

ONE

Cultivating TREE

WEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL sits at the end of a quiet street in a small rural town in Maine.¹ Home to just over one hundred students, the two-story brick building is bright and sunny, with colorful art projects decorating the hallways. The gym doubles as the school lunchroom, an alcove off the English language learning (ELL) classroom includes a school food pantry, and a small room off the library holds warm clothing, coats, and boots for those who need them. Nearly 70 percent of the children are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Although the primary language of the school is English, just over a third of the students are dual language learners. They are children of migrant workers who traveled from Mexico and Central America to work in local industries, settled, and built a community.

In the fourth-grade classroom at West Elementary, you'll find Jorge, a quiet and studious boy who works extra hard to understand his teacher's instructions, knowing his immigrant parents cannot help him with his untranslated homework assignment. Next door, third grader Emma sits at a desk with a whiteboard and marker. After a traumatic experience as a very young child, Emma was diagnosed as selectively mute and communicates almost exclusively through writing. Her voice matters just as much as the other students' voices, but no adult at her school has actually heard her speak. Across the room, Emma's classmates, Rocky and Ben, have no trouble talking in class. Itching to be on the water with their fishermen

dads, they find all too many opportunities to distract each other from their lessons.

For years West has had the lowest test scores and the highest absentee rates in the district, despite teacher and administrator efforts to meet the needs of their students with the skills and resources available. So, when our Trauma-Responsive Equitable Education (TREE) research-practice partnership (RPP) team knocked on their door in the fall of 2017, the principal jumped at the opportunity for extra on-the-ground support. TREE works with a number of schools in Maine and across the country to offer a universal or schoolwide approach to trauma-responsive school change that includes basic needs support, a resource coach, an in-school mental health provider, and ongoing professional development to help address the predictable and recurring barriers to healthy child development and learning that so often exist in high-poverty rural schools and communities. TREE also came with an unusual expectation—the principal and teachers would need to reimagine the role of students in the school’s transformation.

In this book, we tell the story of TREE’s three-year relationship with two schools, West Elementary and East Elementary School, located on either side of a rural Maine county. Our approach is grounded in the assumption that any genuinely trauma-responsive culture must engage children and youth as full and active partners in school and community transformation. Listening to student voices, taking students seriously, and seeking to promote their agency, control, and empowerment are critical to addressing and mitigating adversity, stress, and trauma, and thus, ultimately, to healing.

Although we believe this project offers useful information and insight to educators broadly, most of the schools we work with are located in high-poverty rural America. Of the 250 poorest counties in the United States, 244 are rural. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of rural counties have high child poverty, compared to 47 percent of urban counties. Over 22 percent of rural schoolchildren are children of color. Yet the impact of poverty and inequity in remote rural schools is often overlooked in education research and policy discussions. Few studies address what it means to grow up in rural environments where, because of decades of inequitable public health policy, children have little access to the supports that can mitigate trauma, such as mental health and medical services, or where local assets are often undervalued as sources of meaningful learning, where families face the interconnected challenges brought about by economic decline, a dearth of

living wage opportunities, and under-employment, and where administrators and teachers in under-resourced schools wear many hats, taking on the additional roles of coach, guidance counselor, and after-school instructor. Despite these challenges, we have always assumed that rural communities have the talent that they need to address them. As we illustrate our school-wide approach, we pay special attention to the creative solutions for healing rural America offers the field of trauma-responsive education.

Trauma, defined as an adverse experience, violation, or persistent stress in one's life that overwhelms the capacity to cope, typically has long-term emotional, psychological, and physical consequences.² Trauma arises from a wide range of experiences and intersecting challenges (which can happen to anyone) that include physical and sexual abuse and violence, caregiver substance abuse and addiction, physical and emotional neglect, loss of a parent, poverty, and, for many, the toxic stress of persistent discrimination and systemic oppression.³ In schools, children and youth who have been exposed to significant stress and trauma are more likely to exhibit learning difficulties than children who have not.⁴ Such challenges, in turn, can negatively impact cognitive and social development, readiness for learning, success in school, and, ultimately, preparation for meaningful employment and full participation in civic life.⁵

In the context of schooling, Elizabeth Dutton cautions, trauma is “both ubiquitous in its use to describe various aspects of human experience and highly ambiguous.” Healing requires both a critical lens—the “necessary work of questioning what is meant by the term trauma”—and a kind of tenderness, openness, and flexibility that unsettles traditional schooling.⁶ Becoming a trauma-responsive school is not an easy or straightforward task, then. Developing genuine relationships, so important to a child's sense of safety and belonging, and encouraging voice and empowerment, so vital to their budding sense of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and academic engagement, sit uneasily beside teacher authority and school rules designed to maintain control and move things along in orderly fashion.⁷

