Turn & Talk / Zaretta Hammond on Coaching and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Anthony Rebora

Abstract

PREMIUM RESOURCE

EQUITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
In her book Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain (Corwin, 2018), Zaretta Hammond seeks to direct attention to the "cognitive aspects of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students." For her, culturally responsive teaching is a multifaceted approach to fostering higher-order thinking and helping disadvantaged students become independent learners. A former teacher, Hammond believes that instructional coaches can play an essential role in helping educators grow in this practice.

**You have misgivings about some current tendencies in professional development on culturally responsive teaching. Where do schools most often go wrong?**

Culturally responsive teaching is about improving instruction and helping students of color who’ve historically been deprived due to structural inequities in our education system become better learners. When done right, it can be powerful in helping students improve their learning. But many educators confuse culturally responsive teaching with multicultural education or social justice education. There's nothing wrong with these things, but they’re not about teaching children how to learn, which is the key. Unfortunately, in their haste to implement, schools oversimplify the algorithm—all the pieces that need to come together to get impact. Culturally responsive teaching is a multi-pronged methodology that works through synergy. As I detail in my book, it comprises cultural awareness, information processing, learning partnerships with students, and supportive learning.
environments. That's not the way it's generally promoted to teachers—it's promoted to them as a simple toolkit of strategies or surface content changes like adding diverse authors or including hip hop.

You say it's important for instructional coaches to generate "creative tension" with teachers in their work on culturally responsive teaching. What do you mean by that?

Good coaching is about being in partnership with teachers and helping them see what they need to do differently to get students to step into their learning in powerful ways. By generating creative tension, the coach can help the teacher see with new eyes what's often going too fast in the classroom, so the teacher can understand what's getting in the way. So, creative tension is a kind of gap analysis. We look into the classroom and help the teacher see current reality around the quality of relationships or who is carrying most of the cognitive load during instruction. That way, we are not just offering generic strategies, but truly helping the teacher get a sense of what she needs to keep doing because it's working and what she needs to stop doing because it's not working. What I see happening now is administrators expecting coaches to bring in a set of one-size-fits-all strategies, but not focus on improving ways to get students to actively process new content.

Are there reflective practices you'd recommend for instructional coaches who want to be better prepared to work with teachers on culturally responsive teaching?
Absolutely. Coaches need to sharpen their own equity lens first. They need to do their own "inside out" work around cultural proficiency and implicit bias. But they also have to delve into the science of learning. They have to understand the teaching moves that get underprepared students not only to re-engage, but also to learn at deeper levels. I’d strongly encourage coaches to engage in their own inquiry cycles and their own professional learning communities. Be a hawkish observer of student learning. Smart districts will invest in building capacity among their instructional coaching ranks before they roll out culturally responsive teaching to their teachers. They've typically done it kind of backwards, so that the coach is trying to learn alongside the teacher. That doesn't work.

**Are there common red flags, in terms of teaching practice, coaches should be on the lookout for when helping teachers become more culturally responsive?**

Yes, there are. Too often, in observations, we look for multicultural artifacts but don't look at whether students are becoming stronger learners. The first red flag is when a teacher makes culturally responsive teaching all about relationships but leaves instruction unchanged. The next one is, who's carrying the cognitive load? Is the teacher doing all the talking, and are the kids only talking when the teacher tells them they can, like in assigned group work? That's another misconception—that group work equals culturally responsive instruction. Doing more group work doesn't make the instruction
culturally responsive. The coach has to understand what truly makes instruction "responsive" and assess how is the teacher igniting intellectual curiosity and chunking content so there are cognitive hooks that draw on students' understanding and current experience.

**In your experience, what keeps teachers motivated as they do the difficult work of becoming culturally responsive educators? How can coaches help them keep the vision alive?**

Well, I think the key is to start small. You can't just go in and say, "We're going to be culturally responsive in these four areas in 2 months." That's too much and unrealistic. You want to focus on a small, high-leverage step. It might be a shift in how feedback is delivered. Or it can be making the classroom an intellectually safe place so students aren't afraid to take risks. Or it might be a change in classroom routines or rituals. Coaches can help teachers find that "lead domino" of success. This creates curiosity and a process of inquiry that honors teacher knowledge and expertise.

Here's the thing: Coaching around culturally responsive teaching is about helping teachers improve the dynamic within the instructional core so that kids learn better, so they want to take on hard things. That's the dance of instruction, and it can be very exciting. That's what coaches are there to promote.

*Editor's Note: This interview has been edited for space.*
Anthony Rebora is the editor in chief of *Educational Leadership*.

**Learn More →**

**ASCD is a community dedicated to educators' professional growth and well-being.**

Let us help you put your vision into action.

**Discover ASCD's Professional Learning Services →**

**Related Articles**

**EQUITY**

**Black Kids Have Something to Say—If We Listen**

Kimberly N. Parker

3 weeks ago

https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/zaretta-hammond-on-coaching-and-culturally-responsive-teaching