



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of Reach. Teach. Talk. I am absolutely thrilled today to have as my guest, Ms. Zaretta Hammond, who was a teacher, an educator, an author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. This book, if you're an educator, you must have this book, not just in your bookshelf, but absolutely annotated and with a spine broken.

Nat:

Not just because every single page contains incredible wisdom about the centrality of belongingness in an educational environment, but also because Ms. Hammond is a reader herself, and as ever since being a child, she has found herself in libraries, and she more than anyone I've ever guessed, who's ever guested on this podcast, understands the value of books.

Nat:

I'd like to actually, we'll start with that actually, the idea of reading, and the idea of the centrality of books as extensions of imagination. But as a tie in actually to the central question that we're going to be addressing today together, which is how can teachers connect relationships with intellectual curiosity? Curiosity that comes from book reading for example, is a way to create an authentic sense of community among students, even if they are at home, even if they are remote. With that said, I just want to welcome you, Ms. Zaretta, this is just such an honor to have you on Reach. Teach. Talk. Thank you for taking the time today.

Zaretta:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited for our conversation.

Nat:

I am as well. And why don't we just start the conversation with, what got you into education? What got you into teaching? And perhaps there might be a connection to what I just stated before about your childhood, and your connection to reading the books.

Zaretta:

Yeah, it's interesting. One of the things that I share in the opening of the book is kind of what my catalyst was, which was my mother. She was someone who had ... She was a teen mom. She had her first child when she was probably just about to graduate from high school, probably by a few months. And she was one of the first to participate in the welfare to work program here in San Francisco.

Zaretta:

And she got a job as a library technician, and so part of what happened was she discovered her own love for knowledge, I wouldn't say it was just books. Although my mother who has since moved into the ancestral realm had a love for books. There was never a book that she did not like, but the reality is, it was knowledge that she was drawn to.

Zaretta:

And when we were at the end of our day, and had to some kind of childcare afterschool program, which back in the day, that usually was latchkey kid kind of thing. We would come to the branch library, where she was a technician, and she would pile the table up full of books, and we'd work our way down to the table. That was when we knew it was time to go.

Zaretta:

And I can distinctly remember the day that I asked her if I could move over to the adult section, because I'd read everything outside of whatever new books were coming in the children's section. And she gave me this really weird side eye like, [inaudible 00:03:32], I know there's some grown folks stuff over there, but she said, yes. And I discovered astronomy, I discovered ecology. It was phenomenal in terms of all the things to know.

Zaretta:

And so I got her quest for knowledge and that has always been with me. Now, here's the twist Nat, is that when we were then going to school, she used my grandparents' address. They lived in a predominantly white and Asian community in San Francisco, the Richmond District, right outside of Ocean Beach. And we were one of 10 African-American kids in the school, and three of us we were a good portion of that 10, and they knew we did not live in the neighborhood, and we were lying about our address, in turn they kind of turn the blind eye to it as long as we behaved.

Zaretta:

And interestingly enough, when I went back to the projects where we lived in hunters point, I realized that there were two different educations being had, and the education over in the predominantly white district school was very robust, very hands-on, very engaging. And the other was very rote, very minimal, very compliance-based. And it just catalyzed me, I had no words for what this was, and was saved by the fact that my mother got this welfare to work program job. And I was being exposed to books in a way that had I gone to the neighborhood school that would not have been the case.

Nat:

Oh, my gosh. So curiosity and compliance, curiosity versus compliance. And you also used another C-word. I love alliteration by the way. Catalyst, right? Curiosity is a catalyst and your mother recognized that. And I love that story about her giving you the side-eye because she knows as a mom, she was like, "Oh, there's adult topics in the adult books, now you already know those are not just children's books." And yet I sense in my daughter a real curiosity, and I'm not going to squash that. I'm not going to squelch that.

Nat:

Maybe actually looking at the word, the opposite of catalyzing, and at the idea of squelching, how compliance, squelch curiosity, and how does compliance actually squelch the opportunities that can lie for students who are in schools like the one that you did not fortunately attend?

Zaretta:

I think this is ... And I want to tie in relationships, right? Because the idea of curiosity means that, we in our quest to know and to quest to satisfy that curiosity, it looks a little messy. It looks a little for lack of a better word, another C-word, chaotic, right? And the idea then that, that is problematic for some people with some kids.

Zaretta:

Being able to have an environment that becomes the dojo for intellectual curiosity is critical. What I have found is when there are high numbers of black and brown children, there is an overemphasis on compliance, wanting to control that, "Oh, you're too loud, or however, you're showing up is problematic." We start to mistake intellectual differences, cultural differences for intellectual deficits, or character deficits.

Zaretta:

The way I show curiosity might come through my own cultural lens, the way that excites me might actually be problematic for someone. The relational piece of curiosity is really important, because adults have to hold space for that. And if they don't talk, don't touch that, don't do, we are communicating this kind of compliance. So now we're shrinking the child, every time we say that, we are shrinking the child.

