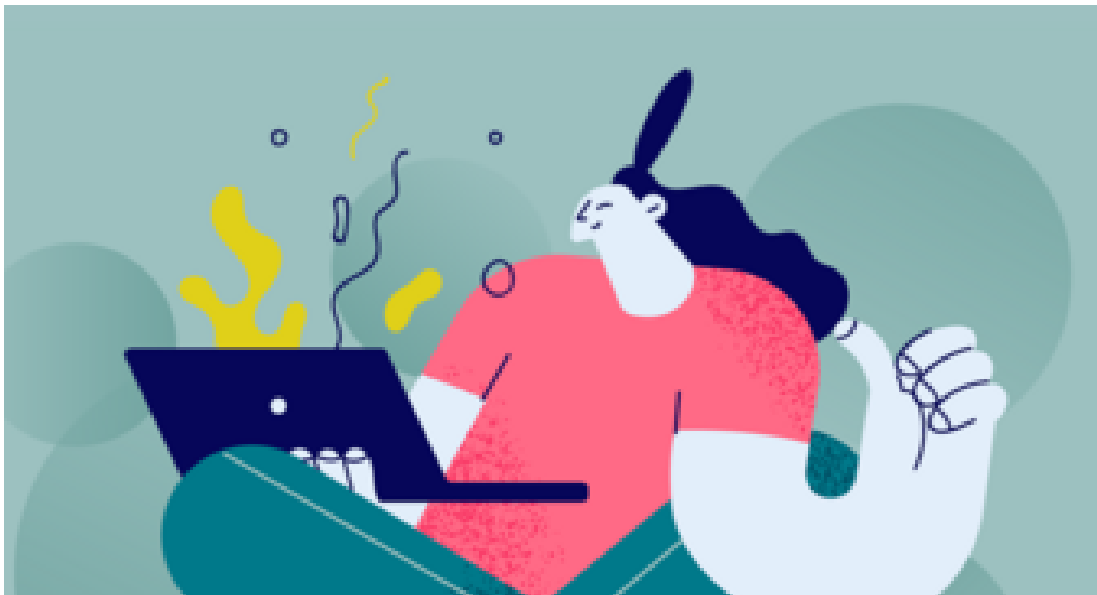


| Learning for Justice

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What is the Care Plan?

Each school year, educators transform classrooms into intentional spaces where growing, sharing, questioning and learning that reflects our world happen as they prepare young people to become global citizens. To do this, educators must grapple with facilitating dialogue and lessons that allow learners to understand what fighting against—and providing solutions to dismantle—oppressive systems looks, sounds and feels like. To that end, my English language arts classroom served as a courtroom for mock-trials as we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a mindful breathing circle to process the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as we read *The Hate U Give*, and an urban redlined city with “residents” finding their perspectives in equity and activism as we read *A Raisin in the Sun*. I wanted safe, practical and equitable strategies to make real-life connections between our texts, my students’ world and the experience of the “othered.”

In prioritizing inclusive education that honestly confronts our past and present, educators are often policed by administrators, families and state officials. Anxieties around what and how discussions are facilitated permeate classrooms, often leading to unease that prevents learners from reaching their full potential.

As educators and nurturers for the next generation, to effectively teach honest history, we must prioritize integrity, purposefulness and psychological safety. The care plan I envision to accomplish this is a research-based roadmap for educators, parents and caregivers offering strategies for care before, during and after difficult conversations. Such care can be a catalyst in positively transforming perceptions around teaching history honestly.

Theorizing the Care Plan

Psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci collaborated in the late 1970s to create a framework for understanding human motivation through Self-Determination Theory (SDT). One of the key tenets of SDT relevant for any educator is the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT): all humans have three basic psychological needs that directly impact well-being—competence, relatedness and autonomy.

Competence refers to how individuals experience confidence in knowledge acquisition. Everyone benefits from a feeling of “I got this! I know this.” *Relatedness* refers to building and sustaining relationships with others. Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging in social groups. Finally, *autonomy* centers one’s ability to make choices while operating authentically as themselves. When all three basic needs are met, motivation increases and individuals thrive. The care plan prioritizes these needs for safe and inclusive approaches to crucial conversations.

Why Is the Care Plan Important?

We can summarize the importance of this care plan by focusing on the three C’s: care, courage and community. As educators, we are taught that the pedagogy of care is one that can be modeled, reciprocated and adapted; it centers personhood and connectivity. Additionally—in the context of teaching honest history—care should be equitable, intentional and oriented toward liberation. We should care for our students in these moments in a way that sets them free because, as author and activist bell hooks states in her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, “Committed acts of caring let all students know that the purpose of education is not to dominate, or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom. Caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge.”

