BLOG

A Conversation About Instructional Equity with Zaretta Hammond

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By Zaretta Hammond | Categories: Expert Voices, Educational Equity



At Collaborative Classroom, we're dedicated to transforming the school experience, developing students, and empowering educators by deepening their teaching practices. Emeritus board member Zaretta Hammond is one of our best thought partners in this work, consistently pushing our thinking and challenging us to do better.

A national education consultant for the past 25 years and the author of the best-selling book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students,* Ms. Hammond was on the Collaborative Classroom Board of Trustees from 2018–2023. In February 2020, we had the privilege of discussing instructional equity—both the big picture and classroom practice—with Ms. Hammond. We're delighted to share excerpts from this rich, wide-ranging conversation with you.

Collaborative Classroom: Equity has become a prominent topic in conversations about education reform. The term *equity* itself is worth taking the time to unpack and define before entering into

discussion, especially since people use it in a variety of ways, with subtle but important distinctions. How do you sort through the various components of the equity question?

Zaretta Hammond: There are a couple of important but separate things in this question. The first is the definition of equity, and the other is the "equity question."

People talk about equity as if it had just one dimension, in an either-or way: *it's this, or it's that*. In reality, equity is a multifaceted and complex issue. I like the National Equity Project's definition of educational, or instructional, equity: reducing the predictability of who succeeds and who fails, interrupting reproductive practices that negatively impact students, and cultivating the gifts and talents of every student.

When people define equity as if it had only one dimension, it's akin to the parable of the six blind men describing an elephant. As each man describes the one part of the animal that he is touching—a tail, an ear, a trunk, a leg, and so on—each arrives at a significantly different description of what an elephant is. Each man is accurately describing the part he's touching, and yet each description on its own is incomplete and even misleading. To make progress in educational equity, we need leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to understand the different aspects of equity and how, when put together, they create more equitable outcomes for children.

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Once we get clear on our definitions and different aspects of equity work, we have to figure out how we enter into conversations that prepare us to transform instruction. Too often, we reduce equity to "courageous conversations" about implicit bias. This path into equity has its limits because there's typically no pivot to instruction. That said, the adult community in a school should engage in this work to become aware of the messages rooted in deficit thinking about the capacity and motivation of diverse students and families. But this type of equity conversation by itself is insufficient in improving outcomes of diverse students.

Then there is the "equity question" related to instruction. That's where conversations about instructional equity and culturally responsive teaching will come in. This facet of equity work requires us to remember that we are trying to improve instruction for diverse students who have historically been marginalized.

Here the equity conversation has to re-focus on helping underperforming students of color, immigrant students, and poor students of any color build their skills and become powerful learners. Here is where things get a little tricky. Most educators will agree there are gaps, but many believe the root of the "problem" is motivating children of color or increasing engagement, when, in fact, our public school systems were designed from the beginning to under-develop these students' cognitive resources.

What I call "inequity by design" was historically the brick and mortar of our school systems. Even today, these design elements are hardwired into our public school systems, resistant to superficial changes. But we often don't look at those institutional elements as part of our equity inquiry and conversations. Instead, we keep thinking schools that once worked got broken at some point, and now we need to fix them.

The reality: These systems are doing exactly what they were designed to do from the beginning, which is to churn out inequitable outcomes that create racial stratification in terms of who is college- and career-ready. This is a hard truth that many people don't want to acknowledge when we start having the "equity conversation."



Let's take the case of literacy development. When it comes to literacy, the research has told us how learning to read happens: learning sound/spelling correspondence accurately, then building fluency while simultaneously engaging in word study and comprehension.

But across the nation, too many minority children are more than one grade level behind in their reading, and it isn't due to a lack of student "motivation." It isn't solely because there are no books in the home. There is a historical pattern of putting the least prepared teachers with neediest students. That's an extension of our country's history of "anti-literacy" laws that penalized those who taught people of color to read. "Separate, but equal" continued this practice *de facto*. Jonathan Kozol in *Savage Inequalities* documented the same patterns well into the 1990s. This is a critical element to bring into equity conversations.

What I have seen out in the field in my 25-plus years as an educator, a teacher educator, and coach is that once a school team agrees that equity is important, they are challenged to get clear on the best approach when it comes to instruction. They are confronted with a new dilemma: distinguishing between *multicultural education*, *social justice education*, and *culturally responsive education* so they understand how each approach will (or won't) get them to instructional equity and the closing of the achievement gap. The biggest problem is they treat these three as if they are

interchangeable, do the same things for student learning, and have the same impact on student outcomes. But they are not interchangeable and not all will get you to educational equity. (See Figure 1: “Distinctions of Equity”)

Let’s first look at multicultural education. When people believe multiculturalism leads to equity, they’re usually envisioning a chain reaction: exposure to diverse books will encourage and inspire students, and therefore they’ll acquire more self-esteem, and that self-esteem will cause students to lean in and achieve.