Zaretta:

Now, how do we give both boundaries at the same time letting curiosity take its natural path? And to me, that is the job of the educator, that we know both where that path is, and at the same time we know how to create the bounded experience that allows curiosity to bloom. I always go back to Mr. Miyagi in Karate Kid, wax on wax off, right? Go over here and watch my car, go over there and paint my fence, right?

Zaretta:

These circumstances were set up to actually satisfy something that Daniel can see in the moment. I think the same thing for our kids, how are we creating a dojo? That actually means we have to have enough relationship where the child respects the boundary, and they understand that the boundary is not just about compliance, that the boundary is your love for me. Your tough love for me that I actually don't just have ... Do what you want to do. Unbounded access to things that actually might be hurtful to me.

Zaretta:

Here's the thing I want to throw in there, that's a trust issue. Competence is a trust issue. Your lack of providing safety for me becomes a trust issue for a student and adult to adult. We have

a tendency to think about relationships is just kind of skipping, and singing, and being happy with each other when it is multi-dimensional.

Zaretta:

All of these things that I talk about, the idea that my mother held space for me, and she showed me that, "Hey, listen, I'm just not letting you just run wherever you want to run. I am, concerned about that, I'm going to give you parameters, but I'm also going to allow that curiosity to blossom, right? I'm actually going to fan that inner flame of wanting to know versus kind of squashing it."

Nat:

Beautiful. There's so many different side topics we can go off based on what you just said right there. Zaretta and the most immediate, regarding your mom and her appreciation of your curiosity in her, I love the idea of her fanning the flames. We don't talk about spirit in education enough. We just as a society, we don't talk about it, but my God, it's all about tending to the spirit.

Nat:

And I think that a lot of what you're saying right now, if I can extend this idea is about the spirit of education. The idea that education is a spiritual, not religious, but a spiritual or spirit oriented endeavor. And I'm seeing that your mom, I'm wondering, did she ask you questions about what you were reading? Was she also inquisitive towards you?

Zaretta:

Mm-mm (negative), no. And here's the thing that I say is, and this to me brings the equity piece in it, right? My mother, her parents were illiterate, and meaning my grandfather had gone to the ... I want to say he went to the eighth grade, and my grandmother learned to sign her name when she was in her seventies. And I actually remember that event and it was like, wow.

Zaretta:

But she was a totally illiterate, they were semi-skilled laborers in Louisiana. My grandmother was a maid all her life on Nob Hill in San Francisco. My grandfather was a longshoreman, strong bodies, strong backs. They could make a decent living, they bought a house in a neighborhood that was kind of groundbreaking. And kind of that was the path for me, she knew that.

Zaretta:

Now, she was still a teen parents, still had come out of that environment, and she didn't not necessarily ... I don't ever remember my mother reading to me. I don't ever remember her asking questions. This wasn't like we're sitting at the dinner table, that to me is one version of how that can look. But I will tell you, she gave me a steady feed of that information.

Zaretta:

What she would do is make sure through apprenticeship, right? The side by side, that in a collectivist culture is how that happens. Meaning, I was the oldest granddaughter, Thanksgiving, would come, I'd be farmed out to my grandmother. And that's what I call it, right? I'd have to pack a little night bag, go over there, and I'd help her prep all the food.

Zaretta:

But what would happen is, other women would come over and in the kitchen, there was conversation. And as part of that, that is how in collectivist cultures, that information, those questions, it's not a one-on-one thing. Being able to understand having a bi-cultural or tri-cultural lens, how that shows up, gives us again, a wider birth, right? Some larger boundaries to see how we're engaging children in conversation.

Zaretta:

And it doesn't have to look like this Eurocentric, middle-Class, I'm sitting with my child, we're at the dinner table, we're all doing those, now black folk do that too, Latinx people people do that, Indigenous people do that, but they also do a variety of other things. We want to also make sure that even when we're talking about relationships, we're not viewing these things through a deficit lens.

Zaretta:

If it doesn't look like that, it must be wrong. Or I can't see that that parents actually doing that, because my mother never read to me, did I feel like that I had any lack of her involvement in my education? Not one, not a bit. Collectivism isn't just we're together, I think that's a very Eurocentric kind of minimizing of what collectivism is. I can be a collectivist person with a collectivist view by myself.

Zaretta:

What I'm saying to you is, she never asked me a question, she wasn't by my side, she was working at the library. She wasn't at the table with me, and over at my grandmother's, she wasn't there. I had to go over to my grandmother's house. What I'm saying to you though, is that as people were moving through, and while we're in the service of doing other things, conversation comes up, knowledge is imparted.

Zaretta:

But this idea of somebody side by side, I think again, it's a very narrow view and then when it doesn't show up like that, when teachers see parents not doing it like that, it's not happening. So now we have a deficit view of what that parent is, and now we got to paternalistic deficit orientation to my relationship with that parent.

