



**Knowing What Works: Creating Circles of Courage**

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Article abstract

Early attempts to help children experiencing academic or behavioral problems were based on an eclectic mix of inconsistent and sometimes harsh and punitive strategies. Drawing from Indigenous cultures, the Circle of Courage embodies four key growth needs that are essential to human wellbeing in any culture: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. This paper analyzes some of the diverse interventions that would support these four components.



# Knowing What Works: Creating Circles of Courage

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## Abstract

Early attempts to help children experiencing academic or behavioral problems were based on an eclectic mix of inconsistent and sometimes harsh and punitive strategies. Drawing from Indigenous cultures, the *Circle of Courage* embodies four key growth needs that are essential to human wellbeing in any culture: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. This paper analyzes some of the diverse interventions that would support these four components.

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## Introduction

Those working with challenging children who march to the beat of a different academic or behavior drum, have encountered a cacophony of competing theories and methodology as they try to determine what works. Increasingly, practitioners are required to spell out the evidence behind their programs and interventions as a response to the intuitive approaches classified as naturalistic, primitive, or naive. Many of the theories and methods seem to use an eclectic approach which essentially consisted of spur-of-the-moment responses to individual academic or behavioral problems. In an early study of services for emotionally handicapped children Morse, Cutler, and Fink (1964) found pitfalls in this “mishmash” eclecticism:

- Doing what comes naturally with troubled and troublesome youth often entails attacking or avoiding them. These very human fight/flight reactions are highly counterproductive. Harsh punishment easily escalates into hostility, and kindness often is exploited. If a whipping or a dose of love were all that were required, these kids would have been “cured” long ago.
- If techniques drawn from different models are mixed together in potluck fashion, confusion sets in about what to do when theories suggest prescriptions that run counter to one another (Quay & Werry, 1988). For example, is planful ignoring angry behavior better than seeing this anger as a cry for help and attention?
- When various team members invent idiosyncratic models of treatment, conflict and chaos reign. Russian youth work pioneer Makarenko (1956) observed that five weak educators inspired by the same principles is a better configuration than 10 good educators all working according to their own opinion.
- When adults are confused or inconsistent, anxious students become more agitated and antisocial students more manipulative. A dysfunctional staff team that confronts a hurting child or a negative peer group inevitably leads to more problems.

“Try-anything-eclecticism” is like choosing a potluck meal while blindfolded. That haphazard approach rightfully led the profession to seek answers that carry scientific weight. The researchers responded with lists of Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) that often determines who gets a place at the funding table. Googling these terms yields millions of hits for programs claiming this status. Yet there is much controversy about what qualifies as evidence based. The “gold standard” for evidence is the randomized control trial as used in drug studies. But a past president of the American Psychological Association calls this “fool’s gold” (Sternberg, 2006). Even if an EBP yields a statistically significant effect, the outcome is often trivial or flies in the face of held values. For example, an evidence-based medication for insomnia beat the placebo with 10 minutes more nightly sleep (Werry, 2013). Statistical significance does not necessarily mean practical significance.

