

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PUTS RIGOR AT THE CENTER

Q&A WITH ZARETTA HAMMOND

Zaretta Hammond is a teacher educator, researcher, and consultant committed to supporting leaders, coaches, and teachers in integrating neuroscience with instruction, equity, and literacy. Her work is informed by her classroom experience, her time in organizations such as the National Equity Project, and her own research about how neuroscience and culture impact learning.

In her ongoing work with teachers, she has successfully supported educators throughout the country and beyond to develop culturally responsive habits of mind and instructional practices that support underprepared diverse students to lead their own learning.



Zaretta Hammond

Q: Your book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Corwin, 2015), introduces the “Ready for Rigor” approach to culturally responsive teaching. How is it unique?

A: For a long time, nationally we have been trying to address gaps in learning outcomes between diverse students — namely, between black, Latino, Southeast Asian, English language learner, and low-income students and

their white and Asian counterparts.

When I began in education reform 20 years ago at the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, schools were just beginning to routinely disaggregate data across racial groups and socioeconomic

READY FOR RIGOR A FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

AWARENESS

- Know and own your cultural lens.
- Understand the three levels of culture.
- Recognize cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism.
- Understand how the brain learns.
- Acknowledge the sociopolitical context around race and language.
- Recognize your brain's triggers around race and culture.
- Broaden your interpretation of culturally and linguistically diverse students' learning behaviors.

LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

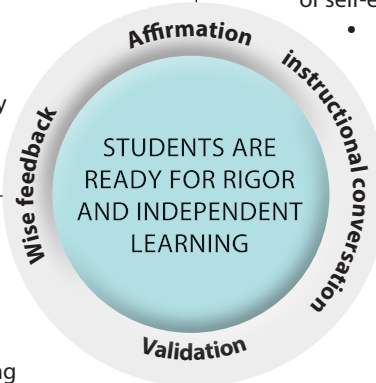
- Reimagine the student and teacher relationship as a partnership.
- Take responsibility to reduce students' social-emotional stress from stereotype threat and microaggressions.
- Balance giving students both care and push.
- Help students cultivate a positive mindset and sense of self-efficacy.
- Support each student to take greater ownership for his learning.
- Give students language to talk about their learning moves.

INFORMATION PROCESSING

- Provide appropriate challenge in order to stimulate brain growth to increase intellectual capacity.
- Help students process new content using methods from oral traditions.
- Connect new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors from students' community and everyday lives.
- Provide students authentic opportunities to process content.
- Teach students cognitive routines using the brain's natural learning systems.
- Use formative assessments and feedback to increase intellectual capacity.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS & LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Create an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning.
- Make space for student voice and agency.
- Build classroom culture and learning around communal (sociocultural) talk and task structures.
- Use classroom rituals and routines to support a culture of learning.
- Use principles of restorative justice to manage conflicts and redirect negative behavior.



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status. A large part of that work was helping educators come to terms with the systems of oppression and bias that created chronic achievement and opportunity gaps.

Since then, educators have engaged regularly in courageous conversations to raise awareness of racial inequities in schools. More and more educators discuss implicit bias, white privilege,

and microaggressions at the school level. This is an important step.

Beyond this, though, it's essential to help teachers and leaders know what teaching and learning moves they should be making in schools to increase achievement and what acts of leadership facilitate and protect these efforts.

I see my work as helping schools that have done significant cultural

proficiency work go to the next phase of equity work: classroom and school implementation. The ultimate goal of culturally responsive teaching is to help students accelerate their learning by building cognitive learning muscles.

A growing body of research highlights this idea of “learnable intelligence.” When we look at the causes of inequity related to instruction,

we see that diverse students aren't given the type of robust instruction early on that builds up their cognition. So they get to higher grades unable to carry the cognitive load.

We see a disproportionate number of struggling, underserved students of color and poor students who can't engage in higher-order thinking or read on grade level. That's not because they are not capable. It's the result of "inequity by design" — we aren't giving them the same learning opportunities as their peers.

To address that, it's not about remediation, but about bringing powerful teaching to underserved populations early on so they have the tools and opportunities to build their brainpower and learning muscles.

The Ready for Rigor framework codifies four core areas we have to synthesize and braid together to help students become leaders of their own learning. These areas are awareness, learning partnerships, information processing capacity, and learning communities and environments. (See p. 41.)

Integrating these pieces involves creating new routines, processes, and structures in classrooms around how we engage students in conversation, give feedback, and provide affirmation and validation.

Q: Schools and districts throughout the U.S. have used the book to inform their work on equity and supporting all students. What professional learning designs are educators employing?

A: I think the most powerful professional learning design (although not the only valuable one) for implementing culturally responsive teaching is a collaborative inquiry process. In collaborative inquiry, teachers work together to identify

When we improve the basic mental operations for processing information, we increase our capacity to take on more rigorous learning.

common challenges related to the achievement gap, test instructional approaches that use cultural learning tools based on the framework, and analyze relevant data to determine if these practices are helping students.

When trying to help students improve their learning using culturally responsive practices, this approach offers a systematic, collective process so teachers build shared language and shared understanding of what works. In collaborative inquiry for culturally responsive teaching, the focus isn't on implementing strategies per se, but in mastering how to get a student to improve her "learning moves" leading to deeper learning.

