

## **Let's Listen: An Examination of Segregation in Today's Schools Through the Lens of Critical Race Theory**

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From the first time he figured out what numbers were, Nathan always loved math. However, as the years passed, Nathan, a Black child who was being raised by a single mom, started to have difficulties with comprehension when answering word problems. He wasn't recommended for middle school math and started to become discouraged. By high school, when he tells his counselor he wants to become an engineer, she tells him he might be better suited going into a trade. Sadly, his dream of becoming an engineer is never fulfilled.

Nathan is a Black student attending school in a school district somewhere in the United States. While he started out as a promising math student, events transpired that kept him from reaching his ultimate goal of attending a four year college and obtaining a degree in engineering. There are some who might say these events transpired organically. Others would say there is only one factor prohibiting Nathan from achieving his dreams: Nathan is a Black student. This single factor allows the public school system to systematically keep him from achieving his goal. We are now looking at Nathan's life through the lens of a critical race theorist. Critical Race Theory is a humanities based discipline focused on identifying and modifying racial problems in the current American education system. This article will discuss the origins and Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Axiology of Critical Race Theory, while also using the theory as a lens to explore racism in the U.S. public education system.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was born as a legal response to racial tensions still happening in

the United States, even after the successful civil rights legal wins of the 1960s and 1970s. Desegregation laws had been passed, but many still believed racism to be at the forefront of several critical social problems still occurring in the United States, including racial districting and affirmative action (McCoy & Rodericks, 2015). Early founders of the theory include Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Alan Freeman. These men helped to shape many of the theory's core foundations. Critical race theorists question "the foundations of the liberal order" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). The theory seeks to challenge "Eurocentric values" in the United States which, according to theorists, ultimately seek to make what is "White" the social norm and to ensure power is not equally distributed amongst "political, economic, racial and gendered lines (Taylor & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The movement bases many of its foundational blocks on Critical Legal Studies and Feminism. Critical Legal Studies developed the term "Legal Indeterminacy" which Delgado and Stefancic (2012) state is "the idea that not every legal case has one correct outcome" (p. 5). According to this term, legal cases can be decided in favor either way, "by emphasizing one's authority over another or interpreting one fact differently from the way one's adversary does" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 5). Critical race theorists agree with feminist beliefs on the relationship of power and how social roles are constructed as well as "the unseen, largely invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up patriarchy and other types of social domination" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 5). Theorists also believe racism is a very real construct and is experienced by Blacks on a daily basis. The dominant group consists of both White "elite" and White "working class" workers serving them both

in a favorable manner and leaves little urge to actually fix the problem (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Race is also a “product of social thought and relations that society invents, manipulates or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.8). Finally, CRT is not a sedentary approach. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) assert critical race theorists seek to change and transform the current social situation. A critical race theorist would seek to change the story of Nathan, a Black student in a predominately White school district, who was unable to rise above his social class because of the color of his skin.

### **Critical Race Theory: Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Axiology**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) defined ontology as, “the form and nature of reality” (p. 108). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argue that the nature of reality from a CRT perspective is that racism is a normal, daily occurrence and daily incidences of racism are commonly overlooked. Reality is that Whites commonly benefit from racism so there are not many solutions offered to fix it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Reality comes from what the culture communicates to members (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Epistemology is the way individuals know what they know and explores how an individual gains knowledge and forms worldviews based on the conditions of learning taking place. Additionally, epistemology includes how knowledge is shared among individuals. In CRT, the epistemology recognizes the effects of culture on knowledge sharing in a group. An individual using CRT must use an epistemology that embraces knowledge that is gained through experiences and see this form of knowledge as very valuable to each individual. Critical race theorists suggest that Eurocentric epistemologies do not value knowledge that is learned through experiences (Yosso, Villapando, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001).