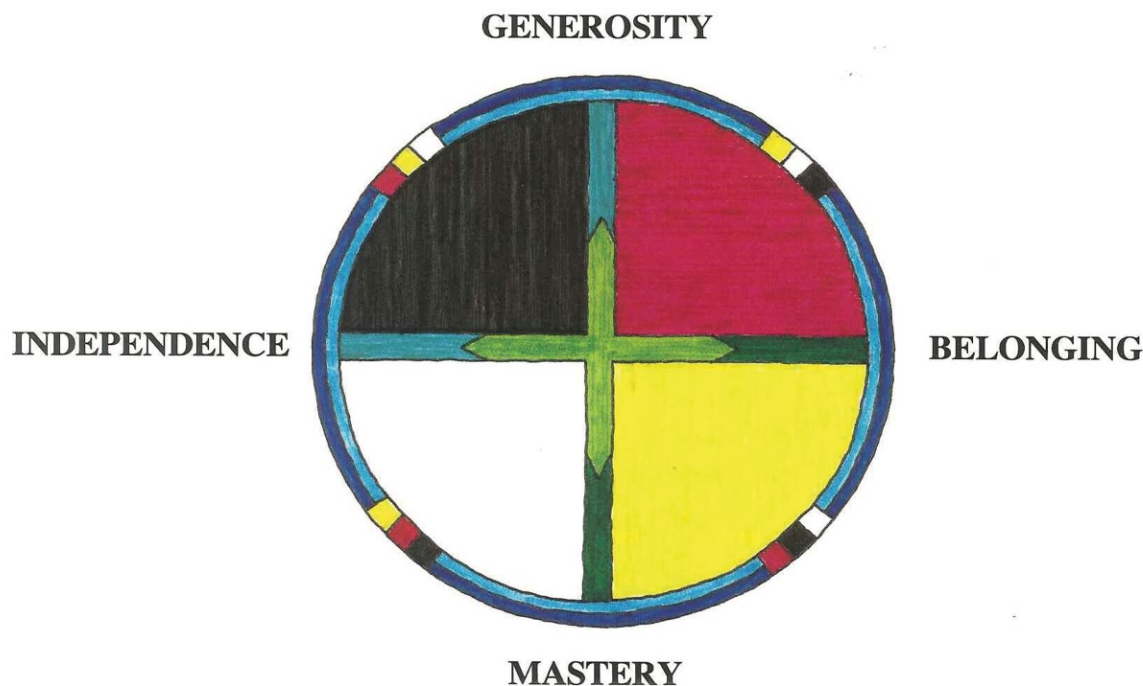
Many practitioners, however, have been skeptical of evidence-based practices that offer a panacea. Merely adding an off-the-shelf EBP does not produce successful outcomes. When facing a furious, unengaged student, a single theory offers a slim shield. As the field of study matures and research from neuroscience sheds new light, there is a movement away from simplistic “one-size-fits-all” mindsets and from evidence that only comes out of controlled laboratories.

The challenge is to deliver what works on the front lines of practice (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010). While Evidence-Based Practices are based on *efficacy* research in carefully controlled studies and randomized research that could be unethical or unfeasible in measuring outcomes of complex interventions in natural settings, Practice-Based Evidence (PBE) requires evaluation of *effectiveness* in real-world situations. Since one can never duplicate the original experimental conditions, *fidelity* must be balanced with *flexibility* to meet the unique realities of a setting (Kendall, Gosch, Furr, & Sood, 2008).

We argue that evidence-based *principles* must permeate the practice. These principles do not necessarily come from narrow comparative experimental trials. Rather, what informs practice must tap knowledge from diverse fields such as neuroscience, attachment, trauma, resilience, talented-at risk, and cross-cultural studies (van der Kolk, McFarland, & Weisaeth, 2007; McCluskey, K., Baker, P., & McCluskey, A., 2005). Harvard sociobiologist E. O. Wilson (1998) observed that scientific specialization buries knowledge in silos and produces a mass of factoids that obscure core truths. Since thousands of isolated variables have some measurable effect, the challenge is to identify powerful simple truths that lead to lasting change.

The highest standard for scientific evidence is consilience which combines knowledge from diverse fields to produce strong conclusions. Consilience draws from the natural and social sciences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cory, 2000) as well as ethical values and the unique needs of the individual. The American Psychological Association also calls for combining evidence from multiple types of research, clinical expertise, and the characteristics of those we serve (APA, 2006).

## Evidence Based Principles



**Figure 1:** *The Circle of Courage* by George D. Blue Bird, Sr. Used with permission from Reclaiming Youth At Risk, [www.reclaimingyouthatrisk.org](http://www.reclaimingyouthatrisk.org).

The Circle of Courage principles (often addressed as needs or values) of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are the result of consilience. These growth needs for all human beings are essential to well-being. They are designed by DNA into the resilient human brain (Brendtro & Mitchell, 15; Masten, 2014). The Circle of Courage is described in three editions of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990/2002/2019) and related publications. The model integrates ideas from cultures of respect, the practice-based wisdom of youth work pioneers, and contemporary research.

