

Cultivating Relational Leadership and Wellbeing Through CARE: A Service-Learning Approach in Teacher Preparation

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The Paris Conference on Education 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper presents the CARE framework: Compassion, Accountability, Reflection, and Engagement—as a relational model for cultivating teacher leadership and wellbeing in pre-service teacher education. The project illustrates this enactment through service-learning projects designed and implemented by four student teachers at Georgia Gwinnett College, during Spring 2024 and Spring 2025. Informed by engaged pedagogy, social and emotional learning, CARE positions leadership not as positional authority but as ethical, relational, and community-responsive practice. Each component of the framework is elaborated below conceptually and is grounded in empirical illustration. The goal is to demonstrate how pre-service teachers develop leadership dispositions and skills through relationships and community-engaged work. Service-learning provides an especially rich pedagogical site for enacting CARE, as it relies on reciprocal engagement that is informed by accountability and continuous reflection across institutional and community spaces.

Keywords: service-learning, wellbeing, leadership, teacher education

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Introduction: Reconceptualizing Teacher Leadership

Contemporary classrooms require leadership that is relational, ethical, and emotionally responsive. Since COVID-19 there has been a growing concern in the teaching profession about teacher burnout and teacher retention (Day & Gu, 2010). These issues call for models of teacher leadership that are sustainable and integrate wellbeing into professional development. In this paper I propose the CARE framework as a conceptual model that connects leadership and wellbeing through relational practice. Scholarship on teacher leadership has consistently moved beyond narrow definitions of leadership as administrative authority toward more expansive understandings of influence within school communities. York-Barr and Duke (2004), for example in their foundational review, define teacher leadership as teachers' capacity to influence colleagues, administrators, and school practices to improve teaching and learning. Danielson (2006) similarly argues that teacher leadership is best understood as a set of professional practices that strengthen instruction from within, rather than a formal role layered on top of teaching. Similarly, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) argue that teachers represent a sleeping giant of leadership potential embedded in their professional expertise and collaborative practice. Distributed leadership theorists such as Spillane (2006) shift the lens further and conceptualize leadership as stretched across people and situations. Muijs and Harris (2003) connect teacher leadership to school improvement, and they argue that empowering teachers fosters collective responsibility and organizational learning. This aligns with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of professional capital, which frames teachers' collective expertise and collaborative capacity as a resource that strengthens the profession as a whole. Scholars of care and relational ethics, particularly Noddings (1984/2013), expand leadership discourse by foregrounding the moral and relational dimensions of educational practice. She emphasizes that educational influence is grounded in attentiveness and ethical responsibility. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) similarly document how women's leadership in education has often emerged through relational and collaborative practice and reinforces this broader shift in how leadership is conceptualized. Across this body of work, leadership is understood less as positional power and more as a form of relational influence that is collaborative and emerges through interaction and shared practice. What is underdeveloped is the explicit integration of wellbeing into teacher leadership theory. This gap creates space for frameworks such as CARE to conceptually align relational leadership and professional sustainability.

While existing scholarship has advanced relational understandings of teacher leadership, these frameworks often treat wellbeing as an adjacent outcome and not as an integral part of leadership practice itself. The CARE framework addresses this gap by conceptualizing leadership and wellbeing as mutually constitutive processes implemented through relational practice. Rather than positioning care, reflection, or engagement as discrete dispositions, CARE offers an integrative model that explains how these dimensions interact to support both professional agency and wellbeing. In doing so, the framework shifts the discourse of leadership as influence alone toward leadership as ethically and emotionally sustained practice.

The CARE Framework

In order to conceptualize teacher leadership and wellbeing as relational, ethical, and practice-based dimensions of teacher education, I developed the CARE framework based on my work in teacher education and wellness (Varga-Dobai, 2024, 2026), drawing on my professional expertise in teacher preparation, specifically service-learning course design, research on leadership development, social and emotional learning (SEL), and wellbeing. In this

framework I do not position CARE as an individual trait or sentiment; the CARE framework instead conceptualizes care as a pedagogical framework that must be intentionally designed and reflected upon within teacher education programs.

