonment in the name of public safety. Rather than building mutual trust, democratic participation, and community building, Wacquant argues that the penal state threatens the vitality of networks of care in black communities. Scholars have argued that growing poverty, crime, and violence as well as the state’s diminishing role in providing basic social services has resulted in new forms of social capital in urban black neighborhoods (Dance 2002). These new forms of social capital are much less concerned how social networks are fostered and sustained through membership to civic and social organizations and much more focused on how “humane investments” of care contribute to healing and justice among African American youth (p. 84). Caring is one important aspect of these social relationships between youth and adults. These caring relationships make possible the achievement of certain goals that would otherwise not be attainable (Dance 2002).

Care, however, is more than simple trusting relationships and mutual expectations and bonds between individuals. Rather, care within black communities and among marginalized youth is viewed both as a collective and individual responsibility. That is, emphasis of care in black communities is on cultural, communal, and political solidarity in addition to interpersonal relationships (Thompson 1995). Thompson defined care within this context as “promoting cultural integrity, communal and individual survival, spiritual growth, and political change under oppressive conditions” (p. 29). In communities ravaged by violence, crime, and poverty, care is perhaps one of the most revolutionary antidotes to urban violence and trauma because care ultimately facilitates healing.

Care within the black community is as much a political act as it is a personal gesture because it requires black youth to confront racism and view their personal trauma as a result of systemic social problems. For example, the capacity for African American youth to develop a political understanding of racism can promote wellness and healthy development (Ward 2000; Hart and Atkins 2002; Watts et al. 2002). Janie Ward (2000) noted that “addressing racism, in an open and forthright manner is essential to building psychological health among African
American youth” (p. 58) who have been failed by schools, social supports, and traditional youth development programming. In the context of economic decay, political isolation, and urban violence, care is cultivated through ties with adult community members, facilitated by building collective interests through political racial consciousness among black youth.

This way of conceptualizing care also builds from prior treatments of social capital that focus on the ways in which mutual trust facilitates community action (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007). Building from Sampson et al.’s (1999) discussion of collective efficacy, which highlights how linkages of trust and willingness to act on behalf of the common good create political consciousness and translate to community action, Drac commented about the process in which they establish relationships with the young men.

Like I met a youngster yesterday. I know that he is with the shit! I know what he is doing out on the streets. I don’t walk up to him and spill my guts and my whole life story to him. I extend my hand to him and say, “how you doin brotha?, I’m Kevin man, they call me Drac, what they call you man?” He might say “they call me Red”. Next time I see him, I’ll say “what’s up Red?”, and give him a hug or something. Now the next time I see him he might say, “hey Drac, can you help me get my license?” I tell him I can try to help you get your license, but then I ask him can you help me with something?

When Red asks Drac to help him obtain his driver’s license, this request opens the opportunity for them to strengthen the exchange value in their relationship, where Drac leverages the trust and respect he has earned by encouraging Red to seek positive alternatives in his life. As such, the ONS strategy is to leverage their relationships with these young men to curb the violence in which these young men participated.

So I said to him, how many kids do you have? Don’t you want more for your children than you have? Do you want more opportunities for them than you have gotten? Don’t you want them to feel safer than you feel? This makes them start listening to me, and I tell them this ain’t the life you wanna live. But if it is the life you want to live, I’m still gonna be here for you. But if you want to do something different, I’m here to help you with that! Even if it means taking money out of my own pocket, I’ll do it because its that important. I know sometimes you only have one chance to have a conversation with these young men. So I let them know that I love them unconditionally, I don’t want nothing back. But if you listen to me, I’m never gonna tell you something that’s wrong, or that’s going to harm you. I treat all these young dudes like they are related to me.
It might take months for one of the team members to get a call from a young man they met on the street. Once they do get a call from a young man, it might be as simple as the young man wanting to go hang out and get some pizza, and wanting someone to listen to him. The members of the team respond to the young men as if each of them were a part of their own family.

We treat all these dudes like they matter! They have worth to us and we let them know it by how we get with them. We project this to them by showing them love! The value in this work is the relationship and their life.

In the span of one typical day, each member of the team wears multiple hats such as outreach worker, social worker, therapist, surrogate father or uncle. But these relationships have far greater meaning for Drac and the other members of the team. They describe their daily work in the broader scope of social change in black community life. Similar to monumental organizing efforts in the civil rights movement, the ONS team are constantly reminded that their work is not only about Richmond, but rather signifies a new, or at least revived, form of justice in efforts to change black communities. Drac commented:

This work really makes you constantly reevaluate your values because they are tested everyday. I keep a vision in my head about representatives from all these warring neighborhoods, under one roof, sitting down at a table with name tags indicating what neighborhoods they are from like you would see at a UN meeting you know. Where we work out our disagreements. I know people say that it’s impossible but if King and Malcolm X thought that what they were doing was impossible, why did they continue if they thought they couldn’t succeed? I mean Medgar Evers gave his life for us to be able to vote, but he never saw it in his lifetime. I’m not a martyr, but the fire that fuels me is that same fire from our ancestors that have made ordinary men to do extraordinary things!

**Peacemaker Fellowship**

In June 2010, ONS launched Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, an 18-month fellowship for the most lethal young men in Richmond. The program focused on outreach and providing services directed at those young men at highest risk for perpetrating gun violence. These individuals are also typically most isolated and idle and suffer from depression or other forms of mental health issues. This group of young men has also been completely unresponsive to traditional services offered by city agencies and community organizations.

Using data from the police department, human and social services agencies, and good observations on the Richmond streets, the ONS team identified
approximately 75 young men. Their strategy was straightforward: they would use their existing relationships to encourage the young men to participate in the fellowship. The fellowship provides mentoring, travel opportunities, stipends, and a host of other incentives. For participating in the program and completing a life plan that provides a road map to safety, health, and productivity, each ONS fellow receives a stipend ranging from $300 to $1,000 per month, depending on their progress following a “life map” of personal and professional goals. What is interesting, however, unlike most interventions that would require the young men to agree to end violence in their communities, the ONS fellowship didn’t require their fellows to agree to put down their guns. Kevin commented:

We don’t ask them to put down their guns because we know that is not realistic at this time in their lives, and it might place them at risk! Just asking these young men to put down their guns also might jeopardize our relationship with them because the request feels and might be perceived as inauthentic. What we do is just want them to wrestle with the option of not shooting! In order to do that we have to provide options that are as irresistible as the feeling that comes from carrying a gun. That’s the only way these young men will actually be forced to wrestle with their options. As it stands now, they feel they have no options other than to shoot. So what we do is inject options in their lives.

The fellowship program focuses on creating opportunities for the young men that aid them in making decisions that could get their lives on track. Their goal is for the young men to start thinking about life, about loving and valuing their own lives. When this happens, they will start making their own decisions to live.

So when Joe and Sam drove up to the separate neighborhoods to pick up two young men who were at odds, they weren’t sure about the outcome. They were sure, however, that in order to heal the toxic relationships between North and Central Richmond neighborhoods, they had to bring people together. Using the only capital they possessed, their relationships with young men in these neighborhoods, they convinced some of the fellows from both North and Central Richmond to take a trip together. Bringing the young men together while in Richmond was both dangerous and improbable. If they could take a trip, it might be possible, they thought, to reestablish healthier relationships between young men in these neighborhoods. Joe, a spirit-filled and energetic resident and outreach worker of Richmond, commented about bringing young men together for the first time.