## Cultures of respect

These universal needs of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity are central to practices of indigenous communities which rear children in cultures of respect (Bolin, 2006). Erik Erikson's research on Sioux and Yurok and Abraham Maslow's experience with the Blackfoot in Canada (James & Lunday, 2014) inspired contemporary theories that focus on the developmental needs of humans. Philosopher Mortimer Adler (1985) observed that universal needs are reflected in the values of all cultures. Of course, some societies do a better job meeting these needs. Thus, traditional societies reared children in a network of caring adults, while many young people today grow up in a materialistic culture disconnected from elders. The Circle of Courage provides a "roadmap" for rebuilding cultures of respect. Early European anthropologists described native children as radiantly happy, courageous, and highly respectful, noting that their elders never subjected them to harsh punishment. The professional literature, however, shows little understanding of how tribal cultures could rear children with prosocial values and positive self-esteem. Long before the term "self-esteem" and its counterpart "low self-esteem" was coined, European youth work pioneers used a similar concept, which they called "discouragement." The counterpart to discouragement is courage. Building courageous children was a central focus of tribal cultures.

In his definitive work, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*, Stanley Coopersmith (1967) concluded that childhood self-esteem is based on significance, competence, power, and virtue. Traditional native child-care philosophy addresses each of these dimensions:

- Significance is nurtured in an environment in which every child is treated as a relative and is surrounded by love and affection. This fosters a sense of belonging.
- Competence is enhanced by nurturing each child's success and by celebrating the success of others. This provides all children abundant opportunities for mastery.
- Power is fostered by practicing guidance without coercion. Even the youngest children learn to make wise decisions and thus demonstrate responsible independence.
- Virtue involves being unselfish and courageously giving of oneself to others. Children reared in altruistic environments learn to live in a spirit of generosity.

## Practice wisdom

The year 1900 heralded "the century of the child" as optimistic reformers espoused the belief that all young people have great potential (Key, 1900/1909). These reformers set out to build democratic systems in schools, courts, and youth organizations. This era saw the creation of scouting, 4-H, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and Boys' and Girls' Clubs. A progressive education movement set out to recast autocratic schools as laboratories of democracy (Dewey, 1916). Across many nations, youth prisons embraced youth self-governance (Liepmann, 1928). In Austria, August Aichhorn (1925/1935) developed relationship-based approaches to reclaim "wayward youth." Fritz Redl, mentored by Aichhorn, emigrated to America to escape Hitler and pioneered studies of children who had suffered trauma (Redl & Wineman, 1957).

We were intrigued to find great similarity between Native concepts of education and ideas expressed by educational reformers who challenged traditional European concepts of obedience training. These youth work pioneers worked at a time when democracy was replacing dictatorships in many nations. The pioneers often attacked traditional authoritarian pedagogy.

- Maria Montessori, Italy's first female physician, created schools for disadvantaged youth and wrote passionately about the need to build inner discipline.

- Janusz Korczak, Polish social pedagogue, proclaimed the child's right to respect. He created a national children's newspaper so the voices of children might be heard.
- John Dewey, American pioneer of progressive education, saw schools as miniature democratic communities of students and teachers that should pose and solve problems.
- Anton Makarenko, after the Russian Revolution, brought street delinquents into self-governing colonies where they took turns as leaders of youth councils.

## Strength-based, developmental research

The Circle of Courage principles mirror similar concepts from other bodies of research. As seen in the table below, these include foundations of *self-worth* from Coopersmith (1967), Maslow's final revision of his hierarchy of human needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006), and research on universal biosocial needs (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015):

**Table 1:** The courage principles in comparison with: Self-Worth; Maslow's Hierarchy; and Biosocial Needs.

Circle of Courage	Self-Worth	Maslow's Hierarchy	Biosocial Needs
Belonging	Significance	Belongingness	Attachment
Mastery	Competence	Esteem	Achievement
Independence	Power	Self-Actualization	Autonomy
Generosity	Virtue	Self-Transcendence	Altruism

The ground-breaking Kauai studies of resilience by Werner and Smith (2012) also showed that children who surmounted the odds had restorative experiences in these four Circle of Courage areas. Further, these four dimensions encompass the Values in Action character strengths (Ihnen & Hoover, 2013; Peterson 2013). The Search Institute identified 40 Developmental Assets which offer a comparative, detailed expansion of the Circle of Courage principles (Roehlkepartain, 2012). As the most parsimonious model of youth development, the Circle of Courage was adopted by 4-H researchers who consolidated a longer list of factors (Kress, 2014).

At first glance, the principles of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity hardly seem debatable. Convincing youth themselves that these are important is not difficult. Young people want to belong, succeed, have power over their lives, and be needed in the world.

