

Curriculum Controversy: Supporting Teacher Candidates in Understanding Politically Divisive Education

Jerry Burkett, Texas Woman's University

Introduction

A suburb in north Texas recently made national news when residents elected a mayor, city council members, and school board members who spoke out against the local school district's proposed Cultural Competence Action Plan. In this plan the district promised to emphasize cultural competence in curriculum, feature student assembly speakers specializing in cultural sensitivity and diversity, and to provide ongoing diversity training for all staff (Asmelash, 2021). Later that year, the state of Texas legislature enacted new restrictions on some types of diversity-related curricula and teacher training. Legislation has also been proposed at the federal level that would prevent federal funds from being used to teach from curricula deemed controversial (Cotton & Buck, 2021).

Prospective and in-service teachers have likely seen headlines about the Critical Race Theory "battle" (Kingkade et al., 2021) and may seek professors of teacher education for guidance from their colleges or universities. It can be difficult for new teachers to navigate what could be classified by some as a divisive curriculum in their first-year in the classroom without the proper background, training, and information. It is important to explore these topics to provide an overview and background of the controversy, offer an explanation of concerns and questions parents may have about new curricula, and provide a perspective on advantages to covering racial issues in schools. This paper aims to provide an explanation for educators on some recent controversial conversations around curriculum and instruction in American schools.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory has gained attention in the field of education over the last couple of years, creating an emerging confusion and debate among educators, parents, community members, and politicians. The debate has often overshadowed the purpose and origins of the theory. Critical Race Theory originated from a framework for legal analysis developed in the late 1970s by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (George, 2021). The original intent of their work was to develop an understanding of a legal system that they considered inherently flawed. Critical Race Theory "critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers" (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, researchers discovered in the early 1970s that people of color were disproportionately sentenced to more years in prison when compared to sentences given for similar crimes to white individuals (George 2021). This disparity was explored further to identify a systemic legal system that was inherently biased, unbalanced, and potentially rooted in racial overtones.

Prior to her discussions on the topic in the seminal paper "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine,*

Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (Crenshaw, 1989), Critical Race Theory was only a legal and social construct theorized by legal scholars. However, since the publication of Crenshaw’s paper, Critical Race Theory also has tied to other intellectual currents, including the work of sociologists and literary theorists who studied links between political power, social organization, and language. Critical Race Theory is studied at the collegiate level with the central idea “that racism is a social construct, and it is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies” (Sawchuck, 2021). The theory’s ideas have since informed additional fields, like the humanities, the social sciences, and teacher education.

There is no singular curriculum for Critical Race Theory in the field of education. The phrase has been used as a blanket term to cover a variety of controversial classroom topics such as race, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Professors of teacher education and first year teachers will not encounter a specific curriculum related to Critical Race Theory unless they are teaching legal framework or conviction rates among certain ethnic and racial groups.

The 1619 Project

In August 2019, *The New York Times Magazine* published a series of essays, called *The 1619 Project*, recognizing the effects of slavery that the authors claim can still be felt today. The *1619 Project* includes essays from various writers including “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond, “Undemocratic Democracy” by Jamelle Bouie, “Mass Incarceration” by Bryan Stevenson, and others.

The Pulitzer Center developed lessons for K-12 schools based on the project, and teachers across the country have created lessons inspired by the project. This has renewed concerns about how history is taught and how teachers discuss current events and issues of race in the classroom. Across the country, governors and state legislators have opposed the possibility of basing curricula on Critical Race Theory or *The 1619 Project*. For example, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp stated, “This divisive, anti-American agenda has no place in Georgia classrooms” (Downey, 2021). In June 2021, Republican lawmakers introduced legislation at the federal level to “ban federal funds from being used to teach the 1619 Project in K-12 schools” (Bernstein, 2021).

Official adoption of *The 1619 Project* has not occurred with Common Core state standards nor as part of other state-mandated educational standards; however, school districts can choose to supplement the way standards are addressed. After the release of the *New York Times* special issue regarding *The 1619 Project*, “schools or school districts in Chicago; Newark, N.J.; Buffalo, N.Y., and Washington, D.C. all announced 1619 Project-related events” (Riley, 2021). To prevent official adoption of the project’s ideals, state legislatures, including those in Georgia, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, and South Dakota, have passed or promised to enact bills banning such curricula. In many cities, parents have expressed alarm and voters have elected school board members and mayors who promise to oppose curriculum based on *The 1619 Project*.

