

# Creating a Complete Learning Community

A New Chapter for Peace Learning Center and the Tribes Learning Community

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## ABSTRACT

More than one hundred years ago, John Dewey espoused an aligned belief that classrooms should be a model of the family, a complete community where students would be nurtured and grow through the learning culture. His profound belief in democracy and progressive education focused his pedagogical philosophy around creating civically engaged citizens. This ideal is one that is critically needed in 2020—the year where racial and social justice and a global pandemic have unearthed and tested individual and systemic rights and responsibilities, requiring civically engaged citizens to move us through this unprecedented time. This article is intended to encourage and anchor the reader in the mission and vision and curriculum of two purpose-filled organizations (Tribes Learning Community, TLC and Peace Learning Center, PLC) that have taken Dewey’s beliefs and philosophy in a civically engaged, democratic classroom to the level of restorative action to build equitable, safe and courageous learning communities of trust and care for our students and the future of their world beyond the year 2020. To build well these equitable and effective learning communities, teaching and learning specific skill sets through social emotional learning, collaboration, and innovative strategies are essential.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the year 2020 has shined a light on equity as a central force for the educational, health, and economic outcomes of students, their teachers, and their families. Many schools and districts that serve youth from lower income families feature arbitrarily enforced rules, punitive discipline, silent lunchrooms, minimal recess, and authoritarian adults from non-representative communities of their students. These practices create hostile learning environments where learning is difficult and relationships are not prioritized. Add to this, a global pandemic has isolated not only students from their peers and teachers, their teachers and families are feeling this isolation as well.

With this in mind, teachers and administrators in our preK-12 schools who are working diligently to change this paradigm of challenge to creative and constructive learning are asking the critical “how to” question: “How do we build safe and courageous learning communities of trust and care for our students in schools and classrooms during this time of racial and social justice restoration alongside an isolating global pandemic?” We believe the collaboration of Peace Learning Center (PLC) and the Tribes Learning Community (TLC) can answer this critical question through their combined curriculum focusing on building civically engaged, democratic classrooms that center the teaching and learning experience through equitable practices, social emotional learning skill development, and restorative practices.

More than one hundred years ago, John Dewey espoused an aligned belief that classrooms should be a model of the family, a complete community where students would be nurtured and grow through the learning culture. His profound belief in democracy and progressive education focused his pedagogical philosophy around creating civically engaged citizens. What better place to develop this complete community of learning where productive individuals and citizens

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collaborate and learn through caring and positive classrooms and schools, both virtually and in person but in the container of the classroom? Within this caring container of the classroom, educators and students can unpack and experience individual and systemic rights and responsibilities, through civic and community engagement to move all of us through this unprecedented time. Classrooms can provide opportunities for deeper and more accurate conversations about our history and civic duties in a democracy where an individual's inalienable rights and “justice for all” at the foundation of our nation's constitution, has not been the lived experience for many of our children and their families, or the colleagues we work with. In order for our nation to move from the racial inequality our schools and classrooms have maintained and move away from this lived experience, we need a new way of learning and being together. We need a safe place to facilitate courageous conversations with our students through a critical pedagogical approach, while supporting students with social and emotional skill building to offset and thrive in the social isolation the COVID-19 pandemic has created. Knowing one's self well is critical to this deeper learning and engagement in courageous conversations.

We believe the curricular process of the TLC and the curriculum design of PLC provide educators and students this critical pedagogical opportunity. The following sections of this article include the work each organization is missioned to do, as well as real stories to anchor these missions.

## THE MISSIONS OF PLC AND TLC: IN THE BEST INTEREST OF EDUCATORS AND THEIR STUDENTS

In order to answer the question “how do we build safe and courageous learning communities of trust and care for our students in schools and classrooms during this time of racial and social justice restoration alongside an isolating global pandemic?” through the process of TLC and PLC curricula, we begin with the mission and history of each organization and their stories. Each organization was created to fulfill the duty of care to support and to create more civically engaged, equitable and peaceful learning communities.

Peace Learning Center’s mission “supports communities in redefining peace through equity, social emotional learning, and the implementation of innovative practices. Our vision is a healed world where strong and caring communities strive together to fully live in peace” ([peacelearningcenter.org](http://peacelearningcenter.org)). PLC has been working in the Indianapolis community for 23 years, serving over 230,000 youth and adults.

