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INVESTIGATING THE HYSTERIA AROUND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

PART TWO

Invited Guest Editor
Cheryl E. Matias
University of Kentucky



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A special thanks to University of Alabama graduate assistant ben ray for his work on this issue.

**Investigating the Hysteria Around
Critical Race Theory
Part Two**

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Hysteria, Hypermania, & Hullabaloo: How White Emotionalities Manufactures Fear of Critical Race Theory & Teaching: Part Deux—The Saga Continues

Cheryl E. Matias, PhD¹

Abstract

The BIG BAD CRT is NOT so BIG and BAD inasmuch as white emotionalities are. This fixation on one's fear or hatred for CRT is only but a surface leveled expression of deeper issues of one's core sense of self. Meaning, these individuals are so insecure about their own identity that they huff and puff when hearing that other people are very secure, even proud, of their identities. For example, their identity has been so sadly intertwined with delusions of whiteness such that any discussion of multiculturalism leaves them feeling abandoned. To be clear, the thought of divorcing from the delusional marriage between whiteness and identity is the real fear. Essentially, who am I if I cannot be white? Alas, anti-CRTers must, like in the Christian sense, have a come to Jesus moment whereby they deeply investigate why they so fear new paths, new identities, new histories, and new people. Unless they do that, they will, as sheep do, irrationally follow a path that takes them farther away from humanity and closer to a life of eternal fear (Matias, 2022, p. 5).

Keywords: critical race theory, whiteness, race, antiracism, teaching, education

Introduction: The Hullabaloo of it All

Though written a couple years prior to this particular special issue publication, the words, concepts, and call-ins are still apropos for today (see Matias, 2022). For even if the CRT frenzy has died down a bit, it still wreaks of unresolved white emotionalities, insecurely projected onto those who have no issues with race (except for racism). Take for example a recent encounter I had with a local California K-12 school principal. Upon my daughter's acceptance into a gifted magnet school, I called the principal to hear more about the program, school, and curriculum. On the phone conversation the principal confidently talked about the gifted and talented curriculum, priding himself on test scores, community, and the talents of the students. In response I asked about whether the school engages in culturally responsive teaching and/or multicultural practices, however, before I could finish the question the principal interrupted me and (almost neurotically) blurted out, "We don't do CRT!" I took a breath and in my calm professor, critical race theorist voice, I responded with, "I did not ask if you do CRT. I asked about culturally responsive teaching which is not the same as CRT. I know because I am a professor of race who does teach CRT to

1. Corresponding author: Cheryl Matias, University of San Diego: cmatias@sandiego.edu

doctoral students.” He stumbled over his words, trying to both backtrack his behavior whilst glossing over his obvious anxiety.

The confidence once exuded in our conversation was diminished. Who knows why? He could’ve been a supporter of racial justice in schools and feared helicopter parents who do nothing but hover over teachers. He could’ve not known a thing about race and was so fearful he just blurted out the first thing in his mind to stop the racial angst he was experiencing by merely bringing up the topic of culture. He could’ve been intimidated by me—rightfully so. The point is the mere question about culturally responsive teaching now ferrets out unresolved racial anxieties so unnecessarily produced because of the anti-CRT hullabaloo. Regardless to what camp one resides, it has produced within us all an unnecessary angst that erodes the confidence, professionalism, and trust in our educators. Is this what we, as a society, want for our educational system?

Furthermore, all of this stems from unfounded hysteria, or more poignantly, hullabaloo. Hullabaloo more precisely captures what this anti-CRT frenzy was all about because, as so defined, hullabaloo is an unnecessary commotion or fuss that when applied to the anti-CRT commotion only derailed the confidence of our educators, fixated on issues not even pertinent to education, and quite literally emotionally drained us to a point of fatigue. Teachers are leaving the classroom in droves. Parents are unnecessarily in a panic for something they know not of. And, most of all, students are straight confused instead of educated. Frankly speaking, this is the extreme opposite of what I want for education as a teacher education and race researcher. Instead of that crazy making, we, as a society, should want education to be about clarity and direction that builds a sense of confidence in our developing knowledge set; not manic hysteria. Yet, in looking at the knee jerk emotional reactions, illogical and irrational discourse patterns, and decisions post anti-CRT hullabaloo, blind hysteria is exactly what is happening to our educational system. So then, why is it that we, as discerning, rational adults, act in illogical, irrational, hysteric ways when it comes to race? Per Gonzalves (2008), teachers entrenched in racist ideology act with blind hysteria when merely engaging the topic of multiculturalism. In fact, he concludes with “if the function of graduate training is to replicate the pathology of denial and resistance, then it should be the priority of progressive academics to provide the antidote of critical consciousness at every opportunity” (p. 24-25). Though Gonzalves refers to graduate education, the same logic can apply to K-12 education. Is the function of K-12 education to replicate a pathology of dumbfuckery, illogical emotional behaviors, and a learnt resistance to discernment, rationality, and the human capacity to learn before engaging in knee jerk reactions? If this is the goal of the anti-CRT hullabaloo, then it is doing a grotesquely awesome job. The antidote for this anti-education then, like Gonsalves states, is for critical scholars to recommit to the betterment of society by reminding humanity of its humanly ability to critically reason; lest become nothing more than animals in heat unable to engage in rational thought.

In this Issue

In this special issue journal, commonly nicknamed “Part Deux-The Saga Continues,” I present six articles that excavate the treacherous terrain of the anti-CRT hullabaloo. Essentially, these manuscripts answer the overarching inquiry of how do we make sense of the Anti-CRT bans and what is its aftermath. We begin the special issues with Bennett and Ramos’s “Troubling Hegemonic Racialized Ideologies in Education with Critical Race Theory.” In it they detail the ideologies that ferreted out during the height of the anti-CRT bans and reveal how such ideologies align to dominant ideas of race that are oftentimes racist. The second article by Cordero-Siy,

Lolkus, & Harper is “Whiteness and Fear: Backlash to Mathematics Education Reforms.” There, they dig deeper into one of those racialized ideologies—whiteness—and how the white emotionality (see Matias, 2016) of fear has led to unforeseen backlashes inside mathematics education. The third article “What do bans on CRT in education mean for Native education? Two teacher educators share their counterstories” is written by Benally and Anthony-Stevens. In the wake of the anti-CRT bans they document its deleterious impacts on native education. The fourth article by Cabral, Parks, and Wells, is ““It’s Just Good Teaching”: Black Educators Respond to the So-called “Anti-Critical Race Theory” Backlash in K-12 Schools.” There, they document how Black educators fight back on the anti-CRT hullabaloo in K-12 schools, especially when the anti-CRT bans unjustly called to remove any mentioning of racism, race, and the experiences of Black Americans completely. The fifth article is by Jordan, Piontak, Treco, & McKoy entitled, “Enwhitened spaces: A critical race/critical whiteness content analysis of whiteness, disinformation, and Amazon reviews” and does a unique study on Amazon reviews of books that came out in response to the misunderstandings of CRT and race so evidence in the anti-CRT hullabaloo. There, they reveal the common misguided ideologies that go hand in hand with the crazymaking of that movement. Finally, we end with Locke and Blankenship-Knox’s ““A Bunch of Liberal, Nazi Communists”: Equity-Oriented Educational Leaders’ Response to the Anti-CRT Phenomenon in Iowa.” In this piece the authors take us into the state of Iowa giving us a concrete case study of how one state responded to the Anti-CRT hullabaloo whilst also documenting the resistance to it.

In each of these articles the authors take the reader deeper into the ideas behind the anti-CRT hullabaloo and how those embedded racist ideologies infected various subfields in education such that education has now become the anti-education. Yet, instead of taking it lying down, the authors resist. Their work is a testimony, so to speak, of their battles, triumphs, and regardless of the outcome, the ever-present struggle for educational justice. This, in and of itself, is what founding father of critical race theory Derrick Bell (1992) himself so argued in his parable “Afrolantica.” That it is not so much that we, as a humanity, should fixate on a false hope for a land without racism because racism is endemic. Instead, he suggests we should honor how humanity struggles through it together. Indeed, our collective struggle *is* our Afrolantica: our home, our peace, our hope. Meaning, though *eracism* (erasing racism) can be a lofty goal to ascribe to, the lack of its fruition should not be where our hope resides. Instead, hope must reside in bearing witness to humanity as we fight this injustice together. In essence, these articles are a testament to the hope and humanity Bell so instructs us to never overlook.

Conclusion: Shouldering the Cross of Shared Burden

In a recent faculty meeting one of my colleagues, Dr. Niki Elliott, a leader in neurodiversity and equity, led the faculty in a breathing exercise to calm our vagus nerve—the nerve that controls most of our body. During the activity she educated us on the science behind how living in fight or flight mode for prolonged periods of time quite literally unnerves our nerves to a point where we are unable to make rational decisions and/or controlled actions. In those uncontrollable states, we lose ourselves. *Indubitably*, this entire anti-CRT hullabaloo with its unnecessary hysteria, drama, and anxiety has left K-12 teachers, all educators, and parents in a state of heightened emotional duress, causing a similar situation of fight or flight. This is the emotional context that could have possibly led that principal, aforementioned above, to almost unconsciously blurt out, “We don’t do CRT!” Out the door was the calm, collected, and educated principal and substituting in his place was a hot mess of panic. No one needs this saga to continue unless one really loves drama,

panic, and a state of unrest. In order to move away from the anxiety-inducing white emotionalities that undergird the anti-CRT hullabaloo, we must, like any good advice of any therapist, put boundaries on those which do not serve us in healthy ways. For topics on race and racism, it is necessary to “just say no” to knee jerk emotional ideologies that induce panic and hysteria around race. Instead, since fear is the devil, perhaps it is time we lean into our fears and begin to learn about race and racism instead of avoiding it; for succumbing to our fears is nothing but a pathetic attempt to avoid the shared responsibility of shouldering the cross of humanity.