Perspective on Teaching Diverse Issues in Schools

While opponents of Critical Race Theory and *The 1619 Project* push back to defend a positive image of the United States, proponents welcome multiple viewpoints of American history, even as the peeling back of the historical layers may result in different understandings. A curriculum that adopts facets of Critical Race Theory would allow more perspectives to be shared from all groups of people represented in historical events allowing different races and ethnicities to feel seen, heard, and respected. “Culturally responsive history teaching also requires that race and racism be presented as terms which connote a complex set of relationships” (Epstein & Nelson, 2011).

Epstein and Nelson (2011) also highlight the positive impact of culturally responsive teaching on students’ interpretations particularly for “low-income students of color.” One example of this impact is highlighted in the teaching career of the writer Jonathan Kozol whose first book, *Death at an Early Age* (1967), was based on his English and language arts teaching experiences in Boston’s public schools (Slattery, 2006, p. 233). Kozol introduced his students, who were mostly disadvantaged African American children, to the poetry of Langston Hughes. This curricular addition “transformed the students and the curriculum, but the poetry also alarmed the school authorities, who were afraid of what might happen if poor black children were exposed to ‘radical’ poetry” (Slattery, 2006, p. 233). The addition of Langston Hughes’ work was not included in the school district’s curriculum and consequently, Kozol was fired. “Kozol has gone on to write many inspiring books about such topics as the lack of education for the children of homeless and migrant workers, the politics of literacy in America, and the savage inequalities of U.S. schooling” (Slattery, 2006, p. 233). While significant advancements have taken place with more diverse reading materials in many classrooms, recent controversies show that curriculum policies have not advanced too far beyond what Kozol battled in his early career more than four decades ago.

Many educators in conservative states where Critical Race Theory is viewed as a problem, like Oklahoma and Texas, worry about the “thought police ” monitoring their lessons and classroom discussions. Educators are beginning to “second-guess whether they can lead students in conversations about race and structural racism that many feel are critical at a time the nation is navigating an important reckoning on those issues” (McGee, 2021).

Educators are left wondering if they choose to cover current events, will they keep their jobs. “Paula Lewis, chair of the Oklahoma City School Board, said though the state’s new law bans teachers from discussing concepts they weren’t discussing anyway, and though its penalties are not yet clear, the danger is the fear it instills” (Florido, 2021). Without schools’ guidance in helping students navigate their current lived experiences, they are left to attempt to make sense of events through news reports, social media, and peers. Students will bring current event topics into the classroom with questions and concerns. Educators are now unsure if they can engage in these current event discussions.

Suggestions for Teacher Educators

What guidance can schools of education offer to teachers who may feel caught between their need to teach various curricula from diverse perspectives and manage parents' concerns who may fear that schools will "indoctrinate" (Kingkade et al., 2021) their children? Much of the concern from politicians centers around curricula based on *The 1619 Project* (Bernstein, 2021; Cotton and Buck, 2021). Given the amount of attention the issue is receiving, educator preparation programs could suggest that teachers read *The 1619 Project* as part of pedagogy or curriculum coursework. Teachers and school districts seeking a civics or history curriculum that present a more-diverse group of stories than found in traditional curricula could investigate new curricula that might be less divisive than one based on *The 1619 Project*.

An organization founded by Bob Woodson, 1776 United, has released a free curriculum for high-school students and promises to release K-8 lessons soon. Another organization, the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism, has released learning standards related to the histories, experiences, and contributions of people of different cultural and ancestral backgrounds in the U.S. Helping future teachers understand both perspectives of the Critical Race Theory issue will be important

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide future teachers with background information about Critical Race Theory, *The 1619 Project*, and related controversial curricula. K-12 teachers have likely heard of bills that have been introduced at the state and federal levels and may face questions from concerned parents and guardians. Teacher educators should have some familiarity with the controversy to be able to respond to K-12 teachers' questions. Professors in education should become more familiar with this debate so that they can advise preservice teachers to choose a school district that reflects their values and help in-service teachers respond to parents who fear that new curricula might not match their family's beliefs.

Gaining a firm understanding of the Critical Race Theory issue is impossible for individuals, outside of the developed political narrative, unless we are open to having the difficult discussion — on both sides. Otherwise, we will continue to see state legislatures and school boards ban the discussion of anything related to Critical Race Theory without fully understanding the theory, how it impacts people of color, and how it could potentially impact school curricula. Silencing voices is dangerous in a democracy; complacency can be equally dangerous.

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