



What the Experts Are Saying

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Zaretta Hammond is a teacher educator and author of [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students](#). She has worked closely with several of the school systems in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, and she delivered a rousing keynote address at CASEL's 2017 Cross-Districts Learning Event in Oakland, Calif.



Mary Hurley is Coordinator of Social and Emotional Learning for the Oakland Unified School District. She was a classroom teacher for 30 years, is a Carnegie Fellow, and is on the Mills College Teacher Scholars Advisory Board.

Excerpts below.

What is culturally responsive teaching and why is it important?

Zaretta Hammond: It's a way to use culture to build trust and relationships with students as well as develop the cognitive scaffolding that builds on the broader knowledge students already have so that they can become competent, independent learners.

There's some confusion that "culture" is a code word for race. It's not. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is not multicultural education, reading diverse literature, or celebrating heroes and holidays. And it's not just about social justice. It's about helping students build their brain power. It's about teaching and learning, not just building a student's self-esteem. It's about getting students [ready for rigor](#).

Mary Hurley: In Oakland we've had a significant shift in how we see and do social and emotional learning. SEL is not just what you're teaching—the specific skills—but the how. It's about building relationships across culturally diverse communities. It turns out there's a name for this work: culturally responsive teaching. It's the instructional stance we want of our teachers.

They're seeing what's going on in their classrooms with greater clarity, using different lenses. They're looking at their practice not just through the academic lens, the SEL lens, or the equity lens. Instead they're seeing students in a very assets-based way. And they're saying, "Oh, you mean the way I'm teaching really shapes their experience and learning." The cultural context is the on-ramp to learning. It has to be paid attention to.

What's the connection between CRT and social and emotional learning?

Hammond: They're two sides of the same coin. If the brain is full of cortisol and stress hormones, the brain's learning center shuts down. School has not always been a safe space for the most vulnerable students. CRT and SEL both help students get into the right mental state for learning—through self-regulation, getting along with



others, and similar skills. Relaxed alertness lets students lean into learning. Culture is the software to the brain's hardware. Otherwise, the brain's amygdala gets hijacked: fight or flight. SEL through a CRT lens builds trust so students don't feel they need to be on the defensive.

Hurley: At one point teachers were seeing SEL as separate from instruction. But we're all realizing that's a false dichotomy. We're using the language of instruction, the language of equity, the language of SEL, but day to day the work is really merged.

How can teachers build on students' cultures?

Hammond: Many SEL programs bill themselves as being racially and culturally neutral. The reality is they aren't. Teachers need to understand how SEL is situated in racial politics. We still have racial stratification. Society still marginalizes students of color, English learners, and low-income students.

How can teachers address these realities?

Hammond: Teachers can help students build a counter-narrative. They *are* smart. They *are* intelligent. For instance, the dominant narrative in schools is that if you speak a language other than English, especially Spanish, that's a problem. The counter-narrative is that bilingualism is a superpower.

Lots of initiatives are trying to support African-American boys, who are disciplined disproportionately for "being defiant" or "aggressive." Those are subjective terms. You could just as easily interpret the same skills as leadership, which needs to be channeled and developed.

The reality is that most communities of color are very resilient, having survived the traumas of poverty, slavery, and the like. CRT is a learning technique that asks how these communities have mitigated their own trauma, what strategies have they used? And use those techniques as part of a culturally responsive SEL program.

Mary, what does this look like in Oakland?

Hurley: In a typical math classroom you might have three or four kids coming up to the board to solve the problem and the other 22 sitting quietly in their seats. They know they're supposed to be quiet, looking at the board. That's a great class, right? But teachers realized they didn't really know what those other 22 students understood about math. To teach thinking skills you need to know how to talk and explain, how to listen, how to ask good questions. Teachers are now doing more of that kind of teaching. What used to be a lesson based on compliance is now a collectivist lesson as the kids co-construct knowledge.

How does CRT help improve instruction?