Special Note

To those I love (crispy bacon, kumbal, and La Dona), thank you for inspiring me to write with fierce love and always with faith.

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Troubling Hegemonic Racialized Ideologies in Education with Critical Race Theory

Cathryn B. Bennett¹ & Delma Ramos

Abstract

As an epistemological, axiological, and methodological paradigm, Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw et al., 2000; Harris, 1993) is a scholarly tool to identify and disrupt inequities, possible via CRT's core tenets towards troubling systemic racism. We argue that political movements in North Carolina (NC) exhibit attempts to delegitimize critical race scholarship and curricula that accurately portray history and contemporary student populations' racialized experiences, a manifestation of the conservative agenda to whitewash the state's history that is predicated on racism and white supremacy. In alignment with radical theorizations and research that examine ideologies at the root of ill-informed hysteria, we present a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the effects of political power in foreclosing educational possibilities toward building equitable societies through our analysis of data from NC's Fairness and Accountability in the Classroom for Teachers and Students for North Carolinian "FACTS" submissions (Robinson, 2021). FACTS is a reporting tool targeting NC educators who employ critical lenses in their instruction that promotes unfounded antagonism toward CRT. The significance of this research is a localized example of CRT being targeted by conservative politicians toward the intent of delegitimizing critical scholarship and education and thus perpetuating ahistorical ideals rooted in racism and white supremacy.

Keywords: *Critical Race Theory, counterstories, public education, southern epistemology, whiteness, white supremacy, race consciousness, conservative ideology, North Carolina*

Introduction

North Carolina (NC) is a southern state where politicized issues are contested and where People of Color have always made home and recently show robust growth. From 2010 to 2020 the NC population of "some other race" evidenced 207% of growth (Tippett, 2021). Public education and increased visibility of People of Color are politicized in NC, a purple or swing state, and inform localized contestation regarding Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw et al., 2000; Harris, 1993). Thus, the present manuscript investigates: What discourses reproduce or resist racialization and racism in a southern state?

We conceptually orient this research through the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Wodak, 2009); correspondingly, we adopt the political stance of opposing white

1. Corresponding author: Cathryn Bennett: cathrynbennett@gmail.com

supremacy.² Furthermore, concepts from historicized racialized ideologies chart the genealogical trajectory of race and racism, past-to-present, situating NC’s contemporary conservative agenda as a byproduct of racialized and racist dynamics from history (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilder, 2014) including movements to de-historicize education alongside resistance to acknowledging racialization and racism.³

In 2021, Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson (R-NC) launched the “Fairness and Accountability in Classrooms for Teachers and Students” (FACTS) taskforce to “monitor the state of affairs in North Carolina’s classrooms” (2021). In the *Carolina Journal*, Bass (2021) quoted Robinson as specifying the FACTS taskforce’s objective “Our task force set about to answer one question: Is there indoctrination happening in our public schools. After doing this report and after doing this task force, the overwhelming answer is yes, it is” (para. 3). Robinson has spoken at a slew of conservative events, including pro-Trump rallies (Frisbie-Fulton, 2022). Across venues, Robinson has consistently denounced LGBTQ+ and queer identities in speeches and filmed sermons (Bruno & McMillan, 2023; NC Democratic Party, 2023), which Robinson has used over the past 2.5 years to stump for his extreme conservative bid for governor, informally announced in April, 2023.

The FACTS taskforce’s solicitation of reports on teachers and schools targets critical perspectives in education and coincides with Robinson’s now-confirmed bid for governor. Eradicating what Robinson terms “woke” ideology and CRT in education are a central pillar of his campaign platform. For example, in an interview with *She Thinks Podcast* (Hollberg & Robinson, 2021), Robinson stated that “We [referring to Black and white people] defeated slavery together. We defeated Jim Crow together. ...CRT will take us backwards not forwards” (para. 30). The FACTS webpage describes what people should report, albeit in vague terms, (Appendix A) and includes an online submission questionnaire (Appendix B). The FACTS taskforce additionally published the responses ($N = 581$) submitted online; these responses comprise the data source for this research. The publicly available submissions do not include demographic information for the people who submitted. We draw from the NC FACTS (2021) publicly-available database of responses as a secondary data source. As evidenced in the Findings section, the submissions to FACTS reflect the discourses of undermining racial justice and upholding white supremacy, for which Lt. Gov. Robinson (R-NC) is known. FACTS is a political maneuver to erode public education and concretize conservative ideologies like anti-intellectualism, whitewashing, and ahistorical views of race relations (Pinar & Kincheloe, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2018).

2. “White supremacy” refers to the ideologies, or ideas, that center beliefs, traits, and norms associated with whiteness (Gutierrez, 2006; Racial Equity Tools, 2020); the corollary concept from CRT, whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), draws from legal conceptions of real property mapped onto the racial hierarchies present in the U.S. to demonstrate how whiteness, and proximity to whiteness, is systemically valorized in correspondence with stigmatization and devaluation of People of Color and their advancement in society broadly.

3. “Racialization” and “racism” have distinct operational definitions based on the level of attribution. “Racialization” refers to individual-level assumptions of another’s race (Racial Equity Tools, 2020) or when someone with an unknown “othered” subjectivity—a continuum of privileged/oppressed racialized identities—“races” another person or group, or categorizes them as within a specific race based on assumptions, stereotypes, or physicality. By contrast, “racism” is structural, even in individual-level instances, because of enmeshment in racial group-based power and oppression. Thus, racism is systematic discrimination based on race (Racial Equity Tools, 2020). To reiterate, racialization is an individual’s assumption of another’s race while racism is a hierarchy of group-based privilege and oppression arising from assumptions of race.

Historicizing Racialized Ideologies

Historicity situated the present inquiry as it pertains to the centrality of race and racism. However, historicizing does not propose the present or future as intractable but instead affords an informed view of the presents' origins and potentialities. Correspondingly, American higher education was constructed by enslaved African, West Indian, and Indigenous peoples (Wilder, 2014) upon Indigenous peoples' lands that settler colonists stole (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021). Enslaved peoples' forced labor was used to create the first U.S. colleges through white settlers' social positions, accumulated wealth (Wilder, 2014), and settler colonial racial ideologies, e.g., white colonizers perpetuating a racial underclass (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021). Dunbar-Ortiz (2021) historicized contemporary U.S. nationalism—American exceptionalism—and ongoing racialized capitalism derivative of settler colonialism, including white supremacist fears of replacement, so-called “white genocide” (p. 229). Immigration and naturalization laws have consistently prioritized the easy admittance of populations deemed white, or proximal to whiteness (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021).⁴ Additionally, racialized trauma in NC—site of the present research—extends beyond WWII; without informed consent, more than 7,000 Black North Carolinians were forcibly sterilized, as late as 1973 (NPR, 2011). No NC politician has acknowledged or offered reparation for the state's violence against People of Color. These violent legacies of reproducing racial hierarchy historically situate contemporary racism central to the conservative agenda within the state. Specific to NC, recent movements to target CRT in education function to perpetuate racism: CRT is a tool to identify, theorize, and disrupt racial injustice, so calling for its removal from educational contexts will further setback movements toward racial justice and healing from racial trauma.

Contemporary Racialized Ideologies

Racialized ideologies are reproduced with whiteness as ideal (Crenshaw et al. 2000; Harris, 1993). This manuscript conceptualizes whiteness as the dominant racial ideology, predominating in public education, founded on sectarian reification. As a system, whiteness refers to racialized social structures of privilege and oppression that differentially distribute privileges/oppressions, not individual racial identity (Harris, 1993; Matias & Mackey, 2016). Social construction of whiteness “preserves racial subordination” (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 26), including unearned accumulated wealth and (white) privilege (Harris, 1993).

Relatedly, Gutierrez (2006) theorized selectively opting-out from race/racialized engagements in education “white innocence,” theoretically grounded in whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and race evasion. White innocence (Gutierrez, 2006) leverages whiteness as property, including racialized privileges, to claim superiority *from* racialization, abnegation from collective, cross-racial responsibility to advance structural racial equity, and pretend that other groups are not racialized and demoted in the racial hierarchy. Precluding oneself from the acceptance of the impacts of racism and racialization is a privilege of whiteness with educational origins in 1990s-era

4. U.S. immigration and naturalization laws present a shifting goal post when examined over time; in 1790, the Act to Establish a Uniform Rule of Naturalization codified whiteness as the standard for European immigrants admitted to the U.S. (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021). Also, Ong (1996) accounted for the racialized binary that immigrants and refugees settled in the U.S. encounter whereby, at the time, certain Asian peoples were whitened—and thus deemed more acceptable or palatable for assimilation—while other groups were endarkened and encountered greater levels of racism and oppression. Collectively, the transitional and unfixed standards of whiteness are rendered visible through historicity.

multiculturalism. Race evasion ideologically underplays complicity in hierarchies of racial power (Crenshaw et al., 2000) and, in education, stultifies educators' critical reflection on classrooms as microcosms of racialized social hierarchies (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). In higher education, Bondi (2012) reported the effects of whiteness as property in student affairs preparation resulting in de facto segregation. Race evasion and white innocence are compounding concepts with the byproduct of ignoring their effects on People of Color.

NC is a southern state where whiteness is entangled with notions of tradition and politeness politics. Tradition entails multiple, diversely interpreted majoritarian positions of identity, religion, and, endemic to the region, politeness politics—an expression of white innocence and race evasion, a refusal to acknowledge realities of racialized oppression to maintain privileges of whiteness. Collectively, these forms of traditionalism are conceptualized through the southern epistemology that whitewashes the atrocities of slavery in favor of anti-intellectualism, romanticizing the past and minimizing the presence of contemporary racism (Camargo et al., 2021; Ramos et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2018). We argue that these regional manifestations of whiteness culminate in an extreme conservative agenda.