They fit with humanistic values, science, and our own experience. After all, who would advocate the opposite of these concepts—alienation, failure, helplessness, and egotistic selfishness? Yet, some cultures often do just that. There are other contemporary values that are strikingly disharmonious with these basic needs or principles. Instead of belonging, the value of hyper individualism breeds an “ecology of alienation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In the place of mastery, traditional schools play a competitive zero-sum game in which enthroning winners ensures abundant losers. When one's need for power is expressed by dominating others, all who are subjugated are disempowered. A culture that equates worth with wealth provides for its young a sanction for selfishness.

Once these four principles or values of the Circle of Courage are given primacy in our communities, programs, agencies, schools, and homes we argue our children and youth will generally do well. With remarkable consistency, in research and practice, all roads to positive youth development pass these four mileposts:

- **Belonging:** building trusting, positive connections with caring adults and peers. In simple terms, the child needs to experience love.
- **Mastery:** gaining knowledge, competence, and the capacity to solve problems. Through experience, the child must internalize a sense of a capacity to succeed.
- **Independence:** strengthening self-control and responsible decision making. Like mastery, the child must internalize a sense of power and the ability to exert his or her will.
- **Generosity:** developing empathy and engaging youth in caring for others. Children must see themselves as helpers in order to flourish as a human.

Because it is grounded in universal needs, the Circle of Courage is relevant across culture, age, and diverse settings.

## **Mending broken circles**

Many children have experienced the principles of the Circle of Courage in their lives. Of course, other underlying physical and psychological needs exist (Brendtro, 2016; Van Bockern, 2018) but from the perspective of psychosocial development, belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity can define social and mental health. Many other children (and adults too), however, are discouraged, with long histories of unmet needs.

- Instead of belonging, they are guarded, untrusting, hostile, withdrawn or they seek attention through compensatory attachments such as gang involvement.
- In place of mastery, they have encountered perpetual failure leading to frustration, fear of failure, and a sense of futility.
- Not having learned independence, they feel like helpless pawns, are easily misled, or seek pseudo power by bullying or defiance.
- Without a spirit of generosity, they are inconsiderate of others, self-indulgent, and devoid of real purpose for living.

How can broken circles be mended? The Circle of Courage provides the big picture but it is in the experiences we give and make possible for children that healing and growth happens. What follows are ideas - certainly not comprehensive or all inclusive – of the kinds of experiences that foster belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity for all children.

### ***Fostering belonging***

*Some of the teachers think they are too cool to talk to us. If you're walking down the hall, the teachers will put their heads down and look at the floor and keep walking. (Helen, high school student)*

Research shows that the quality of human relationships in schools and youth service programs may be more influential than the specific techniques or interventions employed (Brophy, 1986). Teachers with widely divergent instructional styles can be successful if they develop positive classroom relationships. But building successful relationships, especially with adult-wary children (Seita, 2010) isn't necessarily easy.

A good place to begin relationship building is with an attitude that Native American educator and anthropologist Ella Deloria described as the central value of belonging in traditional Indian culture: "Be related, somehow, to everyone you know." From the earliest days of life, all children experienced a network of acceptance, where every older member in the tribe felt responsible for their well-being. Treating others as kin forges powerful social bonds of community.

The following ideas may provide a sense of the kinds of experiences and mindsets that foster belonging. The ideas come from various theoretical traditions:

- Train staff to begin all corrective teaching interactions with a positive or empathy statement.
- Use peer relationships as a possible foundation for treatment. Adults must model caring relationships and monitor confrontations carefully so students don't become targets of counter aggression.
- Break down the barrier of distrust by being someone the child can trust. Create trust by being respectful, putting children at ease in your presence, see them as your social equal and understand there is more to the child than meets your eyes.
- Create environments that lead to connections. Middle school schedules are often designed so frequent and sustained contact between students and teachers is possible.
- Create welcoming ceremonies for new students. Honor students that leave your school or agency.

- Create a strong advising system anchored in a small cadre of peers and a teacher-counselor.
- Attach teachers to students rather than a grade level and have the teacher follow the students throughout their years in school.