Nat:

How do we ... This is so incredibly broadening for me, because I'm thinking about now, even the term, culturally responsive teaching, what is the definition of culture responsive teaching? What does it mean to be responsive then?

Zaretta:

Well, here's the thing. I think the biggest challenge with people defining culturally responsive teaching is the fact that they call something culturally responsive teaching, right? The idea that all education, all instruction is culturally responsive. And the question is to whose culture is it responding? The fact is, we talk about culturally responsive teaching like it's some treatment for black and brown people.

Zaretta:

Like black and brown children are broken, and need some kind of treatment, so let's do culturally responsive teaching, like it's a thing. When really it's a constellation of inner actions that then allow students to be their natural learning selves, allows them to level up. The reality is, how do you create an environment where everyone finds their way to not only feel intellectually safe, to grapple with information, to follow their curiosity, to be in flow in ways that feel internally congruent, and being able to then use that to kind of continue to level up their learning.

Zaretta:

The reality is for teachers who want to be more culturally responsive, the responsive part is who is the student in front of me? How am I the cognitive mediator of getting the information to them? How do I allow their intellectual curiosity to lead me, and how I make this content more ... The word is not even accessible, but knowable, right? How do I connect it? What are the cognitive hooks from the unknown, this new content I want to share with them to the known, right?

Nat:

Yeah. Is that a similar, sorry, is that a similar process to meaning-making we hear a lot about meaning-making in educational circles, right? How do we make meaning out of the content on an individual and a collective way?

Zaretta:

That's called just having a brain. Hello? You don't actually even need education to be a learner. Why? Because that's your brain's natural state. It has to make sense of what is around it. We want to take inert information, facts, figures, dates, and turn it into usable knowledge. This means we have to connect it with our funds of knowledge, our schema, the knowledge tree in our head, all new learning must be coupled with old learning.

Zaretta:

That is not a tenet of culturally responsive teaching. That's called the tenet of having a brain. And if you don't understand that, then you won't understand how to help students actually find the thing that ... You already know something about this, even if it's adjacent or tangential,

how then do I use it as a cognitive hook? Think barrel of monkeys, right? One hook need to lead, the other hook needs to lead the other hook, so that now I actually can make sense of it like, oh, now I move it to my long-term memory because I've had that opportunity.

Zaretta:

That's what I talk about culturally responsive teaching in the brain. Why? That's the brain part. Why is that important? Why is it cultural? Because all learning is cultural. And for certain kids, the way they show up, the way that that learning happens has been marginalized. It's pathologized, and it's not a treatment for them, it's not an engagement strategy, it's not a relationship strategy, it's a learning strategy.

Zaretta:

Now are all those other things connected to it? Yes. It is really about up ending in equity by design that would have certain children have their intellectual capacity, their cognitive capacity minimized to maintain white supremacy culture. Looking at what Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings says, she puts academic prowess at the center of that. Then she puts the relationship as a pathway to that. It's not the end, it's a means to the end, which is helping the student be a powerful learner.

Nat:

The academic prowess is a great term, because I'm thinking about your definition of the brain, and how the brain is ... In a sense, you didn't say this, but I'm intuiting that you look at the brain as always learning, as always hungry. The brain is there. We all have a brain, right? Learning is using the brain, and having that classroom environment that fosters learning, makes me think about where we are today right now.

Nat:

We are many schools are remote teaching right now, many schools are not in real life, and they are not able to take advantage of and lay back on the fact that we have a classroom culture that is shared, where we have a shared sense of place, we have a shared smell in the classroom. We have a shared dynamics between the teacher and the students, kind of transactional energy exchange that does not happen, as simply as I've seen it for the past three months at the school that I'm at, it's not the same.

Nat:

Do you have any advice for teachers who are going into now the deeper, darker months of the winter now, and they've had to start the school year remotely, or they might be anticipating or a shift to remote? In terms of building that classroom culture that is looking outside of acknowledging the individual, but also looking at the culture of the individual in the classroom remotely.

Zaretta:

I think the main thing is, takes us back to what you said a moment ago that we don't bring spirit into it. So the idea that we are connected across time and space, is a really important

piece. But what we see in terms of what looks like traditional education, even when we talk about progressive education, right? Progressive educators, like to think we're on the cutting edge, but if you actually pull back the rug, you'll see there's a lot of compliance-based transactional ...

Zaretta:

And I don't say this to didn't agree or negatively critique, but it's Maya Angela says, "When we know better, we do better." Being able to say, what's actually working for us, but also where can we actually sharpen our equity lens to see where even though it's sugar coated, it's still a lot of compliance, even though it feels like, oh, we're saying it nicely, it still may not be creating the right relational environment.

Zaretta:

Two things I think are really important in that relational environment when we're talking about remote learning is this notion of anchoring people, so they know regardless of where we are, we are always connected. This is where ritual becomes so important, this is where being able to have the intellectual curiosity is stoked or ignited as I talk about in chapter eight of the book, right?