Especially in schools, conservative ideologies demand neutralized, sanitized instruction that does not disrupt romanticized illusions of equality and race neutrality. Seated in conservative masculine subjectivities (Ong, 1996), they evoke seemingly-harmless curricula that celebrate nationalistic ideals and Christian-centric holidays. Departure—white flight—results when demands for these traditionalist ideologies in education are not heeded; conservatives' children opt-out of contentious assignments (Haviland, 2008) or depart public schooling (Donnor, 2021; Zhang, 2009). Extreme adherents of whiteness flee to educational enclaves accommodating the conservative agenda, a contemporary form of segregation and an expression of the southern epistemology's anti-intellectualism (Camargo et al., 2021; Ramos et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2018). By situating our research amid these strands of scholarship, we argue that white supremacy is deeply-entrenched in the U.S. south's public education. Collectively, ideologies of race and racism—whiteness/white supremacy—and corresponding white flight are central to extremist conservative agendas in education.

Counterstories of Resistance to Injustice

We operationally define counterstories for the purpose of this manuscript in alignment with Solórzano and Yosso's (2012) conceptualization which accounted for counterstories as the narratives of those who are underrepresented or marginalized. Primarily, this definition encompasses those in NC who oppose the majoritarian conservative movement and may include school leaders, staff, and community members. Counterstories empower People of Color and other minoritized communities to narrate their own reality and disrupt hegemonic narratives of subordination (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Majoritarian, dominant views valorize whiteness and white supremacy; by contrast, resistance unsettles the supposed dominance of whiteness through racially-conscious advancement of generative and valuable contributions from minoritized people (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Racial equity in education requires counterstories (Ramos & Yi, 2020), to resist deficit framings and hegemonic ideologies. This inquiry operationalized counterstories as resistance to conservatives' vilification of educators who historicize the curricula. CRT as a tool for refusing racism promotes transformation to disrupt inequitable educational norms (Matias & Mackey, 2017).

Researchers' Reflexivity

A major emphasis of productive critical scholarship is to examine researchers' positionality within their work; as scholars, as such, we reflected on our positionality as we examined our own identities in relation to power, privilege, oppression, and histories (Pérez Huber et al., 2018) and connections to the present study. Dr. Catherine Bennett is an anti-racist white woman committed to advancing educational equity and justice and disrupting racialized educational exclusion predicated on white supremacy. I enter this work as a queer, southern, first-generation Ph.D. to advance scholarship and practice that empirically advances historically minoritized groups' assets and knowledges. Although I was born in Germany and have lived around the world, I have lived in NC since 2015; however, I call it home because this is where I have joined communities working for people power and an equitable society.

Dr. Delma Ramos enters this work as a Mexican immigrant woman of color and a first-generation Ph.D. My personal and professional experience inform the focus of my work on examining how hegemonic ideology shapes the day-to-day experiences of People of Color. With a commitment to disrupt systems of oppression, I enter this work focused on the impact of attacks to CRT on the possibilities for education to foster transformation and mobilization toward justice.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Wodak, 2009) framed this research. This section addresses the conceptual components of the theory applied to this research. Issues of power and reproduction of power imbalances are integral to CDA's purpose as discourses—speech, writing, and expression—both reflect and reinforce ideologies that center or reproduce power imbalances (Wodak, 2009). CDA also posits the necessity of identifying and naming a political stance at the core of the research and reflexively evaluating researcher positions (Wodak, 2009). Thus, we adopt the equity issue of resisting white supremacy and promoting anti-racism and racial justice as essential within educational settings. More specifically, our inquiry centers politicized movements in NC that attempt to denounce CRT in public education. Attacking CRT essentializes the lived experiences of People of Color; CRT bans reproduce racial inequity through attempts to white-wash, neutralize, and sanitize systemic racism oppression; political rhetoric denouncing CRT as a viable theoretical, analytic, and educational tool that further entrenches racialized injustice by denigrating the knowledge of, by, and for the advancement of racially minoritized groups.

Concepts central to CDA—discourses, ideologies, and power imbalances—are enlivened by contemporary literature that addresses matters of racial justice pertinent to this research. Furthermore, by its nature of accounting for discourse in terms of the written word as well as discourses amid the sociopolitical context, CDA is a suitable methodology for this research. In the matter of written discourse, we analyzed submissions to the NC FACTS taskforce, addressed in the Methodology section; additionally, we accounted for the discourses circulating in NC surrounding conservatism, especially regarding race in education education. Thus, the following sections address concepts drawn from white supremacy and racialization/racism (see footnotes 1 and 2 respectively), critical studies of whiteness (Bondi, 2012; Gutierrez, 2006; Harris, 1993; Haviland, 2008), historicizing racialized ideologies (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021; Ong, 1996; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilder, 2014), and counterstories that resist racialized ideologies (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Methodology

The critical qualitative paradigm (Denzin, 2017) methodologically frames this research through critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2009) to promote generative critique. As discourses that mirror and reproduce ideologies sustaining power imbalances are central to CDA, the unit of analysis on which we focus accounts for ideologies that support racial justice and denigrate movements to equitably incorporate racial justice in NC's education system. More specifically, the unit of analysis draws from the discourses and discursive climate surrounding the topic hysteria around CRT in the state of NC.

Our data included 581 reports from 2021-2022 to NC's FACTS taskforce, which is a conservative political movement to surveil educators for indoctrination in the classroom—including teaching CRT - started by Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson (R-NC). The FACTS taskforce called for anonymous submissions to an online reporting tool to target educators for a range of infractions including "students being subjected to indoctrination according to a political agenda or ideology, whether through assigned work, teacher comments, or a hostile classroom environment" (Robinson, 2021). The submission form for the NC FACTS taskforce did not ask for demographic information from those making reports; submissions were published online and publicly available.

Analytic Strategy

Aligned with qualitative criticality and CDA, we conducted two rounds of a priori concept-driven coding related to the discursive political climate in NC. Beginning in January of 2021, we co-taught a doctoral course on critical theory, which prompted our thinking about theorizing NC's political landscape as we revisited foundational literature on Critical Race Theory (e.g., Crenshaw, Combahee River Collective). A priori codes were distilled from the literature through multiple reflective researcher meetings held in early fall 2021; after seven meetings, we agreed upon the concepts incorporated in the conceptual orientation. The methodological decision to rely upon a priori coding pertains to our onto-epistemological commitments to racial justice alongside the axiological commitment to substantiate the concepts of foundational CRT. This feature of our research design is additionally consistent with CDA in which a social justice issue is foregrounded and takes a priori importance throughout the research. Once our concepts were clear, we divided the 581 submissions to read and conduct a priori coding. Throughout the coding process, we had check-in conversations to assess if the a priori codes remained suitable; they required little refinement. Furthermore, we conducted intercoder reviews for agreement between the coding rounds and according to the purpose of the investigation (Saldaña, 2015). FACTS submissions are completely anonymous, therefore, the direct quotes presented to illustrate our findings do not name specific reporting parties.

Findings

Publicly-available NC FACTS submissions⁵ suggest themes of a conservative agenda, ideologies of race, racialization, and racism, and ideological effects in public education. Proportionally fewer responses evidence counterstories supporting educators who historicize their teaching as embedded within ongoing legacies of white supremacy and resulting racialization and racism. FACTS submissions are completely anonymous, therefore, the direct quotes presented to illustrate our findings do not name specific reporting parties.

Conservative Agenda

Manifestations of a conservative agenda are evident in reports of school activities, teaching, and learning in NC public schools that reporting parties perceive as oppositional to the values of this “great country.” Broadly, the complaints reference values rooted in Christianity intertwined with denials of racism and racialization and the desire for education disengaged from politics yet commensurate with conservative ideals. Holistically, these reports document the conservative agenda.

Christianity is a feature of this conservative agenda, intertwined with denials of racism and racialization. Statements contrasted the faith’s beliefs as misaligned with teaching for racial justice. For example, a reporting party stated:

NC is seeing/aiding an indoctrination of curriculum by a "club"...allowed to go into the classrooms at school and "teach" about white privilege and other matters not appropriate to be taught in the classroom. As a Christian, I am offended by their teaching.

This report signaled that discussing topics such as white privilege are off-limits in the classroom for their subversion of white Christian privilege. Another statement below clarified these ideas:

My husband Bob and I are parents and Christians. We had to remove our daughters from public schools because too many teachers were talking about color way too much. We do not see color in this family. WWJD? [What would Jesus do?] Jesus would be color blind. Our public schools have to be more color blind so that school is more positive for all the children.

Especially, this statement connects notions of Christianity with romanticized ideas of race-neutrality where the presence and consequences of racism are nonexistent. Reporting parties also evidence a strong conviction that CRT is anti-Christianity. This is expressed in reports that claim: “I have read several articles about the Critical Race Theory. I have 2 grandchildren... [and] feel very concerned that this theory is being pushed... without Christian parents even aware.” Collectively, the positioning of Christianity as a marker of whiteness and white privilege appears to be threatened by the addition of racial justice discussions to the NC K-12 curricula. This dynamic evidences

5. In an attempt to shame NC public educators, many reports to FACTS (Robinson, 2021) name specific teachers, leaders, and schools, in some cases with contact information. We have redacted this information to protect educators’ and schools’ identities and instead include [teacher] or [school] in included quotations. However, where participants name themselves or elected officials, those names have been retained as submitted.

Christianity as a strong foundation for the shaping and maintenance of a conservative agenda in NC education.

Likewise, a call for K-12 education that is non-partisan but that deploys conservatism is present throughout the reports. This idea is illustrated below:

I've also sent emails to the administration suggesting that teachers remain politically/ideologically neutral when facilitating discussions (since several have tended to clearly promote leftist ideology and denigrate other points of view). They've presented the 1619 project as genuine, definitive history and have been known to use multiple Howard Zinn references.

