**Moderated Discussion**

**Understanding Critical Race Theory in Education**

**and**

**Significance & Implications in Loudoun County Public Schools**

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**Critical Race Theory: Definition and Application to Education - Stephanie**

Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework using race as the lens of interpretation, began unfolding in the 1970s on the back of critical legal studies and feminism as activists and scholars collectively drove a movement aiming to recognize and shift power dynamics based on racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). These two components, theory and practice, are fundamental to the tenets of CRT, which “tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). While a single definition of CRT has not yet been established, the common understanding of CRT suggests “race” is “socially constructed,” and that “racial difference” is “invented, perpetuated, and reinforced by society” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278). Race appears and behaves differently in different contexts; racial stereotypes are not static; and racism is generally covert rather than overt, the latter of which is less accepted by most cultures.

Scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solozano (1998) applied CRT to education, which started gaining traction in the early 2000s despite controversial opinions and assertions of its function, definition, and application. To illuminate underlying sources of this controversy, a brief examination of CRT in education is helpful, articulated through five themes providing a foundation for assessing perspectives, research approaches and pedagogy (Solorzano, 2010). (1) *The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism*. Intersectionality, according to Gillborn (2015), refers to the interconnections and relationships among and between different stratifications, such as race, gender, class, disability, etc, which are affected by context, time, and an individual's unique set of experiences. Consequently, intersectionality is not unidimensional, but rather multi-dimensional in its effect and reach (Gillborn, 2015). (2) *The challenge to dominant ideology*, which refers to education institution’s belief in meritocracy, color blindness and gender neutrality, for example. Teachers, cited by Ledesma and Calderon (2015), deserve particular attention in developing not only cultural knowledge, but also the historical and current context of that student’s culture, and how a racial hierarchy is embedded in that experience. (3) *The commitment to social justice*, which arguably lies at the foundation of the inception of CRT and aligns with the motivations of the civil rights movement, feminism, ageism, and so forth. (4) *The centrality of experiential knowledge*; experience, and the stories developed, conveyed, and accepted are recognized as empirical evidence to the frequency of racialization as well as racial microaggressions heard in speech and cultural patterns of communication (Patton, 2016). (5) *The interdisciplinary perspective*: CRT demands the concept of “race” to be viewed within historical and current contexts, and across academic disciplines (Gillborn, 2015; Solorzano, 2015). CRT is inherently an interdisciplinary approach, argues Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman (2020), that grew from social activism and locates “race” as the fulcrum from which all other analysis arises and has meaning. In summary, Solorzano (2015) describes CRT in education as a theoretical framework to “identify, analyze and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects” perpetuating subordination (p. 123).

These five themes provide a framework for understanding some of the controversy and challenge encircling the academy and polity. First, the intersectionality and interdisciplinary nature of CRT does not “fit” within the prescribed silos evidenced in academic, governmental, or private industry structures. Intersectionality is a tool of analysis and resistance, that is, both theoretical and practical, situated within historical contexts, timeframes and interpretations. (Here, Schneider (2004) suggests the relevance of postmodernism in understanding CRT, namely that multiple truths based on an individual or group’s experience exist and that each is as valid as another.) CRT insists on multi-dimensional thinking and processing; the analytical process and responsiveness of CRT lives across axes of dimensions and interdisciplinary factors of cultural and private domains. In education, the intersectionality and interdisciplinary components of CRT mean analysis and resistance is only understood when academic disciplines are considered holistically. Problematically, education systems are generally not structured as interdisciplinary endeavors of critical thinking and action; instead, students major in a particular field, faculty are field specialists, and the institution rewards conformity to its differentiated mandates. Academia, which is meant to serve as a safe and intentional harbor for thoughtful exploration, is not structured to hold systemic, multi-dimensional, and intersection fields.