Voice is a cornerstone of healing from trauma, yet trauma-responsive approaches to schooling rarely move beyond adult-constructed curricula and practices.⁸ Little attention is given to children's desires, insights, experiences, and expertise in school. There is little focus on a child's right to be heard and to participate as a partner in their own healing. Yet studies show how student voice and children's cocreation of their environments increase

their sense of autonomy and control, self-efficacy and competence, and feelings of trust and belonging.⁹ Such opportunities for genuine, meaningful participation not only stimulate students' attention and motivation to learn, but do so in ecologically attuned and culturally informed ways.¹⁰ Feeling empowered changes how young people are regarded and treated by peers and adults, reduces school alienation, and allows students to experience what it feels like to be taken seriously, as well as to educate and influence others.¹¹

Promoting student voice and empowerment also means educating the whole child. Reminders to educators that children and youth are multifaceted, that developmental progress is multidimensional, and, therefore, that schools should focus on more than cognitive development, intellectual growth, and academic achievement are not new.¹² The foundational assumption of the "whole child" perspective is that educators and school policies must understand and promote development along a number of different dimensions and pathways. This idea is supported by recent advances across a wide range of developmental sciences, which highlight not only the holistic, dynamic, bidirectional complexity of developmental change but also the critical role that context plays in child development and the fact that *all* children experience both developmental opportunities and developmental challenges.¹³

Finally, a whole-child, voice-centered, trauma-responsive approach to schooling commits schools to *equity*, to a fair distribution (or redistribution) of access and opportunity, such as basic needs support and educational opportunities that enable children to thrive and succeed. It also means that those with access to fewer resources get specific supports to improve their lives and promote their success.¹⁴ Commitment to equity means asking, "Who is and who isn't thriving and succeeding?" "What historic or current policies contribute to inequities?" and "What will it take for that to change?"

Many immigrant students in West Elementary, for example, and across the country face a distinct set of challenges, including potentially traumatic experiences such as leaving their home cultures, prolonged parental absences, fear of familial separation, discrimination, and social isolation. Like other new-destination immigrants or migrants settling in rural communities across the country, West Elementary families have struggled with pressure to culturally assimilate with white residents who remain in control of local power structures, including school boards.¹⁵ As a result of these and other barriers, such as language, nationally they score on

average 20–50 percentage points below native-English speakers on English language standardized testing, which increases their likelihood of leaving school.¹⁶ It is essential, therefore, that such students have teachers who understand how to support an equitable school experience for them and access to school resources that support their educational needs.

However, in the case of West Elementary, the Latinx community can hardly be considered new: It has been two decades since migrant workers began to settle in the town and establish lives and businesses there. With the support of local nonprofit *Lado a Lado*, Latinx parents have struggled to broach conversations with the school and district leadership about their children’s unmet needs and the lack of cultural representation. They met with the school board to request increased ELL support. They asked that teachers receive training in equity and dual language learning, that students be allowed to speak Spanish in class and assist other Spanish-speaking students with instruction, that the school include signage in Spanish and represent students’ cultures in the curriculum and on the walls, that parental permission and information forms and homework assignments be translated, and even that teachers correctly use and pronounce students’ names. In the last several years, interest in connecting equity and trauma-responsive work has increased significantly.

Paul Gorski and Alex Shevrin Venet have influenced our thinking about these connections, particularly their shared insight that to be trauma-responsive means being committed to equity, and that fully supporting students entails attending to the trauma that can and does occur within schools themselves.¹⁷ We argue, however, that this recent work on centering equity in trauma-responsive education has neither fully centered students as agents of change in school transformation, nor appreciated the power of student voice to create the necessary conditions for healing.

To understand children’s needs—particularly those of children who because of racism, poverty, homophobia, or ableism experience school on the margins—we must create spaces and opportunities for them to speak about their experiences, explain what isn’t working, ask for what they need, and share what excites them and nurtures them. And we need to remain open to what children tell us they know, believe in their capacity to be experts on their own experience, and be willing not only, as Jessica Taft says, “to imagine childhood otherwise,” but also to reshape our practices and policies to account for such reimagination.¹⁸ By doing so, children can impact the way

things usually go in schools and help recreate their school ecology so that it reflects them, works for them, and contributes to their well-being.