Zaretta:

This idea that students then will want to come in and be in community. We see this with adults, and Facebook groups, and other online communities where people come even asynchronously to type in long chats or swap it why? Because it is something that binds us together, being able to think about how then do we take the content we want them to learn, look, we create an environment that anchors them in things that the brain always is seeking.

Zaretta:

It's always seeking connection, it loves ritual, it has a spiritual dimension. How are those things being brought in? And I talk about dopamine, where that curiosity comes with dopamine. If you are just going over, this is our lesson for the day. And even if it feels to you exciting, you have to look and say, "Where is the dopamine hit for the student?" Because if you keep just saying the words, curiosity is not going to ... It's not it, right?

Zaretta:

And just focused on culture for a lot of people, that's I'm going to bring some racialized commentary or social justice thing. That is not what cultural is when we're talking about culturally responsive. Particularly in this climate of anti-racism with the racial justice reckoning going on, I have seen a lot of that reduced to ... Listen, kids don't need a lot of that, they are already stressed, they already have their own anxieties. Intellectual curiosity, oxytocin, and dopamine will counterbalance that cortisol. That's what a responsive classroom does for students.

Nat:



You just made my day by this, by so much of what you're saying, but that comment about dopamine transcending, the cortisol, right? Is huge, because what you're speaking to me on, it's so important that we remember that these kids are stressed, these kids are seeing and feeling everything, they might not have words to it yet, but they are being molded on the inside, by what's on the outside every second of every day. This idea of positivity, and not toxic positivity, you're not even going into that territory of hokey hope and all of that.

Zaretta:

Right, that's right.

Nat:

And in fact, I would love for you to talk about ... You talk about this term critical hope, because I can't separate hope from positivity Zaretta. I can't separate the two terms, because to be hopeful means that there is at any moment in any school day, and this is why I'm in education to begin with, at any moment at any school day, a student can flash a light bulb on, can grasp the concept.

Nat:

And it's not about happiness, it's about flourishing, it's about the feeling that comes with having tackled something, having surmounted an obstacle. Even if it's not fully surmounted yet, it's this idea that I'm getting there, I have hope, I have hope. And the adults being able to have their blinders broad enough to be able to see hopefully to lead their students. Zaretta, I could go on to this, but I won't, because this is your interview. I wanted to ask, and I'm learning so much from this interview, about this idea of critical hope. What does that mean in lens of vis-a-vis toxic positivity for example?

Zaretta:

I think the critical hope is just calling things as they are, but recognizing our ability through our small actions over time, cumulative again, across communities, across time and space to actually change your things, right? Martin Luther King to paraphrase his quote, justice ... Something about inequity or injustice, but over time, it bends toward justice. The idea is the over time, right?

Zaretta:

And so the idea of critical hope is, listen, I see you struggling, this is the warm demander stance, active demandingness is like, we see where we are, we're not trying to sugar coat this, but here's what we can do for ourselves in the meantime. Steve Covey talks about this as your circle of influence versus your circles of concern. We can bitch about things that we have no control over, all you're going to do is get your blood pressure up, versus being able to recognize where we are, this is what we can control.

Zaretta:

Even as for young children, as you helping them understand that the elements inside you, that you cultivate, right? Deep learning, being able to learn new things, being able to build positive

relationships, being able to do that, are going to come in handy, because time will march on, and things will shift. Will you be ready for that moment? Critical hope says things are going to change.

Zaretta:

And one of the things that I hold on to as I think about that definition are enslaved Africans. There is a way in which slavery went on in the US for 400 years, imagine someone who was in the middle of that, but looking back behind you, there's 150 years, looking at behind of view that looks like there's no relenting insight. And historically we know there was an almost another 100, 200 years ahead of you, but you hold onto hope and you continue to pass that down, and small things, small changes that whole propels people to actually move against something that looks it's just always going to be this way.

Zaretta:

But enslaved African didn't, they taught each other to read what sticks and dirt. They cultivated bodies of knowledge, they became scientists. They did those things, not because somebody allowed them to do, but because of their own critical hope, I know it will get better because I'm going to teach my grandchild, my children, who will teach their children. This is the generational notion that comes with indigenous people, and other people of color, that is part of a collectivist orientation.

Zaretta:

And this idea of collectivism isn't people just like to do things together. That is a very Eurocentric misinterpretation of what collectivism is. And it is telling because most white people don't have a broad cultural view, and what it means is, most people of color have to navigate across at least one or two other cultural domains. They have to learn how folks navigate, what are the hidden unspoken rules? What are the ... All of those things, but most white people don't have to do that, and don't spend their leisure time trying to build a bi-cultural lens.

Zaretta:

And instead we want professional development to come give it to us. It's not going to happen. Critical hope really is about knowing that you have to push yourself, you have to get out there and do it. It's not going to change in a day, but I am hopeful. I am encouraged that my continued progress, my continued attention, my continued building will one day pay off for me.