Hammond: As a foundation, teachers need to understand the two primary cultural orientations: individualism and collectivism. Most communities of color have a collectivist orientation. When we use more collectivist approaches, teachers do less lecturing and students own their work. There's less individual work and



competition and more collaboration. Teachers think about how they can help students use their own cultural learning tools. Collectivist cultures have strong oral traditions that leverage the brain's natural learning, with lots of talk and word play, using puzzles and patterns, setting up "maker spaces." Teachers can think about creating many more prosocial learning environments.

Hurley: Classrooms used to be set up traditionally as a series of very individual journeys. Reading scores were posted for all to see. It was competitive. Our shift has helped teachers build more of a collective understanding that kids need to be in a relationship with teachers and peers in order to learn.

How can teachers help build student confidence?

Hammond: Part of this is technical, students and teachers working through the content. Part of this is attitudinal, being able to build trust. You want to get students to hang in there when the going gets tough, to get through "the learning pit." We want them to see themselves as learners. Learning is always hard. Instead of confirming that they're not intelligent, students can use that struggle to build their capacity. The growth mindset helps students change their explanatory story from "I always fail" to "I haven't gotten it yet, but I will."

Hurley: It's important to build trust among teachers, too. We have set up SEL-focused professional learning communities, which give teachers time to learn from one another. Schools and principals need to commit to culturally responsive teaching and SEL. Teachers need a place to share their practice. Once trust is created, they can have difficult conversations that result in a change in teaching. We're not telling them what part of their practice to shift. They're accountable to each other, sharing their data in a safe learning space.

Mary, what's next for Oakland?

Hurley: In elementary school our major implementation challenge is how not to have this be just another layer in that giant hero sandwich where one layer of programs keeps getting piled on top of another layer. Our big lift, though, is how to support high school teachers who have been trained to teach content only. That's a big cultural shift, having them teach the whole child. Some schools are working with Engaging Schools (a nonprofit that helps schools integrate academic, social, and emotional development). Our network superintendents can see a difference in those schools, how teachers are speaking to students, the ratio of teacher talk and student talk. We're still at the stage of influencing instruction. Word of mouth is helping to create the momentum to bring the work to scale.

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DIMENSIONS OF EQUITY

As equity-focused educators, it is important to distinguish between three key areas in education: *multicultural education*, *social justice education*, and *culturally responsive teaching*. Too often the terms are used interchangeably when they are not. Below is a simple chart to help you understand the distinctions between them. A key point to remember, only CRT is focused on the cognitive development of under-served students while multicultural and social justice education each have a supporting role in culturally responsive teaching.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION	SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION	CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY
Focuses on celebrating diversity	Focuses on exposing the social political context that students experience	Focuses on improving the learning capacity of diverse students who have been marginalized educationally
Centers around creating positive social interactions across difference	Centers around raising students' consciousness about inequity in everyday social, environmental, economic, and political aspects of life	Centers around the affective & cognitive aspects of teaching and learning
Concerns itself with exposing privileged students to diverse literature, multiple perspectives, and inclusion in the curriculum as well as help students of color see themselves reflected	Concerns itself with creating lenses to recognize and interrupt inequitable patterns and practices in society	Concerns itself with building resilience and academic mindset by pushing back on dominant narratives about people of color

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Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (*from Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014*). **The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical.** Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLES	MESSAGE
<p>Alien in One's Own Land When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Where are you from or where were you born?" • "You speak English very well." • "What are you? You're so interesting looking!" • A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language. • Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name. 	<p>You are not a true American.</p> <p>You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.</p> <p>Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</p>
<p>Ascription of Intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You are a credit to your race." • "Wow! How did you become so good in math?" • To an Asian person, "You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?" • To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist." 	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.</p> <p>All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science.</p> <p>It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.</p>

Adapted from Sue, Derald Wing, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Wiley & Sons, 2010.

[Full table available here.](#)