Like naturalists, children listen to and observe the relational world.¹⁹ We often interpret their varied responses to unfairness and hurt as disruption, trouble-making, or complaint. But complainers, critical race theorist Sara Ahmed says, tell us a lot about power—about who has it, about how those who have it use and abuse it, and about who is hurt by such abuse. “A complaint can be what you do in order to stop something from happening,” she says.²⁰ Without listening to what children know about unfairness and hurt, without considering the possibility that resistance in its various forms is a sign that something is off or wrong in the relational surroundings, we cannot fully engage in equity work. If we are not engaged in equity work, we are not engaged in trauma-responsive practice.²¹

Building capacities for student voice and empowerment, informed by a commitment to equity, ultimately contributes to the development of what Shawn Ginwright calls “healing centered engagement,” a strengths-based and ecologically responsive approach to healing that “views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events.”²² Those who experience trauma, including children, are more likely to heal when they feel empowered to address and redress the conditions that led to trauma in the first place—in school and out of school.²³

Healthy, trauma-responsive contexts thus offer a sense of personal control and nurture healing relationships where separations and divisions and inequities once ruled: relationships to bodies, to the people who matter, to communities and cultures.²⁴ If trauma is a rupture, a break, and a loss, then healing is a matter of active reconnection, reconstruction, and rediscovery.²⁵ Schools that wish to do trauma-responsive work well quite simply, need to include children as partners. Such work is, by its very nature, unsettling to the way things usually go. It requires humility, flexibility, improvisation, and openness to learning and change. That’s because healing depends on genuine relationships, which, by definition, are responsive and unpredictable. In short, such schools will need to evolve.

Our approach, then, is grounded in the assumption that any genuinely trauma-responsive school culture is best achieved in genuine relationship with children like Jorge, Emma, Rocky, and Ben. As full and active partners in school and community transformation, children help us understand the hidden injuries of schooling.²⁶ With their emotionally resonant, creative input,

we see vulnerabilities and inequities we would otherwise miss, and we better understand the ways policies and practices hurt, marginalize, or simply don't work for those they are designed to help.²⁷ With their energy and imagination, we have a better chance of creating healing-centered schools and communities. Inviting student experiences and expertise builds relational strengths, gives children all the benefits of mattering, and engages them in learning; it also encourages all of us—school leaders, teachers, researchers—to revisit our assumptions and reimagine our practice.²⁸ It fuels our capacity for change-making.

SEEDING TREE

TREE began in 2013 when Alan Furth, the founder and executive director of Cobscook Institute, a community nonprofit in rural Trescott, Maine, gathered an advisory group of educators, community leaders, social service providers, and educational researchers to imagine ways to leverage schools, one of the few robust rural social institutions, to address issues of childhood poverty and trauma.²⁹ The advisory group met regularly for several years, guided by the Community Learning Exchange (CLE), an approach that honors the wisdom that exists within every community.³⁰ Gradually, over the course of many meetings and sometimes difficult conversations, the group moved toward a shared vision for what a whole-child, voice-centered, equitable trauma-responsive approach might look like, particularly in rural schools and communities.

Brittany Ray was hired as the executive director of TREE in 2016 and charged with giving shape to their emerging vision. Brittany grew up in rural Maine and became a language arts teacher and then a guidance counselor in the high school she once attended. Ultimately, in addition to directing the TREE program, Brittany spent much of her time consulting with schools and districts in Maine and across the country interested in developing their own student voice-centered, trauma-responsive, and equitable approaches to educational practice.

As participating researchers, we interviewed fellow advisory team members to gather their ideas and insights about the work ahead. We heard troubling histories of failed top-down educational reform efforts, pragmatic resistance to decades of economic and spatial marginalization, and a clear desire for locally resonant and responsive change.³¹ We also heard a great deal about the assets and strengths of rural schools and the many ways community

organizations ally with schools to create healthy ecologies for youth, helping them overcome challenges fostered by distance, economic marginalization, and structural or historical racism. We learned about the energy and creativity teachers bring to a context of fiscal constraint and accountability policies designed for larger school systems. And we learned about those passionate, caring people that exist in every rural community who use their unique, localized expertise to bridge communities, families, and educators in service to children's healthy growth and development.

