

The Relevance of Critical Race Theory: Impact on Students of Color

Monica E Allen

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The prevalence of race and racism can be found throughout the U.S. educational system.

Although there have been many historical attempts to even the playing field for marginalized students, the attempts have had questionable effectiveness. The fact that students who come from marginalized groups based on race, sexuality, social and economic factors, have more negative experiences in the education system than White students. Many of these students are found more in special education programs, are under-represented in programs for gifted and talented students, lack basic resources, have high dropout rates and low academic outcomes.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides many tools to help educators take to social justice activism, in order to create an environment that demonstrates that learning is valued for all students and ensures that all students are given an equal opportunity to obtain a quality education.

Keywords: critical race theory, social justice, effectiveness

For the past two decades, “CRT (Critical Race Theory) scholars in education have theorized, examined, and challenged the ways in which race and racism shape schooling structures, practices and discourses” (Yosso, Parker, Solorazano, and Lynn, 2005, p. 3). In the past, educators focused on critical race research, particularly in the effort to identify and challenge the macro- and micro-aggressions that have been experienced by students of color. However, more recent critical race scholars, in the field of education, have expanded their focus

to the areas of epistemology, policy, pedagogy and curriculum (Yosso, Parker, Solorazano, & Lynn, 2005). This is based on the premise that CRT challenges the experience of Whites, in society, as the standard to follow, and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color (Taylor, 1998).

History of Critical Race Theory

During the 1970s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) evolved out of work of several legal scholars, who took to reexamining the persistence of racism in America and the absence of racial reform in traditional civil rights legislation. According to Yosso et al (2005), CRT emerged from the criticism of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement which questioned the traditions of the legal system. CLS failed to include an emphasis on race and racism which resulted in the absence of strategies for social transformation of the oppressive social structure created by the existing legal system. According to Ladson-Billings (1999), as a result of CLS' failure to include racism and lack of strategies, CRT became an outgrowth of the dissatisfaction of legal scholars of color. Derrick Bell Jr., Alan Freeman, Charles, Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Richard Delgado, Mai Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crenshaw ignited a growing movement that has spread beyond the legal world into areas such as education, sociology, ethnic studies and women's studies (Hiraldo, 2010; Taylor, 1998). These scholars sought to understand how White supremacy and its oppression of People of Color had been established and perpetuate while putting race and racism at the center of scholarship and analysis (Lynn & Adams, Taylor, cited in McCoy, et al, 2015).

According to Yosso and Solorzano (2007), CRT was initially formed with the focus on civil rights legislation in terms of Black vs. White. However, the addition of other racialized groups in society has caused an expansion of the theory to incorporate the experiences of these

groups: (a) women (FemCrit); (b) Latinas/os (LatCrit); (c) Native Americans (TribalCrit); and (d) Asian Americans (AsianCrit).

“Although CRT is not an abstract set of ideas or rules, its scholarship is marked by a number of specific themes” (Taylor, 1998, p. 122). These “themes” or tenets of CRT have had several different interpretations over the past decade. However, the definitions and framing of the tenets have been maintained. For the purpose of this article, the five tenets being reviewed are: (a) Racism is permanent; (b) Challenge to Dominant Ideology (Critique of Liberalism); (c) Centrality of Experiential Knowledge; (d) Interest Convergence Theory; and (d) Intersectionality (Crenshaw cited in Museus, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1999; McCoy, 2015; Yosso et al, 2005).

Racism is Permanent

Race, a social construct, is the basis of racism. Racism is so ingrained in American culture that it appears to be normal and natural. The concepts of White superiority are woven within the political and legal tapestry of this country (Taylor, 1998). The White, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual norms of the dominant group have become the point of reference against which other groups are judged. They determine the norms which define what is right and wrong, and expect other groups to conform (Goodman, 2011). As a result, the strategy of CRT is to expose racism for what it is (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Challenge to Dominant Ideology

CRT challenges White privilege and the concepts of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity. CRT scholars argue that these concepts act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power and privilege of the dominant culture in America (Calmore 1992; Solorzano, 1997 as cited in Yosso and Solorzano, 2007; McCoy et al., 2015)

Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

The knowledge of People of Color is valuable. The experience of oppression, such as racism and sexism, is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding and analyzing the plight of these marginalized groups. CRT draws on the lived experiences of People of Color by including methods of storytelling, family histories, biographies, and narratives (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso and Solorzano, 2007). These counter-stories originally aimed to restructure legal scholarship and were intended to illuminate, by contrast, the majoritarian story represented by the law (Closson, 2010). Now CRT has found its place in other arenas such as education.