Second, closely related is the systemic viewpoint of CRT and the implications for analysis and response. CRT examines how structure and systems function to support and sustain racism. Weiner (2012) argues racialization is so profoundly integrated into how those systems function that effectively individuals “need” it to be real (p. 340). Problematically, addressing racism occurs at the individual level. While training or other interventions may occur among individual educators, for example, the underlying system of racism supporting racialization has not been addressed. An individual may discard a stereotype, but the societal or cultural structure supporting that stereotype has not been changed. This “inherent and problematic tension” when addressing a systemic problem with individual solutions is representative of “the entrenchment of race and racism in the United States and fails to result in greater equity in schools” (Vaught and Castagno, 2008, p. 98).

For example, the UK mandates national governing bodies in sports to include a clearly articulated mission that ensures equality and inclusion. In fact, only four percent of board positions are non-white (i.e. Black, Asian, or other minority); only one of 68 sports organizations has a non-white Chief Executive; and a “stark under-representation of women in all coaching and leadership positions” (Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman, 2020, p. 1112). In efforts to remedy this disconnect between mission statements and actual practice, studies have been underway to assess individual’s perceptions of the intersection of race, gender, and disability. The latter two topics, gender and disability, arose openly as discussion points among members of these governing bodies, but references to race raised “anxiety and rhetorical incoherence” (Rankin-Wright, 2020, p. 1121). One interpretation explaining the difference in reaction may stem from the complexity and “blind spot” of racism; in short, the visibility of one’s gender or disability (physical or intellectual, with the notable exception of mental illness) differs from the conceptualization and seemingly invisibility of racism. Racism itself is not “seen” except in statistics, neighborhood demographics, school admission reports, and so forth; as such, racism is an interpretation of data, rather than the data itself.

Another current example, in addition to those examples in education institutions noted throughout this collective paper, is the expression of racism and the desire for CRT as a theoretical framework at the University of Richmond. In early 2021, the president of the university, an African-American male, agreed with the Board of Directors, largely caucasian, not to remove two university legacy names, associated with slavery and discrimination, from buildings, but rather to add additional names, freed slaves and abolitionists, to the building names. The conflict ostensibly reflected a desire to recall the negative vestiges of slavery and overt racial discrimination, which framed the tenor of the response by leadership. The counter discourse, however, called for a new lens to examine, interpret, assess, and act against racism and the perception that building names were not representative of a historical context, but rather an affront to the perpetuation of racialization. In other words, the university president and Board of Directors were seeking to locate their decision as a historical narrative; the counter position was positioned to interpret the conflict through CRT and its implications.

The interdisciplinary and intersectional dynamic of CRT challenges and confronts the divisions within American structures and systems. Problematically, but not unexpectedly, this challenge is experienced at the individual level, which results in localized responses rather than systemic and structural re-assessments and redress. Given the inability of an individual to shift the silos and associated cultures within American systems (e.g. within academia or industry), the responses to racism remain localized and unable to address those systems perpetuating the racialization. In effect, the CRT movement is caught in the cycle of individual narratives and responses rather than addressed as a systemic movement affecting change within the intersectionality of how we live. This divergence in intention and result may only increase the polarity the movement has spawned in American culture.

**Critical Race Theory in the United States – Inge**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been an influential academic framework for over 40 years bringing awareness to the institutionally embedded and systemic racism policies that have existed in the American legal system. (Sawchuk, 2021). Since CRT is systemically prevalent, even those who do not intend to be racist can make choices daily that fuel systemic racism and further it shows that these policies are not simply a result of individual bias or prejudice. CRT focuses on the outcomes of systemic racism, not just individual beliefs, and calls into action the way policies and systems incorporate race and if and how it should be discussed.

CRT has become an advanced and polarized issue over the past year with some believing that with a Marxist slant, there is a threat to the very root of the American way of life. However, CRT advocates explain that it shares a way of exploring a history of inequality and racism in the US which we continue to see infiltrated in our American society today (CNN, “Idaho Moves to Ban Critical Race Theory Instruction in All Public Schools, Including Universities.”) Systemically, we see examples of CRT institutional in our policies in laws as in the case of single-family zoning preventing affordable housing in white neighborhoods, or even in the early 20th century, banks refusing mortgages to blacks (Sawchuk, 2021).