The CARE framework consists of four interrelated dimensions: Compassion, Accountability, Reflection, and Engagement. Together, these dimensions offer a coherent structure to understand how teacher leadership and wellbeing are cultivated through practice as experiential and community-engaged pedagogies. CARE positions leadership not as positional authority or managerial function, but as relational influence that is informed and enacted through ethical responsibility, emotional attunement, and community responsiveness. Its goal is to integrate leadership development and wellbeing rather than treating them as separate or competing outcomes. Within this framework, wellbeing is relational and practice-embedded, and leadership is perceived as care-informed action.

Compassion

Within the CARE framework, compassion refers to relational trust, emotional attunement, and responsiveness to students' lived experiences and needs. Compassion is not framed as sentimentality, but as a leadership capacity that shapes how teachers interpret student behavior, how they design learning environments, and how they respond to moments of tension or disruption in the classroom. Thus, compassion functions as a foundational leadership approach that emphasizes understanding and relational safety. In teacher education, compassion is cultivated through pedagogical and instructional practices that attend to students' social and emotional as well as academic needs and encourage pre-service teachers to interpret classroom challenges as communicative acts rather than behavioral deficits. As such, compassion supports both leadership development and wellbeing by creating emotionally safe spaces for learning and risk-taking.

Accountability

Accountability, as conceptualized in the CARE framework, extends beyond compliance or evaluation. It is understood as an ethical responsibility to oneself, students, families, and the larger community. CARE reframes accountability as relational and reciprocal rather than punitive or hierarchical. Teacher leadership, from this perspective, involves advocacy, attentiveness, and responsibility for the broader social, emotional, ethical and academic dimensions of teaching. Within teacher education programs, accountability is practiced through sustained commitment to community partnerships, responsiveness to local needs, and ongoing consideration of power and responsibility in the service of student success. For pre-service teachers, accountability contributes to wellbeing because it grounds leadership in personal responsibility and purpose. Accountability also supports pre-service teachers in perceiving responsibility as dispositional practice rather than an expectation that must be performed.

Reflection

Reflection is the mechanism through which CARE is cultivated and evaluated. In the CARE framework, reflection is an ongoing and critical practice that supports leadership identity development, strengthens ethical decision-making and professional growth. Reflection is not treated as an add-on or culminating task, but as a central pedagogical and instructional practice that is embedded throughout coursework and the clinical experiences of the teacher training program. Through reflective practice, pre-service teachers examine their assumptions,

positionality, their own teaching, and emerging role as teacher-leaders. Reflection also allows compassion and accountability to develop as a dispositional skill through sustained practice while also reinforcing the interdependence of leadership and wellbeing.

Engagement

Within the CARE framework, engagement refers to reciprocal, community-based participation that positions students, families, and community members as partners in the educational process. Engagement is not limited to participation but foregrounds involvement and collaboration that is grounded in mutual respect and shared responsibility. Service-learning provides a powerful context for enacting engagement as a leadership practice, as it allows pre-service teachers to work alongside families and communities in ways that expand traditional definitions of school-based involvement. Engagement supports both leadership and wellbeing, and strengthens CARE as a framework by building relational capacity through problem-solving and communication.

CARE and the Interdependence of Leadership and Wellbeing

The CARE framework conceptualizes leadership development and wellbeing as interdependent processes within teacher education. Rather than looking at leadership as an external skill set or administrative function, CARE frames leadership as relational practice grounded in compassion, accountability, reflection, and engagement. In this model, wellbeing becomes a condition that emerges from these four components through ethically grounded and emotionally attuned practice. Leadership and wellbeing are therefore mutually constitutive: each sustains and deepens the other. Within CARE, leadership is conceptualized and enacted through collaboration and relational influence rather than positional authority, constituting wellbeing in the following ways:

- Compassion fosters trust and responsiveness
- Accountability anchors action in ethical responsibility
- Reflection supports adaptive awareness
- Engagement situates leadership within reciprocal community relationships

These dimensions do not function independently as leadership principles. Compassion without accountability risks becoming sentimentality; accountability without compassion risks rigidity; reflection without engagement risks abstraction; engagement without reflection risks reactivity. These tensions are lived dilemmas in practice. For example, efforts to enact compassion in high-stakes accountability contexts may be constrained by institutional expectations, while deep engagement with communities may surface ethical conflicts that challenge teachers' sense of responsibility. CARE does not resolve these tensions but provides a framework for navigating them. The framework enables teachers to interpret and respond to complexity without collapsing into rigidity or disengagement by holding compassion, accountability, reflection, and engagement in dynamic relation. It is through the dynamic interaction of these four dimensions that leadership development occurs. Wellbeing is embedded within this interaction: as teachers cultivate compassionate and reflective responsiveness, they simultaneously develop the emotional resources necessary to sustain their work. In this sense, wellbeing emerges through the enactment of care-informed leadership practices.