Nat:

Would you say that, I'm thinking back to your growing up in the reading, and the library, and the books, that you had a sense of critical hope in you?

Zaretta:

I think that was a gift my mother gave me. Her rootedness in who she was as a African-American woman. Particularly, I grew up in the '70s, so there certainly was the notion of

women's rights becoming much more evident in society. But even before then, just her idea that as a black person, I wasn't that ... My life was all about pathology, right? What was the true story? What's the true history? Who are you? Know who you are.

Zaretta:

This is not, I need to come to school, or someone needs to do something to tell me who I am. This is one of the fallacies I think of progressive education, that somehow in this paternalistic way, black and brown children don't know who they are, so their self-esteem is low, so we have to help them know. You can't help folks know that, their parents are doing a fine job already.

Zaretta:

What you need to do is be able to look in your own environment and say, where are the unchecked microaggressions that are minimizing who this ... How are we being paternalistic toward parents? How can we be more in a partnership with parents? How am I judging parents about what they do or don't do?

Zaretta:

Being able to help people be who they are, by getting out of the way, and reducing in the environment. These things that are kind of invisible mechanisms that maintain this caste system of white supremacy. And again, I think the biggest challenges, this is not an overt, or I'm saying something negative to people of color. That's not how it works. It's much more subtle than that. And the fact that most white people aren't able to recognize the subtlety, because their racial literacy is so low.

Zaretta:

When you start talking about relationships, this is where toxic positivity comes in. Let's just have relationships, let's just be together. Most people come to us like, we'd like that, but somehow the dominant culture ain't making that happen. The fact is there, the irony that the parent hears that says, "You're saying that to me, but I'm not the one creating a cognitively hostile environment, an emotionally hostile environment, or relationally hostile environment by allowing racial bullying or allowing microaggressions."

Zaretta:

You're even seeing that this is happening, and here's the last thing I'll say on this, Nat, the parents ... A lot of progressive educators will survey their parents and the parents have been telling them these things for a long time. And it's like, they keep surveying, hoping that the information changes, that how can we be in better relationships? Well, listen to what they're actually saying and act on it.

Nat:

Listen, get out of your own way and then act on it-

Zaretta:

You should act like that.

Nat:

You have to act.

Zaretta:

You have to act, because there's a way in which the idea that, "Oh, I've read a book, right? Stamped from the beginning, oh, Dr. Kendy," I've read that, I've read white fragility. I'm good now. You're not good until you actually changed that environment, because now having a little knowledge, being half woke can actually be more dangerous, because now it's like unchecked cancer.

Zaretta:

Now you think, "I feel fine," when the cancer is raging inside you, it is raging in your school environment, it is raging in your policies and practices, and you don't even see it out of this positive, this toxic positivity that we just want to be in relationships. So we have to actually put relationships in a social political context.

Nat:

And my question then is, how have you seen this done effectively?

Zaretta:

I think it's still a struggle, I think this is why we saw so many protests, because one of the things that I have seen is, the low level of racial literacy from white Americans. I'll put it that way. I see it also with Australians, and those from the UK, because those have been colonizing nations as well.

Zaretta:

And the challenge then isn't a cross racial cross cultural kind of kumbaya kind of thing, it really is white people getting with each other and saying, "Listen, I see that we're allowing this racial bullying to happen, it can't happen." Versus kind of downplaying, "Oh, he didn't really didn't mean it, right?" Or now we're going to get the kids together, sit together kind of, well, apologize to each other. We would never do that with a rape victim. We would never do that.

Zaretta:

And this is still an assault, this is an assault on one sense of self, it's an assault on one spirit, it's an assault on your brain, because now my amygdala is hijacked. I'm constantly on a red alert, it is pumping out cortisol and adrenaline. So now you want me to be in a school classroom where I have had the experience, that this does not feel safe enough for me to be, but everybody wants to be in relationship. Now my brain is saying, "Do not listen to that, do not trust those people, because you're going to get there, and you see Johnny over there is doing it again."

Zaretta:

And everybody just said, "Oh, Johnny's just kids just being kids." If we don't start changing policies in that way, meaning Johnny needs to get his shit, and go home and don't come back

with, until your mama comes up here, right? What does that mean? My hair is on fire, but I don't see white folks doing that. And so the point I want to bring is we can't be talking about this wonderful relational thing without looking at the social political context and say, "What has appended relationships in the past? This is not neutral, just because we want to say we're focused on relationships.

Nat:

I'm hoping that it's critically hoping that this is a time where we all as a society are reflecting, and forced to reflect on relationships in schools, because of the compliments of the pandemic, and the racial reckoning that we are undergoing as the United States, right? If we can have more conversations like this one, if we can foster conversations in the schools between school administrators, school teachers, parents, with the students, as central as the kind of the invisible in the middle of the circle, right? Conversation. It's going to start at the grass roots in that sense, right? There's this progress.

