

Introduction to the Framework: Making the Case for a Culture of C.A.R.E.

LEARNING GOALS

As a result of reading this chapter, educators will:

- Understand the power of school culture to transform lives.
- Know the four pillars of the Culture of C.A.R.E. Framework.
- Understand the Culture of C.A.R.E. Framework's theory of action.

SCHOOL SAVED ME

I grew up on the southeast side of Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s. If you know anything about Chicago at that time, you know that the crack epidemic, gang violence, and

disinvestment plagued most African American and Latinx communities and the schools within them. I was in third grade in 1987 when then U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett made headlines by labeling Chicago Public Schools as the worst school district in the nation (Banas & Byers, 1987). Knowing that I grew up during this time and under these conditions, you might assume that I attended underfunded, underresourced schools with dejected teachers who did not care about me. You might speculate that I sat in classes where it was nearly impossible to learn and that I graduated college and earned advanced degrees *despite* my educational experiences. If you thought this was my story, you would not be alone, but you would be wrong.

School saved me. Yes, I was born to a mother who did not attend college and a father who was pushed out of high school by his sophomore year (more on that later), and yes, I was reared in a neighborhood plagued by violence and drugs, and yes, some of my closest friends were gang members. Like many African American males who grow up in neighborhoods like mine, by the age of 21, I could name more than a few friends and acquaintances who were dead or in jail, and yes, I, too, was tempted by the allure of the fast life on the streets. Maybe if I could just sell dope for a few weeks, or months I could alleviate some of my mom's financial burdens, and maybe I would no longer have to hear her cry from the stress of not being able to pay the bills, but school saved me.

My life today differs greatly from many of the young men and women I grew up with. I am no more talented, intelligent, or gifted than they are. In fact, one could argue that despite our struggles, they did more with less, were more resilient, and certainly were more street savvy than I ever was. We hung out on the same corners, sat on the same porches, played ball on the same courts and fields, ran through the same alleys, and bought snacks and junk food from the same corner stores, but there was one glaring difference—the schools we attended. I never attended my neighborhood schools. As I reflect on my life and the lives of my peers, one could surmise that “success” in life was contingent on the quality of the schools you attended. In Chicago at that time, families had three educational options: They could send their child to the school in their attendance boundary (neighborhood school), they could

have their child tested for admittance into a magnet or gifted program, or they could pay to send their child to a private school. For a myriad of reasons, the quality of traditional public education began to wane in the 1980s and 1990s. Thankfully, I was born to parents who were savvy enough to explore the educational options available to me and committed to navigating the labyrinth of Chicago Public Schools, guiding me down a path that would alter the trajectory of my life forever.

Even as a child, I knew that my elementary school experiences were different from most of my friends. When we talked about school, they often complained about how dirty their buildings were and how their teachers did not care about them. They could not bring their books home because there were not enough for every student to have one, so they did not have to carry bookbags. They rarely took field trips because their teachers thought they were “too bad,” and it appeared that fights and other serious disruptions to the learning environment were a common occurrence. Meanwhile, I had a tremendously rich school experience. In elementary school, my teachers had high expectations of me and my classmates. I did not like all my teachers, but I never questioned if they cared about me or wanted me to do well. I had teachers who I thought were mean because they had surly dispositions, assigned too much homework, or made us stand up in class when we were caught talking. Our school was clean, our books were old, but everyone had their own, so we were able to take them home to complete our homework. Even though I blossomed to six feet by seventh grade, I was never treated as if athletics were my only option. Thomas Little, the assistant principal at my elementary school, was an African American male. He took a personal interest in not just me but other young men in my school (African American and Latino) who, from time to time, needed tough love, redirection, and a restatement of expectations. Mr. Little continues to be one of my biggest supporters and a major reason why I went into education.