This statement urges teachers to not engage students in topics that provide counterstories for the understanding of taken-for-granted facts such as conservative whitewashed views of history. These claims for conservatism are often linked to what reporting parties define as propaganda: “Teachers often ridicule right-wing perspectives... The reading lists and materials...are full of leftist propaganda.” Furthermore, reports of teachings that disrupt status quo understandings are often accompanied by demands for schools and educators to distance themselves from politics. For example, a reporting party suggested: “This teacher makes it no secret he is a democrat, he should play a non-partisan role while in school. I...wanted you aware of the bias in this classroom.” Similar ideas are echoed in statements like “the school has a ‘Black Lives Matter’ mural at the entrance. First off, I am wondering why a public, tax-funded school is able to engage in politics, especially with young children.”

The enactment of a conservative agenda in reports of NC K-12 institutions and educators exposes the bond between public education and hegemonic discourse centered around Christianity and ideals that sustain the status quo. Collectively, the presence of conservatism across reports to the taskforce displays the urge for public education to halt efforts that sustain education for justice as these movements threaten the privilege of white Christian stakeholders.

Ideologies of Race and Racism

Ideologies reproduce racialized hierarchies central to the conservative agenda’s beliefs about race and racism. Racism was present in the FACTS data through multiple responses attempting to delegitimize history instruction. One representative response decried instruction about enslavement practiced in NC:

...this so-called teacher tried to indoctrinate MY CHILD into believing that MY STATE was formed as a destination for slaves!...all of this talk about slavery...is JUST WRONG. You MUST DO SOMETHING to stop this liberal plot from indoctrinating my children.

This parent claims education about NC and slavery is indoctrination and also attempts to undermine the instructor’s authority to accurately teach history. Additional respondents pursue delegitimizing history instruction. One parent stated:

My son's ELA teacher has been talking about slavery...[and] referred back to 1619 and I was really upset about this. Another person she discussed was a Hispanic named

Chavez,...the passage about him...basically made Republicans sound like they hated Hispanics...Everyone knows how bad slavery was, but...I don't hear any of these teachers talking about Hitler and how he tried to take out a whole race of people!

This response's multiple qualms feature racist undertones. First, this parent complains about the instructor's attention to slavery and outlines a negative emotional response to students' assigned text from 1619, a key date in the beginnings of slavery in then British Colonies, and now southern U.S. states. Next, the respondent attempts to problematize the curriculum to increase instruction about the Holocaust. This respondent claims that "everyone knows how bad slavery was" and then ascribes "race" to Jewish people, which are unified as a religious and cultural group, not a race; this racist fallacy was also central to the rise of fascism under the Nazi regime. These findings demonstrate racialized ideologies within white supremacy and erroneous, ahistorical understandings of slavery and ongoing racial hierarchy reproduction.

Ideological Effects on Education

Ideologies that sustain racial hierarchies, termed "anti-antiracism," are integral of the conservative agenda. Findings demonstrate desired ideological effects of controlling public education. Specifically, these ideological effects manifest in white flight from public schools and reporting teachers and schools.

white flight refers to parents electing or threatening to remove their children from public school or assignments due to a mismatch between democratic education, including the truth of slavery and contemporary racism, and parents' conservative ideologies. Multiple respondents to FACTS demand their students be exempted from coursework the parents do not agree with, as this parent states: "We have always been big proponents of public education but we are now pulling our kids out of the system to avoid indoctrination." Another representation of white flight includes: "Had I known this charter school was going to be focused on social justice indoctrination I never would have put my child there." Claims of indoctrination among the data evidenced parents' stance against antiracist education, resulting in white flight.

Respondents also named concepts perceived as components of indoctrination and demonstrated ideological effects of conservatism in policing education. For example, a conservative parent stated:

...Black Lives Matter, white privilege...were shoved down the throats of every student! My daughters quickly learned to just write papers...from the teacher's point of view...supporting the BLM movement...They are not racists...with so much focus on racism, they...played the game.

Further, submissions reflect claims against teachers' training, legitimacy, and abilities. This quotation is representative of attacks on teachers following parental complaints about social justice topics in class:

I demanded transitioning him to a different classroom...the teacher he transitioned to was an Educator, not a person with a hidden agenda like the other teacher.

Additionally, responses centered parents' issues with students' learning about antiracism. This excerpt is representative of respondents naming teachers and attempting to shame them for incorporating antiracist perspectives; the teacher asked:

...students [to] discuss why our paper currency only had while [sic] male slave owners on it. My son came and got me so I could hear the conversation. [Teacher] repeatedly commented with a derogatory [sic] tone about how while [sic] male slave owners should not be representing our country.

FACTS respondents attempt shaming teachers by name and enumerating their instructional practices. Another representative data point of policing educators states: "I no longer want my tax dollars funding a socialist tenure system where my kids are being taught depraved communism with no end in sight and no way to punish those who are perpetuating the indoctrination." This respondent seeks "to punish" educators that they accuse of "depraved communism" and "indoctrination." These data, instead, demonstrate respondents' white supremacist ideologies, deployed to reinscribe their conservative agenda under the guise of "traditionalist" and race evading curricula.

Resistance to white Supremacy Culture

Amidst a multitude of claims targeting critical ideology present in NC K-12 curricula, multiple submissions, from parents and teachers serving NC public schools, echoed support for equity, social justice, and race-conscious education. These submissions represent counterstories that challenge majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) promoted in other reports by highlighting the importance of teaching critical thinking and providing students access to knowledge that equips them to think for themselves.

Related to critical thinking, counterstories pushed against hegemonic, taken-for-granted conservative knowledge promoted by politicians to grow supporters. This respondents' statement in a FACT submission illustrates this idea:

I indoctrinate my students year after year into understanding that you must read, think about, and understand things before you criticize them. I know that goes against the philosophy of your fearless, racist leader, Mark Robinson, since he criticized Kendi's speech to CMS despite admitting that he has not read Kendi's work or watched the videos.

This statement also exposes NC republican politicians' fear of the unknown and rejection of complex topics that shed light on oppressive structures sustaining pressing societal issues. This idea is further clarified in a statement that ridicules FACTS:

I am aware of teachers talking about race and racism in schools. This goes against my beliefs as a Christian and what is taught in the Bible. I know that DPI is currently a Christian organization under the helm of grandmaster Truitt, blessed be her name. We also honor Mark Robinson, for teaching a new generation of racist and bigots how to be new-racists. The new-racism he preaches and teaches makes it safe to be a racist conservative again. We also support the ban on CRT, even though we don't know what it is and it isn't being taught in schools...Thank you for censoring our teachers. We need bodycams and conservative classroom observers in every classroom.

Counterstories referencing the anti-intellectual movement of conservative politicians in NC also elicited the importance of teaching non-romanticized history in K-12 schools. These ideas are present in messages such as “We are not politicians, we are educators. There is no indoctrination in truth, there is no indoctrination in FACTS, and there is no extra time in a teacher's schedule to plot indoctrination.” The underscoring of sharing knowledge excluded from the contemporary discourse in the K-12 curriculum is also pressed for in statements like “There is no issue. If you don't know history, then you may want to try learning it. Understand that by learning it doesn't mean it's all going to be pretty.” These statements display encountering information that deviates from hegemonic perspectives. Potential implications of engaging new knowledge included gaining expansive understanding and navigating tensions from learning knowledge that counters dominant ideologies.

More specifically, counterstories highlighted the importance and necessity of education to challenge ahistorical understandings, as noted below:

Thanks for your work on this racist task force and for reminding us why we need to work harder in public schools to prevent people from growing up and becoming as biased, racist, and gullible as yourselves. I want my students to learn to actually think about things, rather than doing what you all do by blindly believing anti-history nonsense by political operatives.

This message also elucidates the role of educators as contributors to developing students' critical thinking to refine their own world views. Others boldly stated this commitment:

I have strong concerns about the efforts of certain leaders to limit the knowledge of our children. In the introduction to this form, it states “the purpose is to hold public schools accountable...by exposing indoctrination in the classroom and ensuring that our students are taught how to think—not what to think.” How can our students be taught HOW to think when people/leaders within our state are attempting to limit the facts that they need in order to use critical thinking skills and draw conclusions?

Summatively, the counterstories emerge alongside claims for indoctrination, statements against CRT, and demands to sustain a conservative agenda through K-12 education. However, the counterstories unsettled hegemonic ideologies by advocating for truth-telling, historicity, and the dissemination of knowledge traditionally excluded from public education. Counterstories also evidence the deep commitment of some NC educators toward social transformation by equipping students with a critical lens to examine societal ills.

Discussion

This CDA-oriented investigation examined a southern state's (NC's) ideologies that reproduce racialization/racism and the presence of counterstories advancing racial justice-oriented education. Findings arise from a so-called anti-indoctrination reporting tool led by elected officials steeped in the conservative agenda. Our analysis of FACTS submissions demonstrated four themes: 1) conservative agenda, including 2) ideologies of race/ism and 3) effects on education;

finally, 4) counterstories demonstrate challenges to these dominant racial ideologies through critical thinking and support for race conscious, historicized education.

Findings evidenced a conservative agenda underscored values rooted in Christianity and conservative politics framed as non-partisan education. Related to Christianity, reporting parties asserted tension between curricular features that they believed to be in contradiction with their Christian values. Specifically, the curricular components that reporting parties expressed rejection of include curricular topics related to white privilege and racial injustice, which they believed to misalign with Christianity's commitment to race evasive ideology and romanticized notions of racial equality.

These ideologies echo anti-intellectual convictions in the south (Camargo et al., 2021; Ramos et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2018). Precisely, the southern epistemology in these data emerges as reporting parties express disagreement with discussions at school that might disrupt their idealized view of a world in which white privilege and whiteness (Harris, 1993) do not exist. The southern epistemology is deployed to disparage educational criticality and maintain the status quo. Reporting parties did not state anti-intellectualism explicitly yet argued that critical topics in education were misaligned with their Christian values, which in this study, echoed whiteness and white supremacy as the norm in education (Crenshaw et al., 2000; Harris, 1993).