The care plan is a method we can use to serve as courageous facilitators and learners. It takes courage to tell the accurate hard history of our world *and* hold space for the emotions that may result. The aspect of care is no afterthought; the care plan allows us to engage with *radical* care. Planning with that in mind and using resources from our own formulations of the plan push people to think about intentional community building in the classroom, the home and the outside world.

The “Before” Care Plan

In the before care stage, we lay the groundwork to create and foster respect and honesty. One of the most important terms to consider in building a before care plan is inclusivity. Learning for Justice’s *Critical Practices* discusses inclusive classrooms, stating: “Differences shape who we are and what we know. Life, history, society and power cannot be understood from a single perspective; we need multiple viewpoints to truly see the world. Because of

this, inclusive classrooms must function as learning communities built on shared inquiry and dialogue.” Participants must be situated in spaces that welcome and honor their multiple identities and perspectives.

These strategies are useful in formulating an effective before care plan.

- **Display visual symbols of inclusion.** Whether you are hanging posters celebrating diverse identities in your classroom or around your home, positive exposure to these identities can increase feelings of empathy and belonging—two critical aspects when approaching difficult conversations.
- **Facilitate the creation of learner-centered agreements.** Let learners express in their own language what they expect for these interactions. Educators can plan a mini lesson in the beginning of the school year; caregivers can co-create a family agreement and display it in a prominent place.
- **Rethink what participation looks like.** As adults, we are often conditioned to associate dynamic engagement with participation. Consider that when you are engaging in activities to teach honest history, or having difficult social justice conversations, participation may show up as silent reflection, a preference to write instead of verbalize or in lines of questioning. Whatever the expression, be open to the fluid “aesthetic” of participation.

The “During” Care Plan

After building the foundation, we must prepare for when we’re in the act of teaching or facilitating a discussion to actively hold space for participants’ emotions and our own. How do we ensure that we’re engaging in productive discourse? It’s no secret that teaching honest history can be difficult. Some may consider engaging in challenging discussions offensive or threatening, thus sparking disruptive emotions, especially between racial groups. This is when significant differences in worldviews and power imbalances within participants can arise.

Instead of merely finding tactics to *engage* in crucial conversations, adult education professor Kayon Murray-Johnson, Ph.D., posits that we should “(en)gauge” with a cyclical model of emotional regulation that includes critical-thinking questions for each stage of the conversation. An awareness of our own and everyone else’s needs and emotional transitions allows us to sustain a safe and productive environment. This may mean asking ourselves questions about how much we know about our participants, or how we can be more mindful of our own actions and reactions. Most importantly, we want to ask what risks we’re willing to take to grow from our conversations.

In addition to asking these questions, we can employ these strategies:

- **Set the stage:** Begin the conversation with digestible and relatable content to aid in transitions.
- **Create and honor expectations for navigating big emotions:** Let your learners know that these conversations may elicit strong feelings and that's OK! Give them options for self-regulation and suggestions for how to ask for help if needed.
- **Establish intentional pause points:** Sometimes we will have a lot to share. There is no pressure to share all the information at once. Use your discretion (read the room) in pausing for questions and reflections (whether they be silent or aloud).
- **Implement mindfulness:** Mindfulness practices are useful in real-time emotional regulation. Provide learners (and yourself) with tools and strategies to center breathing and to be more aware of where in their bodies their emotions are showing up.

The “After” Care Plan

What happens when the conversation ends? First, we must realize that teaching honest history requires an ongoing commitment that takes patience and diligence. But what do we do in the interim, until the next conversation? While there is no concrete answer, our answer certainly should not be “nothing.” Instead, at the end of a discussion period, we need to take time to center our brains, our lungs and our hearts. We can ask ourselves and our students the following:

Brain: What thoughts do I have about our conversation? What can I do to apply my new knowledge? What else am I inspired to learn about now?

Lungs: How can I center my breath when things feel heavy?

Heart: How did this conversation make me feel? How will my new knowledge make me a better person?

There is no need to shy away from difficult conversations and honest history simply because it's challenging. These conversations are essential for young people who will build upon the movement for justice. Ultimately, as educators, caregivers and supportive adults, we must commit ourselves to practice radical care and help prepare a generation of caring young people who can then create a radically inclusive society.

Resources

Critical Practices for Social Justice Education

This guide offers a set of strategies for accomplishing academic and social emotional goals side by side.

Student Mental Health Matters

Cohosted by Charles Barrett, Ph.D. Chair for the National Association of School Psychologists Multicultural Affairs Committee, this webinar focuses on challenges students face regarding mental health, including how those challenges can vary.

About the Author

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