In high school, the teachers who cared pushed me intellectually and refused to accept anything less than my best. They made me feel smart and encouraged me to take Honors and AP courses. There was urgency in their approach to preparing me

for college and for life beyond school. We were empowered to pursue our academic and extracurricular interests. Excellence was the standard, and the question was not if, but where, you were going to go to college. There were multiple opportunities for us to feel connected to the school. This, unfortunately, was very different from the experiences of many of my friends from the neighborhood. School saved me.

I am writing this book because if school could save me, then it can save others. Education is often championed as the great equalizer, and we know the historical significance educational institutions have had in marginalized communities of color. Unfortunately, educational institutions have not always lived up to this standard. Many students, particularly African American and Latinx students, and their families, do not view schools as places that empower them and affirm their brilliance; they view them as demoralizing institutions that are hell-bent on maintaining compliance and order and not on maximizing student potential.

THE CASE FOR A CULTURE OF C.A.R.E.

It is sobering and unfortunate that anyone has to argue about the importance of making our students feel loved, cared for, and valued in schools. That should be a given. For many students, however, it is not. Students across our nation—African American, Latinx, poor, pick a label—do not feel cared for in schools. They do not see the relevance of the school experience—what they are asked to learn, read, do—to their daily lives. They do not see themselves represented in the curriculum; they are not allowed to explore their interests; and they struggle connecting with the adults who are charged with their social, emotional, and academic development. It is this reality that leads to high rates of disengagement, disciplinary issues, and subpar rates of achievement. Like adults who do not feel valued, or appreciated at work, students struggle when they are not happy in school. Despite what some educational hard-liners think, school should be a place where students find joy (Muhammad, 2020), where they are allowed to make mistakes, test boundaries, and have fun—at all grade levels. Unfortunately, as I visit schools across the country where the

majority of students are African American and Latinx, I see the absence of joy and the intentional removal of fun. I see an overemphasis on *safety*, a term that serves as a proxy and justification for overly punitive disciplinary policies and the overpolicing of Black and Brown bodies.

The key to improving student experiences directly and student performance indirectly is to adopt a mindset that centers the care of and the care for our students over everything else.

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

—Dr. Ron Edmonds, 1979

As Dr. Ron Edmonds says, educators know what to do to educate our students properly, but have yet to exhibit the kind of courage and will to act upon these core beliefs. Transforming schools requires a wholesale change to our approach and collective mindsets. The COVID-19 pandemic and the United States' racial reckoning gave hope to many that the educational community would begin to critically examine its systems, policies, and practices to improve the academic experiences of students of color, particularly African American students. We heard a call to “reimagine education.” Remote learning brought educators into students' homes, and with that came a deluge of empathy, understanding, and care at previously unseen levels. Schools and school districts responded to student and family needs quickly and with a level of urgency commiserate with the crisis at hand. Tragically, as we returned to normal, we have not heeded Winston Churchill's call to “never let a good crisis go to waste” and—despite the call to “reinvent education”—have reverted to our old ways, despite their ineffectiveness. The hope that the pandemic would catalyze educational innovation has died due to the system's fixation on comfort and habit. Out of one side of our mouths, we champion education reform; out of the other, there is an outright refusal to interrogate the cultural norms, attitudes, mindsets, and habits that govern students' experiences. What is not often acknowledged is that many marginalized students excelled during remote learning in large part due to a focus on

socioemotional learning, the absence of racialized microaggressions, and the implementation of policies and practices that minimized the emphasis on grading. The laser-like focus on quantifiable results has returned and continues to drastically undermine the experiences of all students, particularly marginalized student groups. Results are important, but the prioritization of student outcomes over student experiences has created stifling, suffocating school experiences whereby many students of color feel either overpoliced or invisible.