“The clear purpose of the Tribes process is to assure the healthy development of every child so that each one has the knowledge, skills and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world” ([tribes.com](http://tribes.com)). When Jeanne Gibbs wrote the first Tribes book in the 1970s, little did she realize that the Tribes Learning Community process would help build community in educational settings well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the support of many dedicated staff and district trainers, Tribes has reached over 46,000 educators and their students in over 10,500 schools in 43 countries. This leading social emotional learning (SEL) program currently offers training for elementary, middle and high school educators, as well as after school and youth development programs.

The two organizations combined will have an impact on hundreds of thousands of youth and adults, educators and students, and

communities around the world with their curricular focus on Social Emotional Learning, Equity, and Restorative Justice. TLC will provide the additional evidence-based curriculum that ensures classrooms move through a sustainable group development process of Inclusion, Influence, and Community.

## PEACE LEARNING CENTER

Over 23 years ago two men were cross-country skiing in Eagle Creek Park in Indianapolis, Indiana when they came across an old home abandoned by time and resources. Today, that building is the site of Peace Learning Center (PLC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support communities in redefining peace through equity, social emotional learning, and the implementation of innovative practices. Tim Nation, co-founder, Executive Director, and one of those two men, had a vision that PLC could be a place where youth could learn about conflict resolution outside of their school settings.

After many evolutions of the work at PLC, today these programs focus around three key categories: Social Emotional Learning, Equity, and Restorative Practices. Over the years PLC’s work in Restorative Practices and Equity has been bolstered by innovative programs backed up by data and external evaluations. In much the same way as Tribes, PLC’s approach is to work institutionally while also working on individual skills growth in each area. Through it all, the original concept of PLC has remained a priority: students need basic social emotional learning (SEL) skills such as conflict resolution to be successful at home, in school, and beyond. The SEL curriculum, developed by a team of professional facilitator/coordinators, addressed growing skills for students Preschool through 6<sup>th</sup> grade through a series of eleven lessons focused on the five SEL skills: social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and maintaining healthy relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

While the end goal is to increase SEL skills for youth, PLC also hopes to build community and mutual respect in the classroom. Lesson subjects include: Being Yourself, Our Emotions Are Important, Mindfulness, We Are a Team, Handling Conflict Peacefully, Upstander or Bystander, and Peace Leaders in our Community. Each lesson is thirty minutes to an hour long, includes hands-on activities for youth and is accompanied by follow-up activities suggested for teachers. SEL skills are reinforced through field trips to PLC's site where grade level teambuilding challenges create opportunities for youth to use their skills in new environments and with new individuals.

Developed out of a rising need from schools, the equity work was created as a response to schools' requests for meaningful and actionable professional development around diversity and differences. The foundation of this work is the "What's Hidden Within: Implicit Bias 101 Workshop." This four-hour workshop examines what implicit bias is, how it differs from overt bias, how to recognize our own explicit and implicit bias and how we move past bias through actionable steps. Unique to the workshop is the built-in time for schools to develop personal and institutional action plans for next steps to mitigate bias. This program has been externally evaluated by Indiana University Purdue University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and used widely throughout the state of Indiana.

PLC has a strong Restorative Justice program that offers an innovative way to build healthy school cultures with built-in protocols for handling conflict and wrongdoing. The program teaches schools to build relationships and community through proactive circles; lead restorative chats where participants address one another in informal ways oriented toward fixing their own issues; lead responsive circles for full group dialogue about issues facing the whole group; and employ restorative conferences which bring together all parties where issues of serious harm have occurred. The Restorative Justice

program was developed from the model used by the International Institute of Restorative Practices. Like Tribes, the restorative practices work is a demonstrating and training model that empowers educators to make them an active part of their classroom experience.

The combination of each of these components, known as "One Indy," was evaluated in the 2018-2019 academic year with the goals of: "1) understanding the effectiveness of the initiative and its components; 2) identifying strengths and weaknesses of the initiative; and 3) providing recommendations to improve the One Indy initiative" (Mulholland, 2019, p. 14). Year after year internal evaluations have shown growth in SEL skills based on self-evaluation of students, as well as teacher evaluations of students' skill growth. However, key takeaways from the 2019 external evaluation shaped PLC's next steps as an organization. The first recommendation was to increase the engagement of teachers.

"Teachers play a huge role in shaping how positive conversations and relationship building can occur throughout the day. When the teachers are not participating in the sessions this 'affects the power in the lesson.' Generally, the more involved the teacher is in the SEL lessons, the more likely that the students are also going to be involved and receptive to the lessons" (Mulholland, 2019, p.14).

The second recommendation was to increase opportunities for training for teachers around SEL skills. It was clear from surveys and focus groups with teachers that time and attention needed to be spent on providing teachers with an orientation and understanding of the need for instruction and skills in SEL. But perhaps one of the most critical deficiencies in the One Indy SEL program was that it was not on the CASEL approved program list which many educators and administrators look for when choosing curriculum and programming for their schools.