Interest Convergence Theory

CRT scholars posit that the advancement of the interests of People of Color will only occur when there is a convergence of the interests of those in power (McCoy, et al. 2015). Goodman (2011) takes that concept even further and explains that our society encourages the dominant culture to be self-focused, to see others as threats and to feel superior. These messages become internalized and lead to resistance. As a result, CRT scholars focus on the opposition and elimination of racism, sexism and the empowerment of People of Color. (McCoy et al., 2015; Yosso and Solorzano, 2007).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality involves the assumption that People of Color not only experience oppression because of race, but also because of other identities, such as, (a) gender; (b) class; (c) religion; (d) ability/disability; (e) sexual orientation, and forms of oppression, such as (a) sexism; (b) ableism; and (c) homophobia. (Ladson-Billings, 1999; McCoy et al., 2015).

CRT in Education

Ledesma & Calderon (2014) shares with the reader that CRT in education can be divided into two groups: K-12 education and higher education. In the area of K-12 education,

the authors identified several themes: (a) curriculum and pedagogy; (b) teaching and learning; (c) schooling; and (d) policy/finance and community engagement. In higher education, they identified the following theses: (a) colorblindness; (b) selective admissions policy; and (c) campus racial climate (p. 207).

In a perfect world, equal opportunity in education would ensure that students from marginalized groups would have access to the same curriculum, instruction, funding and facilities as White students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Unfortunately, the world we live in is not perfect. The prevalence of race and racism can be found throughout the K-12 continuum. CRT, according to Ledesma and Calderon (2015), provides educators with tools to identify these issues found in the curriculum and pedagogy, teaching and learning, schooling, policy, school finance and community engagement. However, in the classroom, CRT is not as easy for many educators to use.

Although there have been many historical attempts to even the playing field for marginalized students, the attempts have had questionable effectiveness. The fact that students who come from marginalized groups based on race, sexuality, social and economic factors, have more negative experiences in the education system than White students. Many of these students are found more in special education programs, are under-represented in programs for gifted and talented students, lack of basic resources, have high dropout rates and low academic outcomes. Okhremtchouk (2015) summed up the impact on society as “it is important not to lose sight of the fact that we, as a nation, are losing generations of talent that...students bring into a classroom, which could potentially impact us all...we are benefiting no one; in fact, we are stagnating our own collective progress by not ensuring equality of opportunity for these students, so they are well positioned to demonstrate many merits they bring to our social structure.” (p. 18).

In order to make changes in the educational system, educators are encouraged to examine curriculum, pedagogy, teaching and learning through a CRT lens. When done so, it becomes apparent that the educational system in America is heavily influenced by White supremacy. Ladson-Billings (1998) posits that CRT school curriculum is “designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 18). CRT provides educators with tools to identify ways to transform current practices in curriculum, pedagogy, teaching and learning into ones that remove colorblindness and meritocracy and allow interest convergence and experiential knowledge into the curriculum. Ledesma & Calderon (2015) express the need for educators to examine their attitudes that they bring into the classroom. Many of their attitudes “mimic” the larger system of White supremacy. This prevents them from teaching in ways that are culturally relevant, which results in the minimization of the impact of racism. These authors encourage the use of distributive justice that shifts the attitudes of educators from being “savior” to a call for social justice activism.

The call for social justice activism does not end with preservice educators, it also continues for them within the school walls. In the school setting, CRT provides tools that educators can use to create a space where all students are empowered to ensure that learning is experiential and engaging. The call to take action can be daunting to some educators and leaders. Goodman (2011) points out that there are difficulties that are associated with praxis. The author encourages educators/leaders to find opportunities in growth when faced with the difficulties and disappointments that come with social justice activism. McMahon and Armstrong (2015) suggest that social justice action should be "a joint responsibility that is shared by...administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the...community" (p. 203).

Climates within schools are affected by public policy, school finance and community engagement. Unfortunately, public policy and school finance impact marginalized communities

disproportionately from White communities (Ladesma & Calderson, 2015). The authors suggest that educators use CRT to "expose, highlight, and challenge" these disparities (p. 213). Ladson-Billings (1998) posits policies and school finance highlight inequity and racism and that CRT argue that this inequality is a direct function of institutionalized racism. The impact of this is devastating to marginalized students who suffer the consequences of this form of racism. CRT supports that without a commitment of redesigning policies and funding, racial progress can not be made. Without recognizing and altering White supremacy and privilege, inequities of schooling will remain in place and guarantee the continuation of the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lopez, 2003).

Many of the challenges faced by educators/administrators in K-12 are also echoed in the halls of higher education. CRT also provides many tools for educators in higher education to take to social justice activism to create an environment that demonstrates that learning is valued for all students.