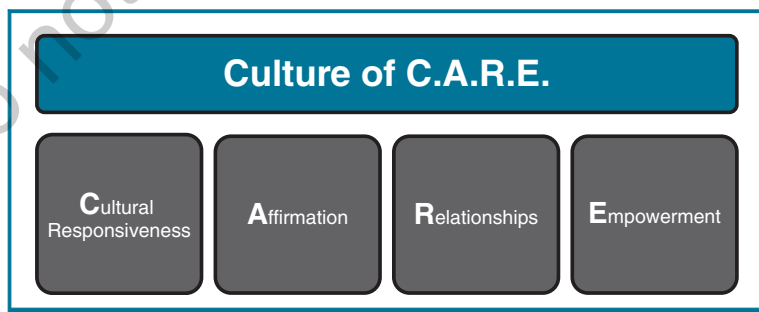
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the catalyst of the “results over everything” culture. The charge to ensure that by the year 2014, every child would be able to read and do math at grade level was a noble one. What was not considered was how school districts would respond to the call. This pressure for arbitrary proficiency created a culture of accountability (bad accountability, not good accountability) and fear, and took the fun out of school. Schools responded to NCLB by creating developmentally inappropriate learning environments for students. No schools felt the pressure and suffered more from NCLB than schools serving poor communities of color. The threat of probation, closure, and state takeover thrust districts into a reactionary, survival mode, leading to poor decision-making and ill-fated policies. Policies that fundamentally altered the experience that children had in schools were implemented in places like New York, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Chicago. Many teachers lost the ability to bring joy and creativity to their lessons. Students became data points on a spreadsheet. The school became synonymous with test prep. Students who did not test well were placed in intervention or special education classes. Principals and teachers were pressured to improve test scores and were celebrated for test performance boosts despite some who employed practices that were detrimental to students. Elective classes were often eliminated to provide additional time to focus on reading, writing, and mathematics. The key to success, many school leaders thought, was to drill and kill students in basic skills. In Chicago, generations of students never had science, social studies, or art classes because the day was divided into halves. Reading often took place in the morning and math in the afternoon (these were the two subjects

that determined NCLB status). Schools became overly punitive because “bad” students negatively affected test scores. Disruptive students were excluded instead of supported. Suspensions and expulsions increased, and marginalized students suffered the most. Results were all that mattered regardless of the cost.

What many educators and educational policymakers have refused to accept is, despite conventional wisdom, teachers and leaders do not control results. Despite the value we attach to them, standardized tests are produced by for-profit companies and paint, at best, an incomplete picture and, at worst, an inaccurate picture of what a student knows and can do. Oppressive rituals like standardized testing and tracking coupled with punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices destroy what should be rich and rewarding academic experiences for students. The results-driven and high achievement-at-all-cost cultures that plague many schools and school districts fuel educational inequities and jeopardize students’ social, emotional, and intellectual health. African American, Latinx, and other marginalized student groups like diverse learners, English Language learners (ELLs), and students who live in poverty find themselves victims of school practices and school cultures that fail to meet their needs adequately.

The framework I am advancing in this book is the potential cure for this sickness. Schools that enact this framework have established and sustained a culture that rests upon four essential pillars: cultural responsiveness, affirmation, relationship-building, and empowerment.



I, and many other students from historically marginalized communities have directly benefited from schools and school communities who prioritize these pillars as foundational to the

student experience. The words they use may be different, but the meaning and the impact of these pillars are similar.

If a farmer is tryin' to grow corn and the corn don't grow, he don't blame the corn.

—Sharecropper

This book is not about boosting test scores or other quantifiable metrics. I will not encourage you to set goals to improve your school's performance in these areas. Test scores, attendance rates, and so on are lagging indicators, they give us an assessment of how our schools are performing right now based on the current state of practices, operations, and resources. I challenge you to focus on the leading indicators: the mindsets we must have, the habits and behaviors we must employ, and the systems we need to disrupt. This is important because it is not the backgrounds of the students or the lack of resources and technology that are the causes of the most predominant issues in education. It is our collective mindsets and the systems that we maintain that are the root causes of the problems. As James Clear (2018) says in *Atomic Habits*, "If you want better results, then forget about setting goals. Focus on your systems instead. Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are for making progress." Disrupt the systems and change our mindsets and then and only then will we accomplish what we say we want to accomplish.