The methodology of a paradigm explores the options of how to get to know what is thought to be

true by researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Methodology in CRT aims to research oppressed individuals through qualitative methods. To apply CRT to situations, critical race theorists use a variety of forms of storytelling, biographies, and family histories. Critical theorists value the experiences of the oppressed. To make useful analysis, critical theorists have to consider both historical and current perspectives. The main goal of the methods used in CRT is to give a voice to stories that are not heard (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

The axiology, or values of critical race, is centered on two major components, equity and democracy (Henry & Tator, 2009). CRT researchers believe the world is split between haves and have-nots and will ensure this opinion and their beliefs are well publicized throughout their research. This resolve turns CRT researchers into action oriented influencers of change. They are now more than just mere observers. Instead, they seek to influence and revise the current social order (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### **Critical Race Theory: From Theory to Methodology**

The goal of an individual using CRT to address a particular situation is seeking to find equality and social justice for the individuals being oppressed. Critical race methodology aims to disrupt the dominant thoughts and actions of the elite (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) are credited with defining critical race methodology that is built on the foundation of critical race theory and has the goal of decreasing racism and race issues in education. In a larger context, critical race theory and methodology is aiming to ensure better environments at all levels for oppressed groups.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argued that critical race methodology contains five key elements: (a) emphasis on race and racism as the central focus, (b) challenges the blanket claims of equal opportunity, (c) acknowledges that there are

several layers that exist in the education environment, (d) uses methodology practices that are not generally used to give a voice to the oppressed, and (e) involves multiple disciplines as a base for methodology.

### **Race and Racism as the Central Focus**

When using critical race methodology in an educational setting racism and issues of race are the central focus. However, critical race methodology does acknowledge the role of other issues (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) in each situation (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso et al., 2001).

### **Challenge What is Dominant**

Commonly, education emphasizes the constant work for equal opportunity in a positive light. However, critical race methodology challenges what is dominant (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology wants to unsettle what is thought to be comfortable. This type of methodology aims to change the dominant thoughts to get social justice for those facing racial issues (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

### **Multiple Layers to Reach**

Critical race methodology in education acknowledges that there are multiple layers in society. At each level of society, the issue of racism and other racial issues are interpreted differently. At the different layers in the educational system, inequalities are viewed and understood differently. In some cases, the different layers may cause resistance to the changes that those trying to create change with a critical race methodology (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Give a Voice to the Silent**

One goal of using Critical Race Theory methodology is to help the oppressed share their voice. Various forms of storytelling are used to give credibility to the stories of those oppressed. By allowing those being oppressed to

share their story, some common thoughts and beliefs that may have come from miscommunications about experiences can be changed (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Many Disciplines as a Base**

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) explained the importance of combining many disciplines to ensure that base of critical race methodology can allow for a strong understanding of current issues facing the oppressed. "Critical race methodology in education uses the transdisciplinary knowledge and methodological base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law, and other fields to guide research that better understands the effects of racism, sexism, and classism on Blacks" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

### **Majorianstories and Counterstories in Education**

From a critical race methodology standpoint, it is important to hear the voice of the oppressed and help get that voice to those who have tunnel vision and see just what is understood as normal (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Majorianstories are stories that are created on what is assumed to be the normal society (Andrews, 2004). Commonly, stories are created by the elite social group to explain social norms (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Stories aid individuals in interpreting situations. When an individual has been exposed to a number of majorianstories they start to view their own experiences and others with a majorian view based on what is seen as the dominant thought (Andrews, 2004).

Counterstorytelling is the creation of stories that share the opposite side and disagree with the majorianstories (Andrews, 2002; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Counterstories that are told can create a resistance to what is generally accepted. Authors of counterstories must illustrate main points that show how individual experiences differ from the norm (Andrews, 2004). By illustrating these main points, there is an

opportunity to expose a side that is not commonly heard (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argued how majorianstories dominate teacher education programs and other educational settings. Educational settings that are based strongly in majorianstory ideas have the ingrained idea that schools are neutral places with equal opportunity (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) defined White privilege as the idea of how certain privileges are given to individuals because of their skin, while others are denied privileges for the same reason. In education, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argued the majorianstory is so deeply based in White privilege that a student with darker skin is assumed to be in poverty and from an area that includes an underperforming school and a high crime neighborhood.

