

Using Critical Race Theory to Understand and reach students of color

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Literature Review

Introduction

For decades researchers and educators alike have use various lens or theories to understand social and cultural issues. The use of these lens can be beneficial for examining education, schools, curriculum, students, and teachers. More than just examining these sociocultural education issues, they also facilitate reform in education and curriculum. Many scholars have used these theories to create tools, and frameworks to help better schools and students. However, many educators become overwhelmed trying to make changes needed to impact students and teachers lives for the better.

It can be daunting and insurmountable to stay abreast with all of the research that academia provides pertaining to the diverse backgrounds of students that may populate any given school or classroom. Yet, it is dedication and drive that gives educators the equipment and understanding to find what works best for their unique student body. But somewhere in between the good intentions and a plethora of studies, something is missed when it comes to application.

The task of creating a culturally relevant curriculum, classroom, and school environment can be overwhelming, even feel impossible. By using knowledge of students, their home environments, and interests any teacher who is willing to do the work can use adopt this three step action plan: Evaluate text provided by curriculum, or themes, 2) find and use alternate sources/texts to compare, 3) allow students to create counter narratives of their own. This action plan servers as a framework for teachers to create lessons the incorporate both standards and

perspectives while tailoring to students. This will give students a chance to see themselves represented in the lessons, and provide a creative outlet. Using the research of many leaders in the field of education, what follows will prove that creating a culturally responsive classroom is not so insurmountable.

A Brief History

In order to understand why all of this is valuable for students and teachers, it is important understand the histories of schooling and the events that have primarily impacted students of color. The birth and structure of the current educational system in the United states is modeled after the earliest versions of the Refuge housing, Boarding schools, and juvenile justice system. During the 1800's children were seen more as property, that was bought and sold, they worked and labored, serving the purpose of their owner. When children broke the law they were treated just as adults, subjected to the same penalties. It was not until the Refuge houses were created in the 1800's that this changed. The refuge houses became home to children who were in need of direction and saving from the immoral surroundings from which they came; "While the notion of separating youth from the detrimental conditions of urban life was a new phenomenon then, the rationale and setup of these houses reflected a concern for poor children and the need for their training" (Hopson & Obidah, 2002). The idea that there was a class of people who needed to have their children "saved", taken away from them, placed in homes that were to make them cable, productive, members of the work force; "These contradictions include molding, children of the lower classes into a complacent labor force, and framing these same children as

those most likely to end up in the juvenile justice system[...]" (Hopson & Obidah, 2002). The wealthy and affluent class felt the need to remove child from their "unfit" homes and parents, placing them in these institutions in that would provide them with what their families could not, and to become what is deemed acceptable by society. This was not solely for the betterment of the children and students, but to serve the needs of those in power, who strategically developed institutions that would serve their purpose, rather than the actual needs of children.

With the rise of the juvenile justice system; a set of laws, codes, and languages use to indoctrinate children into the legal system. Sadly, the model for reform was used by the juvenile justice system has detrimental effects on students' lives; "These students also are shown to have high rates of school failures, teenage pregnancy, and usually, come for low-income families with histories of conflict, drug abuse, and overall instability" (Hopson & Obidah, 2002). Students of color tend to be affected by this more than their white counter parts. The correlation that exists between schools and the juvenile system are undeniable, "Schools were therefore built on the concept of the prison or asylum- the concept of an institution whose sole preoccupation was to control people who were in. its custody- in other words, to "to regiment, control, and discipline the social outcast" (Erevelles & Watts, 2004). It is no wonder that student of color have such troublesome relationship with schools, schools that have since inception tried to exercise power over them, and penalized them for nonconformance. Knowing the tumultuous history that has existed between students of color and schools can give insight to teachers as well as administrators to make conscience choices in both how the space is run, and the curriculum that students are being taught.