We wanted to get fellows together who were at odds with each other to see if taking them out the environment would improve their relationship. We just cannot get young men to talk here. So we agreed to take them
to a men's conference in Texas. We agreed to bring these two young men together who we knew were probably shooting at each other the week prior. We had to take two separate cars to go get them because it could create problems if they were both in one car. But we were going to the airport in one car. We didn’t want to take either of them into the others neighborhood to pick them up. I’ll never forget the anxiety that was in that moment we brought them together. I’ll never forget the looks that the young men gave each other. One young man was in the front seat, the other in the back seat. The one in the front seat was watching the one in the back wondering if he was in danger of getting choked out or something. Then we started talking about football, and for the first time, in their minds, there was something they agreed on and that was that the 49ers suck! That was so important because even though it was small and minute in the bigger scheme of things it was huge! Because here are two people who consider themselves enemies that finally recognize that there is something that we do have in common. Maybe if we have this in common, there might be other things that we have in common. We spent about 4 or 5 days learning about what each of them have in common. They left as enemies and returned with respect for one another.

Since the first trip, the program has taken young men to dozens of places both nationally and internationally. I recall learning about a trip to South Africa from which the fellows had just returned. Each trip was designed to slowly melt away the barriers, hostilities, and walls that prevent healthy relationships between the neighborhoods. These humane investments in the most high-risk young men in Richmond haven’t been without criticism and turmoil. The program has been accused of paying criminals, wasting tax dollars on thugs. In October 2011, young men from different neighborhoods began arguing in the ONS office, and the argument led to a fight. But despite these challenges, the office continues to use care, hope, and healing to restore relationships in Richmond and has established an impressive track record on lowering gun violence in the city.

**How Can You Expect Different Results From Doing the Same Thing?**

Working for the ONS is more a cause than a job. Joe and the entire ONS team are available any time of day for the fellows in the program. The job is thankless, and there are few accolades from the city officials and even fewer from the streets. What keeps the team moving in the right direction is seeing young men make decisions to stay alive and free.

Joe had been mentoring Brian, a 17-year-old fellow from North Richmond, for about a year. On a warm evening in October of 2013, someone drove up to
the storehouse where they were sitting and shot his younger brother. He immediately called Joe to explain what happened, and he was ready to retaliate. Joe knew that Brian’s actions could create all-out war and end the truce that they had painstakingly created. Brian knew the culprit who had killed his brother, making his restraint even more difficult.

Brian is no stranger to gun violence, and has no problem shooting and doing what he needs to do. But with the relationship we have established with him, even though he knows who killed his brother he has not yet retaliated. Every time he sees me and calls me he is very positive. For example, “hey Joe can you help me get my ID because I’m trying to get my driver’s license”. So I'll help him out! This is important because if he retaliates it could start a world war here in Richmond because he knows who killed his brother. Just keeping him from killing somebody, or going over the edge, or going to jail is a success story.

These examples are not insignificant and point to the power of how caring relationships are leveraged to reduce violence in Richmond. These are also the rewards that keep the team committed to their mission. Each member of the outreach team views the fellows as an extension of their own family, and this approach conveys to the fellows a commitment, consistency, and courage that they hadn’t experienced in other programs.

We just stayed on him. He stayed at my house for two nights. I don’t care if he was way in Antioch [a city 30 minutes from Richmond] at 4:30 in the morning, I would try to be there. I would tell the other brothers on this team, “hey man stay on Brian, he needs some support”. You know we would try to surround him with as many positive people and influences as possible.

The ONS strategy, combined with other citywide anticrime efforts, has produced impressive results. From 2008 to 2012, the city experienced a 30% reduction in firearm related homicides. In 2012, five years after the start of the program, Richmond had 14 firearm related homicides, the lowest in 20 years. In 2013, Richmond had its lowest number of homicides in 33 years, and its homicide rate fell to 15 per 100,000. A total of 94% of the 65 fellows remain alive with no injury as a result of gun violence, and 57% of the fellows remain free from custody. Since the beginning of the program in 2007, there has been a steady decline in handgun related homicides.

More Carrot, Less Stick

It seems counterintuitive to offer support, guidance, and loving relationships to hardened young men who shoot each other to solve conflicts. Asking public
officials, schools, and juvenile justice systems to cast away the idea that some ‘citizens are good, others are evil’ might seem a bit naïve, lacking any political punch. However, our deeply held idea that good citizens require protection from bad ones at all cost is not grounded in facts, but rather fear. Public policy debates about crime and violence generally presume that the best way to address violence is with punitive, harsh, and often draconian responses to violence. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that suggests that zero tolerance policies in schools, stop-and-frisk policing practices, and suspensions reflect an outdated and ineffective way of creating safety (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice [CJCJ] 1999). Not only are these practices costly, but they have been overwhelmingly ineffective in addressing youth crime. These forms of public policy are based on “broken windows” theory of crime that focus on small, low-level crime in order to prevent larger and more serious crime (Wilson and Kelling 1982).

This chapter highlighted three key points for schools, community organizations, and public policy stakeholders concerned with educational improvement and community safety. Offering more carrot and less stick to those young people who are most marginalized, creates a cascading series of positive outcomes in neighborhoods, families, and public systems. Safe neighborhoods and schools, more vibrant civic life, investments in the economic infrastructure of neighborhoods, all contribute to an alternative and hopeful vision of community life.

However, carrots must have strong trusting relationships behind them. As discussed Chapter 2, just as health and well-being are defined as more than the absence of disease, justice is more than the absence of oppression. Healing and hope in schools and neighborhoods requires humane investments in young people and courage among policy stakeholders to create, nurture, and implement policy based on hope rather than fear.

Figure 6.2 Richmond Homicides 2006–2013
Source: California State Department of Justice Crime Statistics, Richmond California.
Harsh Policing and Suppression Harms Community Vitality and Hope

Strategies that focus entirely on suppression do more harm than good to community safety. Rebuilding vibrant and healthy neighborhoods and schools requires hope-based policy where investments in young people are driven by assets and possibilities. Research demonstrates that militarized policing and harsh violence reduction tactics do little to improve school climate and neighborhood safety, and actually harms school climate and neighborhood safety because these strategies simply fail to nurture the relationship necessary for school and community change to occur.

Healing Is Important for Civic Engagement and Community Change

Healing builds relationships necessary to change communities and recognizes the psycho-social harm and spiritual injury that are at the root causes of so many civic and social problems. These relationships can be leveraged in ways to facilitate the changes we envision in schools and communities. Public policy that is rooted in healing seeks to address the root causes of these issues and aims to restore and repair rather than retaliate.

Healing Establishes Relationships That Improve School Climate and Contributes to Public Safety

On the surface, healing might appear to be a therapeutic individual response to young people’s mental health. However, healing is a collective response that recognizes that fighting in schools, disruptive behavior, and even shooting all stem from the same fundamental issue, the inability to establish the type of relationships that matter. These relationships serve as the glue, and leverage points for alternative possibilities for young people and their communities.

In thinking about ONS and their strategy to keep young men in Richmond alive and free, I am reminded of the quote I used in the introduction of this book by James Baldwin. In his essay “The Creative Process”, Baldwin reminds us that “the precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through the vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose site of its purpose, which is after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place” (Baldwin 1985). This chapter offers both an example of alternative possibilities and strategies to restore relationships among young people based on love, hope, and relationships. Our role as policy advocates and educators should be more closely aligned with Baldwin’s conceptualization of an artist. That is, our role should be not only to address violence, but also to engender an imagination about how to make the world a more human dwelling place.
Notes

1 The data used to determine the most dangerous city is determined by homicide rate per 100,000. In its annual rankings based on FBI crime statistics and population figures, the research firm Morgan Quinno ranked Richmond above cities like Compton, California; Miami, Florida; and Cleveland, Ohio. Richmond, listed as the eighth most dangerous city with a population between 100,000 and 499,999, was ranked 24th last year. http://journalism.berkeley.edu/ngno/2004/12/10/richmond-among-top-most-dangerous-cities-report/

2 The ONS’s efforts were key in a range of factors including better policing and community relations, and improved youth outreach programs.