As a wise sharecropper once stated, "If a farmer is tryin' to grow corn and the corn don't grow, he don't blame the corn." Educational leaders and teachers must adopt that same mindset. Many of our students are struggling to grow academically, socially, and emotionally because the soil of our schools (the culture) is toxic. Nothing grows in a toxic environment. Improving our schools requires that we improve the experiences that our students are having; improving those experiences requires educators to drastically improve the culture of the school. This is what we do have control over not test results, but the experiences we offer children and the culture we create. Culture is the soil in which everything in a school grows from. Show me a sick, dysfunctional school plagued by achievement disparities, disengagement, and discontent and I will show you an unhealthy school culture.

THE C.A.R.E. FRAMEWORK THEORY OF ACTION

IF schools establish a culture built on **C**ultural responsiveness, **A**ffirmation, **R**elationships, and **E**mpowerment, THEN they will dramatically improve the academic experiences of often marginalized student groups, leading to improved outcomes.

I wrote this introduction to the book (Chapter 1) just shy of the two-year anniversary of the death of my dad. One of the smartest men that I knew, he discontinued his traditional and formal education after his sophomore year of high school. When asked why he stopped attending school he said, “School wasn’t for cats like me.” As I write this book, I think about his contemporaries, brilliant men, and women with many talents who also felt unwelcome and unwanted in schools. I think about the generations of youngsters that would come after him feeling the same way he did about school. Young people who longed for but never felt seen in school. They never saw themselves represented in the curriculum, never felt affirmed by their teachers, did not have authentic caring relationships with the adults responsible for their development, and often felt disempowered in schools. I think about the young men and women who, despite their intelligence, resilience, and talents, have opted not to attend school, not because they did not value education but because the institution that was responsible for their education did not value them. Young men and women who did not drop out but were pushed out.

A FEW WORDS OF CAUTION

Yes, I Am Angry

If, as you read this book, you feel that I am angry, frustrated, and disappointed, then you would be right. At some point, educators must decide whether we are willing to do what it takes to do right for *all* children. We have an industry

overloaded with consultants, experts, and the newest and hottest technology, but we still cannot seem to find ways to provide every child, regardless of skin color, zip code, or level of poverty, a high-quality, empowering, and liberating educational experience. How can we not all be angry?

I Love School Leaders and Teachers, But Not All of Them

I do not want anyone to feel as if I am bashing all educators in this book, but I am bashing some. Teaching is a noble profession, and I am grateful to teachers and leaders who have chosen to stay in the field despite the difficulties plaguing us. The polarization, the political divisiveness, and the attacks on historical truths have made professions associated with education less desirable than they have ever been. I am both thankful and grateful for those who do this work for the right reasons and center on what is best for children over the convenience and comfort of adults. Once while leading a professional development session, a department chair admitted in a public forum that he allows some of his teachers to harm students. His justification for this educational malpractice was that he only has to work with the student for a year or two but he must see the teacher every day for twenty to twenty-five years. His comfort and his friendships with his colleagues were more important than the well-being of his students. I do not love that educator.

I Am Not Concerned With Anyone's Readiness

You will not agree with everything that is written in this book and I am fine with that. We are the sum of our lived experiences and as Anais Nin (2014) stated, "We do not see the world as it is, we see it as we are." My experiences as a teacher, school leader, network leader, and now professor and consultant have shaped my perspective in very particular ways. In my attempt to make the case for the importance of establishing a Culture of C.A.R.E., I illuminate some problematic mindsets, behaviors, and practices. This could be perceived as me beating up on school leaders and teachers. That is not my intention. My intention is to hold all of