While it is important to talk about the history of our country, approaching it in this way may be creating more racial division. While it is not a new theory, conservative political stances have focused the current discussion around issues of race, white privilege, and systemic racism. CRT has been viewed both as “racial essentialism” as well as “rooted in Marxism” as a construct enforced by those in power (namely white men). (“The Conservative Case Against Banning Critical Race Theory”)

*What’s Happening Elsewhere in the U.S.*

The attention on CRT attempts to show how a systemic history of racism and inequity continues to impact US society today. Kimberlé Crenshaw is a founding critical race theorist and a law professor at UCLA and Columbia universities. According to Ms. Crenshaw, "It's an approach to grappling with a history of White supremacy that rejects the belief that what's in the past is in the past and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it.”

In half of our nation, Republican lawmakers have proposed legislation placing limits on how teachers can talk about race and racial issues in the classroom. In the state of Idaho, for example, lawmakers have proposed a bill that prohibits any public schools from teaching "any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior, “ and that any "individuals, by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin.” These arguments, of course, are all found within CRT.

In California there is a recently approved ethnic studies model curriculum option available for local school districts to incorporate into their curriculum models. "By affirming the identities and contributions of marginalized groups in our society, ethnic studies help students see themselves and each other as part of the narrative of the United States," a draft of the California curriculum reads. "Importantly, this helps students see themselves as active agents in the interethnic bridge-building process we call American life." Specifically in San Francisco, a K-12 curriculum in Black Studies was approved and incorporated into the curriculum model.

The state of Connecticut is another state embracing CRT requiring high schools to offer African American, Black, Puerto Rican and Latino studies., becoming the first state in the nation to do so. (CNN, “Idaho Moves to Ban Critical Race Theory Instruction in All Public Schools, Including Universities.”)

**States Status on Critical Race Theory (Katelyn)**

According to World Population Review (2021), seven states have already banned Critical Race Theory. These states include Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Governor Kevin Stitt (R-Oklahoma) signed a law in May banning Oklahoma educators from promoting the idea that "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously” (Newsweek, 2021). In addition, the law ensures that educators are prohibited from instructing their students that "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex," and from making students feel "guilt" or "anguish" on "account of his or her race or sex” (Newsweek, 2021).

In addition to the states that have banned Critical Race Theory, there are also sixteen states that have bans currently moving through the state legislature. These states include Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The remaining twenty-seven states currently have no restrictions (World Population Review, 2021). Of note, states that were once a part of the old confederacy are now widely represented in the number of anti-Critical Race Theory policies being proposed in legislation. In addition, a large number of Midwestern states have requested restricting the manner in which race is taught in their state school curriculums (World Population Review, 2021).

*Critical Race Theory and Loudoun County Public Schools (Inge)*

In our school systems today, we see that through diversity and inclusion practices, our educational institutions are systematically developing walls between children. Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) in the state of Virginia, has been at the forefront of the CRT debate in teacher education, development and in the curriculum. LCPS District enrolls over 81,000 students, with a high majority of Hispanic, Black, Asian, or multiracial descent. After recently identifying systemic racism in the LCPS school system, targeted toward the Hispanic and Black populations, LCPS developed initiatives such as the “Plan to Combat Systemic Racism” which outlined a plan to develop a more racial consciousness platform and strategy for our students. Areas of teacher development in “racial consciousness” and a ban on confederate clothing in school were two items that were included in the report. The content of the teacher development sessions relating to the concepts in CRT included terminology such as “white supremacy” and “systemic racism” which created a highly charged environment, accusing the LCPS of incorporating CRT as a foundational aspect of its system.

LCPS parent groups have voiced concerns that the content and initiatives posed in the teacher development training sessions on CRT will create a greater racial divide and misrepresentation of the notion of race. Parents believe that through incorporating CRT into our classrooms, our students are getting a perspective and worldview that is based on impossible barriers to overcome based on the color of our skin. Others are voicing concerns regarding CRT in relation to transgender issues and rights in the schools, another issue that needs to be included in the conversation of racial and identity (How and Why Loudoun County Became the Face of the Nation’s Culture Wars, date).