These ideas elucidate contemporary manifestations of Christianity as a tool for domination (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilder, 2014) begun during U.S. statehood development and extended to strong influences in public education. Furthermore, and connected to effects of hegemonic ideologies on education, a conservative agenda pursues so-called non-partisan educational curricula but, by virtue of centering neutrality, sustains conservative knowledge and ways of knowing (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). This dynamic was clearly present in submissions that demanded teachers not engage students with so-called left-leaning and assumed as misleading texts. This is yet another reverberation of taskforce supporters' commitment to perpetuate ahistorical whitewashed curricula in NC public K-12 education.

Findings also demonstrated pervasive beliefs in whiteness and white supremacy which revealed respondents' ideology of race/racialization/racism, for example, in demands to eradicate Black History Month. Through the conservative agenda, participants called for *maintaining* dehistoricized, whitewashed public education, especially regarding topics of slavery and ongoing racialized oppression. Historicized, these demands parallel the nationalist, racist permutations of immigration policy, construed along shifting perceptions of (proximity to) whiteness (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021; Ong, 1996). The findings betrayed respondents' beliefs rooted in notions of whiteness as dominant (Gutierrez, 2006) and evidenced the perceived threat to the superior valuation of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) through accurately conveying the historical and contemporary racialized experiences of People of Color. Specifically, the data displayed conservative movements to evade race (Harris, 1993) and, if unsuccessful, to more forcefully prioritize whiteness. Throughout the data, conservative agenda adherents espoused a racialized ideology that valorized whiteness, its unearned privileges (Harris, 1993), and, correspondingly, demonized and sought to dominate People of Color. Conservatives perceived historicized, race-conscious education as a form of theft, diminishing the superiority of whiteness; this ill-founded belief directly corresponded with reliance of white supremacy upon racial subordination (Gutierrez, 2006) and evading the reality of racism (Crenshaw et al., 2000).

The ideological effects of the conservative agenda on education represented attempts to police and control educators and the noncommittal move to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) of white flight. Findings exhibited demands to sustain the conservative agenda and resist antiracism

in schools through deployments of white innocence (Gutierrez, 2006) in attempts to perpetuate conservative ideological instruction.

Calls for fundamental Christianity, ahistorical, and whitewashed curricular components demonstrated assumptions of white innocence and condoned racial oppression by proxy of side-stepping complicity. Expectations of white innocence (Gutierrez, 2006), an unearned privilege of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), resulted in conservatives' fear, discomfort, and shock when confronted by race-conscious education. Conservative adherents—to preserve whiteness—resorted to demands for upholding the subjectivity of whiteness to “preserve racial subordination” (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 26). Maintenance of white supremacy was displayed as opting-out of assignments (Haviland, 2008) disagreeable to the conservative agenda. When unsuccessful in maintaining white supremacy-as-property (Harris, 1993), conservatives relied upon white flight from public education (Donner, 2021; Zhang, 2009), a contemporary expression of educational segregation (Bondi, 2012), and demonstrated the fear-based motives of whiteness. Threatened by displacement at the top of the racial hierarchy, conservatives' claims of liberal indoctrination resulted in opting-out of “politicized” assignments or, in its most severe form, departure from public education.

Furthermore, our findings revealed a growing number of submissions representing counterstories, some believed to be from teachers serving NC schools per their intent to ridicule the taskforce. These counterstories conveyed messages that disrupted the taskforce's framing of educators as indoctrinators and expressed support for racial justice oriented education. Precisely, counterstories focused on two issues, the importance of critical thinking and the inclusion of knowledge that counters traditional curricular components. Some counterstories ridiculed the taskforce's purpose by powerfully countering hegemonic discourse, which reflected purposes and transformational impacts of counterstories (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through counterstories, NC educators were empowered as legitimate knowers to narrate their own realities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Beyond amplifying the narratives of teachers and serving to disrupt stock narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) constructed by elected officials, counterstories documented the urge for public education to equip students with knowledge and tools, grounded in historicity, to expand their worldviews. Counterstories also demonstrated educators' agency, positioning as disruptors, and commitments to education for transformation within the conservative sociopolitical context of NC. The conceptual mapping that grounded this inquiry in the origins of racialized oppression, foregrounded the enmeshment of ongoing racism and its concomitant effects on educational spaces. Achieving racially-equitable public education requires undoing the twisted interconnectedness between racialized ideologies of white supremacy and racial subordination.

Implications

Our findings indicate the need to problematize the contexts within which critical scholarship resides. Specifically, counterstories present in submissions reflected powerful messaging and commitments to disrupting the status quo, however, the ideas evidenced a disconnect with contemporary critical scholarship that helps support these efforts. This is not to say that distancing from the critical scholarly discourse is a flaw of counterstories, our argument is that keeping critical scholarship within the confines of the academy limits its capacity for transformation. Accordingly, we invite critical scholars to disrupt academic elitism in the academy, especially the academy's control over knowledge production and sharing of knowledge to disrupt whiteness and white supremacy.

In NC in particular, calls to maintain and sustain “traditional” curricula evidenced the overrepresentation of conservatism already present in schools. In response and to advance critical race perspectives, a corollary implication is the necessity of assessing existing curricula for the present level of ideological foundations.

Critical educators need to know to what extent textbooks, standards, assessments, and curricular guideposts uphold conservatism and ahistorical perspectives. This knowledge will empower educators’ awareness of modules and lessons that require updating to account for historicized, justice-oriented pedagogy. A related implication is the need for updated textbooks and curricular materials that account for counter-stories that center race-consciousness and justice orientations.

Our findings also expressed urgency for the expanded understanding of CRT and its capacity for shaping education for transformation and racial justice. Pointedly, submissions underscored the mobilization of critical curricula in the classroom, yet denied it to be an illustration of a CRT-informed approach to knowledge production and sharing. Accordingly, we encourage education stakeholders to invest in efforts that support educators to more deeply understand CRT, its principles, and possibilities for shaping critical education. Despite conservative hysteria, Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 2000) is not a villain.

Conclusion

Altogether, CRT as a conceptual orientation in the present inquiry shed light on key ideologies that reproduce racism and racialization in NC and highlighted messaging of a commitment to transformation and racial justice present in educators’ counterstories. Primarily, this contemporary examination of politicization in a southern state upheld the reality of persistent ideologies of race and racism (Crenshaw et al., 2000) and the transformative capacity of counterstories (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, the context of interest demonstrated reproduction of racialized ideologies in public education, evidenced through residents’ demands for continuing de-raced, de-historicized education. This demonstrated the CRT tenet of the social constructedness of race (Crenshaw et al., 2000); importantly, social construction conveys racialized ideologies’ permeability to change and transformation—they are not constant, intractable.

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Appendix: FACTS Documents

F.A.C.T.S Task Force: Fairness and Accountability in the Classroom for Teachers and Students

Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson is seeking to provide support for **parents, teachers**, and most importantly, **students** who are willing to stand up for North Carolina's future by exposing indoctrination in the classroom and ensuring that our students are taught how to think - not what to think. The Office of the Lieutenant Governor is establishing a Task Force (FACTS) to monitor the state of affairs within North Carolina classrooms. The primary goal of this task force is to allow the **voices** of concerned citizens to be **heard** regarding public K-12 education in North Carolina.

The FACTS Task Force advisory board is composed of education professionals representing all levels of K-12 including teachers, administrators, and university professors.

Purpose of the Task Force.

- To assist in holding local and county-level education officials accountable for what occurs in their schools;
- To provide a safe and secure setting where education professionals can transmit concerns regarding their school without fear of retaliation;
- To provide a central state-wide mechanism for gathering and sharing data related to parent concerns regarding public education, and to provide a mechanism for elevating awareness of concerns so that they can be addressed;
- To provide underrepresented parents and students a voice and an open line of communication with professional educator advocates for student experiences and outcomes;
- To assist concerned parents in navigating the bureaucracy within our public school system.

The FACTS Task Force is requesting that parents and teachers in North Carolina help us hold the system accountable. The Lieutenant Governor's Office is asking that you **submit anything that meets the criteria listed below**:

What to submit:

- Examples of discrimination or harassment related to a student's faith, ethnicity, worldview, or political beliefs;
- Examples of unequal, inconsistent, or disparate treatment of students in the enforcement of school rules and/or in disciplinary matters;
- Examples of students being subjected to indoctrination according to a political agenda or ideology, whether through assigned work, teacher comments, or a hostile classroom environment;
- Examples of students being required to disclose details regarding their individual race/ethnicity, sexual preference, religious ideology, or economic status
- Examples of students being exposed to inappropriate content or subject matter in the classroom, including matters relating to substance abuse, profanity, or of a sexual nature.

F.A.C.T.S. SUBMISSION FORM

First Name

Last Name

County

Email

Phone

Address

Address 2

City/Town

State/Province

None ▾

ZIP/Postal Code

DATE OF INCIDENT



If ongoing, leave blank

DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE

Please tell us in as much detail as you can what the problem is, the parties involved, whether or not the issue is ongoing, and what steps have been taken to resolve the problem.

Submit

Whiteness and Fear: Backlash to Mathematics Education Reforms

Eric Cordero-Siy,¹ Michael Lolkus, & Frances K. Harper

Abstract

Recent reform efforts to center issues of equity and social justice in mathematics classrooms have been under fire from the loudest sectors of right-wing media. The hysteria around incorporating social justice issues in mathematics classrooms is captured in the artificial binary: STEM or CRT. In our paper, we examine resistance to reform efforts in mathematics education in artifacts geared towards audiences beyond mathematics education researchers through the lens of whiteness. We analyzed artifacts from the Math Wars of the late 1990's and the current backlash towards mathematics education reform (Math Culture Wars) in California and Florida. We identified fear as a significant mechanism to upholding whiteness in the backlash to mathematics education reforms, particularly centering white fear. By describing how fear is constructed in the artifacts, scholars may find more targeted responses to the backlash by addressing the ideas perpetuated in these artifacts. Still, the field of mathematics education has done little to become more inclusive and just because our agenda is too closely aligned to the status quo, with responses to the backlash being largely absent or tepid. We close with recommendations for action and allyship within the broader field of education to thwart the hysteria against CRT.

