



BUILDING FELLOWSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

In recent years, the concept of discipline in the classroom has yielded to more communal approaches that foster a sense of fellowship among students – and rightly so. When students are welcomed as members of a classroom community, they are more likely to engage in academic work and will feel safer taking intellectual risks as they encounter new material and practice their developing skills.

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond describes how teachers can develop a mindset that sets high expectations for students while embracing the diversity of cultures in each classroom.

According to Hammond, as teachers work to expand their awareness of students' cultures, they can take note of cultural archetypes that prioritize collective values and successes. "Collectivistic societies emphasize relationships, interdependence within a community, and cooperative learning," she explains, whereas individualistic societies "emphasize individual achievement and independence."

As Hammond explains, many students from across the U.S. and beyond are likely to absorb collectivist approaches to learning in their home culture. Teachers who can recognize this and build collectivism within their classroom community can honor students' diversity while also strengthening their sense of fellowship and, thereby, their academic engagement.

The neuroscience behind Hammond's focus on positive teacher-student relationships reveals that learners are better able to retain new information and skills when they feel socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe. Without a sense of safety, students' stress levels can activate the deep-seated amygdala within the brain, sending distress signals to the body's sympathetic nervous system and releasing heightened levels of adrenaline and cortisol. The amygdala, which focuses on emotional processing in response to fear, may then preclude intellectual and cognitive processing until well after perceived threats are reduced.

At all age levels, teachers who intentionally build community in the classroom are laying the groundwork for learning. Social and emotional safety are prerequisites for executive functions such as staying organized, managing time effectively, and regulating our responses to others. When fellowship in the

classroom is strong, students are better able to integrate new knowledge and skills into the brain's preexisting neural pathways.

Hammond argues that all teachers from all backgrounds can reach students more successfully when they increase their capacity for culturally responsive teaching. A significant part of this approach requires teachers to deepen their awareness of their own home culture and how it might shape their approach to teaching.

As Hammond states, "To be a culturally responsive teacher means committing to being a lifelong learner." As all educators know, the process of teaching always requires ongoing learning, especially when we are striving to welcome every individual student into the shared community of the classroom.



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