**Diving Deep: Defining CRT in Loudoun County Public Schools (Katelyn)**

In a recent article published by *The Washington Post*, Loudoun County, Virginia, a wealthy suburb of Washington D.C., was featured as the “face of the nation’s culture wars” for the emergence of the highly controversial topic, Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is defined by *EDWeek* as “a decades-old academic framework which holds that racism is woven into the country’s past and institutions — to claim that equity-conscious school systems are teaching children to hate one another, and White children to hate themselves” (EDWeek, 2021). According to *NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund*, critical race theory denotes that systemic racism is a part of American society, in areas such as education, housing, employment, and healthcare (NAACP LDF, 2021).Under CRT, there is recognition that racism is present in more than just individuals bias and prejudice, but also immersed in policies, laws, and institutions that endorse racial inequities.

*Loudoun County*

While this topic has been widespread throughout the country, Loudoun County has become the “face of the nation’s culture wars'' for its close proximity to the nation's capital, its wealthy status, and its substantial growth in diversity over the last decade. In addition, this county houses the third largest school district in the state of Virginia (following Fairfax and Prince William) and comprises more than 80,000 students in 97 facilities. Diversity is highly present, with 48% of students being White, 17.3% are African American, 22% are Asian, 7% are Latino, .5% are American Indian or Alaska Native and 4.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (LCPS Dashboard, 2021).

Loudoun County Public Schools has had a frequent presence in the media due to recurrent rallies and protests outside the school district’s administration building. Oftentimes, these protests occur during school board meetings, which result in tense arguments from individuals who oppose the policies being enacted. School board meetings have frequently concluded early, especially during the public comment portion of the meeting, which allows community members to speak on issues that are of concern to them. New LCPS superintendent, Dr. Scott Ziegler, has addressed community member’s concerns and reiterated prior statements that Loudoun County school system has not adopted Critical Race Theory, nor is it being taught in the district. The district has made conscious efforts to ensure that instruction, staff hiring, training, and other elements are more equitable, as its population continues to become increasingly diverse (Loudoun Times Mirror, 2021).

Other challenges being highlighted within the district include the legal action against the school system. In some instances, these actions have been challenged by employees who refuse to relinquish their beliefs, even though they may clash with the mission and message of the district. Both educators and parents who have voiced their opinions and expressed concern have been silenced by officials, resulting in educators relinquishing their roles, community members being arrested, and overall higher levels of outrage within the community. In response to the race-related controversies, LCPS hired a consulting firm, The Equity Collaborative, to administer a “Systemic Equity Assessment” in 2019 to measure certain areas pertaining to equity and diversity. The results from that time reported Loudoun County needed improvement in areas such as accountability, hiring practices, and professional development (Loudoun Times Mirror, 2021). Since these findings, LCPS now requires equity training for all staff members within the district, which has also contributed to an increase in the attraction of more diverse candidates, (i.e differing backgrounds, cultures, and experiences) now serving in leadership positions throughout the county (Loudoun Times Mirror, 2021).

**Concluding Comments**

As we explore the issue of CRT and the depth of the debate with this theory, the cultural and racial sensitivity is surfaced; furthermore, we see the intricacies and depth of the system wide permeation of race within our culture. We are seeing that discussing race and racism is leading to more division in an already very divided country.

This leads us to question whether the theory of critical race has a greater reach outside of American and western cultures and into other cultures and races. Is CRT evident elsewhere, such as in the caste systems in India? As the United States continues to explore and grapple with the issues surrounding systemic racism, cultural identity, and systemic inequalities, the distillation of the identification and association of race and racism is unique, and may be considered largely a reflection of the great experiment of American society; or, is the U.S. one of the first to openly grapple with this issue in the public forum? Exploring issues in social justice and the development and advancement of programs in diversity, equity and inclusion lends itself to the question of where CRT conversations and dialogue may be headed: whether we are on the verge of a true paradigm shift and recalibration of the lost and unheard voices of our country, or perched at the beginning of a greater and more widespread divide that will continue to separate and divide based on the color of our skin.

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