In postsecondary institutions, the problems of racism and policies that are influenced by White supremacy still prevail. Unfortunately, the framework of "majoritarian" remains the norm on campuses across America. Although institutions of higher education are very good at designing inclusive mission and vision statements, achievement of the goals is, not only difficult but sometimes are proven to be impossible. Upon review of the literature pertaining to institutions of higher education, CRT scholars have mainly focused on the areas of (a) colorblindness; (b) selective admissions policy; and (c) campus racial climate (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015).

CRT scholars posit that the needed attention to the concepts of race and racism in higher education is rarely the focal point of the analysis of academic success and achievement of students of color. It is mostly used as a demographic variable. The need for a change in

viewpoint is vital to the transformation of the inequities in the higher educational system (Closson, 2010).

Ledesma and Calderon (2015) point out that the “majoritarian” framework that has historically shaped educational access and opportunity for marginalized students has been exposed by Critical Race scholarship. This scholarship has reinforced the fact that race and racism matter. The authors further explain that the exposure of the prevalence of White supremacy continues to shape the culture on many college and university campuses. In fact, it is usually “in the guise of colorblindness” (p. 214), which is rooted in the belief that claiming to see skin color and race leads one to be a racist. Unfortunately, the concept of colorblindness tends to ignore the fact that it continues to support White supremacy, the privileges it affords, and the continuation of discrimination against students of color. The denial of a system of privilege and oppression minimizes of the disparities that exist between Whites and marginalized groups, resulting in the blame of shortcomings being placed on the students of color. (Diggles, 2014).

Many institutions have made an effort, to support the work of CRT, by utilizing admissions policies that are related to affirmative action. As pointed out by Ledesma and Calderon (2015), interest convergence provides the reason why PWIs continue to “defend affirmative action”. Although there have been many attacks on the use of affirmative action in the admissions process, administrators are beginning to recognize the value that a diverse student body brings to their campuses. In response, CRT can be used to help with the exposure of the “social construction” of admission policies and how attacks on these policies are being used to maintain the status quo. Yosso et al. (2005) posit that the attacks on affirmative action admissions policies are the majoritarian stories that “unqualified” students of color receive preferential treatment which has a negative effect on White students. The claim is for all students to

compete for admissions on a level playing field. The premise behind these claims is that White students are being denied admission because “unqualified” students of color are taking their seats.

CRT’s tenets of interest convergence theory and the normality of racism, help educators understand that the majority on college campuses are advocating for colorblindness and race-neutral policies. Counter-stories of students of color can help remind the majority of the history of unequal K-12 schooling, hostile racial climates on campus, and the limited access to higher education for members of their community (Yosso et al 2005).

Although attention may be given to race when it comes to admissions policies, there is still much room for changes to be made to the racial climate on campuses across the country. Students from marginalized groups continue to experience micro- and macro-aggressions. As a result, educators are encouraged to use the tools of CRT to explore how racism continues to exist on campuses and what the implications are for students of color. One suggestion is to give voice to students and for administrators to be open to hearing the stories and experiential knowledge of marginalized groups on all levels across campuses. CRT scholars find that the counter-stories of these students usually reveal intense racial climates in and out of the classroom, struggles with self-doubt, frustration and isolation (McCoy, 2015).

As with the call for social justice activism in K-12, the same call exists for institutions of higher education. Faculty, staff, administrators, students, all have a responsibility to take steps to expose and eradicate racism on college campuses. Learning should be able to happen for all students regardless of race, gender, sexuality, economics, ability, etc. This learning should occur in an environment without fear, frustration, and pain. Higher education educators and administrators can use the tools provided by CRT to provide a climate that is conducive to learning.

Conclusion

CRT recognizes the existence of race and racism throughout the educational pipeline. It provides the tools that can be used by educators to ensure that all students are given an equal opportunity to obtain a quality education. The majoritarian structure of the current K-20 education system should be redesigned so that race and racism can be eliminated. According to Lopez (2003), CRT reminds educators to take the time to understand how racism works, recognize it for what it is, identify it within one's self and take action to do something about it. By answering the call for social justice activism, all educators can use their power of influence to fight for equity for all marginalized groups.

On the institutional level, institutions of learning must be inclusive, there must be change to (a) initiatives; (b) infrastructure; (c) environments; (d) curriculum; (e) pedagogy; (f) financing; and (g) policies to eradicate the promotion of racism, inequalities, and social injustices. Educators should continue to identify ways to solve problems in schools, classrooms and on campuses. Using the tools provided by CRT can be difficult and unpopular and, in many cases, unfortunately, leads to inactivity (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

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