References


LA CUTURA CURA

How Culture Cures and Builds Activism

The air outside had been baking all day from the sweltering August heat in California’s Central Valley. Stockton, California, is not a city full of glitz and glamor, and rarely makes national headline news. In the building that housed Fathers and Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ), the cool air draped over you, and washed away the heat and welcomed you with open arms. Perhaps it was the hugs, smiles, and genuine sense of community that made us feel like we were walking into a family reunion. Positive vibes pervaded the entire space. Upon arrival everyone welcomed us and we were introduced to a very sharp and articulate fifth grader, who was responsible for giving us a tour of their facilities. She walked us through the youth center with great enthusiasm and introduced us to the various projects and staff at FFSJ. Without hesitation, this young and confident young girl, with beautiful soft brown skin and long hair, introduced herself as a youth organizer.

Sammy Nuñez, the executive director of FFSJ created the organization to address the multifaceted needs of his community, and to fill the gaps for young people growing up in Stockton. Nuñez is charismatic, yet just beneath the smile in his eyes, you can see that his inner joy didn’t come easy. He greets you with a smile and an embrace from his left arm. Usually he keeps his right hand in his pocket of his neatly pressed pants, explaining that “bullets are bad for your health”. As a young man, Sammy was nearly killed from a shotgun blast and the near-death experience contributes to his passion for healing, justice, and love.

Sammy experienced first hand the criminalization that many young black, brown, and poor youth learn to navigate. His near-death experience was a catalyst for him to come to grips with existential questions about life, his purpose and faith. His deep searching resulted in him co-founding FFSJ to counter the contradictions and inhumane responses by conventional top-down policies. He recognized early on that the young people in Stockton were traumatized from
the pervasive violence in low-wealth neighborhoods of color, and these same young people had no platform to be heard. These two unmet needs (healing from trauma, and political voice) served as the basis of his work.

Sammy is not alone in his quest to creating alternative approaches that combine healing and organizing. In fact, Sammy is one of a growing number of Black and Latino community organizers in California who blend healing and conventional organizing. These healing-centered activists share the idea that in order to transform systems, advocate for policy change and build local power, people who have been harmed by policies and systems need opportunities to heal and build collective practices to sustain well-being.

This chapter illustrates the significance of culture in the radical-healing framework, and how Black and Latino activists draw from rich indigenous cultural practices and rituals to heal and to organize. This chapter is somewhat different from the others because in some ways, our participation in the practices, rituals, and activities healed us as we participated. In other words, in order to for us to achieve some empirical clarity about the nexus of culture and organizing, we were asked to roll up our sleeves, jump in, and become immersed in the circles, conversations, and rituals. Our participation in healing circles, deep listening to young men in Stockton, and conversations at rallies and marches in Oakland provided a lens to more clearly articulate how culture heals and why it’s important to ground healing in cultural practices.

**Just a Way of Life: Culture, Healing, and Activism**

Culture can be described as a shared worldview and common ontological assumptions about the social, physical, and spiritual worlds. Culture is a way of being, knowing, and relating to one another that is both shaped by historical and contemporary social and economic forces. Often culture is transmitted intergenerationally and carries important lessons about identity and anchors who we are. Know one knows this better than Maestro Jerry Tello, director and national trainer from National Compadres Network, a national organization focused on strengthening and restoring communities by increasing positive supports to Latino, Native, and African American men and their families. Tello is perhaps the most significant figure in introducing cultural healing practices and activism to Latino young men in California. A trained therapist and spiritual leader, Tello has been a key figure in spreading indigenous cultural healing since the 1980s. Growing up in Watts and Compton during the civil rights movements, he developed a consciousness about social justice and its connections to healthy black and brown relationships.

Tello commented (personal interview, August 2014):

> My mother could not afford to take us to the doctor. So my mom would pray to heal us. She was very spiritual, and used prayer, singing, herbs, lay of
hands to heal us. She would ask me to help her when I was a kid, but I really wanted to go play. But healing was all around me, I didn’t see it as mystical, it was just how my family did stuff.

On one occasion Tello recalled people coming to his house to thank his mother for saving their lives. Mothers would bring their children to be healed by his mother, sometimes at 1 a.m. People would knock on the door just to say thank you. The power of healing was never a foreign concept to Tello. His father died when he was 13, and growing up was tough, but his grandmother’s teachings about healing and spirituality kept him from the dangers of growing up in Watts, California.

I remember my grandmother everyday before she did anything she would kneel down and pray. We had a little altar at our house . . . she would kneel down every day at the altar, sing and then after she would do that she would come over to us kids and she would bless us . . . I remember the energy of her hands, the look in her eyes I remember her putting her hands in my shoulder, I remember her blessing me . . . be careful whatever you do affects us all.

Today, maestro Jerry Tello is a leading authority on healing, social change, and transforming the lives of Latino young men. His three-day intensive workshop training on La Cultura Cura and the Hombre Noble curriculum has provided countless breakthroughs for Latino young men. The curriculum and training are based in indigenous rituals and practices aimed at restoring and transforming our human connections. Culture, for Tello, holds wisdom to heal because in indigenous worldviews, collectivity, harmony, and balance are concepts that can inform how we relate to one another and understand how our individual traumas are the result of social and global imbalance.

In essence what it means is the healing starts inside of you. Within every culture, within every family, within every individual is everything necessary, all you need is right there. It’s in you. And some people take that individually but I don’t mean it that way. You are connected to ancestral wisdom, cultural traditions. The channel of your roots, within that is everything necessary for you to find balance and harmony.

His techniques and philosophy has been the foundation of a burgeoning movement among activists and youth workers to make healing an explicit goal and process of their activist work. Tello has perhaps hundreds of young men whom credit their own transformation to his work, and he is intentional about teaching the next generation of leaders the power of healing circles in movement building.
For example, George Galvis is the founder of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), a community organization that interrupts cycles of violence and empowers young people to lead change efforts in their schools and communities. George is soft spoken and displays his native indigenous roots with pride. His wisdom far exceeds his age, probably because his life hasn’t been a crystal stair. But his insights on healing community change provide insight into the ways in which organizers articulate the role of healing in activist work. Galvis commented about the role of healing and organizing:

You know 80% of the movement is us fighting among ourselves because a lot of people bring all their carga—all their baggage into the circles. So there are a lot of wounded people in the social justice movement. That’s why they are passionate about justice because they have been wounded. They are trying to stand up for justice but they still haven’t healed up and they are bringing it and they are projecting it and there is a lot of internal divisions. There is a lot of non-profit gang banging and organizing gang banging.

Galvis illuminates several key points regarding healing and activist work. First, he calls attention to the fact that activists are often wounded and bring the pain, frustration, and trauma to the very organizations and movements that should address social problems. Ultimately, these unresolved issues are dismissed in some activist organizations as individual issues, and viewed as a private problem as opposed to collective response to unresolved pain from past experiences. When people join organizations who haven’t committed to a healing practice, the unhealed insecurities, fears, uncertainty, anxiety, and disappointment create unnecessary conflict and makes it difficult to build healthy organizational culture and foster healthy partnerships and coalitions. For Galvis and his organization, healing is placed at the center of organizational culture, interventions, and youth development strategies.