For critical race methodology to work in education, researchers must find the individuals willing to share personal experiences that will allow others to see the side that is not visible because the majorianstory dominates. Individuals who have faced racial issues and have been oppressed have different histories than those who are elite (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). A variety of forms of narratives can be used to express experiences. The main goal is to find experiences that illustrate that a variety of experiences exist. Researchers hoping to create social change in education can explore stories and narratives as data that illuminates a problem, expose opportunities to give a voice in a new community, and produce findings that show there are differing ways of daily life than those of the majority (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

### **Application of CRT to Today's Educational Issues**

Much progress has been made since the Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) that called for integration of all public schools, however CRT is relevant and applicable to many educational issues today. Critical Race

Theorists believe there are still systemic structures in place that advantage Whites and disadvantage Blacks and other racial minorities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1997) discussed why it is important to apply CRT directly to the field of education in the United States. The authors claimed the U.S is a society based on property rights. Curriculum, in the U.S. education system, can be defined as an intellectual property which leaves Black students at a disadvantage. Take Nathan, our young black student being raised by a single mom, for example. He starts school as a promising young math student and as he becomes older, he is not recommended for higher level mathematics classes. When he considers college, his counselor refers him to a trade school. The system, continues to work against Nathan. Other issues such as "affirmative action, racial districting, campus speech codes, and the disproportionate sentencing of Blacks in the U.S. criminal justice system" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5) are just a few examples where Critical Race Theory can easily be applied to both reveal the racially biased underlying issue and to challenge the established power structures. We will be applying Critical Race Theory to two different educational issues to illustrate the persistence of these issues.

### **Applying CRT to Issues in South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey**

The first is an issue that occurred in South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey, school district in 2014. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights became aware that Black students were "significantly underrepresented in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities at the district's elementary, middle, and high school levels" (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Black students accounted for over half of the student population in the county but only 18 percent took advanced classes during the 2012-13 academic year. The resolutions agreed upon by the district, after the investigation by the Office of Civil Rights, include offering additional advanced courses, reducing tracking, and ensuring that all fourth- and fifth-grade students benefit from the English Language

Arts enrichment program and “rigorous, inquiry-based curriculum in its new International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Program to prepare students for college preparatory courses” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The enrollment policies for advanced courses were also relaxed so more students are now eligible to take the more rigorous courses.

CRT suggests the root of this unequal treatment is about institutional power; as long as the dominant group (Whites) were achieving success there was not an issue. Gettleman (2005) examined the practices whereby students were placed in advanced courses in Columbia High School located within South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey school district. Columbia High School did not have many Black students enrolled in advanced courses and many in the school community believed that anyone could recognize the issue of Blacks not having a larger presence in upper level courses (Gettleman, 2005).

An individual applying CRT could use insights from Gettleman (2005) to obtain an understanding of the environment Black students are currently facing at this school. Some facts a researcher would notice is that the school is majority Black, yet White students make up the bulk of the advanced placement courses, and the educators feel appropriate teaching and learning is taking place at each level. The majorianstory in this school of equal learning opportunities for all students is similar to one Solorzano and Yosso (2002) suggest as a dominant idea in education today. At Columbia High School, the idea of equal opportunity is called leveling. In Gettleman’s (2005) article, the students interviewed disclosed how anyone could tell what level class was taking place in a particular classroom by just looking in and seeing if Blacks or Whites dominate in numbers. A critical race theorist would label the counterstory as those stories of Black students who have complained about unfair treatment when being considered for higher level classes and the students who tried to voice their concern to the school administration, but were not successful. In applying

CRT, it is important to gather as many counterstories as possible and encourage Black students and parents to continue to share their story.