Positive attachments between adults and youth are the foundation of effective education. These individual bonds, however, must be part of a synergistic network of relationships that permeate the school culture. These include positive peer relationships among students, cooperative teamwork relationships among school staff, and genuine partnerships with parents. Administrators must also see their roles as co-workers in support of their staff, not as superiors trying to dominate. In the final analysis, only adults who are themselves connected and attached will be free to build empowering relationships with youth.

### ***Fostering mastery***

*I was walking down the hall and said “hi” to Mr. Nilson. He looked at me and said, “Oh, you’re still here. You haven’t dropped out yet, huh?” I know people have this in their head and think of me as being less than them. I would like to put Mr. Nilson in the situation I’ve had in my life, and I’ll bet any amount of money he’d fold his cards. (Lincoln, high school student)*

In traditional Native American culture, children were taught to celebrate the achievement of others, and a person who received honor accepted this without arrogance. Someone more skilled than oneself was seen as a model for learning, not as an adversary. The striving was for personal mastery, not to become superior to one’s opponent. Recognizing that all must experience competency, success became a possession of the many, not of the privileged few.

Maria Montessori, Italy’s first female physician, decried the obedience tradition of schooling in which children sit silently in rows like “beautiful butterflies pinned to their desks.” She tried to revolutionize learning with the belief that curiosity and the desire to learn come naturally to children.

The desire to master and achieve is seen in all cultures from childhood onward, a phenomenon that Harvard psychologist Robert White called “competence motivation.” People explore, acquire language, construct things, and attempt to cope with their environments. It is a mark of humanness that children and adults alike desire to do things well and, in so doing, gain the joy of achievement. Tragically, though, something often happens to the child’s quest for learning in school, the very place where mastery is supposed to be nourished and expanded.

A sampling of promising methods for helping children achieve mastery follows:

- Encourage creativity and self-expression in the curriculum to create a sense of mastery. Art, drama, music, poetry, and literature can help youth connect with their feelings and surmount their problems.
- Use systematic social skills instruction to develop social competence.
- Teach adaptive skills like asking for help and making friends, accepting criticism, using role playing and other realistic methods.
- Use cognitive behavioral techniques to replace irrational thinking or destructive self-talk with more accurate and adaptive thinking.
- Train youth to assume problem-solving roles. The peer group provides feedback about hurtful or inconsiderate behavior of members and encourages positive alternatives.
- Academic success itself is seen as a powerful therapy. Success impacts a person’s self-worth and motivation.
- Use adventure and outdoor education activities to reach students who don’t respond to typical school structures. Wilderness education programs build on this spirit of adventure.
- Teach the idea that failure is “more data”.

### ***Fostering independence***

*This is probably the biggest part of school that I don't like. All through school, kids are herded around like sheep and are left with almost nothing to decide upon. (Travis, high school student)*

Traditional Native culture placed a high value on individual freedom. In contrast to obedience models of discipline, Native education was designed to build respect by teaching inner discipline. Children were encouraged to make decisions, solve problems, and show personal responsibility. Adults modeled, taught values, and provided feedback and guidance, but children were given abundant opportunities to make choices without coercion.

Horace Mann once declared schooling in a democracy to be “an apprenticeship in responsibility.” Early in the century Janusz Korczak of Poland founded a system of student self-governance in his orphanage for Warsaw street children. “Fifty years from now, every school in a democracy will have student self-governance,” he declared.

Strategies for teaching independence and self-control.

- Offer behavior management strategies for providing external controls temporarily while using problems as learning opportunities.
- Teach youth self-regulation. Emotional dysregulation is a core outcome of relational trauma and adults must be calm while setting secure limits (Bath & Seita, 2018).
- Use peer-helping groups to undertake problem solving.
- Challenge the common practice of employing punishment-based codes of conduct to manage behavior. Although these rule books make some adults feel secure, they are likely to be ignored or outmaneuvered if they are not owned by front-line staff and youth. Effective schools shift the emphasis from pursuing rule violators to teaching values that foster inner control.
- Rely on simple statements of values, for example, “Respect people, respect property.”
- Treat students with respect.

### ***Fostering generosity***

*I would have liked to tutor something or been a peer counselor. I could have helped someone and benefited from it myself if I had been given the chance to participate. (Sondra, high school student)*

A central goal in Native American child rearing is to teach the importance of being generous and unselfish. Children were instructed that human relationships were more important than physical possessions. Describing practices from a century ago, Native American writer Charles Eastman tells of his grandmother teaching him to give away what he cherished the most—his puppy—so he would become strong and courageous.