We also conducted focus groups or “listening sessions” with over 300 students, teachers, and administrators in schools across rural Maine. We asked children and adults what they love about their schools and communities, and we asked, if they could wave a magic wand and make their school better, what would they change? Teachers and administrators expressed their hunger for resources and services necessary to address the wicked problem of childhood adversity, toxic stress, and trauma. Students expressed their desire for art, language, and music classes; for more recess and movement; and for after-school programming and sports: the kinds of activities necessary for healing-centered engagement because they make room for active bodies, relationships, expression, and creativity. Adults and children alike reported their concern about inequities facing students and families; unmet basic needs, including mental health access; and the kinds of whole-child support and programming—social and emotional learning, with opportunities for student engagement and expression—that ensure a healthy school climate.

We formed a design team in the wake of both the advisory group conversations and in-school focus groups. The team subsequently developed a set of core assumptions—TREE's roots, if you will:

- Chronic adversity, stress, and trauma are not just individual mental health issues for which families are solely responsible. These are also systemic or structural conditions disproportionately affecting certain populations and geographic areas.
- Student success is best restored through thoughtful, informed, and committed action on the part of all members of a community in partnership with students, teachers, and families.
- A genuinely trauma-responsive culture is best achieved through engaging youth as full and active partners in school and community transformation.

With these assumptions in mind and a review of the literature on trauma-responsive schooling, the team developed a universal or all-school approach designed to accomplish the following:

1. Address inequities in access to basic needs, including food, clothing, and other material needs, mental health and wellness services, as well as instructional practices and resources to support dual language learners;
2. Support the whole child by empowering students—that is, including them as partners in the work—and promoting academic, social, and emotional development; and
3. Improve trauma-responsive and equitable instruction, school practice, and leadership.

The goal was to create safe, empowering, and effective educational environments by working with students, families, schools, and communities to build capacity in these three fundamental areas. Ultimately, we consider our approach to be desire-focused—an effort, Eve Tuck explains, “to capture desire instead of damage”; a research project “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives.”³²

AN EVOLVING PRACTICE

The design team transformed into a RPP. The core practice team consisted of TREE executive director Brittany Ray, TREE project director Sarah Turner (a former elementary school principal, responsible for overseeing the TREE project in East and West), TREE resource coaches Rachael Kelly and Bethany Snow, and TREE project associates Ana Garcia and Cass Greenlaw.³³ The RPP was tasked with guiding and refining our approach as we began our work in West Elementary School in January 2018.

Issues of voice and equity surfaced on day one. As we walked the halls, observed classes, and talked to students, teachers, and staff members, we were struck by a glaring contradiction. We were introduced to West Elementary as a homey and welcoming space, yet there was no visible indication that such a warm welcome extended to the nearly 30 percent of students who were Latinx, most of them dual language learners. There was no official signage in Spanish, no acknowledgment of Latinx culture on the walls, and very little reflection of their lives and histories in their curriculum. Teachers had no formal training in the education of bilingual students, and there were few resources in the school library for dual language learners. We soon

learned that, for nearly 20 years, West Latinx parents have initiated a series of frustrating conversations with the school and district leadership about their children's unmet needs and the lack of cultural representation and inclusion. We began building a supportive and collaborative relationship with these families and the local organizations that support them, aided by TREE's trauma-responsive resource coach, Rachael Kelly, a former elementary ELL teacher.

During a developmental evaluation of our first six months in West, we were struck by the inordinate power and impact of what began as a relatively simple and low-cost series of activities we initiated to introduce and support student voice and empowerment. Students expressed joy in helping to develop lessons and projects around their interests, teachers expressed renewed energy and deeper connections with their students, and families who felt alienated from school began to reconnect. Latinx families, in particular, expressed support for practices that gave their children more voice and control over their learning.

After these first six months in West, we initiated TREE programming in East Elementary School. Like West, East Elementary is located in a small, rural community, dependent on seasonal agricultural work. Like West, East is underfunded and struggles with a lack of educational resources and distance from mental and physical health supports. But while the community in which West is located is racially diverse, the community in which East Elementary is located is predominantly white, and while West was led by a veteran principal who embraced TREE's offer, East's principal, new to the role, inherited TREE and with it a staff mourning the resignation of a much-admired leader. Bethany Snow, a former elementary special education teacher, joined East Elementary as TREE's trauma-responsive resource coach.

"Resilient children are made, not born," child psychiatrist Bruce Perry says, and the wider the foundation of supportive and authentic relationships with adults, the more likely children are able to cope with the effects of trauma events and toxic stress.³⁴ In addition, the more schools can rely on adults in their surrounding communities, leveraging assets and local knowledge, the more likely they can create and sustain a support network for children and families.³⁵ At the outset, our two rural TREE schools desperately needed this support network.