Keywords: *Math Wars, Math Culture Wars, Mathematics Education Reform, Whiteness, Fear*

American society and its education system is at a crossroad. In the months since proposing this paper, two major waves of news have emerged. Racist, violent acts towards BIPOC communities continually make news headlines (e.g., towards a predominantly Black community in Buffalo, NY, an Asian-run salon in Dallas, TX, a six-year old Palestinian-American near Chicago, IL) at the same time state legislators are banning “forbidden” books and instructional materials that make students feel “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex” (e.g., Florida H., 2022). School mathematics is not immune from this. Mathematics has largely been regarded as value and culture-free, so mathematics classrooms should just “be about numbers;” however, researchers noted this ideology aligns with whiteness and white supremacy (e.g., Battey & Leyva, 2016).

School mathematics is a racialized space for students both at the individual and structural levels (Martin, 2019). Mathematics educators and researchers are taking up calls (e.g., TODOS, 2020) to teach mathematics for social and racial justice. These efforts have taken multiple forms,

1. Corresponding author: Eric Cordero-Siy, Boston University: ericcs@bu.edu

including teaching with dual goals of promoting social justice and supporting traditional mathematics (e.g., Gutstein, 2006), ensuring BIPOC students have access to and achieve in mathematics as a tool of liberation (e.g., Moses, 1994), and reform efforts to center justice in mathematics classrooms. Still, organized and persistent efforts outside academia and school resist mathematics education reforms, especially ones centering social and racial justice.

Whiteness and Whiteness as Property within Mathematics Education

We examine backlash to reform centering racial and social justice in mathematics education through the lens of whiteness. Whiteness is a social construction that maintains white supremacy, the ideology that the white race is superior to others, while simultaneously claiming a sense of delicacy and fragility (Frankenburg, 1993; Leonardo, 2009). Whiteness operates in mathematics education particularly on prevailing ideologies of colorblindness (“Math doesn’t see color”), meritocracy (“You just need to work hard”), and individualism (“I’m not a math person”) (Battey & Leyva, 2016).

Harris (1993) offered whiteness as property where white people gain, accrue, and maintain benefits within societal institutions. Within her argument, she explains the property functions of whiteness where its holders have intertwined rights which we see manifested in mathematics education. First, whiteness provides the right to use and enjoyment where one can use whiteness as “an active entity that—like other types of property—is used to fulfill the will and exercise power” (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). Battey and Leyva (2016) argued white students’ languages and behavior are used in mathematics to exert power over students of color by “managing” their language and behavior to revert to the white norm, even when they substantively contribute to classroom mathematics. Second, whiteness provides the right to reputation and status where white racial identity “by recognizing the reputational interest in being regarded as white as a thing of significant value” (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). We see this in mathematics where “those who benefit from whiteness hoard real property to gain intellectual property” (Bullock, 2017, p. 633). Consider the amount of “property” owned by those deemed “successful” in mathematics. In 2021, 70.6% of public-school students who enrolled in Advanced Placement mathematics are white or Asian² (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). In 2018 (most recent publicly available data), 90.8% of doctorate recipients in mathematics are white or Asian (Golbeck et al., 2020). In the same year, 80% of public middle and high school mathematics teachers are white, 93% of which teach in a school where more than 50% are white (Rotermund and Burke, 2021). Finally, whiteness provides the absolute right to exclude where “whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded” (Harris, 1993, p. 1736). Mathematics education has long been the site of meritocracy where pervasive discourses of “high” and “low” students (e.g., “honors” and “support” mathematics classes) serve to separate those in the club, with white and white-adjacent students in the club, and everyone else, not. This leads to, according to Battey and Leyva (2016), the academic delegitimization of non-white and non-white-adjacent students.

Because mathematics education is a white institutional space and its practices have been shaped by whiteness and whiteness as property (Martin, 2019; Bullock, 2019; Hand & Spencer, 2015), genuine reform that upends the roots of mathematics education threatens whiteness.

2. We include Asian(Americans) in the first two data because of their proximity to whiteness in mathematics in that their presence as non-White achievers in mathematics absolves mathematics from racism (see Chen and Buell, 2017). The number of Asian (American) teachers were not included in the third set of data.

White Emotions

We dig into emotions as a reaction to mathematics education reform, ergo, threats to whiteness. We adopted an interactionist conception of emotion, meaning that emotions are both an individual, physiological experience and an expression that (re)produces sociocultural and sociopolitical discourses (Zembylas, 2007). If whiteness is unsettled, strong emotions are used to repair and revert to the status quo (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014). In particular, white emotions, such as disgust (Matias, 2016), have been used to hinder justice movements. Ultimately, the emotions stabilize whiteness and white supremacy and allow whites to keep “material benefits, protection, and advantage at the expense of the humanity, achievements, and reality of people of color” (Matias, Thompson, and Luney, 2022, p.14).

Even in the act of proposing mathematics education reform, particularly the standards-based reform of the 1990-2000’s and the current turn towards justice, we see strong emotions enter. Incidentally, we do not argue that mathematics education reform fully dismantles white supremacy and, arguably, is problematic; Gillborn (2005) argued educational policy acts to defend white supremacy. It could, however, challenge whiteness by centering diverse perspectives. But when whiteness is decentered, “the emotionalities of [w]hiteness become too unfettered” (Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2016, p. 3).

Because mathematics education is a manifestation of whiteness as property, the strong emotions to reform are analogous to someone losing whiteness. Matias (2016) illustrates the loss of whiteness, “melancholic state of existence that constantly mourns and grieves its own death yet, in actuality, never really dies... Whites never fully let go of their whiteness or the sense of loss of whiteness. It becomes a perpetual state of being, one that becomes the shared burden for humanity” (p. 112). Thus, we ask, what emotions, rooted in whiteness, emerge in mathematics education reform?

Research Process

Context and Goals

For the last forty years, mathematics education reform efforts have championed equity, but whiteness inherent in these efforts has upheld inequities in the achievement, access, and opportunities of BIPOC students (Bullock, 2019; Martin, 2003). Thus, this manuscript does not break ground by describing whiteness as a mechanism to maintain the status quo. Instead, we hope to contribute to our field’s understanding of the reforms by situating it within the framework of whiteness as property. Specifically, we examine the discourses in the backlash to two reform movements: the math wars and the math culture wars.

Math Wars (MW)

Controversy around standards-based reform efforts sparked the (MW) in the late 1990’s. Initially, this reform movement centered around the publishing of “Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics” (hereafter “Standards”) from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), particularly, California’s adoption of the Standards in 1994. Overall, reforms sought to lessen mathematical formalism and direct instruction (Herrera & Owens, 2001).

Tensions arose between prioritizing student-centered pedagogy, which would limit the amount of content presented, and prioritizing content (Klein, 2003), which catalyzed multifaceted backlash (see Berry et al., 2014; Schoenfeld, 2004).

As Wright (2012) recounted:

The reformers believed in equity, education for the masses and advocated primarily progressive and critical teaching approaches. They saw mathematics as a value-laden subject, which served as a barrier to social and economic advancement for particular groups in society, although it had the potential to be a democratising force. The traditionalists saw mathematics very much as a value-free subject and believed in the maintenance of excellence, advocating a primarily conservative teaching approach. (p. 9)

We included the MW because it championed, “mathematics for all” (Martin, 2003). Under this slogan, reforms themselves ultimately failed to “grapple with the complexities and particularities of race, minority/marginalized status, differential treatment, underachievement in deference to the assumption that teaching, curriculum, learning, and assessment are all that matter” (Martin, 2003, p. 10). Moreover, the discourse is reflective of racial remediation as a strategy to “eliminate irritation, not to execute justice” (Bullock, 2019). The slogan is still persistent in mathematics curriculum and policy such as NCTM’s (2014) position statement, “Achieving access and equity requires that all stakeholders ensure that all students have access to a challenging mathematics curriculum” (p. 1).

Math Culture Wars (MCW)

The current reform movement seeks to center social justice, and specifically racial justice. TODOS: Mathematics for All (2020) called for mathematics educators to take an antiracist position by “challenging belief systems that perpetuate microaggressions [and] disrupting the role mathematics classes play in pushing students out of schooling” (p. 2). Efforts to attend explicitly to social and racial justice in curricular content choices, pedagogical approaches, and organizing structure of mathematics have sparked the MCW, particularly in California and Florida. The backlash in California stems from the implementation of a new mathematics curriculum that includes a social justice component. Reformers argued for the inclusion because a “different perspective enables teachers to not only help their students see themselves inside mathematics but develop knowledge and understanding that allows them to use mathematics toward betterment in their worlds” (p. 55). In Florida, the backlash manifested in a state ban on mathematics textbooks that included prohibited topics such as “CRT,” defined as “the theory that racism is not merely the product of prejudice, but that racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons” (Florida State Board of Education, 2021, p. 1). The Governor argued textbooks were “impermissible” because it indoctrinates “race essentialism, especially, bizarrely, for elementary school students” (Florida DOE, 2022) and state legislature proposed instruction should not include anything that makes students “feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions, in which he or she played no part” (Florida H.B. 7, 2022, p. 4). These reforms are situated within broader national culture wars, and backlash to educational reform is often framed as opposition to “CRT” (i.e., Critical Race Theory; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: STEM not CRT Protest (Bloustein, 2021)

OPINION | LETTERS

Critical Race Theory Has a Racism Problem

From the idea that white people are congenitally disabled by virtue of being born white to the bigotry of low expectations.



Opponents of critical race theory protest in outside of the Loudoun County School Board headquarters in Ashburn, Va.