Critical Race Theory

There are several theorists that have been pioneered the way with their research and articles to help educators. What they have done is made doing the work that much easier to understand the social factors surrounding their students and schools. The purpose of these theories and many others is to help see these events through a specific lens; as a way of thinking about and examining the things happening now, and things that have happened in the past – ideally to prevent future problems, or alleviating current issues. Specifically, Critical Race Theory in conjunction with Disabilities Theory, Colony Internal Theory and Portraiture methodology are all valuable for educators to better become culturally relevant and responsive. It is important to realize that while they will be discussed at separate theories, they do overlap and frequently do intersect in the context of education; these intersections will be discussed as well.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), got its start in the 1970's initially focused on law and the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. It then was used by other researchers to view race and the impact it has in the educational system. This helped all to see the world through a racialized lens; the importance of not ignoring race and how it operates on a daily basis in all aspects of life.

CRT is deeply dissatisfied with traditional civil right litigation and liberal reforms.

Having seen many of the gains of the civil rights movement rendered irrelevant by an increasing conservative judiciary, CRT scholars have lost faith in the traditional legal remedies. They have seen restrictive definitions of merit, fault, and causation render

much of current antidiscrimination law impotent, Progress on employment and contracting laws designed to end discrimination has been stalled as courts promote preferences at the expense of minority interests (Taylor, 1998).

Despite all of the hard work and struggle for progress that went into the civil right movement, many of the laws and changes were ineffective. According to Taylor this is largely due to the fact that many felt they were basing decisions for employment, education, and housing on merit and colorblindness; all of this still continued to perpetuate a system of whiteness and white privilege (Taylor, 1998).

The same questions and lens can also be applied to education. Viewing the education system here in America as being racist, through a racialized lens it makes seeing how whiteness has impacted policy, structure, and culture of our schools. “Most whites have embraced the color-blind perspective and many constructs built upon the premise that racism is a normal activity in American society will be resisted. It is less painful and upsetting for most whites to simply deny, usually not maliciously, that racism exists” (Taylor, 1994). What CRT and its scholars are trying to say is, yes we operate in a system and society that is inherently racist. However, it is largely ignored and discredited by whites and many others simple because it is less painful that way. This kind of thinking and operating is harmful to everyone. Using the CRT is one way to view, examine events ,and structures that may appear normal, and acknowledge how bias or racism play a role. “CRT as a theoretical framework that allows scholars to interrogate social, educational, and political issues by prioritizing the voices of participants and respecting multiple roles held by held by scholars of color when conducting

research. Data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted through a race based epistemological lens rather through critical or feminist methodologies or theories that first privilege class and/or gender” (Chapman, 2007). But it does not just leave it there, it continues by challenging these ideas, by providing counter narrative and truth. This is not an easy task, as many will refute and ignore the facts surrounding the issues; “In sum, CRT usefulness will be limited not by weakness of its constructs but by the degree that many whites will not accept its assumptions;” (Taylor, 1998). It is then incumbent on educators, particularly white educators to acknowledge and examine their power, using their power to restructure the current educational system; this is vital, our students lives depend on it.

As mentioned before CRT does not exist in a vacuum, much like racism. There are other factors and social constructs at play simultaneously. The correlation between special education and the large amount students of color who are classified as such. In their work, Watts and Erevelles write about how CRT and Disability Studies intersect, explaining why it has become beneficial to label people of color as disabled. Labeling the bodies of people of color is one way to control them, in schools this occurs when the bodies or students cannot be controlled or they do not conform. “These theorists recognize that such associations with deviance have been used to justify the brutality of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the continued exploitation of people of color” (Watts & Erevelles, 2004). The act of classifying students of color as disabled (primarily cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally), is a form of control and oppression that our schools continue to enforce down to this day. By constructing an “other” which is not solely based on race or gender, there is then a need to create both a separation and reason to keep certain groups of people down. This raises the question, why? Why is there a

need to create a group of others? According to Erevelles and Watts, along with other scholars it is because: “[T]hey argue that capitalism has most pernicious effects on those who are relegated to society’s lowest ranks (e.g., people of color and disabled people belonging to the working class and/or the underclass) and therefore that capitalism is fundamentally undemocratic” (Watts & Erevelles, 2004). As mentioned before, historically there is a reason for labeling and the mistreatment of students and people of color that is still embedded and fundamental to our current education system.