An example of the Restorative Justice Program

is illustrated in the following story. With social media usage increasing and the divide between those different from ourselves becoming larger, more schools have found a need for PLC's holistic approach for not only preventing, but also addressing the challenges they face. A school principal reached out to PLC when an incident of racial discrimination made national coverage. Using a popular application, Snapchat, a student took a photo of Sikh students (who wear turbans for their religion) and captioned it "bomb squad." The snap soon went viral and all parties involved were called in for a restorative conference facilitated by PLC. The Sikh students maintained from the beginning that they did not want the other student punished, rather they wanted to dispel any perpetuated misconceptions about their culture and religion. As a group, the student who did the harm and those who were harmed, decided to provide educational presentations to the entire student body to educate them on the Sikh religion and culture. PLC's restorative practices tools' emphasis on equity through diversity education, and conflict resolution resources, turned the incident into a learning, growing, and relationship-building experience for everyone.

### **TRIBES LEARNING COMMUNITY: A NEW WAY OF BEING TOGETHER**

The *Tribes* process for building communities for learning originated in the 1970's by author Jeanne Gibbs to teach small groups of students and their teachers substance use and abuse prevention, replacing risky behaviors with positive choices. The focus was on the individual student, tapping into the human development themes of resiliency and belonging. The *Tribes Learning Community (TLC)* process created community building through inclusion and an active, safe environment. An unintended consequence of the original process, educators found the method gave them the opportunity to teach core academic subjects in the small group system more effectively. Student behavior

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problems decreased, student self-esteem and responsibility increased, and the overall climate of the classroom improved. The process is based on a synthesis of a wealth of research on human development, social emotional academic learning, resiliency, a caring culture, community building, professional development, authentic learning and assessment, reflective practices and systems change (Benard, 2005, p. 4).

As with all effective processes, the pedagogy and andragogy of *Tribes* improved over the decades of implementation and consistency of use, as Jeanne Gibbs embedded the statement "trust the process" for educators to continue to be consistent in their facilitation, trusting that when challenges occur during the influence stage, if educators and students stay the course, a strong healthy learning community will emerge. The cooperative learning model built on positive group dynamics became one of the lead strategies of this improved process, transferring responsibility of problem-solving and group learning support from the teacher, who becomes facilitator of the process, to the students managing their work together. Four *Tribes* Agreements were determined and comprise the "common language" of *Tribes* communities. The four agreements of mutual respect, attentive listening, appreciations/no put-downs and the right to pass (as well as the right to participate), are the core tenets of building the classroom learning community.

As a process, building a *Tribes* learning community has developmental stages that occur within the class as the greater community or in the small cooperative groups called *tribes*. The three stages of group development are inclusion, influence and community, each corresponding to basic human needs. “Inclusion—the need for safety and belonging; influence—the need for respect, autonomy, identity, and power; and community—the need to be connected to something larger than ourselves that gives our lives meaning and purpose” (Benard, 2005, pp. 132-133). Specific activities help move the classroom community down the *Tribes Trail* (the group development process) as it is called. Two important components reinforce the group development down the *Tribes Trail*.

One component is the community circle, where the class meets on a regular basis to discuss the community’s norms and expectations, as well as creating an opportunity for meaningful and respectful dialogue. In a circle, everyone can be seen and heard. “The circle is an ancient and universal symbol for unity and wholeness. For many millennia human beings have met in tribal or village circles to tell stories, provide mutual support, and arrive at an understanding of the common good” (Garfield et al. as quoted by Benard, 2005, p. 89).

Reflection is the second component that is necessary to community and small group development. In reflection goals, working relationships, and the curriculum are processed by the class or in their *tribes*. Reflection increases meaning from the activity, continuously improving the quality of the group’s task, as well as giving teachers an immediate method for assessing learning objectives.

