



## Washington State ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”

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*What if we considered culturally responsive teaching and brain science in our lesson planning?*

I’ve learned from my fellow WSASCD board members that many districts are using Zaretta Hammond’s game-changing book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015) in professional development (PD) across the state. Hammond examines the connection between culture and cognition, and offers a framework for considering equity and culturally responsive pedagogy that is grounded in neuroscience. Many of these concepts mirror research designed to help educators implement trauma-informed practice, another important and growing trend in professional development and policy around the state. Educators are asked to consider how student behavior might be impacted by adverse childhood experiences that change the brain and impact readiness for learning.

Last year, our teacher preparation program began using Hammond’s (2015) book as a text in one of our key courses, *Diversity, Inclusion and Equity in America*. It’s a big, important course that examines both historical and contemporary issues around access and equity in American schooling. Our students were so engaged with the text that program faculty discussed how we might integrate some of the research-based concepts and strategies even earlier in our teacher candidates’ development. Our story could offer a compelling point of reflection for educators working to implement culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and trauma-informed practices around the state.

### *Year One*

In the first year, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015) was an optional book for students in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion class. They could also choose to read *So You Want to Talk About Race* (Oluo, 2018) or Debbie Irving’s *Waking up White, And Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (2014). Students loved all of the books, and found Hammond’s especially relevant to their daily lives as teacher candidates. It brought together the many concepts they’d been learning all year around teacher beliefs, classroom management, and student-focused instruction.

My colleague (and the instructor) Emily Huff noted that the brain research was empowering for teacher candidates because they realized how this shift in their thinking as educators would empower their students as well. As Hammond notes, “When we focus on using culture as a cognitive scaffold, then we’re able to leverage students’ neural pathways that make learning easier” ([Hammond, 2016](#)). These strategies also connected to our previous teaching on trauma-informed practice. Students began to understand that they could help reduce the increase in student stress hormones by developing a safe and inclusive classroom learning environment.

### *Year Two*

Our students’ response to Hammond’s work encouraged us to examine how we could highlight the concepts and strategies much earlier in our curriculum. In the first quarter, students take a course in lesson planning. Emily Huff revised and taught this course as well, centering culturally responsive teaching practices within the basics of planning a lesson. To scaffold student learning, students first completed

graphic organizers and discussed concepts from *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015). Later in the quarter, students planned a simple lesson using our university required elements and they received instructor and peer feedback. Next, they were required to include at least one CRT strategy that would make the lesson *more powerful* for students. Finally, a metacognitive reflection required students to consider their choices by responding to the questions, “What culturally responsive teaching strategy or strategies did you embed into your revised lesson and why? How do you think this will accelerate the learning for all of your students?” The revised lesson plans and reflections showed an extraordinary level of depth and thoughtfulness for beginning teachers.

#### *Relevance for Schools and Districts*

We all know that practicing teachers do not compose the kinds of lessons that were required in our teacher preparation programs. As we tell our students, *the countless hours writing out these plans will cause you to internalize each element and you will just begin to think this way*. Our hope is that these students are now integrating CRT practices into their lesson plans in internship. Veteran teachers around the state are most likely familiar with the basics of CRT, and have worked to shift discipline policies and instructional strategies in order to better serve students. District leaders plan the PD and likely include “make and take” strategies for participants. What if, from our various positions of impact on student learning, we all tried to add these simple reflection questions as we begin planning for our days, “What culturally responsive teaching strategy or strategies did you embed into your task(s), and why? How do you think this will accelerate the learning for all of your students?”

#### *References:*

- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
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