Another such theory that intersects with CRT is Internal colony. Internal colony is based on the belief that the people who are oppressed in society are living in internal colonies, according to Billings and Tate.

Internal colony theory explains that colonized people are forced to interact with oppressive institutions within the colony; this necessity creates feelings of vulnerability, which when left unattended can lead to violent reactions by the colonized people toward the institutions and toward one another. [...] These schools are populated predominantly by African American and Latino students who live in spaces where inadequate educational opportunities, high unemployment and underemployment, disinvestment in communities, lack of access to quality resources, police brutality, and an unjust court system create vulnerability and despair” (Watts & Erevelles, 2004).

Our society here in America is set up to continually create a group, mainly people of color that are placed at a disadvantage. Then when they respond or react to their situation (individual or

group), they are condemned for their anger and aggression towards the unjust system. Schools then are one agent of the system that is used to label and create these internal colonies, that in turn gets students of color marked as defiant or deviant; feeding into the cycle of mistreatment and abuse. “When the social control of students is given higher priority than learning and the mechanisms for controlling students are sanctioned by state boards of education, structural violence is present” (Watts & Erevelles, 2004). What these theories or lens are try to help us understand in that all of the issues we see are interconnected and related by one common thread which is oppression in the form of racism above all else. For centuries history has been repeating itself through the power structures that have violently oppressed people of color first through actual brutality, then by means of laws and the justice system, and now the use of institutions such as schools by using psychological and economical tactics.

Yet another way CRT can be useful, is in examining historical events and traumas. In her article *Terrorism in Native America: Interrogating the Past, Examining the Present, and Constructing a Liberatory Future* Writer discusses how the narrative of past historical traumas can offer insight into how the narrative can have deep impact, while lacking the truth. In the wake of 9/11/2001 the term terrorism was used to describe the attract of foreigners on US soil. However, Writer argues that US has a long history with terrorism that started with the extermination of Native Americans; “Forgotten or ignored are the United states’ colonization, deculturalization, and oppression of Indigenous peoples through acts of terrorism. For over 500 years, terrorist acts have been carried out yet erased for the consciousness of the non-Native United States population and in forms of media” (Writers, 2002). Writers then details two historical events, the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864, and the death of Anne Mae Aquash during

the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1976. The details of each event are too horrific and inhuman to recount. Yet one theme was present in both, and throughout similarly events in Native history – the justification of violent and sadistic acts against Natives. Main Stream media was in both situations responsible for deifying the white man who executed the “justice” against the savage and unhuman Natives; “The naming or positioning of individuals and groups as terrorist was and is fostered through the use of media. [...] They also illustrate the influences of the media in the developments and dissemination of social constructions of the Other,” (Writers, 2002). The media help to perpetuate and construct the narrative of the “other”. How though can we fight against the narrative, and the racist system?

CRT also focus on how to create a counter narrative that showcases the voices of those who most often go unheard. This is one way that teachers can work with students directly to create a sense of self, through exploring and creating their own counter narratives. Chapman writes about how Portraiture methods combined with CRT can be a powerful tool, “Portraiture and CRT allow the researcher to evoke the personal, the professional, and the political to illuminate issues of race, class, and gender in education research” (2007). This can be used with students to help them elicit their own personal story and narrative, allowing them to see how their own experiences play out in the context of race and society. It also provides and out let for students to express themselves and see how the all coexist in a larger community. “Together, Portraiture and CRT can move participants toward a more collective agency and understanding or each other. [...] In portraiture, our ability to provoke readers, participants, and ourselves into reevaluating our respective points of view is a small but meaningful form of social justice” (Chapman, 2007). Teachers can help students not only reclaim their voice and take

action by simply representing their own stories, and identities in whatever way possible. These counter narratives are not to highlight the negative aspects of their lives, rather to write their own stories, perspectives, and truth down, show how life is really a mosaic of both good and bad experiences.