Both components work because the level of relational trust has evolved from the community the teacher and students have built together. The focus of the community becomes the students and their learning, not the teacher and the teaching. This dynamic term of “relational trust” emerged from a longitudinal study of 400 schools in the

Chicago area that began in the 1990s by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, affirming the strong belief that we must keep relationships and people at the heart of education in order to keep ourselves moving forward and positively in this often challenging work. In their book, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, Bryk and Schneider (2002) shared that relational trust was a critical factor to the ultimate outcome school reform was intending to produce, that of school success and student achievement. They were able to show that schools that were successful academically had high levels of relational trust. These trust relationships were between principals and faculty, faculty trust with each other, and trust between students and their teachers. Student benefits to relational trust with their teacher and peers takes on a level of inclusion that supports the emotional and academic well-being of all students, including the external factors that students of poverty and students of color experience (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

These external factors are the reality of schools as schools are a microcosm of the greater community and mirror back the issues that emerge from it. With that said we, as public educators, must welcome all students, whatever a student comes with in their “backpack” full of life experiences that may include these societal factors. We must then passionately and compassionately provide opportunities for their emotional, social and academic success. We must learn well to understand the individuals they are when they come to us, helping them find a place of nurture and trust to grow beyond their “categories” of poverty, racial isolation, and student mobility.

The mission of *Tribes*, “to assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, skills, and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world” (Gibbs, 2001, p. 10) puts the essential component of relational trust at the forefront of the process: to create democratic classrooms where students and

teachers teach and learn together and at the end of the year, have grown to be better people through relationship and learning. The *Tribes* agreements and community building process provides the learning community the tools and practice to create this relationship and bond, building relational trust between students and teachers, as well as giving staff members collegial connection in the six plus hours they are together each school day.

The school and classroom community learns that when trust and belief in the process of *Tribes* happens, the consistency of use occurs, plateaus in the process are reached, overcome and deepened, and the emergence of an authentic, strong, professional learning community evolves in each classroom. Through positive and caring classroom communities, the greater school community blossoms.

To share the story of TLC, the story of one *Tribes* focused school illustrates well the benefits of this process. In 2004, when the opportunity came to open a new school, literally from a bare piece of land, the questions of how to create caring and positive classrooms and school culture alongside Dewey's democratic ideals and pedagogical philosophies, were at the forefront of planning and development. The new principal wanted to create a home and a family where staff members, students and their families would come to grow and learn as caring individuals and members of a community, while focusing on social justice by creating a holistic place for all. The diverse New Mexico community was an ideal opportunity for this to occur, as students were not only of Spanish descent, but Mexican American, Native American from various tribal communities, African American and Anglo. Staff members were hired intentionally to meet the needs and perspectives of the various community members, and family and community collaboration in building a learning community was welcomed.

The process for creating community through *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* was selected as the principal had

years of imbedding it in her teaching and administrative experience. The goal was to create a community for learners that would sustain both the individual and the family it would become long after the principal had moved on. At its highest and best *Tribes* has helped both teacher and student co-create an enlightened learning community where healthy interactions and meaningful relationships are the norm, and where individuals reach their full potential by participating in an environment where mutual respect, collaborative learning, and commitment to the whole matter most. This was the legacy the principal hoped to leave.

This new school embraced the belief of creating a strong, sustainable professional community for learning. The learning community worked hard to live up to the original intention and vision. In the first year, one of the fourth-grade teachers said best what the intention of becoming would be:

“A school where the students are given grounding in the skills which will allow them to become persons of civic efficacy and social responsibility; where students are provided the opportunity to acquire self-reliance and self-motivation; and where diversity is respected; a school where professional collaboration and cross-grade level dialogue promotes achievement of standards-based learning for all our students; and where a love for life-long learning is instilled in students and staff, reminding us of what we are about” (McMahan, 2007, p. 80).

The mission of providing an education for the “whole child” and creating a collaborative environment through the *Tribes* process yielded a bountiful harvest of growth and learning as evidenced by continual improvement on the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment scores. From the first year as a school to the second year, students gained nearly 3 percentage points in reading and over 7 percentage points in math. From year three to year four students gained another nearly 7 percentage points in math and nearly 1.5 percentage points in reading.

After four years and substantial growth in student population from 765 to 1,550, the school divided into three new schools with three new visions and missions. The hope was that the sustainability through the *Tribes* professional learning community process carried on and embedded in the hearts of teachers and students. One of the third-grade teachers described this intention:

“I believe as a teacher that creating a strong community within the classroom is vital for a productive year. By creating a strong bond, we are setting high goals and standards for our students to become life-long learners. My classroom is full of students that truly care about each other and feel comfortable sharing things with each other. My students work as a team to help each other to succeed. These children are very good about welcoming new students into our classroom by accepting them and making them a part of our community. Another positive aspect of having a sense of community is that it extends beyond my classroom walls and out into the entire school. I believe that not only do the children feel strongly about their community they have created, but I know that all of the teachers feel a bond with each other” (McMahan, 2007, p. 136).

This teacher felt that the bond created by students and staff members formed the strength of the learning community and, with that foundation, could become the complete learning community that John Dewey had hoped would occur in a progressive, democratic educational environment.