So for us the framework begins with healing. It is an integral part and ongoing part. We never stop healing until we catch our last breath until we make the transition into the spirit world. We have to constantly be growing. They say if you are green you are always growing. If you are ripe, ain’t shit left to do but rot homie! So once you think you know it all, then rot. So ceremony, spirituality, and healing have always been an integral part of it. Its first stepping stone.

Second, Galvis understands that the health of a broader movement is a function the health and well-being of each participant in the movement. For Galvis, and others who share his framework for healing and activism; indigenous rituals, values, and worldviews allow movement participants to disrupt conventional
modes of thinking and relating to one another, and opens the possibility of restoring relationships and building personal power.

The connections between healing and activism are not entirely new. Gloria Anzaldúa (Keating 2009) has written extensively about the convergence of culture, spirituality, and activism. She uses the term “spiritual activism” to convey precisely Galvis’s understanding of the intimate intersection of healing and organizing. Writing about Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of spiritual activism, Keating (2008) argues that Anzaldúa offers the most extensive discussion to date of her theory and praxis of spiritual activism “by focusing simultaneously on self-change (‘inner acts’) and outward directed social activism (‘public acts’)” (p. 57). Anzaldúa intertwines the “inner” personal sphere with the “outer” public acts. There is simultaneous attention to both personal and public domains involved with social justice. As individuals and groups heal the inner personal aspects of life, they equip themselves to challenge and transform unjust structures and systems. For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism combines healing, growth, and compassionate acts that spark transformative material change.

Third, Galvis points to the ways in which culture can offer pathways to healing and well-being. As a young man, George was deeply involved with gangs, had been incarcerated, and was struggling with substance abuse; his life had spiraled out of control. Looking for a way to survive, he enrolled in a local community college where he was exposed to ethnic studies and soon thereafter became a community organizer. During one class, he heard Nane Alejandrez, a long-time cultural organizer and founder of Barios Unidos youth program in Santa Cruz, California. He was inspired by Nane to work with youth by using his testimony of his life and the story of his journey. Organizing, however, felt like something was still missing. He was deeply involved in political work but he still sensed that his wounds required healing.

When I started this work, I didn’t realize that organizing was another way that I was numbing my pain. Before I used violence, and certainly weed and alcohol, but then I realized that organizing was also a numbing tactic. Organizing didn’t force me to deal with my stuff because I felt self-righteous, and committed to a good cause.

We need help to move beyond trauma. So we started with ceremonies like healing circles, and building relationships with each other and building trust with each other before we got into the politics and the social justice framework.

Participation in organizing is generally outwardly focused, aiming to build political, economic, or collective power to impact and/or change policies in systems. The focus on self-awareness, growth, and healing has not been considered a central feature of social justice activist strategies. However, there is growing
recognition among activists of color that culture can provide an important antidote from the toxic harm of poverty and racial injustice. Healing circles, sweat lodges, and indigenous lessons are all used to facilitate the convergence of the inner and outer worlds.

A Touchy Feely Side to Revolution

I recall the first indigenous healing circle in which I participated. It was at a summer camp that I helped to design for young men and boys of color in California. The circle was held late at night after the day’s activities and was led by Jerry Tello. The week-long summer camp consisted of over 100 young men ages 14–18 from around California. The camp was designed to build a statewide network of civically engaged high school students. During the day, our camp focused on political education, ethnic and racial identity awareness, gender justice, and healing.² It was late, around 11 p.m., and all the other cabins of young men were preparing for bed. I was already tired but just about every young person who had participated in the healing circle was thankful that they participated.

It was quiet, and everyone respected and honored the ritual of sitting together under the stars deep in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Tello opened by honoring the four directions requesting permission and guidance from our ancestors. He began with a beautiful story that captivated us all with its positive and meaningful lesson. Tello is an animated storyteller and he used musical instruments such as the flute and drumming to share his story, convey meaning and reflection. The power of the circle is facilitated by the concept palabra, or “word,” which Tello conveys is sacred. He reminded us that the circle always needs intention and purpose and thus needs to stay in the heart.

Tello explained that palabra is represented by passing a talking sacred stick. He shared some insights about the power of holding healing circles, and how through the simple act of gathering in a circle we begin to heal. Moreover, he placed emphasis on the importance of setting our intentions for healing. One by one each person was given the opportunity to share some words or whatever they were compelled to shared from the heart. The power of the circle comes from the intention held by its participants, honesty from the heart, and respecting every participants’ experience. So as each one of us held the talking stick, we shared our struggles, triumphs, fears, concerns, pains, and vulnerabilities as well as our dreams and how we imagined the world should be. The stories were all heartfelt, unedited, and uncensored. This experience allowed me to reflect on past relationships, unresolved conflicts, and other aspects of my life that need to be healed. In the circle, I felt safe and that my sharing would be honored and kept from public view. I left feeling a bit lighter, more optimistic, and generally closer to those who had shared and opened their raw vulnerability to the group.
There is “touchy feely” side to systems change and fostering vibrant civic life that often gets lost in the history of revolutionary change. The activists and community organizers we spent time with all shared the idea that movement building and healing are not separate, incompatible strategies, but rather one holistic way of understanding that changing systems also requires healthy vibrant communities. One organizer commented:

What we learn from our elders and from lots of movements, like the Brown Berets and the black panthers. A lot of those movements did a lot of awesome work. A lot of those folks had a lot of baggage and lots of issues they were dealing with. When you don’t take time to address those issues it can be detrimental to your health and to the cause.

The ways in which culture is used to weave together healing and activism also has deep roots in black activist tradition. One need only examine the civil rights movement, not simply for the way the movement used non-violent protest, but its roots and existential meaning was firmly rooted in the black church. Social science researchers have examined the specific ways in which African American culture in general, and black “church” culture in particular, contribute to activism in black communities (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Fredrick Harris (1999), for example, shows that black churches provide the moral authority, fortitude, and sense of self-efficacy necessary for communities to organize and act.

Determined to Go East and West Simultaneously

In Oakland and other urban communities around the country, the Nation of Islam has supported millions of African Americans, youth and adults, with both a powerful spiritual practice and laser-sharp political analysis. In Oakland, two widely known organizations, United Roots and Urban Peace Movement, developed DetermiNation, a program which uses West African cultural symbols, rituals, and practices to reach African American young men who have been incarcerated and are looking for opportunities to rebuild their lives.

Adimu, DetermiNation’s facilitator and leader, admits that he was deeply involved with street life and was turned around when he was introduced to IFA (from Nigeria), which is the foundation of Yoruba spirituality. Adimu is street savvy, which allows him to connect with the young men in the group. He is also spiritually wise for a man in his mid-30s. Dressed in all white, he hugs each of the young men as they trickle into the evening session. Similar to the healing circles in the Latino communities, the group began with a few words to express their gratitude as everyone checked in.

That night’s discussion and healing circled focused on stress and the coping mechanisms the young men practiced to deal with stress or stressful situations.
Adimu reminded everyone that we live in some very stressful times and that it is important to “think about how we want to channel our energies in terms of how we choose to deal with the day-to-day struggles we encounter”. There wasn’t a talking stick, similar to palabra, but one by one each person shared his or her struggles, stories, and successes about difficult issues that needed to be shared.

Unlike other healing circles, there was no altar, nor any sacred rituals used to invoke permission from the ancestors, but the circle was just as sacred. The young men, mostly dressed in white t-shirts and sporting long flowing locks, were all deeply engaged in the conversations and Adimu’s lessons. This circle felt relaxed and connected to the urban sensibilities, language, realities, stories, and styles the young men used to share and learn from one another.

