

## Applying a CARE Framework to Trauma-Informed Schools: Introduction to the Special Issue

Jerica Knox

*University of Maryland  
School of Medicine*

Brooksie Sturdivant

*RISE Services, Inc. &  
3e LLC*

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Every day, educators encounter students whose distress shows up as silence, withdrawal, defiance, or exhaustion—behaviors that often mask the hidden weight of trauma. The latest National Survey of Children’s Health data reveal that nearly 1 in 3 (31%) youth ages 12 to 17 had a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral problem in 2022-2023. Research suggests that approximately 25% of children in the U.S. will experience at least one traumatic event by the age of 16 (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Schools across the United States have adopted trauma-informed approaches in response to these widespread mental and behavioral health needs among students (McIntyre, 2018; Sharkey et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2019). These approaches, often grounded in safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017), have shifted educators’ and schools’ responses from punitive, compliance-oriented discipline to supportive, relationship-centered practices. Students benefit when adults understand trauma and respond with curiosity, attunement, and strategies that promote emotional regulation. Trauma-informed schooling, in its current form, has also helped many educators move away from assumptions about “defiance” and toward awareness and compassion for the complexity of student behavior.

However, awareness and strategy adoption alone have not changed the structural conditions that create traumatic experiences, such as racism, cultural invalidation, and inequitable practices. Even in schools that have adopted trauma-informed language or training, inequities persist. Racially minoritized students continue to experience discipline disparities, culturally and linguistically diverse students are misidentified as having behavioral disorders, and LGBTQ+ students experience school-based



trauma related to identity invalidation. Trauma-informed efforts often train educators to *understand* trauma, but not to examine the structures that cause it (Alvarez, 2020; Haynes et al., 2023; Marraccini et al., 2023; Venet, 2023). In a recent systematic narrative review of 24 studies examining the content of trauma-informed professional development in K-12 schools, nearly half (11 of 24) did not incorporate culturally responsive, anti-racist, or equity considerations within the training content (Knox et al., 2025). Instead, educators were largely taught to conceptualize trauma as located within the student—as an individual psychological experience—rather than as something also produced or exacerbated by structural and identity-based stressors such as racism, exclusionary discipline, cultural invalidation, or immigration-related adversity. This persistent gap suggests that trauma-informed education, as currently implemented, can build empathy while allowing inequitable systems to persist.

Recognizing this gap, the *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education* issued a Call for Papers—*Culturally Responsive, Anti-Racist, and Equitable (CARE) Practices in Trauma-Informed Schools*—explicitly seeking scholarship that interrogates the cultural, racial, political, and systemic dimensions of trauma-informed education. The call stated that trauma-informed approaches must “acknowledge and address the cultural, racial, and social contexts that shape students’ and educators’ experiences.” The call represented a rare and urgent opportunity to bring together research not just on what trauma-informed schools do, but on what trauma-informed schools must become in order to disrupt inequity and support healing.

The response to the call revealed a clear pattern. Researchers, practitioners, and community partners across the country are moving beyond traditional trauma-informed knowledge to asking, according to available literature and practice, whose trauma matters in schools and can schools address trauma without addressing racism, cultural exclusion, and inequitable access to services? The manuscripts selected for this Special Issue demonstrate that the field is ready to move beyond trauma awareness toward work that is grounded in culture, identity, belonging, and shared power.

## THE CARE FRAMEWORK

A recent conceptual article by Beason and colleagues (2024) offers a pathway forward for trauma-informed education. The Culturally Responsive, Anti-Racist, and Equitable (CARE) model advances three central claims: (1) trauma is an individual psychological reaction but also a response to structural and identity-based stressors; (2) trauma-informed work requires shifting power by engaging students, families, and communities as partners in decision-making; and (3) equity is not an optional enhancement to trauma-informed practice, but the mechanism through which trauma-informed work becomes effective. Within CARE, culturally responsive practices refer to intentionally affirming and leveraging students’ cultural identities, values, and ways of knowing in all facets of schooling. Anti-racist practices move beyond individual beliefs to examine how policies and procedures within schools advantage some racial groups over others. It requires identifying and interrupting practices that reproduce harm. Equitable practice requires that resources, access and opportunities be structured so that students receive what they need based on context and lived

experience rather than on assumptions of sameness. The CARE framework integrates each of these constructs into the design and delivery of school mental health systems, ensuring trauma-informed schools actively cultivate belonging, affirmation, and power for students who have been historically harmed by schools. In this way, the CARE framework provides the conceptual foundation for this special issue.

