

Understanding Culturally Responsive Teaching

By Jennifer Gunn • December 3, 2018

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is so much more than a trendy education term, but many educators struggle to define it. They are unsure of how it's different from other equitable teaching practices and they can't explain how to utilize it in their classrooms. [Zaretta Hammond's](#) popular book [Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students](#) cites neuroscience to argue that CRT allows students to become drivers of their own learning and build their cognitive capacity. I spoke with Zaretta Hammond to demystify CRT and to explore the dimensions of education equity.

The misconceptions of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

One major misconception about culturally responsive teaching is that it's a *thing* teachers *do* to students or a *technique* they use in class. "It's not," says Hammond. "It's a multifaceted approach where the various parts come together to create a synergy that allows students to accelerate their own learning." CRT isn't just a singular strategy that one applies in classroom teaching. "What I think is important to embrace is equity by design and helping students to become the leaders of their own learning. I believe Culturally Responsive Teaching practices are a *vehicle* to that end. People have to begin with the end in mind. It's an approach — a multifaceted approach. It's not the goal. The idea is that we really need to have some instructional equity."

Another misconception is that CRT is just another name for multiculturalism. "Anything that comes with equity or has to do with children of color or immigrant students, we lump it all in one big basket," says Hammond. "People confuse CRT with diversity and inclusion. They confuse it with cultural proficiency and talk around implicit bias. We just take an 'it's a small world' approach — have a little bit of everybody and everybody will feel seen and heard, and that's a real reductionist view. It just reinforces the lack of understanding about inequity by design and how the roots of inequity are hardwired into our school systems. There's no amount of multiculturalism that can undo the legacy of segregation that has underdeveloped the cognitive resources of students and their competence as learners."

Dimensions of equity

Equity in education encompasses a multitude of practices, beliefs, theories, attitudes, shifts, and structures that overlap, but are often used interchangeably when they are, in fact, quite different.

In Hammond's 3 Dimensions of Equity, she states that there are three different aspects to focus on:

1. Multicultural education
2. Social justice education
3. Culturally responsive pedagogy

"Only Culturally Responsive Teaching is focused on the cognitive development of underserved students. Multicultural and social justice education have more of a supporting role in CRT," Hammond says.

Multicultural education

Multicultural education is the incorporation and celebration of diversity in schools. This can include reading more diverse texts or the consideration and inclusion of various perspectives. Traditionally marginalized students should see themselves reflected in the school's spaces, faces, and curriculum, while more "privileged students" should have more exposure to cultures and perspectives outside of their own.

Social justice education

Social justice education helps students identify injustice and inequalities in their everyday lives and in their community. It focuses on building school practices and a culture that disrupts these inequalities. This dimension can include students working on projects for social change or designing more equitable behavior management systems that include restorative justice practices.

Trauma-informed education

This falls outside of Hammond's 3 Dimensions of Equity but it is a component of equity. Trauma-informed education utilizes social-emotional learning practices to boost academic success, decrease disruptive behavior, and reduce emotional distress in the long term. It involves teaching the whole student, taking into account their personal history, and the resulting coping mechanisms when attempting to understand behaviors and teach learners. Adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to the students who have been impacted by their past experiences.

As Kim Scott, CEO of Trillium Family Services, put it, "Schools are the future wellness hubs of our communities." Trauma-informed care promotes equity, safety, and inclusion — all of which impact student outcomes. Positive response methods and strategic interventions are used to directly address students' behavioral issues. And, trauma-informed methods can improve reading scores and reduce absenteeism.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Hammond's third dimension of equity, culturally responsive education, focuses on elevating the learning *capacity* of students who have traditionally been marginalized in education. According to Hammond, academic struggles that are so often attributed to a "culture of poverty" or "different community values toward education" really exist because "we don't offer [students] sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks."

In essence, students of color are routinely taught a "pedagogy of poverty," featuring a more shallow well of skills, content, and knowledge, according to Martin Haberman, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. This leads to the perpetuation of dependent learners who leave school unprepared for the demands and rigor of post-secondary learning or the workplace.

"Here's what we know from neuroscience: When you're engaged in complex thinking, your brain grows," says Hammond. "Too many classrooms have students passively sitting. The teacher is doing the majority of the work." Hammond sees CRT as a driver toward "helping students have environments in which they can grow their brain power and be active participants in their own learning" and where "they see that they are more than capable because competence precedes confidence. And if we only see Culturally Responsive Teaching as something to build student *confidence*, but we don't help them build *competence* as learners and pay attention to how to learn from their mistakes — how to use that as information — then I think we are missing the point of CRT as a vehicle for getting to equity by design."

Consider the academic performance of your English Language Learners, students of color, and low-income students. If they are not successful, your teaching may need to become more culturally responsive. CRT "concerns itself with building resilience and an academic mindset by pushing back on dominant narratives about people of color," states Hammond.

Getting started with CRT

One way educators can begin digging into CRT is by examining their own pedagogical practice using Hammond's Warm Demander chart. The chart identifies four types of teaching styles that either help, stagnate, or hinder student learning and independence. "The ultimate goal as a warm demander is to help students take over the reins of their learning," says Hammond. "Dependent learners have been conditioned to be passive when it comes to making decisions about their learning moves. They have relied on the teacher to tell them what to do next. If they are to become more independent, we have to provide them with the tools." Identifying one's practice on the chart and surfacing areas for growth is a good first step in the work. Another place to start is Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework, which offers four quadrants of approaches for the classroom.

Zaretta Hammond's book, Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students, is full of CRT research, information, frameworks, and strategies for school leaders and educators to make the

shift to a more culturally responsive practice. You can also check out Hammond's [Ready 4 Rigor website](#) for additional information, including workshops like "Culturally Responsive Lesson Design" and "Coaching for Cultural Responsiveness."

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