During our circle, one young man commented that he smoked weed in order to deal with stress. Adimu calmly provided feedback about the consequences of smoking weed. His comments provided lessons to each of the young men, and yet he always found a way in his comments to highlight things that each of the young men did well. Another young man commented about his sense of gratitude for the small things in his life. He recognized that through his practice of gratitude he learned that some of the challenges he focused on simply didn’t seem as big.

As he talked, he pulled out a neatly wrapped piece of candy and looked at the wrapper and said,

Sometimes when I don’t think I have anything to be thankful for, I really have to think. Like I’m grateful for the wrap around this candy! If you look closely the paper that it’s wrapped in matches my hat!

He noticed that the candy wrapper with blue spots also matched the color pattern on his hat. He explained to the group that all of them must be grateful for little things like this: “I’m grateful for the color of the wrapper that my candy was in”. He also began to name other things that he was grateful for. Then he gleefully and humorously ate the candy. It was clear from this young man’s comments that he had spent a good deal of time in this healing circle. His reflections about life were far beyond most of the other 18 to 20 year old young men in the circle.

He continued to share his reflections:

Sometimes I feel like its useless to have angst about the past, and be anxious about the future. It’s like in many ways the same as trying to head east and west at the same time! This is virtually impossible! We have to learn to be in the calm present and make decisions about better living.

It was clear to me that each of the young men felt safe, supported, affirmed, and loved. Adimu represents an important way that activism is being advanced in communities, and as he talked, the young men scooted up in their chairs and leaned
forward to listen to every word. “I eat junk food and lock into Black Ops on my PlayStation for hours”, one young man commented. Again, Adimu’s calm voice acknowledged that it was good to escape sometimes and simply asked the young man if there were healthier ways he could practice escaping when he felt stressed.

The circle provided thoughtful advice and guidance to the young men. When the men expressed that smoking weed was one mechanism that helped them deal with stress, Adimu in a caring but firm demeanor expressed his concern, and his advice was to balance that with other healthier habits. The circle provided the opportunity for each young man to share, in real ways, their experiences and reflections on what is means to be a parent, a partner, and an African American young man.

The circle was not only about sharing painful experiences; Adimu brought humor into the circle, which energized the conversations and balanced the serious reflections of pain and suffering with lighthearted laughter. The laughter created a space and opportunity for joyful outbursts that reminded the group that it’s not all bad, that there are reasons to rejoice even when things get tough. This was particularly the case when our conversation turned to relationships. Some of the young men shared their struggles with having to deal with trust issues with their girlfriend and/or drama with their child’s mother.

As a participant, I shared with the group that I had been married for 20 years, and that its actually healthy to experience challenges in marriage. My comments provoked a great deal of curiosity among the young men. The young men simply could not understand how a man could be with the same woman for 20 years!

One of the young men commented:

I have never seen or met anyone like that! I didn’t even know that was possible. Every man I know just has short-term relationships with women, its normal.

The circle was culturally poignant because the conversations, language used, values expressed, and issues discussed were directly relevant to their daily lives. Culture in this sense was both rooted in African principles but also made relevant to the young men’s daily experiences. Adimu’s lessons involved discussions about African philosophies and spiritual teachings, while at the same time, the lessons were connected to the realities of the struggles the young men navigated in their own lives. There is a tendency to conceptualize indigenous cultural lessons in ways that are disconnected from the realities of urban young peoples’ daily lives (Ginwright 1999; 2002). In these examples, however, culture was a fluid thread weaving narratives, stories, and lessons together in ways that opened opportunities for healing and new possibilities for activism.

It is important to note that as practitioners, scholars, and policy-makers that we avoid oversimplified models of what is needed to improve urban schools and
create positive community change. Our training as academics, practitioners, and activists tells us that what really matters in changing the external conditions of people’s lives are the easily measured accumulated metrics that count, categorize, and compare external aspects of quality of life. Admittedly, availability of jobs, access to affordable quality education, economic power, political effectiveness all matter a great deal. However, our myopic focus on these external aspects of our lives eschews an even more important fact, that young people’s capacity to hope, imagine, and dream hold incredible power to act. Therefore, urban educators and organizers have an additional challenge to attend to matters of the heart, in ways that inspire, inform, and engage young people to hope, dream again.

We need new strategies to connect and engage young people not only in education but in bringing about social change itself. Culture can be a powerful thread connecting these seemingly separate inner and outer worlds. Changing urban schools and communities will not come from top-down policies that dictate curriculum, lesson plans, and testing parameters. Rather, the changes will come from those educators and activists who are learning, searching, exploring new and bold pathways to transform matters of the heart.

Notes

1 Our research team consisted of two graduate students, a long-time community organizer in California, and myself. There is somewhat of a danger in writing about these practices in ways that respect, honor, and acknowledge the ancestral wisdom that created them. Each of the activists profiled in this chapter trusted that their practices, stories, and profiles be written and handled with care. They challenged us to avoid the voyeuristic, distant, and disconnected stance in order to achieve objectivity that is privileged in social science.

2 The Boys and Men of Color Summer Enrichment Camp was funded by the California Endowment in order to support the social, emotional and physical health and well-being of boys and young men of color in California. The camp’s specific goals were to build the capacity of boys and young men to become effective community leaders focused on issues of health equity and social justice. The camp focused on (1) culturally responsive engagement and mentoring from older young men of color, (2) creating spaces to heal from trauma and form meaningful healthy relationships with peers and adults, (3) processes that allow young men to define, explore, and understand gender and manhood development, and (4) the development of a political awareness of structural inequality, and tools required to create solutions to local problems.

References


This thing called reconciliation . . . if I am understanding it correctly . . . if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back . . . then I agree, then I support it all.

(Krog, 1999, p. 109)

In the fall of 2014, I spent a month in South Africa. I had been invited to lecture at several universities and the last was scheduled in Cape Town. This particular morning was unusually cold and wet. The blustering winds and rain had blown all night and cluttered the normally pristine beaches with kelp. My family was still asleep, recuperating from two weeks of Dad’s boring lectures at the University of Pretoria, and of sight-seeing in Johannesburg.¹ Our trip to Cape Town, was supposed to be a fun, sun filled beach get away, but the weather had other plans. So as they slept, I woke up at 6:00 a.m. so that I could be first in line to purchase tickets for the 10 a.m. ferry that would carry tourists to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had spent 18 of his 27 years in prison. I hopped in a taxi, and we rushed off to the Victoria Alford waterfront. To my surprise, I wasn’t the only one who assumed that an early arrival would guarantee tickets on the 10 a.m. ferry. There were at least 50 people who were patiently waiting, hoping that they would be able to purchase tickets.

Most of the time, in predicaments like this, fate is on my side. Despite the odds, I am usually able to charm my way into purchasing tickets, sold-out hotel rooms, or last-minute dinner reservations when everyone else has been shunned away. But this morning, fate had abandoned me. I walked away ticketless, wondering how I was going to explain to my wife and kids that we had traveled all the way to Cape Town to visit Robben Island and Dad couldn’t get tickets! The
cab driver must have seen the worry on my face. He said, in a calm reassuring voice, “you can always get tickets tomorrow, they always hold some tickets back. They never sell all of them”. “Thanks”, I replied, knowing that this would be the last of my multiple efforts on this trip to get to Robben Island. For some reason, we began a conversation about his life, probably to put my disappointment into perspective. He said, “I used to work in the gold mines outside of ‘Joburg’, now that was hard work. But now young people just don’t seem to have the same values we used to have. When I would return home from the mines, everyone welcomed us, even strangers! We would always begin the long trip back home to the townships knowing that people who had very little would open their homes to us, welcome us, and feed us. You know we have a term for this, we call it Ubuntu, which means that we are all connected, like family, and we treat each other with care, dignity and love. I think we are losing Ubuntu in this younger generation”, he said.