PHOTO: EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/REUTERS

UPCOMING EVENTS

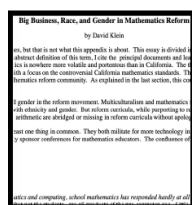
Sep	12:30 PM - 2:00 PM EDT
14	The Future Of Transportation
2021	
Oct	12:00 PM - 5:00 PM EDT
5	WSJ Jobs Summit
2021	
Oct	12:30 PM - 2:00 PM EDT
6	The Future Of Health
2021	

Methods

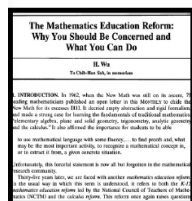
We used critical discourse analysis to “explore connections between educational practices and social contexts,” particularly issues of “power abuse, injustice, and equality to uncover implicit or concealed power relations” (Mullet, 2018, p. 117) to examine how power structures are maintained (Oughton, 2007). We analyzed a number of artifacts from the MW and MCW. We used the following criteria for inclusion: (1) explicitly discussed mathematics education; (2) related to MW or MCW in California or Florida; and (3) authored by writers from various backgrounds and for diverse, broad audiences. Our rationale for these criteria was based on ensuring that backlash explicitly addressed mathematics education reforms (sometimes discussed alongside broader reforms). To do so, we focused on the states where mathematics reform backlash has been most prominent. We also sought to consider a range of voices (e.g., general public, mathematics education, STEM/mathematics; different media sources), which have made a broader impact on narratives surrounding mathematics education reforms. After applying criteria, we included nine artifacts in the analysis, which are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

We selected a discourse to examine (i.e., the backlash to mathematics education reforms) then selected and explored the background of each text because examining the social and historical context and producers of the texts is a key aspect of critical discourse analysis (Mullet, 2018). Next, we identified emotional language clarifying the particular emotion that was being expressed, especially when related threats to rights to property (i.e., rights to use and enjoyment, right to power and status, and power to exclude). Using these emotions, we identified characteristics, manifestations, and functions of the emotions. Although literature on whiteness helped sensitize us to code for themes, concepts from the literature on whiteness were used to interpret the themes rather than dictate the themes.

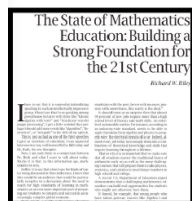
Figure 2: MW Artifact Descriptions



Klein (1999): Klein is a professor of mathematics. He has shared multiple pieces expressing dissatisfaction with the California mathematics reform. This artifact is found in the second edition of “How to teach mathematics” by Steven Krantz. It no longer appears in the most recent edition and can be accessed on Mathematically Correct, a website that shared writings critical of reforms.

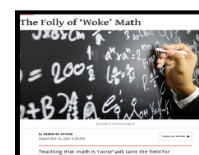


Wu (1997): Wu is a professor emeritus of mathematics. Although Wu was critical of the Wars reform, he expressed support for the latter Common Core reform. This artifact is found in the American Mathematical Monthly, a professional magazine of the Mathematical Association of America, most of whom are university mathematicians.



Riley (1998): Riley was the secretary of education under the Clinton administration. This artifact is found in Notices, a professional magazine of the American Mathematical Society, most of whom are university mathematicians. This is the text of a speech he gave at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, a large mathematics conference hosted annually by the American Mathematical Society.

Figure 3: MCW Artifact Descriptions



Spivak (2021): Spivak is founder and chairman of SMI Group LLC. This artifact is found in the National Review, a popular publication known for defining modern American conservatism (Sivek, 2008). This artifact has been shared on social media 1,678 times according to sharescore.com.



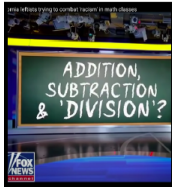
Evers & Wurman (2022): Evers is a senior fellow at the Center on Educational Excellence at the Independent Institute and headed the Trump-Pence transition's agency review for the Department of Education. Wurman is an engineer and research fellow at the Independent Institute. The artifact is an open letter shared on Independent Institute, an American libertarian think tank, and has more than 1,000 signatories.



Barak et al. (2022): The authors are a group of computer scientists (Barak and Cohen) and engineers (Mims and Nelson) at different institutions. The artifact is found on a Google-hosted site and is an open letter with more than 1,500 signatories that are limited to STEM and quantitative field professionals.



Chayes & Liu (2022): Chayes and Liu are both professors in the department of electrical engineering and computer sciences at UC Berkeley and hold administrative positions (associate provost and dean, respectively). The artifact is published as an op-ed in the LA Times, a publication that leans left, according to Ground News (2022).



Fox News (2021): Fox News interviews Carol Swain, a political scientist and former tenured professor at Princeton and Vanderbilt and a co-author of *Black Eye for America: How Critical Race Theory is Burning Down the House*. This artifact is found on YouTube with a little over 400,000 views and published by Fox News, a media company that leans right, according to Ground News (2022).



Florida Department of Education (2022): This artifact is a press release from the Florida Department of Education under the DeSantis administration. This artifact spurred news reporting on the amount of mathematics textbooks that were rejected because they contained prohibited topics such as “CRT.”

Findings: Fear to Uphold Whiteness

We found authors of the texts evoked a strong emotion of fear within two broad narratives—a fear of a growing enemy and a fear of loss. The authors wrote about an enemy aiming to replace K-12 mathematics and gaining traction, despite a flimsy research basis funded by powerful, bad actors. They explained the threat to affordances of the current ideology of mathematics and how losing them would erode the American economy, and thus America’s international competitiveness.

Fear of a Growing Enemy

In both reforms, the authors invoked fear of a concrete, growing enemy and sought to discredit research and reform proponents. In our first characterization of fear, the backlash discourse framed reforms themselves as something to be feared because they are based on a dangerous, ill-informed paradigm backed by selfish bad actors with substantial profit to gain.

The Ill-Informed Paradigm

Authors presented a growing ideology taking over school mathematics, which we refer to as “the paradigm.” In the MCW, the paradigm has a specific name, “CRT,” but was not presented with the nuance of the original conceptualization of CRT. Instead, CRT refers to the idea that racism is embedded in society/institutions (versus individual prejudice; Florida State Board of Education, 2021). To an extent, Florida (2022) elaborated on and legislated “CRT” in H.B. 7 where they deemed any activity that “espouses, promotes, advances, inculcates, or compels such individuals to believe... an individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously,...an individual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed” is unlawful (p. 1). The paradigm described in the MW centered on efforts to focus on mathematics curriculum standards that shifted from prior-

itizing procedures to conceptual understanding (Schoenfeld, 2004). Standards that centered mathematics with real-world applications were seen as an attack on traditional mathematics that was reserved for select individuals (Ravitch, 1996) and primarily a mental exercise (Klein, 2003). The paradigm, thus, frames mathematics as a race-neutral, exclusive activity.

Discounting research supporting reform served as one mechanism to sow fear of the paradigms. During the MW, opponents described research informing reform as “fads” and “experimental” with some echoes of how No Child Left Behind (2001) described “scientifically-based” research (i.e., preference for random-assigned experimental research as objective and the one correct way). For instance, Wu (1997) described the pedagogical practices in the MW as “based on opinions rather than research data of large-scale studies from cognitive psychology” (p. 946). Discourses in the MCW mirrored this skepticism, claiming that the new curriculum “propose[s] drastic changes based on scant and inconclusive evidence. Subjecting the children of [California] to such an experiment is the height of irresponsibility” and that the current reform is “elevating trendy but shallow courses over foundational skills would cause lasting damage to STEM education in the country” (Barak et al., 2022, para. 9). Spivak (2021) offered another interpretation, that current reforms are simply “belied by common sense” (para. 22).

These attempts to discredit the paradigms, and thus stroke fear of reforms, are effective because the paradigms themselves run counter to widely accepted ideological discourses of mathematics. For example, Klein (1999) wrote that the MW leaned on the “thesis that learning styles are correlated with ethnicity and gender is widely accepted in education circles” and that such research “leads to new, watered-down mathematics curricula” (para. 28). He then argued that there is “no doubt that minority students can thrive in traditional programs” and concluded that the “mathematics community would do well to purge itself of any hidden assumptions that non-Asian minority students learn mathematics differently from anybody else” (para. 39). This illustrates the source of fearing the paradigm—mathematics must remain untouched for the use and enjoyment of those currently in possession of it, white and white-adjacent folk. Moreover, the arguments of the paradigm being supported by flimsy research echoes the right to exclude, that those who are in possession are able to exclude research that justifies reform.

Bad Actors

Another prevailing and related fear mechanism in the backlash is the identification of powerful bad actors. These actors are framed as people and groups, who stand to profit, working behind the scenes to push for reform, and as such, should be feared. In the MW, Klein (1999) named technology corporations as a bad actor. Namely corporations, such as Exxon and Texas Instruments, sought “to create new consumers of technology” (para. 17) through funding large grants and attending academic conferences. He asserted that proponents of reform gained from these relationships because the “de-emphasis of basic skills [leads to] greater reliance on technology” (para. 10). Thus, technology corporations were a bad actor because the de-emphasis of algorithms challenged the ideological discourses of whiteness in which mathematical procedures are done using one right way.

In the MCW, a different bad actor was introduced, namely a group of “progressive” mathematics education researchers (i.e., Deborah Ball; Rochelle Gutiérrez) who espouse and promote the paradigm (Spivak, 2021). Spivak questioned their intellectual contributions using emotional verbiage such as “groans” and “overstates” and framing their work as Gutiérrez’s “worries,” and

Ball “complains.” Thus, the author positioned them and their work as not to be taken seriously because it “sound[s] like parody” (para. 4). These discourses uphold whiteness by framing the bad actors as responding emotionally, which remains unacceptable within the ideological discourses of mathematics as objective (i.e., emotion free).