Zaretta:

And it has to start with listening. I think you said that earlier. I mean, the idea of one of the protocols I love is the fishbowl, right? Where people, the chairs, there're four or five chairs in the middle, and the rest of the chairs are around. And the people in the middle of that fishbowl have a conversation.

Zaretta:

And the people on the outer are listening, because one of the things that again, I feel like people aren't seeing in their systems where these things are happening. One of the things I ask people to do is, assess their current reality along some of these markers, look at your discipline numbers, look at what parents have said. Interview children and tell them how do they feel? Because a lot of times they're telling you that.

Zaretta:

What are the racial incidents that are happening, and when they typically happen, and how is it happening? After a while, students of color will stop talking about these things, because they see people aren't interested in changing them. And then what happens is, they then withdraw.

Nat:

Right, that was your example earlier as well, the student who is withdrawing because he or she is not fitting into a certain white privileged patriarchal environment or expectation. And I'm thinking, as you were just saying Zaretta, that I'm not sure if you're aware of the Instagram account that exploded over the summer for a lot of schools.

Nat:

There were these Instagram accounts that were created black at this school, black at this academy, black at this academy. And I was thinking about that as you were just speaking, because that was an incredible source of lived experience, that could not be vocalized by

students of color that had ... It was ... If ever anybody needs example of microaggressions, like that is just this, right?

Zaretta:

Here's the thing I wanted to say, Nat, those examples have been around for a long time. I've worked with independent schools for long time. I've done consulting at Andover Phillips Academy. And I've done this work for 20 years, those students have been saying that. That Instagram account was just ... It's not just listening, it's responding. People have heard it.

Nat:

[inaudible 00:38:30]

Zaretta:

That's it, it's not enough like, "Oh, I listen, oh, I heard you, oh, I feel your pain," but you're not doing nothing about it. What that does is it erodes trust, it just as if a child were living in a house in which he or she is being molested and the other parent knows. That child after a while does not trust, you know I'm being hurt.

Zaretta:

And I'm using these extreme examples, because it makes us cringe inside a bit to say, "I would never allow that to happen," but we allow racial bullying, but we allowed with ... In the news that was just shown, just came up a news story, where in the yearbook, the one black student in a predominantly white school was called the black guy, not even able to use it. What group of adults allowed that, because a yearbook has to be approved.

Zaretta:

This is my point to you, that wasn't a cross racial conversation. That was the fact that it was handed from white adult to white adult, and somehow that was code. What does that tell parents? What does that tell that child?

Nat:

Complicit.

Zaretta:

Well, folks can change it if they want, but this idea that we've got to keep dialoguing, and somehow I got to read some more books. No, there's one example, the Instagram, right? And my daughter went to Harvard, we lived in up close and personal, right? This idea of, "Oh, people would hear her say, Oh, I got accepted to Harvard Academic Scholarship" Not some program to let in underprivileged kids or whatever. She walked through the front door and people would hear Howard, "Oh, you're going to Howard." No, I said, "Harvard," Like, "Hmm, how did you get there ..." I mean, all in microaggressions in these settings are subtle. That's the problem.

Zaretta:

They're out of this notion of being good white people. And unfortunately, good white people are allowing these microaggressions to hurt children and say, "I want to have a relationship with you." This is a trust buster. When you talk about having critical hope, it's actually, the child needs to hear you say, "Stuff ain't right, that ain't right."

Zaretta:

When racial bullying happens, and that teacher hears that the child says, so-and-so said such and such to me, her neck should snap toward that child who was doing the bullying. And literally like her hair is on fire, communicate non-verbally, that is unacceptable, get your stuff, oh, my God. That communicates emotionally to the other children. We don't do that like that.

Zaretta:

But when you're calm and it's just, "Oh, let's get to the bottom of this." You know what you're communicating to young children, that it is okay to do that." And for white children you are initiating them into behaviors that are on the precipice of white supremacy culture. So this issue-

Nat:

Thank you for sharing that. I'm thinking about [crosstalk 00:41:45]. I'm thinking about that response also to microaggressions, and how important it is not just for the kid who's said the microaggression or acted it out, but for, I think, you were saying the same thing, right? It's for everybody else in the classroom, because Ted Nancy Sizer, by the way, your use of the word grappling often, I just love that word, because it's something that we need to lean into. Is this idea of grappling with discomfort, and not personalizing, and not making it as stamp teacher, student.

Zaretta:

That's right.

Nat:

Besides or talks about this, right? And the idea of we are in this, the students are watching, right? That the name of one of that other books is the students are watching. They're watching you, and they might not want to be teachers, they might not want to be ... They might not respect certain parts of you or even like you, but they want to respect you. And they want to see how you handle those micro moments that happened in the classroom, right?