I was vaguely familiar with the term, and I had seen it on billboards in Johannesburg, and on the flight to Cape Town from Johannesburg there was a magazine called Ubuntu. But his explanation was not theoretical as it had been in my prior exposure to the term. Rather, it was real, heartfelt, and honest. We swerved past a café on the corner and headed toward our hotel near the beach, and I watched the large waves crash against the rocks. I remembered that a few weeks earlier a young woman at the University of Pretoria had explained to me that the concept Ubuntu was being coopted and commercialized, and is losing meaning. “I am Zulu, and we must hold on to some things”, the taxi driver told me. We pulled up to our hotel, and as I got out of the taxi, he thanked me, and I thanked him not just for the ride, but also for sharing his 15 minute story about Ubuntu.

It turns out that Ubuntu is a concept that provided the moral compass of South Africa’s new constitution, and drove the activities and deliberations of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was responsible an ushering an unprecedented national healing process (Gade 2012). The Promotion and National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 established the TRC to expose the human rights violations that had existed in South Africa from 1960. The commission’s purpose was to make full public disclosure of the human rights violations that occurred and grant amnesty to those who disclosed their participation. The commission also served as an opportunity for victims to openly share the violations they suffered. The stated purpose of the National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 is to afford,

victims an opportunity to relate the violations they suffered; the taking of measures aimed at the granting of reparation to, and the rehabilitation and the restoration of the human and civil dignity of victims of violations of human rights; reporting to the Nation about such violations and victims; the making of recommendations aimed at the prevention of the commission of gross violations of human rights.
A major thrust of South Africa’s new constitution focused on reconciling and healing the country’s troubled past. Without a peaceful and stable country, South Africa could have deteriorated into a war zone. The TRC served as a bridge between healing South Africa’s old wounds and creating a hopeful new future. In fact, the Constitution states that “there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimization”.

Some critics claim that TRC was primarily a tactic to ease the extremely high white anxiety of a violent and hostile political and economic takeover from black South Africans after the 1994 election of Nelson Mandel and the subsequent election of the African National Congress, the political party responsible for ending Apartheid. Most observers of the process, however, agree that while it was difficult to listen to the horrific stories about the atrocities white police committed against blacks, the process opened a radically new path for the country.

The term *Ubuntu* has been used throughout sub-Saharan Africa in various forms. The term has various, but similar meanings that convey the idea that humanness is found through our interdependence, collective engagement and service to others. Countless scholars have studied the concept and generally define it as a concept that conveys that “a person is a person through other people”. Others argue that “Ubuntu” illuminates the communal rootedness, collectivity, and interdependence importance to human well-being and flourishing in African life (Munyaka 2009). Ubuntu was popularized by Bishop Desmond Tutu in 1999 when he wrote:

> Ubuntu is difficult to render in a Western language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. When you want to give high praise to someone we say, “Yu, u Nobuntu”; he or she has Ubuntu. This means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate . . . it means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in theirs . . . I am human because I belong, I participate, I share.  

* (Tutu 1999)

The concept of Ubuntu is radically civic in nature and opens new terrain for us to consider the relationships between the public and private domains of our lives. In South Africa, the concept is foundational to legal authorities, constitutional order, and public policy (Munyaka 2009; Waghid and Smeyers 2012; Taylor 2014). The United States has a great deal to learn from South Africa about the relationship between healing, hope, and public policy. While South Africa is far from a “healed” society (indeed gross injustices and economic disparities linger), there is a powerful, almost irresistible vision for the county that is laced in passionate love and embraced with compassion for a promising future. That is hope.
Radical Healing and Imaginative Civic Action

Similar to Ubuntu, radical healing holds the possibility to transform our public consciousness about the meaning of community change, and how to heal what is hurting urban America. Healing is a critical and necessary element of social and community change. From community-based organizations and local schools to national think tanks and foundations, visionary leaders are recognizing that oppression does more than simply block opportunities, it erodes hope.

The case studies in this book illustrated how leaders are advancing conventional social and community change strategies to heal young people, schools, communities, and themselves. While these teachers, activists, and youth advocates may seem to work somewhat in isolation, they all articulate an amazingly consistent analysis of why they have chosen an approach rooted in healing. Almost verbatim, they say that the issues and challenges (poverty, violence, substance, joblessness, poor education) have taken a toll on people, and yet strategies and pathways to support young people do not go deep enough. Creating and sustaining social justice movements requires intense dedication and commitment that often leads to burn-out, which in turn fosters loss of purpose. Activist Yashna Maya Padamsee commented, “We put our bodies on the line everyday—because we care so deeply about our work—hunger strikes, long marches, long days at the computer, or long days organizing on a street corner, or a public bus, or a congregation. Skip a meal, keep working. Don’t sleep, keep working. Our communities are still suffering, so I must keep going”.

As I have demonstrated throughout this book, one of the greatest challenges facing movement building among communities of color is loss of hope. Activists work in isolation, often fragmented from other movement efforts and disconnected from one another due to a focus on particular social justice issues (environmental racism, educational justice, gentrification, etc.). As a result, the broader and wholistic vision for the type of world in which they want to live is rarely nourished. Hopelessness and despair create barriers in their ability to trust others, envision a different, more positive world, or work toward that vision.

The conventional strategies (charter schools, job training, youth development) only scratch the surface of what is really needed. We need to go deeper into not just addressing the root causes of the problems we face, but also the root consequences of exposure to these challenges. These case studies in this book illustrate how activists and educators are turning inward in order to better equip themselves with the psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being necessary to bring about real change and transform schools and communities. These activists are discovering practices that promote healing and well-being and represent a small but significant shift in efforts to foster school and community change.

Since I began writing this book, nearly every day the country has been riveted on social media and television to hear the jury’s final decision regarding the
guilt or innocence of Trayvon Martin’s assailant George Zimmerman. On July 13, 2013, the jury found Zimmerman not guilty. Ironically, on July 12, a day before the verdict, the film *Fruitvale Station* was released depicting the life and humanity of Oscar Grant, a young man fatally shot by police officers after stepping off a Bay Area Rapid Transit train in Oakland.

A little over a year later, on July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was choked to death in broad daylight by a New York City police officer. Again the officer was not indicted. Almost a month later on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teen, was shot and killed by a police officer. A grand jury was not convinced that there was sufficient evidence to indict the officer. On November 22, 2014, 12 year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by Cleveland police officers after they mistook his toy play gun for a real weapon. The two police officers were not charged. Walter Scott, a 50-year-old resident of North Charleston, South Carolina, was shot by a police officer on April 4, 2015, while running away from the officer. He was stopped for a broken taillight when the officer claimed Scott had taken his stun gun. The video surfaced on the Internet showing the officer firing into Scott’s back. The officer was fired and charged with murder. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old resident of Baltimore, died of a spinal cord injury about a week after he was taken into custody by Baltimore police officers. It was unclear how his spinal cord was severely damaged, but all officers involved with the case were charged with Gray’s homicide.

Millions of people, a coalition of gay, straight, black, white, poor, and wealthy, have expressed outrage, not so much about the specifics involved in each of these cases, but more importantly who we have become as a society where police and the legal system can determine which lives really matter. Millions of people have asked questions about what moral and ethical compass can determine who is human and who is not. These are questions about our collective trauma, healing, and humanity.