Many people think, “If we have lots of multicultural books, that will create conditions for equity and learning.” It’s the belief that diverse, multicultural texts create some kind of motivation that gets diverse students to engage and pay attention to the instruction offered. Many think having a multicultural classroom library makes them culturally responsive educators.

It’s magical thinking to believe that despite not knowing how long vowels work, when students see a brown face in a book, somehow that will be a catalyst, and students will begin reading with greater fluency and comprehension.

In general, educators, especially at the elementary level, don’t interrupt this wishful thinking around multicultural books because it’s easy and appealing, especially when grappling with institutional equity around reading practices feels too complex.



Figure 1: Distinctions of Equity

Other educators have come to understand that multicultural education has its limits when it comes to instruction. Instead they focus on social justice education. But the misunderstanding that some educators have is, “If I simply discuss issues of oppression, read books about civil rights, their leaders, and people who worked against oppression, then my students’ cultural identity will be affirmed.”

Here’s a thought to consider: Second graders don’t want to talk about oppression, and when we as educators make that our sole focus, we’re doing students a disservice.

Instead we must build their background knowledge across a wide array of topics. To comprehend texts with critical literacy and critical consciousness, students must be equipped with that deep background knowledge. The social justice paradigm would have us only talking about issues of inequity, bias, or how we become non-racist.

But we know that's not enough; the tendency is for that to get reduced into diverse books about boycotts and basketball or injustice topics of the day. Many social justice educators push back on the teaching of phonics and word study as oppressive *when in fact, those elements of reading development are liberatory*.

Keep in mind that social justice and multicultural education are useful and necessary in the equity conversation, but they play supporting roles. On their own they are not sufficient for effectively promoting instructional equity.



I believe that culturally responsive teaching as Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings framed it is the heart of instructional equity. This instructional approach leverages the science of learning by exploiting (for good) the cultural schema—or funds of knowledge—students come in with to make learning "sticky." When we build instructional practices around opportunities to process information in ways that make learning sticky, then students become able to carry more of the cognitive load that leads to doing more rigorous work. We focus on the cognitive development of underserved students and teach them how to be literate, competent readers and writers.

This is the vital equity work: students must comprehend what they're reading, possess advanced decoding skills, have word wealth, and be able to command all of these literacy skills. Our social justice frame should prompt us to ask these questions: *How are students code breakers, how are they text users, how are they text critics, and how are they meaning-makers*? Our culturally responsive pedagogies arm us to build these dispositions and skills in our most vulnerable kids.

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Collaborative Classroom: We've been speaking about the equity big picture and clarifying what

equity means. Let's change the focus: what does instructional equity look like in a classroom? And when instructional equity is absent from a classroom, what might we notice?

Zaretta Hammond: Instructional equity happens when the teacher is scaffolding learning to the point that *the scaffold at some moment falls away, so that the student becomes independent* . Unfortunately, what I often see instead is over-scaffolding and permanent instructional crutches. Students remain dependent learners; they never internalize cognitive routines and procedures. In contrast, an independent learner knows the mental operations that she needs to use.

Instructional equity happens when the teacher is scaffolding learning to the point that the scaffold at some moment falls away, so that the student becomes independent. Unfortunately, what I often see instead is over-scaffolding and permanent instructional crutches. Students remain dependent learners; they never internalize cognitive routines and procedures.

If white or affluent parents see their child is not doing the work, they won't wait for the school to address the issue. They will get a tutor until the student learns to advance his literacy skills and internalize the cognitive structures he needs. Meanwhile school-dependent students are being conditioned to rely on the teacher to carry the cognitive load since the teacher never allows the scaffolding to fall away.

Teachers have been trained to shepherd these dependent learners through those procedures: *We're going to get in groups and decide who's going to be the summarizer; can you be the visualizer now?* We've taught reading and literacy well before mosaic of thought.

Teachers and leaders must ask themselves what the reproductive practices of inequity are. Frequently, the use of strategies, best practices, and summarizing practice dispossess the students of actually becoming independent. When educators defend their methods by characterizing them as "best practices," that is not sufficient justification. A "best practice" is often simply a popular practice. Just because many people use it does not mean it's effective. We still have children in our schools who are not reading at grade level. When we call these practices "best," is the unspoken message that these children can't learn to read?

Collaborative Classroom: In your experience, where are we more likely to see teachers consistently coaching their students toward becoming independent learners? Do you think that in wealthier schools, on average, teachers tend to shift the cognitive load more onto students?

Zaretta Hammond: First, let's not forget about inequity by design. For more affluent populations, especially White communities, schools were designed to develop student capacity to "learn how to learn," which builds cognitive structures. These structures, like strong muscles, allow one to carry the weight of heavy thinking, comprehending and reading of complex text. So, yes: the expectation is that in wealthier schools, students learn the skills earlier on and get the practice necessary to carry that cognitive load.