Service-Learning as CARE in Action

This study examines how the CARE framework shaped service-learning projects designed and implemented by four pre-service teachers placed in general and Dual Language Immersion (DLI) classrooms at the elementary level. Service-Learning is an educational approach that is grounded in experiential learning and relies on practices of community development as instructional strategy to meet learning goals (National Youth Leadership Council). Experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). In other words, when students engage with concrete experiences and reflect on them, they will be able to use abstract conceptualization to apply newly created knowledge to new experiences. DLI programs deliver half the school day in English and half in a target language—Spanish, French, or Korean. In the process of designing their service-learning projects, students first identified a classroom need through observation, surveys, and informal interviews, then researched the topic, set goals, designed and implemented a project that addressed the need, collected data, and reflected on outcomes. Throughout, they collaborated with mentor teachers, school counselors, administrators, and families. Most service-learning projects centered on two themes: social and emotional learning and family engagement—both areas of documented need in placement schools. Analyzing these projects through the CARE framework reveals how pre-service teachers enacted its dimensions in practice and how leadership identity developed through that enactment.

Peace Pact—Alina, 2nd Grade

Alina noticed students struggled with conflict resolution. She designed a peer-to-peer Peace Pact protocol: two squares taped on the floor, a talking piece, and explicit steps for active listening, naming feelings, offering solutions, and ending with a compliment. She taught it explicitly through modeling and a PowerPoint before implementation. Students reported enjoying the protocol, using kinder language, and allowing peers more thinking time; seven students noted observing classmates talking over each other less frequently. Through CARE: Alina's interpretation of conflict as communication rather than defiance interprets compassion as a leadership stance. Her acknowledgment that the Peace Pact would have been more impactful had it been implemented from the beginning of the year reflects accountability and reflection working together. Collaborating with students to develop shared language for conflict represents engagement as relational co-creation.

Restorative Circles—Jordan, Kindergarten

Jordan implemented themed restorative circles during morning meeting focused on emotional vocabulary, honesty, and conflict resolution. She used a talking stick, collaborated with the school counselor and vice principal, and held impromptu restorative chats when conflicts arose during the day. Assessment through anecdotal notes showed students completing tasks with fewer meltdowns, engaging more positively with peers, and resolving conflicts more independently. Through CARE: Jordan's consistent practice illustrates the interdependence of compassion and accountability—relational safety made possible by sustained, structured commitment. Her reflection that consistency was key to building the trust that made students willing to share deepened her understanding of leadership as a relational, long-term practice rather than an event.

Family Book Club—Alexandra, DLI Classroom

Alexandra identified that students needed more reading exposure at home and that families needed strategies to support comprehension. She ran three weekly workshops for parents, taught five reading strategies through an anchor chart, sent bilingual materials home in Spanish and English, and had students read chapters with parents between sessions. Results included improved reading assessment scores and increased student confidence and participation in class discussions. Through CARE: Alexandra's project exemplifies engagement as CARE defines it as reciprocal partnership rather than a form of transactional involvement. Her collaboration with her mentor teacher on text selection deepened her responsiveness to the specific literacy needs of the community. The experience of working as a genuine partner with families expanded her professional purpose—an instance of wellbeing emerging through care-informed leadership, not as a separate outcome.

MATH Club—Miriam, 1st Grade Dual Language Immersion

Miriam identified through parent-teacher conferences that non-English-proficient families struggled to support math learning at home due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with U.S. curriculum. She developed bilingual weekly anchor charts, take-home activity packets focused on fractions, and participation contracts. Seven families engaged; results showed stronger parent involvement and improved student performance in small-group math work. Through CARE: Miriam's project demonstrates accountability extended beyond the classroom. Her responsiveness to linguistic and cultural barriers in the home environment reflects an ethical commitment to equity that is relational and grounded in supporting the community. Her reflection on how family conversations reshaped how she designed materials illustrates how engagement and reflection reinforce one another, and how leadership identity deepens through community responsiveness.