TREE's first priority, then, was to leverage community assets to meet basic needs: to gather together those who could help ensure children came

to school warm and fed and that families no longer fell through the cracks. In addition, neither West nor East had access to a school-based social worker, and each shared a guidance counselor with other local schools, an arrangement typical of many rural districts. When TREE began, the wait time for a child to schedule an appointment with a mental health provider was nearly a year. When appointments were arranged, parents often had to drive their child 70 miles round trip to the nearest provider, which often meant a day off from work, gas money or transportation arrangements, and perhaps the cost of childcare for those left at home. Sarah hired licensed clinical social workers Nora Allen, at West, and Monica Harris, at East, as TREE therapists to provide on-site mental health support, first for one day a week, and then for two. The impact was profound. In the first year, mental health wait times dropped to under one month.

Brittany, Sarah, and the TREE coaches Bethany and Rachael worked with teachers to better understand the impact of trauma on children's behaviors and the healing power of a safe and secure school day. In addition to school-based training and coaching, TREE paid for teacher leaders to attend state and national conferences on trauma-responsive and equity-focused practice. From there, they began the process of building healthy, relationship-rich environments, informed by the importance of voice and storytelling and providing the space for full-body engagement that connects heart and mind. If nothing is left at the school door, if children bring the impact of their traumatic experiences with them to school, they also bring their creativity and their capacity for healing and resilience.³⁶ Making space for them to shape their environment, to have a say in what makes them feel both safe and engaged, is the essence of TREE's relationship-rich learning environments. TREE coaches provided trauma-responsive professional development in student-empowered, equitable, whole-child practices and strategies.

Considering children as cocreators of their learning environments, TREE infuses voice and storytelling in ways that overflow the school walls. TREE coaches and therapists scaffold a series of student-empowered activities that engage social and emotional learning; teachers and students work together to improve school climate; and community organizations are invited to work with children and teachers together in ways that nurture autonomy, belonging, and a wider sense of place. Every day, in a variety of ways, staff and students are reminded that children's desires, creativity, and engagement are key to both healing and academic success. This system-wide approach to student

engagement and empowerment has revealed a series of insights and lessons about the relationship between voice, equity, and intergenerational healing.

Ultimately, this is a story of evolution, which means it's a story of listening, of creating openings and negotiating barriers to change in the service of a universal—all-school—trauma-responsive approach. Like every compelling story, however, there is a plot twist. In this one, it's the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in our third year of the pilot, combined with the emotional impact of a divisive election in a deeply conservative region of the country. In the end, we describe the experience, impact, and the outcome of these unexpected events and what they reveal about both trauma-responsive schooling and the fragility of transformative school change, especially in schools under considerable stress.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

Our central argument is this: A whole-child, trauma-responsive, and equitable approach to schooling cannot exist without student participation and partnership. When we create the conditions for students to know what they know, to speak and to have their thoughts and feelings matter, when they are respected as experts on their own experience and the experience of schooling, then genuine connection, trust, and safety have a real chance to flourish, and healing is possible. School becomes a more joyful, relationally responsive place. As they listen to children, adults become more ecologically attuned and culturally informed. The hurt children carry with them, the inequities they experience, their struggles, and their strengths are more visible and understandable. In such a deeply relational context, children and adults can work together to develop strategies for healing.

In this book, we not only explore what student-empowered and equity-informed trauma-responsive schooling looks like, but we also consider what creative solutions rural America offers the trauma-responsive field. Flipping the usual urban-facing script, we foreground untapped insight and creative problem-solving that rural schools provide to those developing trauma-responsive school practices. We believe that innovative practices necessary for rural schools to survive and thrive have much to offer those working and living in urban and suburban schools and communities. This is a book, then, for teachers and school leaders who appreciate the wisdom of children and the role they can play in imagining and enacting a systems-wide whole-child approach to trauma-responsive schooling.

Throughout we utilize thick description, narrative, and storytelling, offering insights and cautionary tales, and most important, rich and useful examples of practice as we tell the story of trauma-responsive practice at West and East Elementary. Each chapter tugs at a thread of our central premise, highlighting different aspects of our approach to trauma-responsive schooling, drawing from the voices and experiences of students, TREE coaches and therapists, teachers, and families. We braid theory and research with stories of student-inspired and initiated practice to lay the groundwork for a way of working. Each chapter ends with a series of questions designed to encourage reflection and address the challenges and opportunities of this work.