## **CARE and the Current Special Issue**

While the CARE framework describes what trauma-informed schools must become, the articles in this special issue illustrate how districts and schools enact that transformation across policy, implementation, adult learning, and student partnership. Collectively, the manuscripts reposition trauma-informed schooling as a process of redistributing power, transforming school environments so that students experience belonging, access, cultural affirmation, and agency. Across diverse contexts, these manuscripts demonstrate that trauma can be produced or intensified by school systems through racialized discipline practices, cultural invalidation, resource inequities, limited access to mental health supports, or lack of representation in decision-making. Schools therefore have the responsibility not only to respond to trauma but to reduce the conditions under which trauma is reproduced. The manuscripts in this issue show that when school systems embed CARE practices into decision processes, implementation structures, professional learning, and student partnerships, trauma-informed education becomes transformative.

## **STRUCTURAL SHIFTS**

Across this special issue, several manuscripts argue that whether trauma-informed schooling advances equity depends less on individual educator skill than on the policies, structures, and decision-making rules that organize school systems. Ouedraogo-Thomas' (2026) critical policy analysis shows how state-level documents can appear progressive on student mental health while remaining vague or compliance-oriented on equity, leaving racism, poverty, and other structural drivers of trauma unnamed and unaddressed. The analysis demonstrates that "policy neutrality" is a myth: when equity language is symbolic rather than directive, implementation defaults to surface-level uptake and uneven enactment, ultimately reproducing disparities the policy purports to solve. The paper calls for explicit, equity-embedded policy language, enforcement mechanisms, and resource redistribution so that trauma-informed mandates move beyond rhetoric to systemic change. Onipede and colleagues (2026) extend this structural lens through a modified Delphi with national experts, mapping where the field sees both importance and feasibility across trauma-informed school components. Their consensus ratings reveal a persistent gap: organizational and policy reforms that directly advance racial equity (e.g., power-sharing in decision-making, discipline reform) are rated as highly important but less feasible relative to more traditional training or classroom-level strategies. This feasibility barrier at the systems level clarifies why culturally responsive and antiracist commitments so often stall in implementation, even as stakeholders agree they matter.

Two additional studies situate these feasibility and policy challenges inside real school decision-making and implementation. Crosby and colleagues' (2026) district-level study of the MONARCH whole-school model underscores that trauma-informed transformation is fundamentally a systems project—requiring policy alignment, distributed leadership, and cross-school collaboration to overcome resource constraints and to prevent initiatives from collapsing into isolated classroom routines. The paper argues that, without policy scaffolds and inter-school learning networks, promising culturally sensitive, trauma-informed practices remain fragmented and fragile. Griffin and colleagues (2026) examine the intersection of discipline and mental health for Black students through focus groups with school counselors and administrators. Their findings reveal how structural conditions, such as referral pathways and role ambiguity, determine whether Black students are interpreted as in need of support or in need of removal. The study makes visible how system rules, rather than student needs, may dictate the response to distress, and illustrates that structural change is essential to ensuring equitable access to care.

Together, these manuscripts expose that trauma-informed efforts fail when systems remain unchanged; empathy cannot compensate for inequitable policies, resource imbalances, or power asymmetries. They command us to redesign the conditions under which trauma occurs in schools by embedding equity into the rules, routines, and decision-making structures that govern daily practice.