us accountable to doing better by children. This requires us to engage in critical self-reflection and be honest and courageous enough with ourselves to reflect on (a) how we are contributing to the problem, and (b) what we need to do differently. As a turnaround principal in Chicago, I employed practices that I am embarrassed about. I did things and acted in ways that are counter to the type of educator I aspired to be. It is uncomfortable for me to admit, but step 1 to becoming a better leader or teacher is to confront what is most ugly about our thoughts and behaviors and commit to changing ourselves. Before we can change and transform schools we must change and transform ourselves. Only you know if you are ready for that, but I am not concerned about your or anyone else's readiness when generations of children are being harmed because we lack collective courage and have decided that our readiness trumps what is best for children.

STRUCTURE

This book is divided into six chapters. A brief synopsis of each is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction: Making the Case for a Culture of C.A.R.E.

In this first chapter, I have attempted to make the case for establishing a Culture of C.A.R.E. Each subsequent chapter will be devoted to a pillar of the framework beginning with cultural responsiveness.

Chapter 2: Cultural Responsiveness

To be culturally responsive is to create a school and classroom environment that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates the diversity of students' cultures in meaningful ways and offers full, equitable access to education for all students. School leaders, faculty, and staff recognize the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This chapter will explain what it means to establish a culturally responsive school and classroom. Drawing on the early

work of scholars like Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Dr. Geneva Gay, readers will be challenged to rethink how to operationalize cultural responsiveness in their schools and classrooms.

Chapter 3: Affirmation

To affirm a student is to celebrate, honor, protect, and cultivate their identity. To affirm a student is to nurture, love, and value their uniqueness and validate their sense of self; to offer emotional support or encouragement. This chapter presents practical, research-informed strategies to ensure school leaders and teachers are affirming the identities and acknowledging the humanity in every child they encounter. The pressures of social media, the stresses associated with the pandemic, and an ever-decisive world, require that educators are intentional about elevating the self-esteem and self-worth of the students they serve. Many students particularly, African American, and Latinx students are made to feel inferior, effectively souring their academic experiences and pushing them away from schools.

Chapter 4: Relationships

If this was a book about real estate investing, I would be championing the phrase “Location, location, location”; because this is a book about school culture and supporting student success, I must champion the phrase “Relationships, relationships, relationships.” Calling educators to invest in building relationships with their students is not new but what is often missing from that conversation is the work that leaders and teachers must engage in to build the relationship. In this chapter, I not only make the case for relationship building but how to do it. I will challenge readers to rethink how they interact with and forge bonds with students, to reflect on ways they may have undermined relationships, and to offer concrete relationship-building strategies that can be leveraged immediately in their schools.

Chapter 5: Empowerment

Many students view schools as disempowering and joyless places. Too many schools have become places where random

and arbitrary knowledge is deposited into the minds of students, and only compliant students who can regurgitate often useless information are seen as successful. School, for many students, is a place where they first learn what they cannot be and where they first learn that they are not good enough. To address this heartbreaking reality, schools must be intentional about empowering students. When schools are committed to empowering students, they help them realize their abilities and potential and grant them the power and authority to be great. In this chapter, I will offer concrete strategies to help educators empower their students to realize their full potential.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The conclusion will remind readers of the importance of school culture in defining the in-school experiences of students. It will challenge them to reject the idea that educators must only be driven by results and to acknowledge that when it comes to educating children, we only have control over what happens within the four walls of our schools and our classrooms. Rejecting the “achievement at all costs” mindset frees educators to do what is best in classrooms which is to create warm, caring, loving spaces where students feel loved, cared for, emotionally and physically safe, and intellectually challenged. Results will come, but we must first focus on what is important: school culture.

Each chapter will end with a summary and five reflection questions.

WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

I am writing this book because it is time for educators to realize the responsibility that they have for why things are the way that they are. This book is not about assigning blame or rehashing the problem without providing solutions. Those of us who have spent more than ten minutes in education know how skilled we are in articulating problems but how shallow our solutions are. Rather than look inward for the solutions to achievement disparities, lack of student engagement, poor attendance, and

disproportionalities that exist in our schools, we (a) do nothing about it because this is how things have always been or (b) latch on to the new hot thing. Neither approach has led to sustainable improvement. The Culture of C.A.R.E. Framework is different in that it rests almost solely on the need for educators to shift their mindsets. It requires school leaders and teachers to think differently about their role in improving the lives of their most marginalized students. It places the responsibility for school improvement at the feet of the educator, not parents, not political officials, not researchers, nor consultants. I believe wholeheartedly in the power of the principal and the teacher to transform the lives of students. I know how powerfully positive academic experiences can significantly alter the trajectory of a child's life, and I have also witnessed how negative or traumatic school experiences can harm a student, robbing them of the self-sufficiency, confidence, and esteem that they need to navigate the complexities of our world. I have seen how schools can ruin a child's life, push them away, and condemn them to a life of struggle. Typically, when authors pen books like this, they do so to document an overwhelmingly negative experience that they had to overcome. Through grit, resilience, and good fortune, they were able to overcome insurmountable obstacles to reach success and they write and often speak about those horrible experiences as a warning to educators about what not to do. They are also written to inspire educators to take greater care and responsibility for those students. Leveraging these experiences, they then reverse engineer what can and should be done in schools for young people. This book is different. I do not have a sob story to share about my school experience. I had a wonderful academic experience (which as an African American male, some might find hard to believe). In fact, school for me was an escape from a sometimes stressful childhood. The school was an extension of my home—a place where I felt loved and cared for. It was a place that made me feel good about being me. It was a place where I was challenged intellectually and held accountable

for my learning and my behaviors. It was a place where nothing less than my best was accepted. I was able to thrive in my school and that is precisely why I am writing this book.

As I mentioned before, we spend so much time detailing all that is wrong in the field of education, and we do not spend nearly as much time detailing all that is right. Is our educational system broken? No, it is not—more on that later. Are African American, Latinx, female students, and other marginalized groups receiving the same caliber of education as their white peers? Nope. Are there some schools that are educating marginalized groups well? Yep. Have you ever heard about them? Probably not.

The best thing—and most challenging thing—about this book is that it reminds educators that the solutions for much of what plague our schools are free and lie within educators themselves. Success does not require the retention of expensive consultants, new technology, or hours of boring professional development. It does, however, require us to acknowledge the importance of school culture in our work and that our ways of thinking, believing, existing, and engaging with one another and our students are either promoting or inhibiting the success of our students. This book is about school culture—not curriculum, instruction, formative assessments, or summative assessments. This book is about how we, as an educational collective, can work to transform school cultures in a way that will lead to the success of all students (even our most marginalized). If we have learned anything, we should have learned that school improvement strategies alone have not been able to guarantee sustainable school improvement.

I encourage you to fully engage with this book. Mark it up, argue with it, challenge the thinking, but above all, reflect on your practice.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

- When adults intentionally build a positive school culture that prioritizes the needs of students, schools can transform lives.
- Improving students' academic performance requires educators to improve their academic experiences.
- Improving students' academic experiences requires that educators adopt a mindset that prioritizes the care of and the care for the students they serve.
- School leaders must be willing to resist the “results over everything” culture that has permeated the educational landscape.
- A Culture of C.A.R.E. rests on the four pillars of cultural responsiveness, affirmation, relationships, and empowerment.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Beyond academics, what role did the schoolhouse play in your life? Did you succeed because of or despite of the schools you attended?
2. Do you agree with the theory of action advanced in this chapter? Why or why not?
3. What are the barriers to addressing the needs of the whole child?
4. At first glance, which pillars of the Culture of C.A.R.E. framework resonate with you most? Why?
5. Are you ready to reflect on and deeply examine your mindset and assumptions regarding educating historically marginalized students?