Discussion

The most significant finding across these four projects is what happened to the student teachers themselves. Through service-learning, they moved from understanding leadership as a role to experiencing it as a practice—something that they have built through relationships, collaboration, and reflection rather than authority. They learned that knowing students: their struggles, their strengths, their home context is foundational to good teaching. They came to understand that SEL is not a supplement to instruction but integral to it, and that daily improvements in a student's mood and engagement are as significant as any formal assessment measure. They also developed confidence in working with adults, for example mentor teachers, counselors, administrators, and families who became genuine collaborators. Miriam's conversations with families revealed linguistic and cultural barriers that reshaped how she designed materials. Alexandra's collaboration with her mentor teacher on text selection deepened her understanding of responsive instruction. Jordan's conversations with a peer about restorative practices affirmed the value of professional community. Student teachers also noted constraints honestly: time limitations, the trust that SEL work requires, and the complexity of gathering reliable data in real classrooms. These acknowledgments are themselves evidence of CARE as student reflect deeply on what worked and what did not. Instead of self-congratulation these reflections become honest assessments of the conditions of practice. Within these conditions, CARE does not promise the elimination of complexity but a framework to work with that complexity with integrity.

Implications for Teacher Education

If leadership and wellbeing are understood as interdependent and relational, then teacher education must intentionally design experiences that cultivate these dimensions in integrated ways. The CARE framework offers a conceptual structure to rethink how leadership is introduced, practiced, and sustained within teacher preparation. Teacher education programs often treat leadership as an advanced role associated with formal titles or administrative functions. CARE invites a reconceptualization of leadership as relational practice—grounded in compassion, ethical accountability, reflective awareness, and reciprocal engagement—that begins in preservice preparation. The CARE framework positions reflection as a continuous practice central to professional formation. Teacher education programs might consider how reflective inquiry is scaffolded across coursework and field experiences. Rather than functioning as a culminating task, reflective practice could serve as an ongoing space where leadership identity, ethical reasoning, and wellbeing are shaped together. CARE also suggests that teacher preparation should not separate emotional attunement from professional responsibility. Preparing teachers to hold compassion and accountability in tension requires pedagogical spaces where candidates can examine ethical dilemmas, navigate those complexities with courage, and practice adaptive decision-making. CARE emphasizes engagement as reciprocal and community-based. Teacher education programs may consider how candidates are positioned in relationship to families, communities, and colleagues—not only as implementers of curriculum but as collaborative partners who engage in change together. Service-learning, as the projects described here, is a particularly rich site for this work, as it demands the accountability, attentiveness, and community responsiveness that CARE describes. At the same time, implementing CARE within contemporary educational contexts has constraints. Teachers operate within systems shaped by standardization, accountability mandates, and uneven resource distribution, which may limit the extent to which relational and care-centered practices can be sustained. The emotional labor associated with compassion and engagement may place additional demands on educators, particularly in under-resourced environments. Recognizing these tensions is important: CARE is not an idealized solution but a framework that must be negotiated within broader structural conditions.

Conclusion

This paper has presented CARE as a way to reframe teacher leadership as care-informed action grounded in compassion, accountability, reflection, and engagement. Empirically, this framework is grounded in the service-learning projects of four pre-service teachers. The CARE framework offers teacher education a coherent and integrative model that cultivates leadership and wellbeing as mutually reinforcing dimensions of professional preparation. It repositions teacher leadership not as an advanced credential or administrative aspiration, but as a developmental orientation that begins in preservice preparation and deepens across a professional lifetime. The projects described here—a Peace Pact in second grade, restorative circles in kindergarten, a family book club, a bilingual math program—are small in scale. But the leadership dispositions cultivated through them are not. That is the argument this paper makes, grounded in CARE: that consequential, community-engaged action is not a supplement to teacher preparation, but it is a foundation. In other words, CARE is less a destination and an outcome rather than an ongoing practice that becomes more nuanced and more sustaining with practice and continuous integration.

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