### **Relational Shifts and Shared Power**

While the previous manuscripts illustrate how policy and structural conditions shape what is possible, another set of articles demonstrates that even well-written policies cannot transform schools unless the work is grounded in relationship-building, trust, and shared power. Merchant and colleagues (2026) show how whole-school trauma-informed implementation depends on ongoing relational work rather than the technical adoption of strategies. In their case example, cultural responsiveness, flexibility, and shared sensemaking were not “add-ons,” but the very mechanisms that enabled progress; when conflict or misalignment occurred, the team paused to repair relationships and return to meaningful collaboration. Similarly, Soltani and colleagues (2026) demonstrate that the success of trauma-informed work with immigrant and refugee youth hinges on cultural brokers—trusted community members who mediate cultural meaning, support family engagement, and carry emotional labor that schools often overlook or undervalue. Their findings reveal that trauma-informed systems must be built on relational reciprocity and role parity; otherwise, the burden of care falls disproportionately on those closest to marginalized communities. Nadeem & Ringle (2026) further reinforce that trust and partnership are central implementation mechanisms within school-based behavioral health centers. Providers were most effective when they addressed basic needs, navigated barriers such as language and stigma, and engaged families as collaborators in interpreting symptoms and planning care. Overstreet and colleagues (2026) expand the relational imperative from partnership to shared power. This study illustrates how trauma-informed practice transforms when students are positioned as co-designers rather than informants. Through youth participatory inquiry, students examined their

school environment, identified sources of harm, and generated solutions that adults had not previously named—demonstrating that those most affected by school routines hold the knowledge needed to improve them.

Across these studies, trauma-informed practice is not depicted as a checklist of interventions, but as a relational endeavor that requires schools to become trustworthy institutions. These manuscripts collectively show that implementation quality is determined by how schools leverage relationships, redistribute power, and engage with students and families, not by how many trauma-informed strategies appear on a training slide. They compel the field to recognize that trauma-informed work is not executed through programs; it is enacted through relationships.

## **Adult Transformations**

A third set of manuscripts centers the adults who are tasked with carrying out trauma-informed work and makes clear that educators' internal development is a part of systems change. Poole and colleagues (2026) demonstrate that professional learning must move beyond increasing trauma knowledge to cultivating educators' critical consciousness about race, power, and identity. In their model, educators engage in structured racial literacy routines, examine their own beliefs and assumptions, and practice strategies that honor students' lived experiences. Trauma-informed practice, in this framing, is not simply a matter of learning new techniques but of unlearning deficit-based narratives and reflecting on how one's positionality shapes interactions with students. Haynes (2026) extends this argument by centering the experiences of Black educators who are often expected to absorb the emotional labor of supporting students' trauma while simultaneously navigating their own experiences of racialized harm in schools. Her findings illustrate that trauma-informed professional development frequently focuses on "supporting students," while neglecting the wellness and healing of the adults who deliver that support. Participants emphasized that they feel most equipped to engage in trauma-informed work when their cultural identities are affirmed, when they experience relational care from colleagues and leaders, and when school environments foster psychological safety for them as well. These manuscripts reveal that trauma-informed schooling cannot rest on techniques alone; it demands adult reflection, identity work, and spaces where educators experience the same relational care we expect them to provide to students. They invite the field to shift the question from "*Do educators know what to do?*" to "*Do educators have the consciousness, support, and belonging required to do it well?*"

## **CLOSING INVITATION**

As you engage with the articles that follow, we invite you to sit with a productive tension: trauma-informed education is no longer only about helping schools understand trauma. It is about preparing schools to interrupt the structural, cultural, and relational conditions that generate or magnify trauma in the first place. The empirical and conceptual articles in this special issue offer different entry points into that work. Some start with policy, naming the procedural systems that maintain

inequity. Others begin with educators, demonstrating how critical consciousness must increase. Overall, authors make visible what becomes possible when schools commit to the practical application of CARE in their trauma-informed practices. As you read, we invite you to do three things: first, notice the assumptions you hold about where trauma “lives” in schools—within individual students, or within systems and routines that can either support or harm them. Second, consider whose voices are centered in trauma-informed decision making, and whose are missing. Finally, imagine what would be required in your context to redistribute power so that students and families are partners and co-designers of trauma-informed, school mental health systems. Our hope is that this special issue pushes readers to expand what trauma-informed education can be when schools choose to change the conditions in which students learn and live.

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**JERICA KNOX**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and faculty member at the National Center for School Mental Health. Her research interests revolve around school mental health, with an emphasis on trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices. Email: [jerica.knox@som.umaryland.edu](mailto:jerica.knox@som.umaryland.edu)

**BROOKSIE STURDIVANT**, EdD, is the founder and lead educational consultant at RISE Services, Inc. & 3e LLC. Her major research interests lie in the area of autoethnographic and narrative inquiry with a focus on subjectivity, agency, trauma and resilience. Email: [brooksiesturdivant@gmail.com](mailto:brooksiesturdivant@gmail.com)

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