

Cultural Responsiveness Starts with Real Caring

Culturally responsive teaching is really about building relationships and validating students. Ensuring the academic success of students takes care and a little tough love.

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“If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then and only then will I drop my defenses and hostility, and I will sing your praises and help you to make the desert bear fruit.”

–Ralph Ellison

I’ve been in conversation with teachers, literacy coaches and district-level folk who out of the gate are trying to figure out how to raise the achievement of black and brown students in reading. The big question folks keep asking is: How do we accelerate their progress? How do we motivate students of color to learn?

They want to focus on the techniques and the strategies—the technical moves of culturally responsive instruction.

But I am reminded by the Ralph Ellison quote that the foundation of culturally responsive instruction is not technical, but relational. It’s about authentic caring. It’s not about using some generic “call and response” strategy to get kids fired up so they are excited about the same ole boring, unrelated stuff. Kids can see through that...quick.

A colleague told me about a recent incident that makes the point. She was part of a team doing classroom walk-throughs in a school in the Midwest that wanted to really focus on culturally responsive pedagogy school-wide.

When the team walked into one fifth-grade classroom with mostly white students, they saw an African-American boy curled in a corner crying hard. The teacher wasn’t attending to him. The other members of her team just looked at each other trying to figure out if they should do something. She couldn’t believe this was a point up for debate. She went over, crouched down to his level, put her hand on his shoulder, and asked what was wrong.

A moment of compassion. A gesture of caring.

The Neuroscience of Caring and Being Cared For

There's real science behind this idea of caring as the on-ramp to learning. When we feel cared for, our brain is flooded with neurotransmitters and hormones like *oxytocin*, the same hormone that makes moms fall in love with their babies even after the pain and effort of labor. These "happy chemicals" tell our pre-frontal cortex, the thinking part of the brain, that all is safe socially, emotionally and physically. All systems are a go for learning.

What happens if you don't feel safe or cared for? Ain't no learning happening. The flood of stress hormones like *cortisol* divert blood from the pre-frontal cortex to the amygdala, an almond-shaped organ in our reptilian brain, in preparation for fight or flight. Not the time for learning. The brain is signaling us that it's time to respond to threats, not lay back and chill.

Imagine going through school without feeling affirmed for the way you speak, think or see the world? I can bet that doesn't generate a lot of happy feelings. Instead, you might feel guarded, untrusting and a wee bit hostile even.

Call for the Warm Demander

How do we show care as culturally responsive educators? By building rapport and a sense of connection, but also by showing "tough love" when necessary, insisting that students rise to their fullest potential, bringing them into their zone of proximal development, kicking and screaming if necessary.

I call it *care and push*.

It's just like insisting your kids eat their vegetables and refusing to let them eat donuts for dinner. You know veggies are good for them. And while donuts may make them happy in the moment, it's not in their best interest in the long run.

Becoming culturally responsive starts with showing genuine caring that recognizes the unique gifts and talents of every child, particularly when that child doesn't look like you.

How do you show "care and push"? How do you explain your "tough love" to students?

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