

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING K-12: LEARNING RULES AND CHOOSING TO BREAK THEM

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“You have to know the rules before you can break them.” – Professor Dexter Gordon

In my Freshman year of college at the University of Puget Sound, I received my first failing grade on an essay. Professor Gordon eased my heartbreak and embarrassment with a heartfelt conversation during office hours that helped me understand that once I learned the rules of academia, I could break them by choice. This lesson followed me into every undergraduate and graduate-level Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) course I took at Puget Sound and into my professional career as an educator for Tacoma Public Schools. As public-school teachers, we constantly walk a thin line between teaching students “the rules of the game” – how the K-12 system works, how to succeed within that system, and uplifting and amplifying students’ experiences and individuality. At times I have had to ask myself a tricky question. Am I asking kids to assimilate and uphold a system of oppression?

Culturally responsive educator Zaretta Hammond (2015) says, “Microassaults involve misusing power and privilege in subtle ways to marginalize students and create different outcomes based on race or class” (p. 113). When I make any decision that affects my students, I must be conscious of my privilege and power to disrupt and dismantle instead of upholding oppressive systems. Every day I must choose which rules to follow and which rules to break. In these instances, I must take a moment to stop and reflect by considering the outcomes my most marginalized student groups might face. Reflection is a core practice that I learned in the MAT program that I lean into often as a K-12 teacher.

Many pre-service teachers and current K-12 educators encounter a problem: They are well-versed in educational theory and have attended training that emphasizes equity education, but there is a skill gap putting theory into action. As an Adjunct Professor at Puget Sound and an Instructional Coach in Tacoma Public Schools, it is my mission to facilitate spaces where teachers and administrators can develop and align their beliefs and teaching actions to create academic success for racially marginalized, disabled, and LGBTQIA students.

For the past two summers, I have taught the EDUC 628 course, “Centering Race and Unlearning Racism.” I am constantly reminded of Professor Gordon’s words, “You have to know the rules before you can break them.” The MAT pre-service teachers I work with during the summer have just finished their student teaching experience and are often overwhelmed with “the rules” – how their mentor teacher did things, how district and schools want initiatives followed, and how to use “best practices” packaged, branded, and sold by big curriculum companies. These teachers are so worried and consumed with learning the rules that they don’t know they even have the choice to break them.

I start the course by looking at the Institute of Education Sciences (2019) data that describes the average United States teacher as between 30-50 years old, noting that 76% of teachers

are female and 79% are White. Many of our students will face a cultural mismatch with their teacher due to age, gender, or race. When a cultural mismatch occurs in public schools, we see a rise in disciplinary actions and lower student achievement. Muhammad (2021) speaks about cultural mismatch by saying, “this (cultural mismatch) does not mean that these teachers cannot teach Black and Brown students excellently, but it means that work needs to be done to learn and respond to the social and cultural lives of students” (p. 40). For this reason, in the summer, MAT candidates start by contextualizing the history of race and racism in the United States. They spend time reading and comparing their student teaching experience with historically antiracist institutions. MAT candidates lean into vulnerability when they identify their own implicit bias and the microaggressions they committed during student teaching and take action steps to disrupt bias. We distinguish the difference between Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility. After deep reflection, we start putting theory into action by developing authentic celebrations of diversity within the classroom and envisioning how to create an inclusive social justice curriculum that uses culturally responsive teaching practices. The culminating project for MAT candidates is to present a culturally responsive teaching plan which they will put into action on day one of their professional careers.

I’m thankful that MAT pre-service teachers have a summer to step back and address the skill gap. After being immersed in rules, candidates have intentional time to build their culturally responsive skill set to disrupt racist practices. They reflect on the rules and systems they were complicit in upholding and they create classroom spaces that love and celebrate marginalized students.

I appreciate that Professor Gordon helped me understand that we must first learn the rules to break them intentionally. In the realm of education, I now consider and reflect on so much more than breaking the rules. I ask you to view our next step as educators, How can we love marginalized people more than we hate systems of oppression? A teaching pedagogy that leads with fierce love, cultural humility, and deep reflection will create rigorous classrooms that lead to academic and social-emotional success for all students. I appreciate all the MAT candidates who have graduated each summer and entered their careers with love and a commitment to act against racist school practices.

Resources

Hammond, Z. L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

Muhammad, G. (2021). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public School Teacher Data File,” “Charter School Teacher Data File,” “Public School Data File,” and “Charter School Data File,” 1999–2000; and National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Teacher Data File,” 2017–18. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*

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