

# Teachers need to learn about students' lived experiences

By Chantei Alves



I'm a 7th-year preK special education Teacher of Color who successfully includes, supports, and engages Students of Color, especially Black and Brown boys, in the classroom. But I didn't start out so successfully. It was only by seeking out professional development on my personal time that I learned how to integrate social-emotional standards into culturally responsive instruction, cut down on wrongful disciplinary referrals, and prepare my special education students to be socially, emotionally, and academically ready for kindergarten.

I have created an environment in which 92% of my students have met or exceeded their academic goals. Although I attribute this success to my ability to relate to and support my Students of Color, I shouldn't have had to develop that expertise on my own. If the instructional and professional development provided to me had addressed issues specific to Teachers of Color, I might have had a much more realistic view of my role and purpose in the classroom from the outset.

When I stepped into the classroom on the first day of my first year of lead teaching, I was unprepared, and largely unsupported, for what was to come. I had just completed a yearlong residency in which I was immersed in weekly professional development lectures on quality instruction, classroom discipline, and differentiated instruction. However, what I needed most was guidance on how to engage students through cultural connections

and relationships within the classroom and how to use the backgrounds of my students and their families to increase partnerships and agency. I needed to understand that traumatic lived experiences could be triggered in a classroom. I needed best practices to support my students and myself. In hindsight, I wish I had spent that year developing my skills as a Teacher of Color who would lead Students of Color. More specifically, I wish I had been given the opportunity to confront my own biases and engage in conversations about the ways in which my cultural background and life experiences might affect my classroom.

I thought I had half the journey completed already because I'm Black, and I assumed that I would immediately be able to connect with my Black students. However, as an Afro-Portuguese woman from Long Island, New York, I didn't know my students' families or understand much about their lives in Boston, Massachusetts, so I couldn't relate to the lived experiences of many of my students. Although I might have looked like them on the outside, my core values and experiences differed from theirs, and my lack of understanding hindered my effectiveness.

After a difficult first year of teaching that was plagued with student behavioral issues and insufficient progress, I knew I had to do something different. Although we all know that having diverse teachers in classrooms can boost the success of all students, just being a Teacher of Color is not enough to be effective. I needed training on ways to use my authentic experiences (and those of my students) to challenge my assumptions and engage my students — and I needed to learn these things from someone who could relate to me.

So, I researched courses and attended events that focused specifically on Teachers of Color, the need for greater numbers of us, and the impact we're capable of having on students. I attended one event that, to this day, I believe was most beneficial. It was called "Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain," led by Zaretta Hammond and hosted by my district. In this workshop, I learned to think critically about the ways in which my cultural and educational training was affecting my pedagogy. It helped me discover how my own background, biases, and awareness of the world could affect my classroom culture, as well as my students and their educational experience — and that was a powerful insight. It was through this workshop and the accompanying book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Corwin, 2014),

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**CHANTEI ALVES** is a K1 inclusion teacher at Young Achievers K–8 Science and Math Pilot School, Mattapan, MA.

that I realized that relying mainly on my cultural background hindered my ability to connect with my Afro-Caribbean and Latinx students growing up in Boston.

Since no two families experience the world the same way, and since culture is built from one's experiences, I had to get to know my students and their families, and the best way to do this was by visiting them at home (even though my school stopped paying teachers for such visits) and venturing into their communities. But instead of using this time with my students to conduct a long assessment or have their parents fill out paperwork — the usual routine — I spent the home visits playing with them, reading them their favorite books, responding to questions from their family members, and developing a better understanding of the local culture.

Making connections like this provides an invaluable lens into the world of students and families. That's why I believe that every school district should invest in opportunities to support all teachers, among them Teachers of Color, through culturally relevant workshops that highlight the importance of such approaches.

Teachers of Color are as diverse as the students they teach. We have to move away from required and inflexible teacher professional development,

the one-size-fits-all version that doesn't reflect teachers' day-to-day experiences inside and outside the classroom. Effective Teachers of Color aren't born — they're made. If employers want to attract, cultivate, and retain those teachers, they need to do a better job of providing them with the professional development they require to continue growing and succeeding in the classroom.

The onus shouldn't fall entirely on teachers to seek out professional development on their own time and with their own money. Districts should send out surveys to teachers to query them about their specific professional development needs; this information could inform both the choice of relevant professional development and the choice of teacher mentors. My district began this work by providing every school with Zaretta Hammond's book and encouraging educators to study and implement its recommended strategies. Such best practices should become commonplace in all school communities. ■

#### Reference

Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