As mentioned before counter narratives, or counter story telling is an important aspect of CRT analyze. Because of how the media is used to support the dominate narrative there is a need for the voice of the oppressed to counter balance, and tell a more truthful accurate version of events. “Counter-stories aim to reveal another version of reality: A reality that has been “filtered-out,” suppresses, or censored through the normalization process. Proponents of CRT believe that if we acknowledge subjugated discourses we will not only recognize there is more than one way to look at the world, but we will also open up possibilities for understanding phenomena in new and different ways” (Lopez, 2001). Counter narratives are our change to rewrite history, to contribute our input into what will someday become history, and into a space that would otherwise silence our voices.

In order for students to accurately examine themselves to create a counter narrative, they also need to see themselves represented in a culturally relevant classroom. It is vital for all student to see themselves represented in the curriculum, the classroom, and the media. IF the effort is not made to include these diverse representations, students will be given a whitewashed stereotypical version of reality. “The dominate culture representations reify romanticized notions and naturalize racism. At worst these images promote cultural and physical genocide” (Rangel, 2012). Such is the case when it comes to the representation of Native American art. In her article *Moving Beyond the Expected* Rangel focuses on how the portrayal

of Native American in the arts community, and museums is rather detrimental to all. There is little to no focus on contemporary art of Natives, rather the focus is solely on the historical and marketable (capitalism) arts. “Contemporary, in this context, is employed to distinguish from historical and ethnographical museums, which focus on and frame Native people and their cultures only existing in the romanticized pre-colonial, pre-civilization past. Contemporary means still existing today, production as and contextualizing Native people and cultures as part of the present and moving forward” (Rangel, 2012). This living in the past is detrimental on two levels, first that it negates the contributes of Native American and now, and secondly it furthers stereotypical notions of Natives, promoting the commercialism and capitalism that fuels these negative representations. “Western frameworks that conflate Native arts and cultural production with Native crafts, artifacts, and material culture misrepresent the complexity of Indigenous cultures. [...] The power to remove products of material culture from one specific context to another, as with cultural objects in an ethnographic museum exhibit, is an important tool for maintaining Euro-American hegemony” (Rangel, 2012). The power that is exerted over Native culture and arts brings us back to the idea that those in power exercise it over the body, or in this case the things that the bodies have produced. Control Native art and how it is seen allows those in control to skew the narrative of the Native/Indigenous population. The narrative they made undermines any valuable contribute that have been, and that are being made. This is why representation is to vital. Students need to see themselves not just as slaves, or as chiefs from the 1800’s living in teepees, but as productive and important member of society, then and now.

Action Plan

For many educators it is one thing to talk about these theories and methodologies, but it is another thing to apply them in the classroom on a daily basis. Some may be overwhelmed with guilt over whiteness. Some may feel overwhelmed because of the overwhelming amount of work that is needed above and beyond what is already expected. And for some they just simply do not know where to start. The desire to do right by students through the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy is more than just an afterthought or superficial cultural experiences. There has to be a deeper meaning and significance to making learning culturally relevant. “However, they rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities. There was no discussion of issues such as school choice, school closings, rising incarceration rates, gun laws, or even everyday school climate questions like whether students should wear uniforms (which typically sparks spirited debate)” (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Somewhere in between the desire to do what is best for students and the courage to stand up and do the work lies despair. Many teachers feel this, like nothing they can or will do can have a lasting impact or be added into a curriculum filled with standards, tests, and constant demands for accountability. In order to stop overthinking the issue and start doing more - there is a need for a three-step action plan. The first step is to use the curriculum, text, and resources that are already provided. Second, after covering lessons introduce students to other voices and perspectives from the same time and events. Showcase the reality of those who are not in power, the voices and stories of the oppressed, the forgotten and the unheard. Allow students to analyze the varying sources using the skills from each lesson. Then lastly, have students create their own counter narrative from the perspective in which

they choose. Using the lens that CRT uses students can examine any topic or subject from Art, Science, and Math to the obvious History and English. This framework can be tailor to be used at any grade level. Be real, start small, and be dedicated to doing the work.

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