Nat:

Am I right to say that when a teacher snaps their neck and says, "No, that is not allowed, that is not okay." And I'm not just going to wait until after class to have a little sit down and calm, go and go the ducks back. With you, we're going to talk about this now, because the teacher recognizes that the students are watching.

Zaretta:

Right. Here's the thing, we're not even going to talk. The problem is, there's too much talk.

Nat:

Ah, I like that, yes.

Zaretta:

What happens is this is what I see a lot of white teachers do, right? We want to sit in it over, we want to stop and talk now class and stuff. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you are removed from this environment. So this is back to what you were asking before, the idea of a community of learners is predicated on intellectual safety and trust.

Zaretta:

Now, if I can't trust that I'm safe to just be my natural self. And I have to continue to edit myself, which is like holding a beach ball under water. You're exhausted by the end of the day. But if that's going to result in this relentless bullying, and small things that people are saying that goes unchecked, emotionally teachers have to communicate, no, you are being removed. Get your stuff, get your pen, go to the principal's office. I will get ... You need to go call your mother. I am not even going ... You are removed from this community of learners, we don't roll like that.

Zaretta:

That's what happens, but what happens it's this kind of ... Because we're not practiced, right? Our racial literacy is low. We don't know what to do in the moment and then we just want to make it all better. And the fact is it ain't going to be better until you actually demonstrate to the class, that community, we remove folks who don't behave by our rules. The reality is, it actually should be a norm, right? This kind of racial bullying, unacceptable. I don't care if it's a class of only two white, I mean, two children of color. We don't roll like that.

Zaretta:

The idea that children know from the onset and it doesn't have to be a lot of conversation. It has to be the adult removing that element. And it's a visual, it's an emotional thing. The kids see they are watching. And what we see is, or you need to do, like you said, other Instagram accounts, other news articles coming out around, how even teachers are dressing up, like people on the border, Latinx people or they're ... Halloween's coming up now everybody's telling you about be mindful, and mark my words on the internet, it's going to be some group of people who are clearly not thinking.

Zaretta:

They're going to get in some costume, or allow something to be said, or kids coming in with a politicized red caps. And you're going to go back to Mexico. That comment will get you removed, but the teachers not being sensitive because as an adult community, they have policy and practice, because now when the other child who's being racially bullied hit someone, now it's a problem, when that is just emotional defense.



Nat:

Exactly, exactly. Emotional defense in a classroom. And this gets me actually coming full circle around in this conversations Zaretta, this is about ... Is he going to be thinking about school, and what the purposes of school today, and this being remote has absolutely generated that question, right? What is the school? If this is not going to be classroom, and it's not going to be whiteboard, or desks, or in school bus, or whatever, it is what is it?

Nat:

And if we're also going to be ... And this is other discussions, if we are going to be looking at curriculum differently, and we're going to have this tension between curricular achievement, and focus on SEL, and trauma informed teaching, and whatnot, which is super healthy to have this tension. What is a school? What is a classroom? And everything you were just saying about the kid who's in the classroom, who feels unsafe makes me think about, then what is a school?

Nat:

Because if a school is a center for learning, and you have a lot of focus on rigor, a lot of focus on relationships, and teaching is not about being nice, and not about just kind of handing education to children and having ... It's not a one-way unidirectional thing. It's not passive. Learning is not passive, learning comes through risk taking, right?

Nat:

Learning comes through, we talked earlier about overcoming obstacles, and having that moxie within to be able ... That's reinforced though, by the only adults in the room, and that only adults in the room controls the barometer of the emotional barometer of the classroom.

Zaretta:

That's right.

Nat:

I'm just sharing this back with you because as a white male teacher, and as a white educator, and somebody who is leaning in, and perceive myself as somebody who's leaning in, and trying so hard, it's I want to try to find connection too, just with the importance of belongingness and safety in learning, and the open mind. The amygdala, that's not triggered. The dopamine that overrides the cortisol.

Nat:

That's our job as teachers, that's our job when it comes to creating a classroom, a true classroom of learning this school of 21st century school. I'm going to ask you this as my final question for you. What can the teacher like listen but take action, respond immediately to microaggressions, create cultures of belongingness. Is there anything that I'm missing from this conversation, or that you would like to reinforce to the Reach. Teach. Talk. audience?

Zaretta:

I think the primary thing is to understand relationships as multi-dimensional, and to kids want to know that you see reality too, and that we're not dwelling on it, but we're getting after something. And that in their own backyard, they can be curious, right? There's a book I love called the Word Collector, little boy, Jerome. I feel such an affinity for him, because he goes about collecting words, because they make him happy.

Zaretta:

How do we do that? And to your point, what's a school? What's a classroom? We all come at an appointed time to say, this is what I was curious about. This is what I found in my backyard. Don't assume kids don't have anything at home, don't assume we can't be learning in our own backyard. How are we set up so that when we go back into our environment, these are the projects, these are the things we make.