The rallying for justice in New York, Cleveland, and Baltimore represents new modes of organizing that are both internally focused on healing from the wounds of collective trauma inflicted from structural violence and outwardly focused on structural change. This dual focus represents an important form of movement building that requires a collective conversation about hope and the meaning it holds for each of us. Young community leaders increasingly acknowledge that both organizing and healing together are required for lasting community change. Both strategies, braided together, make a more complete and durable fabric in our efforts to transform oppression and hold the power to restore a more humane and redemptive process toward community change.

Unlike other protests and forms of collective action I have seen in the past that begin with the general public’s moral outrage, compels thousands to take to the streets, and sparks disruption in the calm daily lives of citizens, I believe these recent protest are different. These mass mobilizations, consisting of thousands of
people from around the world, seem to be pushed by moral outrage and pulled by a love ethic. #Blacklivesmatter is a statement about a deep and unapologetic love for everyone. It is rooted in an understanding that in order for everyone to be free and enjoy humane treatment, black young men, women, families, and communities must be treated with dignity. When it gets down to the heart of it, the seemingly impossible and difficult task of transforming the hearts of people is what really matters. Changing hearts, however, requires courage, or at least an Ubuntu way of understanding our interdependence.

_Hope and Healing in Urban Education_ highlights glimpses of new possibilities in communities that may seem static and immutable. Sometimes only a glimpse is all we really need to muster the courage to take a different path to change our classrooms, schools, and communities. Each case study in the book provided not simply a glimpse of what is possible in our communities, but also a roadmap of how activists have placed healing and well-being at the center of political and educational strategies. These roadmaps contain lessons and ideas that represent innovative program strategies, effective public policy, and meaningful community change. Each chapter illustrated how new modes of activist engagement confront structural inequality by focusing on collective and individual barriers to freedom, peace, and well-being.

How do teachers and activists respond to hopelessness in ways that restore human dignity, meaning, and possibility? How can these responses inform broader structural changes in civic, educational, and public safety? What is required to respond to go deep, rather than to scratch the surface of well-being? These are the driving questions behind the empirical logic of this book. If there is one message I want to convey, it is that we need to pay close attention to how innovative teachers and activists are responding to these questions. Each case study illuminates the wonderful and complicated intersection between self and society, and the joining of spiritual and the civic.

At the most fundamental level, this book demonstrates that there are multiple paths to healing, and points to unconventional and sometimes messy and untested strategies to restore the humanity that has been torn from sterile educational and public policies that aim to harm, rather than to heal. Nor are there perfect conditions to implement any one of these strategies. It should prompt readers, to ask the question, “are my efforts in the work that I do futile or transformational?” I am reminded, of Albert Camus’s writing on the myth of Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Camus (1955) writes:

_I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises the rocks. He concludes that all is well. . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy._ (p. 123)
As Greek mythology goes, the gods punished Sisyphus to an eternity of futile, hopeless, and meaningless labor of ceaselessly rolling a large rock to the top of a mountain only to have the rock roll back to the bottom. Despite all his energy, strength, and efforts, once he reached the top of the mountain, the stone would fall back to the bottom requiring him to begin his ceaseless journey back up the mountain. The story raises questions about meaning, purpose, and hope. For social justice advocates, this story might sound familiar. One might ask, “what is the purpose of all my organizing, teaching or community engagement if the end result is the same?” This book calls for an understanding and recognition that educators and activists need to consider more seriously what is required to free Sisyphus, and ourselves, from the ceaseless task of rolling the stone up the large hill.

A Healing-Centered Approach to School and Community Change

How can radical healing inform policy and practices in our schools and community organizations? What lessons to these case studies hold for practitioners and policy advocates who understand the significance of a healing informed approach to school and community change? What challenges and opportunities of a healing-centered approach? These case studies provide several key takeaways that will prove useful in thinking about the relevance of healing-centered approaches to school and community change.

Recognize Signs of Collective and Individual Harm

Most strategies to improve schools, and learning, transform communities and create policies that enhance the quality of life all neglect one crucial reality. They rarely focus on restoring and healing individual and collective harm. This calls for a shift, or at least a pivot, in our analysis of how schools can address the social emotional domains of learning and school climate. We cannot discount the significance of how community issues, such as violence, impact what happens in classrooms. First, it is important to simply recognize the signs of individual and collective harm. This doesn’t require long diagnostic tests of all young people, nor do schools need to hire expensive consultants to tell them that a significant number of young people at the school are traumatized. Rather, it simply means that we need to pay attention to our own and others’ social emotional states.

For example, one of my graduate students is an excellent teacher; she is loved by her students and admired by her colleagues. She pours everything into her teaching, and as a result, she was promoted to school vice principle. Her high school was located in an area of Oakland where the majority of shootings occur. I would visit her about once per month to observe and offer any advice I could give about how she might improve her effectiveness at the school. On several
occasions, I would call or drop by only to find that she couldn’t sit down and chat for a few minutes. Turns out that 90 percent of her job as vice principle was simply putting out fires such as stopping fights, talking to disruptive students, negotiating with teachers to get students who were sent to her office back into the classroom. She was stressed and emotionally upset, and it showed.

She explained to me on one visit that she had broken up a fight and had physically gotten in between two students in the midst of their battle. One of the students, with whom she had a good relationship, was perturbed that she had interrupted his battle, and looked at her straight in the eye and said, “move, you little bitch”. She was devastated, hurt, and angry and broke down. We talked for a while and she recognized that the stress she was feeling was the same many of the students were experiencing. There had been a recent shooting at the school, and despite their efforts to support the students, everyone in the school was stressed.

We talked about her need to take some time off, rest, relax; only then could she consider how to best support the school. She took my advice and worked closely with the teachers and community members to hold a community-wide healing circle where students, teachers, and community members could all be heard and affirmed. This wasn’t a magic bullet, but it created a rupture in the normative practices at school that sustained a ‘business as usual’ atmosphere.

**Define What Well-being Looks Like First Rather Than Only Focus Harm**

Each of the cases presented here illustrated how teachers, activists, and youth workers held a vision of individual and collective well-being, which can be central to the strategies they employed. Rather than focusing on violence reduction, for example, Lena envisioned creating a healing zone. Similarly, the outreach workers in Richmond developed loving caring relationships with young men who shoot to kill. Their vision of well-being drove an innovative strategy in each of these cases.

What does well-being look like in a school? How might well-being shape violence-reduction strategies? In order to answer these questions, we have to explore what can exist, rather than what does exist. This is called imaginative action, where we push for possibilities even when all the evidence points to the contrary. Sometimes a different strategy is required for leaders to see these possibilities in the first place.

For example, visiting inspiring schools and community organizations is a good place to start. I traveled with a group of educational and community leaders from 12 community organizations from the San Francisco Bay Area to Chicago so they could learn about an inspiring community that organized a hunger strike in order to force the city to build a new school. My goal was for them to re-envision their work and develop a vision of well-being for themselves and their organizations.
It was immensely difficult work, because many of them were so entrenched in the daily grind of teaching, raising money, planning after-school programs that it was difficult for them to reflect in ways that pulled them away from their daily tasks.

On our trip to Chicago, we met with educational organizers from two neighborhoods, Little Village and North Lawndale. They had successfully forced the school district to commit $30 million to building three new high schools in the Little Village neighborhood (Stoval 2006). When we visited the Little Village High School, it was much more than they had imagined. More importantly they were inspired by the effort and began the work of redefining well-being for their own communities.

