



Culturally Responsive  
Teaching and the brain by  
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BOOK STUDY

# Collectivist cultures

"There is a reason that collectivist cultures focus on relationships. The brain is wired to scan continuously for social and physical threats, except when we are in positive relationships. The oxytocin positive relationships trigger helps the amygdala stay calm so the prefrontal cortex can focus on higher order thinking and learning. Just as you want to identify and remove things that create an emotionally unsafe environment, you have to also focus on building positive relationships that students recognize based on their cultural schema."

# The warm demander

**"For the warm demander, the feedback conversation offers an opportunity to engage the student and help him 'up his game.' But not just any old feedback will do."** Hammond asks us to excuse the pronouns.

This quote speaks to me as a teacher and learner. In my roles in life, feedback decisions must be made moment by moment. It is so tricky! I can really relate to learning to use just the right prompt and scaffolding language in my lessons to get at the point-of-need information to help the learning.

This encapsulates what our role is in relation to students whenever we give them feedback. Making a demand of a student without having laid the ground of trust, caring, and understanding is just authoritarian. This can cause a student to be put on the defensive (flight, flight, freeze) or just shut down to learning. Conversely, just expressing warmth towards a student without holding high expectations and seeing capability will not help that learner. As educators, we have to strike a balance between warmth and demand.

# Debunking culture of poverty

**"Culturally responsive teachers acknowledge the impact of the sociopolitical context on children of color and their families."**

Hammond writes that poverty is not a culture. Right? But how often do we hear about "the culture of poverty?" Instead, poverty is sociopolitical. It is part of the oppressive nature of our systems in place that limit upward mobility. If we reflect on our perception of people in poverty, who are disproportionately people of color, we are likely to fall into deficit thinking. Our implicit bias reinforces views that people in poverty are less able to be invested in their children's education. This is hugely impactful on our students and their families. We can shift away from this deficit thinking, hold high standards for all our learners, engage them in culturally responsive ways, and we can make a difference.

# Debunking Culture of Poverty



The "culture of poverty" argument is grossly outdated. The idea that people of color choose to be poor and uneducated based on their cultural and family values is self-serving to the majority. If we are going to make an intentional effort to challenge these biased thoughts, we have to assume the best intentions of our students and families. We have to ask families what their values are in regards to education and what their hopes are for their children's future, as well as what their children's hopes are for themselves. Then we have to take that information and actually adjust what we're doing. This practical adjustment, not just a thought experiment, but real change, is the hardest part.

# Intellectual Apartheid

"Our ultimate goal as culturally responsive teachers is to help dependent learners learn how to learn. We want them to have the ability to size up any task, map out a strategy for completing it, and then execute the plan. That's what independent learners do."

"Culturally and linguistically diverse students experience intellectual apartheid. A disproportionate number are dependent learners. They don't see teachers trying to get to know them as learners and help them [to] build the necessary skills to be successful. Instead, teachers lower their expectations, dumb down the curriculum and slow down instruction [which] leads to boredom and disengagement."

"Culturally responsive teaching begins with re-establishing rapport and trust so that teachers can rigorously support students to close their learning gaps. [An educator's] role as an ally in the learning partnership [is] to know when to offer emotional comfort and care and when to not allow the student to slip into learned helplessness."

# Rapport + Alliance = Cognitive Insight

**“Relationships are not just emotional; they have a physical component. Relationships exist at the intersection of mind-body. They are a precursor to learning.”**

Separate from the idea of academic difficulties being the result of academic skill deficits, or even behavioral/emotional skill deficits (e.g. Ross Greene’s theory), could be whether we understand and are responding to our students’ deep cultural values. If deep cultural values reflect our students’ concepts of self, worldview, spirituality, understanding of fairness, etc., then the methods we use for teaching, as well as the lesson content itself, might not jive. The students themselves may not even realize why they are not connecting with a teacher or subject. If we assume best intentions, believe they want to do well, and value who they are as humans, students will begin to feel safe to take learning risks.

# Rapport + Alliance = Cognitive Insight

Try these:

- ▶ I Wish My Teacher Knew... (challenges/hard stuff I am working through)
- ▶ I Wish My Teacher Knew...(what activities cause me to lose track of time)
- ▶ What keeps me going when working on something hard in class is...
- ▶ My “appreciation language” is (pick one)
  - Quality time like having special time to hang out with the teacher or other special group or person at school
  - Physical touch like a high-five or fist bump or have a dance break
  - Acts of service like having someone do something special for me
  - Words of affirmation like getting a note of encouragement or certificate for a big accomplishment
  - Gifts like small fun objects to remind me of my achievement or to mark a milestone

# Empowerment and equity

**“In culturally responsive pedagogy, the classroom is a critical container for empowering marginalized students. It serves as a space that reflects the values of trust, partnership, and academic mindset that are at its core.”**

To me a welcoming, safe, trusting and relaxed classroom community is so important for our learners. It helps to support our dependent learners reach more toward independent learning. Culturally responsive pedagogy means you are there for all your kids; not holding their hand, but cheering them on. Culturally responsive teaching is about feeling safe to take risks, and safe to be seen. Every child deserves to feel safe in their learning community; valued, trusted, and loved.

# Instructional conversation

**"One of the most important tools for a culturally responsive teacher is instructional conversation. The ability to form, express, and exchange ideas is best taught through dialogue, questioning, and the sharing of ideas. Instructional conversation provides the space to do this type of processing."**

Often in classrooms it's easy to default to the teacher and individual students having back and forth conversations. Instructional conversations are very different. These are conversations among students with the teacher guiding on the side. In classrooms where students are having instructional conversations, we would expect that the room may have a buzz of conversation - with small clusters discussing and processing - and not the traditional everyone listening to one student at a time directed by a teacher.

# A place furnished with hope

**“Every person needs a place that is furnished with hope.” – Maya Angelou**

The place that I am furnishing for my students is their classroom environment, which includes the physical space, rituals, routines, and relationships between teachers and students, and students with one another. When our students feel hopeful in this space we call school, they are more open to learning and to taking the risks that learning entails. Conversely, when a student does not feel a sense of hope at school, they can shut down, isolate, act out, or become unavailable to what all that school has to offer.

Based on our human need to feel safe in spaces and for connection with one another, the author’s call for us to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices makes sense to me. In her book, she lays the groundwork by reminding us what we already know from neuroscience. Our brain is wired and comes standard with a safety-threat detection software. When our basic needs are met and we feel connected to others in our environment, our nervous system releases oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. However, when we feel a threat (even a perceived social or emotional one) we release adrenaline and cortisol to prepare to fight, flight, or freeze.

What it means for me is that I want to be thoughtful and intentional about my teaching practices. Am I creating a place for every one of my students that is furnished with hope?

# Final thought from Hammond

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

– Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*