Zaretta:

I love maker centered education, right? Out of the Harvard's Project Zero, they talk about this idea of maker centered education, because it really helps students know that learning is just about living. It's not about a grade, and how many points, and you got to come to this classroom at this time. A school, a classroom should be really about giving kids the skills to learn constantly in their environment at higher and higher levels.

Zaretta:

And I'll bring it all the way back around to that table with all the books. My mother understood that it wasn't just that I was taking in new knowledge, that I was learning how to learn, and that she didn't have to be by my side, because she was giving me these tools that the more I was able to engage in them, the more my capacity is going to expand.

Zaretta:

Rigor is not just let's give kids harder stuff. Let's allow them to grow the learning muscles that will expand their ability to carry more of the cognitive load. We're actually in a really unique and wonderful position, I think, right? Crisis brings opportunity, how will we empower students with learning skills, so they can go into their own environment, and use it as their own classroom, as their own dojo, and bring that back to the group of folks that they're sitting with and in Zoom.

Zaretta:

Let's think of Zoom or whatever virtual platform you're using as the campfire, right? Hey, I went out and what did you bring back to the .. Hey, what did you get? How did your day go? What did you do? This should be the place where ... This is what I learned today, and I get to go tell these folks about it, or we get to actually do this. How are we stimulating that sense that I want to go, and talk to that group of people about this stuff that I learned.

Nat:

That is beautiful. And that is the opposite of a deficit mentality when it comes to the possibility of remote learning, and the remote teaching, and that you can develop these genuine relationships, these genuine connections, if you allow yourself to, if you open up and if you allow for that openness through connection.

Zaretta:

That's right.

Nat:

Oh, my gosh, Zaretta, thank you. This has just been a beautiful conversation. And so thought provoking and heart stimulating. And I would say pragmatically hoping, I mean, I would say that it's critically hoping here. I think that what you've just said about how this is an opportunity for all of us as a society, when we look at education to acknowledge what's going right between acknowledge, what's been just so not going right. I mean, it's so interesting. It's like education before March was not ... We don't want to go back there.

Zaretta:

Right, that's right. Here's the thing I would say, as long as we can see this is the breakdown to the breakthrough, right? I think that when we plant a seed, the seed is in dirt, literally in dirt and manure, right?

Nat:

I'm humbled.

Zaretta:

And for a long time, we're not going to see anything, that doesn't mean it's not happening, right? Underneath in the dark things must break down, that seed must break through its shell so that roots will come out. After a while the seedling is going to break through and become some type of a little branch or whatever it's going to be a stem.

Zaretta:

But all of this looks chaotic, renovation of a house when you're just like, "Oh, here's our bathroom being renovated, isn't it lovely?" No, because you have no walls, but it is still ... It's just in the process of becoming that lovely after picture. We just want everything to be the after picture, it's not. And we have to be okay, this is the grappling. We are okay with chaos when we understand how to leverage it. But that's part of where we're given the opportunity to rethink, what is a school? What is a classroom? What does belonging look like?

Nat:

Allow us for the messiness of our human condition. The seed in the dirt, that's just there's so much humility in that, Zaretta. There's so much humility and grace in that image, from something so small and something born into dirt, literally dirt, manure.

Zaretta:

That's critical hope. That's critical hope, that when I plant the seed, it will break through. Although I'm standing here and look like not a damn thing is happening. It is my critical hope is, it will break through, it is doing what it is programmed to do by nature, by spirit. And when we are able to follow that, this is where it belongs, we are social creatures.

Zaretta:

When we are able to be honest with ourselves, and each other, and create an environment that feels intellectually safe. It's built on trust, real trust, not hokey trust like, "Oh, it's all just good." Like, "No, this is the social political context." We are country born of apartheid, this is how we're going to get moved forward from that. When we do that, then we are the seedling, we're about to break through. This is just a breakdown before the breakthrough.

Nat:

We're going to end on that note, because my cortisol is completely being overtaken by my dopamine. I thought I didn't have any cortisol to begin with and this conversation, frankly, but the dopamine rush that I'm getting right now, by those final words Zaretta, in this week before election. And in this march toward darkness, or after the darkness does come to light, [inaudible 00:55:28] spring comes after the winter.

Nat:

All of this is a beautiful way to end this beautiful conversation. And I'm just so grateful for you to have been a guest on Reach. Teach. Talk. Ms. Zaretta, and by the way, I know you make a point to say, you're not Dr. Zaretta Hammond. You are a teacher, a teacher of teachers, you are a teacher with passion. And if anybody listening here doesn't take away that passion, then you are not listening carefully enough, or you just need to dial up your volume. Thank you so much for being with us at Reach. Teach. Talk. today. Thank you so much.

Zaretta:

[inaudible 00:56:01].

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to Reach. Teach. Talk. With Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for our future episode, you can send your suggestion, or questions to [nat@reachacademics.com](mailto:nat@reachacademics.com).