### **Applying CRT to Issues in Prince Edward County, Virginia**

The next issue we are examining through the lens of Critical Race Theory is the educational divide in Prince Edward County, Virginia. In the early 1950’s in Prince Edward County, located in central Virginia, the school a student attended depended on their race—the White students went to schools “made of brick; with steam or hot water heat and indoor toilets” whereas the Black students’ schools were nothing more than “a wooden frame structure with no indoor restroom facilities; and had only wood, coal, or kerosene stoves for heat” (*Davis v. School Board*, 1952). The schools being separated by race was not illegal at the time, but the blatant disparity in quality of facilities was a violation of the “separate but equal” guidelines outlined by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). A lawsuit was filed and after reaching the U.S. Supreme Court, *Davis v. School Board of Prince Edward County* was combined with a few other cases to form the landmark *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) case. The Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional and was nothing more than state-sponsored racism. The response to the *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) ruling varied depending on the locale but many predominantly White communities were upset that the racially separate schools now had to integrate.

Instead of following the new guidelines outlined in the *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) case, in 1959 the local government in Prince Edward voted to close the schools rather than integrate. With the schools closed, “1,700 African-American students went without formal education for the next five years” while Whites worked to build an alternative—the building of a new private academy where the White students could attend without having to mix with the Black students (*Davis v. School Board*, 1952). Remarkably, this

situation of closed public schools and a new and functioning private school went on until 1964 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Prince Edward County had to re-open their public school system. But the damage had already been done—integration could not truly happen now that the White community had found a way around the *Brown v. Board of Educ.* (1954) decision. Years have passed, both the private school and the public schools have become more integrated now, yet there is still disparity in the educational opportunities available to White and Black students. “Fewer academic enrichment courses are offered to Black and Hispanic students than to White students” (*Davis v. School Board*, 1952). CRT is especially applicable to the issues in Prince Edward County because of its grounding in legal theory and its formation during the civil rights movement. CRT seeks “to understand how White supremacy and its oppression of People of Color had been established and perpetuated” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5). In looking at the history of Prince Edward schools over time, the racially segregated schools were unequal because of racism, the schools were not integrated and instead closed because of racism, and although integrated now, educational opportunities for students of color are not equal to those afforded to White students because of racism. Over much of the county’s history, there was an “unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5) because of the color of people’s skin.

A researcher applying CRT to the Prince Edward situation must use critical race methodology. Since this is a historical case, a researcher could draw from several disciplines to examine the issue including history, law, and philosophy. Using these disciplines, a critical race researcher must first examine the articles that explain the issue to explore the ideas expressed in them. A critical race researcher will explore if racism was put at the focal point of the investigation of the school issues in Prince Edward. Also, a researcher could search for new counterstories that shed new ideas about this period in their history.

The Prince Edward case allows a researcher to find new ideas and stories that have a focus on racism as the main issue and possibly challenge the dominant ideas that were the original conclusions in Prince Edward County (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Since its creation in the civil rights era, Critical Race Theory has helped to illuminate the unique stories of persecuted individuals and the systemic oppression they experience. A growing edge for the future of research in Critical Race Theory is intersectionality, or the convergence of different categories of identity like race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class and how this affects Black individuals in the United States (Crenshaw, 1991). Today, like critical race methodology suggests, educators must acknowledge racism is still in existence and be willing to listen to all versions of students stories.

Ladson-Billings (2014) emphasized it is important to maintain a culturally fluid education environment. She argued many educators are making attempts to insert cultural examples into the classroom. However, Ladson-Billings (2014) suggested more can be done. Educators at a lower level must view all of their students as subjects and not objects. They must have the ability to focus on assessment and student-driven learning. As students mature and reach higher levels of education, Ladson-Billings (2014) recommends educators create an environment where students can consider critical perspectives of issues like how racial tension is affecting their communities.

Future research in CRT is exploring how CRT can be applied to Asian, Latino, and Multiracial individuals. As the research moves in this direction, educators should acknowledge all areas of oppression. Also, research could expand to other aspects of education like extracurricular activities. In the higher education environment that would include a CRT view of student affairs and athletics. With more investigation, researchers will provide educators with more knowledge on how to

create educational environments that are not dominated by the majorian narrative. With a wider base of educators understanding how groups of students are oppressed, there may be more awareness in educational environments leading to fewer students like Nathan being left behind.

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