Implement Practices That Facilitate Healing From Harm

There are numerous examples of how to integrate healing into activist and educational work. Acknowledging harm and developing a vision for well-being are necessary, but without implementation no healing will occur. Implementing practices that facilitate healing begins with healing yourself. It is not possible to create vibrant, thriving classrooms, schools, and community programs for young people with adults who are toxic! Implementing these practices requires that we integrate a philosophy and worldview of well-being, healing, and joy into our daily practices, and only then will we experience “successful” implementation.

It takes courage to implement a healing center approach to school and community change. In each example given here, the teachers and activists departed from convention to courageously attend to matters of the heart. I caution those readers who are using or considering implementing healing-centered approaches to also be vigilant about measuring results. It’s easy to succumb to the argument that healing is merely a feel-good stop gap, and it cannot be easily measured or evaluated. However, to succumb to this argument would simply undermine our ability to point to evidence beyond intuition. When there is tangible evidence that healing is occurring, it is just as important to identify what is contributing to the process.

For those of us who care about improving our schools, communities, and society, healing is simply another tool in our arsenal to bring about our own belief in the possibility of change. The call for implementing healing-centered strategies has already taken its root in urban America; the question is: will we all step up and answer its call?

Notes

1 The research in South Africa was sponsored by the Fulbright Specialist program. I was fortunate to work with the faculty in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pretoria during the fall of 2013.
2 Zero-tolerance policies and three-strikes laws are just a few examples. For a more complete exploration see Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010).

3 Restorative justice approaches are one key exception to this statement. Schools in California in particular and others around the country in general have implemented restorative justice principles and practices into the school day.

References


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APPENDIX

Methodological Synopsis

Our research was guided by the following research questions.

1. How do teachers and activists respond to hopelessness in ways that restore human dignity, meaning, and possibility?
2. Where does healing activities fit into a progressive social change process?
3. To what extent does healing lead to increased at-risk/high-opportunity youth participation in social change or community organizing work?
4. How can these responses inform broader structural changes in civic, educational, and public safety?

This study was conducted over a three-year period and was divided into four phases. We identified 31 schools and community organizations, primarily in California, that integrated healing and organizing practices. Our selection process focused on selecting teachers and organizational leaders that practice both healing and various forms of organizing. We were also particularly interested in teachers and organizational leaders who could inform our understanding of the ways that structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods influence civic behavior among African American and Latino youth. From our initial list of 31 schools and community organizations, we developed a purposeful sample of 24 teachers and organizational leaders and community organizers in order to describe their motivations and rationale for integrating healing into their school or organizational practices.

Phase One, the initial period of ethnographic research, we gathered local neighborhood information and develop a detailed profile of the neighborhoods in which the schools and or organizations were located. In Phase Two we conducted
24 in-depth interviews from a combination of teachers, community organizers, and directors of organizations. Our goal in Phase Two, was to further “unpack” insights from our observations of the variables under study. Our in-depth interviews probed unanswered questions or themes generated from the ethnographic observations. During Phase Three, we analyzed the qualitative data and refined the working model to explain the relationship between healing and organizing in these neighborhood settings.

**Phase One: Ethnographic Study: Understanding the Convergence of Healing and Organizing Practices**

The goal of Phase One was to provide a rich description of neighborhood, school, and organizational settings. We began with an initial period of formative research consisting of ethnographic observations of healing practices and organizing activities in schools and community organizations. During Phase One, our goals were to (1) develop rich descriptions of neighborhood settings in which the school and/or community organization were located; (2) develop rich descriptions of 24 of the organizations; and (3) observe healing and activists practices of 24 organizations and provide rich descriptions of these activities.

In order to develop rich descriptions of each of the schools and organizations, we conducted “organizational level” interviews with executive directors from the identified community-based agencies to learn about (a) the organizational mission and primary activities, (b) how the organization utilized healing and engaged in civic and political activities. These “organizational level” interviews were complemented by “ground level” interviews with case managers, youth organizers, counselors, and teachers, all of whom have immediate and intimate knowledge of the issues, relationships, and activities of the youth participants. This information was also used to establish a sampling plan for participants of the subsequent in-depth interviews.

**Observations of Healing and Organizing Activities**

Our goal was to identify 24 organizational leaders to serve as “information rich” cases that illustrate the convergence of healing and activism in their classrooms and organizations. Our observations of these occurred primarily in community organizational meetings held in local schools, in after school activities in community-based organizations, and in less structured situations like political rallies, creation of a public mural, or canvassing at the local mall. We conducted approximately 20 hours per month of field observations at each the selected schools and community organization over three years, totaling approximately 750 hours of field observations.
Phase Two: In-Depth Interviews Identify Features of Healing

Our aim in Phase two was to establish features of healing and activism in our sample. We wanted to provide rich detailed descriptions of the specific practices that integrated healing and activism in organizations. During this phase, we conducted 24 in-depth interviews to examine perspectives on healing, and civic and organizing practices. These interviews enabled us to develop a descriptive explanation of the factors that inhibit and promote healing and civic engagement. We also focused on themes and concepts that emerged from the ethnographic observations requiring further nuanced details and explanation.

The 24 in-depth interviews allowed us to build a conceptual map of the pathways to healing, and to identify features of healing practices. This data allowed us to develop a more nuanced explanation of participants’ explanation of healing and its relationship to activism and organizing. From our in-depth interviews, we reconstructed a common narrative of the major experiences that may have influenced each informant’s current participation in healing and organizing activities. We were particularly interested in the significant neighborhood, school, and family experiences that shape perceptions of healing and injustice.

Each interview yielded considerable qualitative data that provided a comprehensive narrative about pathways and roadblocks to various forms of healing activities. Each interview was audiotaped, last approximately 1–2.5 hours, and took place at the respective organization or school site. Two graduate research assistants were trained by the PI in the reflexive method which keeps the interview as close as possible to a structured conversation. This approach allowed each interviewer to maintain some level of control over the interview without being restrained by a strict list of questions. It also provided flexibility for the interview team to probe unanticipated and emerging issues not previously considered.

Interviews were conducted by the PI and two graduate students. Prior to conducting the interviews, each interviewer used an “interview guide” that provided explanations of core ideas, theoretical constructs, and suggested questions to ask respondents. The guide served as a resource to the interviewer by providing direction and structure to each interview.

The interviews covered the following topics:

1. Views of fairness and injustice illustrated by examples and stories.
2. What constitutes healing, and how is it achieved.
3. Issues and topics that illustrate hope and what to do expand hopefulness.
4. Types of political and civic activities over the past two to three years.
Appendix: Methodological Synopsis

Theme 3: Analysis of Qualitative Data

Analysis of our qualitative data focused on:

1. Understanding the rationale for healing.
2. Identifying features of neighborhood and school settings that promote or inhibit healing.
3. Identifying features of healing.

Our analysis was guided by our theoretical framework, which views healing as political efficacy. Claims from our qualitative data were established by triangulating the data, exploring the possible explanations among researchers who reviewed the same data, including any evidence that might discount our conclusions.

The analysis focused on comparing and contrasting specific processes or themes (e.g., participation in organizing activities, participation in healing circles) as they occurred in each case, and describing the process. The first part of the qualitative data analysis involved reviewing ethnographic field notes and developing analytical codes that assisted our analysis and interpretation. In the second phase, we read the transcripts from the qualitative interviews and refined previous codes generated from the ethnographic field notes. After developing a coding system, field notes were reviewed in order to check the substantive quality of each analytical code. Data, analytical codes, and memos were organized with the assistance of NVIVO—a qualitative software program that aids researchers in discovering patterns and meaning from unstructured data. The final part of the analysis involved turning the codes that reflect the major patterns in the data into longer analysis memos.

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