Our goal in this book is to present our layered approach to trauma-responsive schooling that centers student voice and equity. Each of the first four chapters illustrates a whole-school practice designed to engage children around pressing and meaningful aspects of their lives, to provide opportunities to express and access what they love and want from school, and to explore what feels unfair or impedes their education and growth.

In chapter 2, “Listening as a Radical Act,” we consider the surprising insights and outcomes when the schools, engaging in an activity called “Someday,” risk improvisation and invite children’s insights, creative ideas, and expertise into the school day. If trauma is the result of dehumanizing experiences, healing begins with voice, with being heard, and with a claim to humanity. Genuine relationships are the root of health and well-being. Listening to children opens underutilized pathways to understanding inequities, cultural tensions, and the impact of economic deprivation. Somedays invite children to weigh in on questions of teaching and learning, which surfaces questions about the very nature of accepted school practice.

In chapter 3, “First Child in the Woods,” we describe the use of student-initiated “microadventures” during the school day to enliven and enrich learning. As cocreators of their learning environments, children’s full embodied presence makes a difference in how these environments feel and how well they support learning and life. Through partnerships with a county-wide outdoor school and other community organizations, students benefit from the healing power of an embodied education—an education that invites the whole body, which is, of course to say, the whole child. Microadventures calm and destress, increase motivation and engagement, decrease attention fatigue, and focus energy. Combined with Somedays, they also offer students ways to initiate personally meaningful educational experiences, to work on

curriculum development in genuine partnership with both peers and adults, and thus to create the school they want.

TREE uses storytelling in various ways to help students find meaning and creative avenues to social and emotional learning. Chapter 4, “Stories in the Sand,” focuses not only on the power of stories to move us and to impact a child’s growing sense of self and developing relationships, but also on TREE’s use of an expressive arts therapeutic method called “Moving Stories” that integrates story, sand tray work, and play. Moving Stories, when used in a classroom setting, provides the safety of metaphor to work out difficult and sometimes frightening experiences that have not yet found words and thus enables students to find meaning and healing as they learn. Incorporating stories into the school day not only creates space for children to explore their emotional lives, to “free up stories caught in our throats,” but also opens the door to aspects of relationship and culture not always visible to us.³⁷

In chapter 5, “The Alchemy of Student Voice,” we address the importance of adult–youth partnerships for school climate transformation and also what happens when adults step back from those partnerships. We illustrate how a TREE-scaffolded sixth-grade leadership team in West challenged their teachers’ assumptions and ideologies by creatively advocating for marginalized students and by naming and exploring their personal and community identities in the public space of the school. Without ongoing teacher partnership and advocacy, however, children’s desires, creative engagement, and empowerment, so key to both healing and academic success, risk suppression, effacement, or punishment.

In chapter 6, “Coaching Toward a Paradigm Shift,” we broaden our focus to look at schools as systems undertaking trauma-responsive and equitable change, and we explore what leadership looks like when trauma-responsive work is centered, when student voice and equity are given space, and when leadership itself is an embodied practice. Specifically, we consider the role of the TREE coaches in scaffolding systems change. As the West and East coaches respond to student needs and scaffold teacher inquiry in their respective schools, they reveal both the challenges and the opportunities of building the momentum necessary for real change within a faculty and a school.

We entered the third year of our pilot confident that our approach to listening and partnering with children deepened relationships and trust, enabling teaching and learning as a healing practice. Scores on standardized

tests were up; absentee rates were steadily declining, especially among children receiving in-school mental health support; and school climate had improved significantly. As they had done all along, our partnerships with students, particularly those on the student leadership team, alerted us to the work yet to be done, and in partnership with Lado a Lado and several other community organizations, we had begun to design opportunities for student–adult collaborations to increase equity literacy and equity-informed practices in the school and community.

In our concluding chapter, “Toward Critical Hope,” we revisit the principled shift required to do this system change work and the key insights gathered through the TREE project. We highlight a series of takeaways and underscore the courage and tenacity it takes to humanize students in schools, to take them seriously as partners in trauma-responsive school reform. Doing so leads to a counternormative approach to schooling that is relationally and socioculturally grounded, committed to equity, and focused on changing the social and physical environment to better meet students where they are.

Just as TREE entered the second half of our third year, COVID-19 required Maine schools to close. Like so many schools, West and East Elementary felt the immediate impact of anxious principals, stressed teachers, and panicked families. We end our book with a coda, “Saplings in a Storm,” to address the impact of the pandemic on TREE’s approach to trauma-responsive schooling and to highlight the promise of a widespread base of community relationships and support to shore up struggling students and their families in such difficult times.