This isn't the blueprint for most schools in lower income or rural communities, especially those with larger numbers of children of color and emergent English learners. We see just the opposite happening. There's a tendency to underestimate the intellectual capacity of diverse students and give them low-level tasks, while the teacher carries most of the cognitive load. In practice, this means that the teacher over-scaffolds the lesson, and the over-scaffolding becomes a crutch. The students may get through the lesson, but they haven't internalized the learning because of the over-scaffolding and the lack of productive struggle.

Having students carry more of the cognitive load and allowing the scaffolding to fall away over time is what stimulates brain growth, so that cognitively your brain says, *'Oh, I need to step up. I need to get stronger. I need to figure that out.'*



We have to make the brain work. This is [psychologist Lev] Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," commonly called the "ZPD." When is that brain going to work a little bit? It has to be the right amount of work. It can't be too much, or the brain just shuts down. This is the work of teachers: they must understand how to move students into their ZPD, and recognize that their students won't go into it spontaneously or willingly, and that's natural. They need to be coached (not coaxed), like an athlete. Without coaching and the right level of support, students can't get into the learning zone.

Instead, we postpone more challenging, interesting work until we believe they have mastered "the basics," which are often low level. All the emerging cognitive neuroscience tells us to do just the opposite: you have to "water up" instruction to get kids into the learning zone. Teachers must give students tasks during the day in which they have to stretch themselves, and it should feel a little cognitively confusing by design. Let's use military boot camp as an analogy. Boot camp prepares soldiers by making them go through grueling training, and that at the end of that eight weeks, they are like, *oh, snap! I can do new things. I can do hard things.* They've trained, they've been stretched, and they're now stronger.

Just as the science of fitness informs us that building our body's physical capacity occurs via stretching ourselves—which in turn triggers the body to grow stronger—the science of learning informs us of the same in building powerful reading brains: The more productive struggle, the more the brain grows.

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How are we reversing the systemic underdevelopment of these students? Reversing is taking students from being dependent learners who rely on over-scaffolding and helping them become independent learners. How do students become code breakers, text users, text critics? How do they engage in critical literacy? How do they think about text? Are students asking, *Who is writing this text? What's the author's point of view? Do I believe him as a reliable narrator? What is he trying to say to me?* Or, if it's nonfiction, are they asking, *What has been left out of this? Whose story is this?* Students need that ability. That is ultimately where we want them, but we know those areas have to be cultivated. Then by the time they get to fourth, fifth, ideally sixth grade, we can just focus on deepening those abilities.

Collaborative Classroom: You've mentioned teachers needing to "water up" offerings and instruction to give students work that makes them stretch. What do you think of the current trend of providing material at grade level or higher?

Zaretta Hammond: Let's put this into historical context. Districts have gotten dinged during No Child Left Behind for not providing access to high-quality materials at grade level. So, in many ways we have over-corrected. Now the mandate is to provide only grade-level text, even if students are well below grade level. It's an equity issue. The solution is *not simply to* provide all text at grade level.

Grade-level texts need to be accompanied by focused instruction using responsive pedagogies that focus on advanced decoding, building word wealth, and deepening background knowledge. Why? In face of such mandates, we have a tendency to fall back on over-scaffolding so students get through the text with a bunch of workarounds—like just asking them to *summarize or visualize* as simple comprehension strategies when their fluency is low and decoding slow. Under those conditions, these once-helpful strategies become negative reproductive practices leading to inequity.

Here's the reality: These teacher workarounds can't go with the child to the next class or into a testing situation. That's why teachers need to "water up" instruction to give students the deliberate practice to strengthen their skills *before* they have to work through texts in a unit.

As educators we must ask ourselves: Are the children in our care coming through our programs reading at grade level? Are they feeling competent and confident as readers and writers? This is our goal in defining equity so that it's more than a buzz word.

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We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from our interview with Collaborative Classroom Board of Trustees member Zaretta Hammond. We also invite you to watch the recording of our recent Facebook Live conversation with Ms. Hammond.

Zaretta Hammond is a national education consultant and author of Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students. *She joined the Collaborative Classroom Board of Trustees in November of 2018.*

She holds a Master's in Secondary English Education, with a concentration in Writing Instruction, from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is a former high school and community college expository writing instructor. Ms. Hammond has also served as an adjunct instructor at St. Mary's College School of Education in Moraga, California, where she taught The Foundations of Adolescent Literacy. As a consultant, she has advised and provided professional development to school districts and non-profit organizations across the country around issues of equity, literacy, and culturally responsive teaching for the past 25 years.

COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM™

1001 Marina Village Parkway, Suite 110
Alameda, CA 94501
Phone: 510.533.0213
Fax: 510.464.3670
Email: info@collaborativeclassroom.org

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