

Chapter 8

Critical Race Theory in K–12 Schools: A Four–Element Framework to Inform DEI Training

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines the tenets and goals of CRT as a useful and important analytical tool versus the “myths” of CRT recently perpetuated in the media and illustrates CRT’s use as an analytical tool in three key areas of K-12 education. It then provides four key elements designed for educational leader and teacher diversity training in K-12 schools based upon a review of current CRT educational research. Perpetual racial inequities cannot be addressed or remediated by simply ignoring race or failing to consider the impact of systemic racism; rather, this chapter will highlight why it is crucial to shift away from a colorblind approach to a CRT framework within educational reform—specifically within teacher education and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training—in order to address racial disparities through a “race-conscious” lens that allows for direct dismantling of systems of historical oppression of minoritized groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite half a century of educational policies aimed at closing the opportunity gap between white and minoritized individuals in a post-Civil Rights era, a person of color is more likely to live in poverty, be imprisoned, drop out of high school, be unemployed and experience poor health consequences (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, depression) than their White-identified counterparts (The Aspen Institute, 2016). Historical government-sanctioned racist practices in the United States (e.g., genocide, slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, voting discrimination, “sundown” laws) have created a lasting legacy, one that upholds a dominant “culture of whiteness” as the “norm” with standards and practices that continue to perpetuate existing racial disparities in a number of fields (e.g., housing, employment, education, healthcare, counseling).

Within K-12 education, so omnipresent is the invisible culture of Whiteness that it consistently skews the educational outcomes to favor White students, contributing to and perpetuating inequitable outcomes for minoritized individuals despite educators’ efforts to address such inequities. Specifically, there is an abundance of research documenting the persistent racial inequities in several key aspects of K-12 education, including school disciplinary practices (Joseph, et al., 2020); assessment and identification of giftedness (Hammond, 2020) and special education (Hartlep & Ellis, 2012); representation in the curriculum (Chapman, 2013); teacher expectations (Blaisdell, 2005); ability tracking (O’Connor et al., 2011); and school funding (Aleman, 2007; Vaught, 2009).

Critical race theory (CRT) grounds race and racism at the center of understanding these racial inequities, inequities that are a direct outgrowth of historical racist practices and that persist in disparate outcomes and unfair treatment in policy and practice for minoritized individuals. CRT encompasses a set of tenets originating from legal scholarship that provide an important lens with which to help educators understand racism’s impact, and to *center them openly and directly on the goal of racial equity*. This goal holds education to a higher standard -- by challenging educators to address not just individual-level discrimination but persistent, structural racist inequitable outcomes.

Analyzing educational outcomes through a CRT lens centers conversations around the *realities* of racism rather than turning a “colorblind” eye. Using a CRT framework, for example, has enabled many universities to recognize that the use of the historically problematic SAT test as a “colorblind” tool to determine student aptitude has merely perpetuated systemic racial inequities across campuses despite 40 years of use (Hammond, 2020). Applying a CRT framework has also allowed educators to take a critical look at years of prioritizing multiculturalism efforts in K-12 schools aimed at celebrating “diversity”, since data reveal that despite the

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