Pioneering German educator Kurt Hahn once observed that all young people desperately need some sense of purpose for their lives. Youth in modern society, however, do not have roles in which they can serve, and thus they suffer from the “misery of unimportance.” Hahn advocated volunteer activities that tap the need of every youth to have some “grande passion.” During the Hitler years he went to England, where he developed the basis of the Outward Bound movement.

Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Korczak, and many others also wrote of the importance of teaching youth the values of compassion and service to others. A century ago, William James noted that war always has fulfilled young men’s need to be valuable to their community. He proposed a “moral equivalent to war” by involving youth in volunteer civic service. Although we seem to have lost sight of these basic truths for a time, there is now a healthy revival of the concept that we must offer opportunities to develop altruism, empathy, and generosity in modern youth.



The following ideas highlight the increasing emphasis being placed on developing prosocial values and behavior as an antidote to hedonistic, antisocial, and bullying lifestyles:

- With support, encourage the bully to talk to the victims to help foster internalization of caring values.
- Teach social skills as a way of fostering moral development. The goal is to create empathy in once self-centered youth. Now empowered with prosocial skills, youth have new options to act in caring ways.
- Make caring fashionable and to make youth uncomfortable with selfish, hurting behavior and thinking patterns.
- Create service learning projects to contribute to the community. Examples include helping the elderly and distributing food and toys to families.
- Service learning opens unusual programming possibilities with children and youth who have seen themselves as “damaged goods.” As they reach out to help others, they create their own proof of worthiness.

## Summary

Indigenous education always involved important truths, sacred principles or virtues that had to be learned by experience. While knowledge or the education of a person’s mind (i.e., facts, rules, definitions of words) is crucial to be successful in a complex world, there is another kind of learning that is more valued among Indigenous peoples. This deep, holistic learning that takes place when all aspects of a person’s five perceptions work together, is talked about as knowing “in the heart.” Indigenous peoples have always valued this learning more than intellectual learning. In the Lakshóta language, wowiyúkchañ, is thinking with all of one’s human abilities. The mind is used but this kind of thinking is not limited to logic. Emotions are involved but this kind of thinking is not sentimentality. The body is involved but the physical is not separated from the spirit. The soul and spirit of the person are involved but grounded in an intense reality. When all of these human aspects work together, a Lakshóta will say “this I know in my heart” (Brokenleg, 2018).

What do we know - in our hearts - works for children? When they can stand in the center of the Circle of Courage and know - in their hearts - they are loved (belonging), can solve problems (mastery) and exert their will (independence) and help others (generosity) they will do just fine. Our work is to help them experience those things. So that you don’t think we are resorting to naturalism, primitive thinking or green thumb eclecticism, there is plenty of contemporary research which validates these core principles. Or may we suggest, the Circle of Courage principles validates some research.

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## About the Authors

**Dr. Steve Van Bockern** is a professor emeritus of education at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Steve has been a teacher and a principal. He has directed programs and grants for talented and at-risk students. Steve co-authored the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*. The work of the authors has been shared in over twenty countries. Steve has presented worldwide in Russia, Thailand, South Africa, Australia and extensively in Canada. His book, *Schools That Matter: Teaching Minds, Reaching Hearts* was published in June, 2018. Steve works in juvenile justice as an expert witness. His research interests include resiliency, alternative education, restorative justice, school discipline and creating well-being in school settings. He is a recipient of the Crazy Horse Award and an honorary Doctor of Laws from the University of Winnipeg, Canada. Steve and Sarah have four children and three grandchildren.

**Larry K. Brendtro, Ph.D.**, is Professor Emeritus at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He is the founder and former president of Reclaiming Youth International, and co-author of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*. He is a Senior Training Consultant and writer for the non-profit organization Reclaiming Youth at Risk. He may be contacted by email at [larrybrendtro@gmail.com](mailto:larrybrendtro@gmail.com)

**Martin Brokenleg, EdD**, is a Professor Emeritus at Augustana University. Martin, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe holds a doctorate in psychology and is a graduate of the Episcopal Divinity School. Retired and living in Victoria British Columbia, Martin enjoys his time writing, reading and watching his children and grandchildren grow.

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