

Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain

*Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor
Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
Students*

Zaretta Hammond

Foreword by Yvette Jackson

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*This book is dedicated to my children,
Morgan and Zindzi.
You have been my greatest teachers.*



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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-1-4833-0801-2

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

14 15 16 17 18 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

Neuroscience research has substantiated a reality that we should relish: We are all wired for expansive learning, high intellectual performances, and self-determination!

Although this has been verified, there is a syllogism for educators that should be proven to be true and yet has still not become the performance standard: If all brains are wired for expansive learning, high intellectual performances and self-determination, then students of color should be experiencing this state of being. Since neuroscience has proven the validity of the premise of this syllogism, this is the time for a seminal question to be reckoned with: Why are so many students of color underachieving?

We can't overstate the fact that this reality is a complex conundrum, requiring the need to consider and address a myriad of underregarded factors, the most prevalent being lack of belief in the innate intellectual potential of these students. The most poignant consideration to address in order to answer this seminal question takes us back to the finding from neuroscience: If all students are wired for expansive learning and self-determination, what is needed to activate that wiring for optimal connectivity for students of color? The answer: mediating learning through cultural responsive teaching.

When the brain encounters information, especially during the act of reading and learning, it's searching for and making connections to what is personally relevant and meaningful. What is relevant and meaningful to an individual is based on his or her cultural frame of reference. Finding cultural relevance and personal connections give us perspective, engages our attention, and assists us in interpreting and inferring meaning, enabling the depth of understanding and interest needed for what are considered acts of high intellectual processing such as conceptualizing, reasoning, or theorizing (Jackson, 2011).

Unfortunately, teachers are too often unaware of the fact that the connections they choose to assist students in understanding concepts being taught are in fact "cultural," reflective of the lived, familiar experiences of students who are not students of color, leaving students of color in a state

of disconnect, and often a deep sense of frustration. As much as they search to find the relevance that would enable them to be engaged and make meaning, they are unable, so their innate ability for high levels of cognitive processing is inhibited.

Cultural relevance is the key to enabling the cognitive processing necessary for learning and imperative for engaging and unleashing intellectual potential for students of color. Neuroscience has informed us that it is the catalyst that activates the wiring for neural connectivity to be optimized for learning. But why? And how can we use this information to assist the tens of thousands of teachers around the country who search tirelessly for what's needed to design their teaching to be culturally responsive to students of color so they can perform at the high levels they believe these students are capable of attaining?

Cultural responsiveness is not a practice; it's what informs our practice so we can make better teaching choices for eliciting, engaging, motivating, supporting, and expanding the intellectual capacity of ALL our students. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor* elucidates for us the neuroscience behind why culture is the fundamental imperative for learning. Zaretta Hammond translates this science into a framework that enables teachers to both create the relationships *and* apply strategies that foster culturally responsive teaching to optimize learning, enabling us to make real the implication of the syllogism that students of color can demonstrate the expansive learning, high intellectual performances, and self-determination for which their brains are wired to achieve.

Dr. Yvette Jackson

Acknowledgments

I remember the day in 2000 a principal suggested I write this book as she left my conference breakout session. I had just presented findings from my 3-year pilot program on educational equity as part of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) annual conference. I thought it was ironic for her to say that given so very few people had attended this session where I talked about equity, instruction, and brain science. But the idea was planted. Over the years, I found other teachers, leaders, and researchers interested in the topic. Every conversation and article shared has contributed to this book. I thank each one of you for being part of my personal learning community. I also want to thank those teachers who invited me into their classrooms to explore these ideas in real time and shared their practice with me.

I also want to appreciate my National Equity Project family. My two tours of duty allowed space to practice and refine many of these ideas. To LaShawn Route-Chatmon, I appreciate your continuous encouragement. Victor Cary, I am so glad you liked talking about neuroscience just as much as I did. And a special thank you to coaches, Mark Salinas and Colm Davis, who were so kind to read the first draft and offer insightful feedback. It's a better book because of you.

For their commitment to ensuring the next generation of teachers are culturally conscious, I'd like to acknowledge my St. Mary's College colleagues, Clifford Lee and Rania Leon. I am privileged to teach with you.

A shout out to Steve Jubb, Michelle Grant-Groves, Sarah Breed, Mica Mosely, Shane Safir, Leslie Plettner, and Susan Sandler. You all have been my cheerleaders over the years. A special thanks to Professor Nikole Richardson at Mills College who reminded me that I wasn't writing for myself but for teachers who were committed to being culturally responsive educators.

Becki Cohn-Vargas, you deserve a special thanks for being a great matchmaker and introducing me to Dan. I so appreciated our shoptalk over lunch. Thanks to my editor, Dan Alpert, for being a champion for this book during a very difficult personal period. My appreciations also go out

to Kimberley Greenberg and Cesar Reyes for their help in getting all the pieces of the book in the right places.

There are no words to express my gratitude to my family for enduring the disruptions of daily life so I could write this book. Your encouragement has been my oxygen. Last but not least, I want to thank William, my spouse and partner in life. Thirty years ago when we formed our partnership you promised I'd never have to sacrifice my own identity and dreams. This book is living proof of that promise. Thank you.

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Marsha Basanda
Fifth Grade Teacher
Greenville County Schools, Monarch Elementary
Simpsonville, SC

Charla Bunker
Literacy Specialist
Great Falls Public Schools
Great Falls, MT

Marcia Carlson
Sixth Grade Teacher
Crestview Elementary School
Clive, IA

Becki Cohn-Vargas
Director, Not In Our School
The Working Group
Oakland, CA

Jennifer Craft
Staff Development Teacher
Montgomery Blair High School
Silver Spring, MD

Rick DuVall
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Central Florida Education Consortium
Orlando, FL

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Zaretta Hammond is a former classroom English teacher who has been doing instructional design, school coaching, and professional development around the issues of equity, literacy, and culturally responsive teaching for the past 18 years. She teaches as a lecturer at St. Mary's College's Kalmanovitz School of Education in Moraga, California.

In addition to consulting and professional development, she has been on staff at national education reform organizations, including the National Equity Project and the former Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). She has trained instructional coaches in reading development, especially targeted at students of color and English learners. She has also designed national seminars such as the 3-day *Teaching with a Cultural Eye* series for teachers and school leaders. She is regularly invited to present at regional and national conferences. She has authored articles that have appeared in publications such as *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Along with a focus on culturally responsive teaching, Ms. Hammond has a strong research agenda around literacy, vocabulary development, and equity. She has designed culturally responsive tutor training programs aimed at volunteer reading tutors for a variety of nonprofit organizations. She is currently designing a literacy program to accelerate low reading skills among high school students. She holds a Master's in Secondary English Education.

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