Too often, teachers think the magic is in the strategy and don't focus on helping the student become a more confident, independent learner. When using collaborative inquiry for culturally responsive teaching, the focus is on the learner. Because only the learner learns.

Collaborative inquiry provides a space for teachers to come together to honestly examine how to help diverse, struggling students carry more of the cognitive load during instruction. "Cognitive load" relates to the amount of information that our working memory can hold at one time as it is solving a problem or working through a complex task.

When we improve the basic mental operations for processing information, we increase our capacity to take on more rigorous learning. For example, some teachers use Harvard's Project Zero's seven studio "habits," which are

really mental steps for analyzing a task. Some schools use "thinking routines" as a way to get students to process more effectively.

The more a student independently uses these routines, over time he can process more content with less effort. This results in him being able to engage in more academic conversations or depending less on the teacher for help with each step.

There are a variety of ways educators are integrating elements of the Ready for Rigor framework. For example, the work at Roots International Middle School in Oakland Unified School District in California is powerful. Roots International serves high-poverty communities in East Oakland, home to African-American, Latino, Cambodian, and Pacific Islander families.

Under the direction of principal Geoff Vu, the faculty have focused methodically on understanding how to help students carry more of the cognitive load by using the "ignite, chunk, chew, and review" process embedded in Ready for Rigor. As part of the "chunking" element to create more cognitive connections between students' everyday lives and the content, they've been innovative in combining elements of ethnic studies, social justice education, and popular media.

For example, one history teacher used *Underground*, a popular TV show about the pre-Civil War period, to build several social studies units. Students then created historical fan fiction based on the units' lesson to teach writing skills and help students process their understanding of the concepts, motivations, facts, and events of the era.

Teachers in geography, science, and math are also finding ways to innovate. It's not perfect yet, but very promising.

I am also seeing promising efforts to integrate Ready for Rigor with existing frameworks and curricular approaches.

In the Boston Public Schools, leaders were able to integrate some of the core design principles from the Ready for Rigor frame into what they call their Essentials of Instructional Equity. They focused on creating shared language around core concepts and design principles that help students accelerate learning.

In California, Alameda County Office of Education is integrating Ready for Rigor into a course of study for educators that uses arts-integrated education methodologies from Harvard's Project Zero.

They have revolutionized the training of coaches who lead the courses for educators so that culturally responsive teaching is part of their larger work, not separated from it.

Q: This work is challenging. It requires educators to be ready and willing to rethink their beliefs, their actions, and the systems in which they work. What are some of the ways you recommend schools address the challenges to make culturally responsive teaching feasible?

A: This work is challenging for many schools because it requires that we coordinate several elements in four key areas of practice. The elements of the Ready for Rigor frame are most powerful when they act in unison. But too many schools are tempted to oversimplify culturally responsive teaching for an easy, quick rollout.

Schools fall into the trap of trying to find a few turnkey strategies that they label culturally responsive without ever engaging the student. If we don't give the student new language for talking about his learning and how he goes about improving it, then we won't see achievement scores improve.

Leaders too often promote culturally responsive teaching as a "thing" rather than as an approach

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that coordinates and integrates four macro-level areas outlined in the Ready for Rigor framework and a number of micro-level moves.

I see often where leaders make it a technical treatment for students of color rather than promote culturally responsive teaching as an adaptive challenge that requires change in how educators think about and do their work in partnership with students as learners.

The biggest trap is letting a sense of urgency lead to poor implementation. I see districts that are forming book study groups, asking teachers to pick a few actionable practices, and then expecting successful, widespread implementation when there's no capacity to support teachers and no quality control. There is a set of conditions that leaders need to put in place to execute equity by design.

Unfortunately, there is a real danger of culturally responsive teaching going the way of growth mindset a few years ago — people extract one element, oversimplify or misinterpret it, and then misapply it. Growth mindset's originator, Carol Dweck, had to come out and try to set the record straight.

I am hoping to encourage and support school districts to be more deliberate in building capacity thoroughly first — get small now to go big later, so you'll have real impact on student learning. Otherwise, schools can end up feeding achievement gaps, rather than closing them.

Q: Ideally, schools commit to this work in a systemic way. But getting everyone on board doesn't happen

easily. Where can individuals start at classroom, school, and district levels?

A: The beauty of culturally responsive teaching is that it doesn't require any special equipment. Any teacher who desires to improve the learning capacity of students can begin by assessing current practices in the four areas of the Ready for Rigor framework, determining what's missing, and using collaborative inquiry to make changes.

Helping underserved, struggling students develop the language and opportunity to talk about their process as learners can lead to students feeling more intellectually safe in the classroom and feeling that they have greater agency over their learning.

You have to begin small with your teacher leaders, building their skill and capacity by using their classrooms as lab classrooms, where they master their skills in moving struggling learners from dependent to independent learning over the course of a semester. You support those teacher leaders to become peer coaches to a new cohort of teachers within the school.

Coaching is beneficial so there is observation of new practices and educators can help one another overcome specific challenges. It is also essential to have a schedule that allows teachers to collaborate and make classroom time for a deeper engagement with students.

When you put all these pieces in place, over time you have shifted both the culture of the adult learning community and the instructional power of faculty. Unfortunately, you can't book study your way to being a culturally responsive school. But when done correctly, culturally responsive teaching can be a game changer for accelerating student learning. ■