## CONNECTING THE STORIES OF PLC AND TLC

The acquisition of TLC as an organization by PLC has been a mutually beneficial intersection of the stories of each purpose-filled organization. The dilemma PLC struggled with in positioning the SEL curriculum with CASEL certified curriculum became more pronounced in the schools PLC served. TLC, with extensive

evaluation and high value alignment was a perfect fit to complete the trio of offerings at PLC: Social Emotional Learning, Equity, and Restorative Justice. In schools like the one described, two-year evaluations of *Tribes* schools found improvements over control schools, such as:

- evidence of improved student inclusion, collaboration, respect for multiracial populations, sense of value, resiliency, and student engagement;
- students and staff enjoyed safe and supportive classroom and school environments;
- teachers and principals reported declines in student referrals and suspensions;
- evidence of better classroom management and increased teacher collaboration and planning;
- three-quarters of teachers reported that the *Tribes* process helped them to address academic standards and helped students master standards; and
- second and fifth grade reading and math scores increased more in *Tribes* schools than in comparison schools (WestEd, 2003).

What was even more compelling to PLC was that *Tribes* emphasized and reinforced their two other pillars of programming. Community Circles are at the heart of Restorative Practices work. These “proactive circles” are 80% of restorative practices and place meaning in relationship building among teachers and students. The *Tribes Trail* with its first stop of inclusion, gave life to their values of equitable practices, inclusiveness, and antiracism. As mentioned earlier, schools are microcosms of the greater community and the inequities that plague it also affect our students.

While PLC was determining how to address the issue with their social emotional learning programming, *Tribes* was beginning a search of

a different nature. After several decades functioning as an organization run primarily by founder Jeanne Gibbs, her children, and long-time trainers, it had become apparent that it was time for *Tribes* to find a new home. Candidly, many of those involved in the everyday business of *Tribes* were ready to retire from the profession and believed the organization could benefit from a younger, more diverse ownership. Having worked on collaborative projects with PLC in the past David Gibbs, Jeanne's son, felt strongly that PLC would move *Tribes* in the right direction for future success and that PLC had solid value alignment with the curriculum his mother created. The partnership was mutually beneficial, allowing *Tribes* to find new ownership as well as filling a void in programming for PLC.

In PLC's home community of Indianapolis black students are 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Central Indiana Community Foundation, 2019). Due to disproportionate suspensions and expulsions for youth of color and LGBTQ youth, researchers have coined the term "school-to-prison pipeline." What has been found is that students who are suspended just once in their school career are less likely to graduate with a high school diploma. Furthermore, youth that do not graduate from high school are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than peers who do (Central Indiana Community Foundation, 2019). The long-term effects of a single-biased and unjust interaction with the educational disciplinary system are real and felt by many. "Because educational attainment beyond high school has become the key determinant of economic opportunity and social mobility" the gaps in graduation caused by unjust discipline systems have real consequences for students of color (Lumina Foundation, 2019, p. 98).

Both TLC and PLC have worked diligently to overcome this "school-to-prison pipeline" dilemma by providing proactive SEL work that builds relationships between teachers and students and between students and their peers,

reducing bias, which in turn reduces the chance for disproportionate disciplinary actions. Moreover, the educational system in Indiana as well as the educational systems in most states across the country have acknowledged the need for SEL skill development in their districts and school. The Indiana Department of Education announced in 2019 that schools should implement SEL programming in some capacity (CICG, 2019). Many educators understand the necessity of these skills, but most believe they do not have the time or resources to dedicate to the topic.

While 70% of principals expect their teachers to incorporate SEL skill development into their classrooms, they also acknowledge that "it's hard because they have to get through so much curriculum for tests" (DePaoli, Atwell & Bridgeland, 2017, p. 21). In fact, more principals (71%) note that the greatest challenge to implementation is lack of time. The difference between the schools who are succeeding in SEL and those that are not comes down to, once again, equity. PLC sees *Tribes* as a way to level the playing field by providing teachers and students with tools and resources to incorporate SEL into their everyday curriculum. It is often said in the *Tribes* community that this process is not another thing for teachers to add to their plate, instead it is the plate on which everything else is supported. The *Tribes* plate that has always included SEL skill building and strategies for building resilient learning communities, now includes and supports PLC's curriculum of SEL, Equity and Restorative Justice.

This intersectionality of the Tribes Learning Community and Peace Learning Center is a new story that has yet to be fully realized and expressed, but as one organization working together to create a complete community of learning for the teachers, students, and families served, Dewey can be proud that his legacy of a democratic, civically engaged education will live on.

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