Spivak (2021) also framed the ideas of bad actors as “gaining traction” (para. 8) by describing how they are being taken up by schools and school districts with the backing of powerful institutions. Specifically, he named the Gates Foundation’s funding of Ball’s *TeachingWorks* project, and Education Trust-West’s (tied closely to the Obama administration) funding of the toolkit, *A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction*. Consistent discourses here position Obama and Gates as the bogeymen of the left (see McLaughlin, 2021; Smith, 2021) and help explain why the paradigm is “gaining traction” and “strongly endorsed by educators, leading mathematics organizations, and policy-makers” (para. 4). Politicizing reform efforts by associating them with the bogeymen of the left also invokes the possessors’ right to exclude in that they exclude those who challenge the status quo by painting them as profit-seeking entities, and thus cannot, in good faith, enter the space of mathematics education.

Fear of Loss

The second fear mechanism promotes fear of hypothetical outcomes of reforms (not the reforms themselves) by characterizing what society will lose. Here, discourses evoke a fear of losing “real” mathematics (i.e., neutrality and objectivity) as well as losing the status and opportunities often associated with mathematics.

Loss of “real” mathematics and unreliable, hypocritical actors. Fear mechanisms across all artifacts upheld whiteness through adhering to a neutral view of mathematics, particularly mathematics as solely getting correct answers and distanced from power, history, and human relationships. The impact of this loss of objectivity should be feared. For example, Evers and Wurman (2022) emphasized that there is “actual” math, “as in arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry and calculus—not an endless river of new pedagogical fads that effectively distort and displace actual math” (para. 2). Wu (1997) described mathematics as a field with “precise technical language” and that “a tendency of the reform is to move mathematics completely back into the arena of everyday life where ambiguity and allusiveness thrive. A loss of precision...is the result” (p. 947). Here, the core components of the perceived reality of mathematics as objective are called into question resulting in existential white fear (van Kessel et al., 2020). This view of mathematics that distances itself from human activity allows the authors to add another layer of fear and argue that proponents of reform are hypocritical.

Because authors described mathematics as separate from humans, they are able to argue that mathematics is race neutral (Battey & Leyva, 2016). For some authors, connections between mathematics and race is not only counter to the idea that mathematics is colorblind but also that reform outcomes would hold back underrepresented students by watering down mathematics. In the MW, Klein (1999) described “the cost of eviscerating the algebra component of calculus [as] harmful to students of all ethnicities and both genders” (para. 36). This argument has been more prevalent in the MCW. In a Fox News interview (2021), Swain argued including CRT in Florida textbooks would “destroy opportunities for minority students...These children will not have an opportunity to be successful in life if they cannot be taught math, traditional math” (1:23). Evers

and Wurman (2022) argued focusing on “politics” in mathematics will make “math dramatically harder for students whose first language is not English” (para. 13). Spivak (2021) made a similar point but also focused on the proponents of reforms:

There is no white math, or black math. There is only math. Americans, particularly our black and Hispanic students, are falling behind because, instead of finding better ways to teach, progressive educators debase math...The idiocy of having math teachers lead discussions on social justice instead of teaching black children how to do math will ensure that black children never receive the tools they need to succeed. (para. 25, 30)

We also found a feared reform outcome of loss related to STEM professions and university mathematics. Chayes and Liu (2022) argued, “The result would be students missing out on math courses necessary to succeed in STEM programs in college and beyond” (para. 7). Backlash texts from university mathematicians addressed reform outcomes as a disruption of the preparation of future STEM students. Some texts pointed to the importance of K-12 mathematics as foundations for calculus and in service of the goals of university mathematics. Wu (1997) argued mathematicians should have a vested interest in “flawed reform” because “the most obvious reason why school mathematics education should matter to university professors is that a continuing influx of mathematically incompetent students would decimate the university mathematics curriculum” (p. 950). Wu invoked fear that students would not understand mathematics necessary for university courses, as an outcome of adjusting instruction to focus on mathematical reasoning and connections to the real world, echoing the right to exclude. Thus, the backlash to reform during the MW maintained K-12 mathematics must stay the same or students will not be prepared for university mathematics. Critics in the MCW make similar arguments, such as framing proposed reforms as “no replacement for the mathematical foundations required for students to pursue STEM” (Barak et al., 2022, para. 28). In this, the possessors call on their right to use school mathematics, in that, higher level (i.e., university) mathematics reaps the benefits of school mathematics.

Moreover, the burden of reform is placed solely on K-12, as opposed to considering the possible need for reform of university mathematics programs. As illustrated by Klein (1999), “the focus should be on raising the level of mathematics education in K-12, not on how best to lower it in the universities” (para. 40). In the MCW, Barak et al. (2022) similarly stated, “K-12 math curriculum development cannot be disconnected from one of its most important end goals: Preparing students for success in college-level STEM education and a STEM career” (para. 9). Here, the backlash to reform and commitments to status quo K-12 mathematics underscore that there is one right way and reason to learn mathematics (i.e., to prepare for college-level mathematics or STEM professions). This framing positions college mathematics and STEM as property, where the loss of “real” mathematics as (whiteness as) property results in the loss of status that is gained through an association with mathematics (Bullock, 2017). Thus, the fear being evoked by those who have passed the gates maintained by status quo mathematics (cf. Martin et al., 2010) is perceived as nothing more than power hoarding.

Loss of an internationally-competitive economy. Another evoked fear of mathematics education reforms is that the loss of “real” mathematics will result in America’s loss of international competitiveness. From this perspective, K-12 mathematics serves the needs of a capitalist society by producing an internationally competitive labor force. This discourse in the MW was most clear in Riley’s (1998) speech: “the need to reach for high standards of learning in mathematics as an ever

more important part of preparing our students to compete and succeed in an increasingly complex global economy” (p. 487). Wu (1997) echoed this sentiment: “the economic and social well-being of our nation is critically dependent on the existence of a robust corps of technicians in science and technology: the competent mathematicians, scientists, and engineers who evolve from school students gifted in science and mathematics” (p. 951).

We also found this fear in the MCW. Chayes and Liu (2022) expressed the fear bluntly: “California [would not] grow the talent needed to remain a global economic engine” (para. 12). Barak et al. (2022) positioned traditional pathways to AP Calculus by 12th grade as preferred for students who wish to pursue a STEM career and noted a resulting “disadvantage [to] K-12 public school students in the United States compared with their international and private-school peers” (para. 2). Moreover, the authors situated their argument on a global stage. Florida’s Commissioner of Education said mathematics curriculum should offer “world-class education without the fear of indoctrination or exposure to dangerous and divisive concepts in our classrooms” (Florida DOE., 2022, para. 5).

As we illustrated, the authors of the backlash artifacts instilled fear of a loss of international competition. Authors implied that moving away from traditional mathematics and embracing change would result in fewer students prepared to enter into STEM careers or compete with international and private peers for jobs. Thus, voices of the backlash continued to perpetuate whiteness through the belief that whiteness is property and that there is only so much (international) power to go around. Here, achievement in mathematics in the traditional sense provides mathematically successful individuals with access to real property through attaining well-paying jobs in STEM fields. According to the authors, mathematics education reforms should be feared because they aim to share access to STEM fields more broadly, effectively challenging the exclusive right to power and property owned by those identified as white or with white ideals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates how fear is used as a mechanism to uphold whiteness in the backlash to mathematics education reforms, particularly centering white fear. We showed how opponents construct reform efforts as an enemy backed by flimsy research and powerful bad actors by invoking white and white-adjacent folks’ right to exclude. That is, these bad actors have no place in mathematics education. Additionally, we illustrated how they depicted the loss and deterioration of university mathematics, STEM, and American economic competitiveness as a result of reform efforts that push traditional mathematics out of K-12 further showing their sole right to its use and the right to the high status of university level mathematics and the American economy. Backlash is rooted in the tremendous influence fear has wielded in shaping human history and its influence over power relations within society (Bourke, 2003). In fact, fear is the primary strategy for sustaining white supremacy by undergirding all other strategies and relying on a “promised safety [that] is false because it is always based on the abuse and misuse of power” (Okun, 2021, p. 7). Matias (2023), in parallel, described anti-CRTers with a fear of loss of their identity, humanity, and path. Notably, we saw fear in service of white supremacy as central to the argument because of absence of any other racialized fear. Fear is generally part of the BIPOC experience (Jones, 2022). Especially in mathematics, even high achieving BIPOC students live with the daily fear of inadvertently confirming the racial stereotypes that position them as less mathematically capable (McGee & Martin, 2011). Although having this fear is acceptable, expressing it is not

(Battey & Leyva, 2016). Thus, the emotions featured in this paper solely centers white emotion and fears (Matias, 2014).

Our analysis was limited because we did not analyze other significant reforms (e.g., New Math, Common Core) nor did we exhaust all possible backlash artifacts. We note that characterizing mathematics and mathematics education as steeped in whiteness is not new (e.g., Bullock, 2017); however, a notable contribution is how whiteness is persistent and conceptions of mathematics outside academia and how fear centers white emotions and ideologies while BIPOC emotions are discredited. Gomez Marchant, Aguilar, and Gargroetzi (2023) described how mathematics justifies claims of “truth” in public community meetings to rezone a school to shift its population from majority non-white to majority white. These projects demonstrate the public discourse of using mathematics to reify truth and objectivity as white property (Pham, 2023).

Understanding the backlash to mathematics education reforms has implications for how communities of mathematics teachers and mathematics education researchers can respond. We foresee fruitful responses in centering BIPOC emotions, rather than alleviating white fear, which has been the prevailing tactic of our field’s response to the backlash. As we were writing and in response to the Florida mathematics textbook ban, NCTM, a prominent mathematics education organization, promised to “advocate against anything that disproportionately distracts from [equity for all] or hurts the most vulnerable populations within our schools” (NCTM, 2022, para. 1). Such responses double down on white ideological discourses of mathematics and wave the flag of “for all” as a sufficient response. Moreover, underlying this response is an assumption that “student[s] must embrace Whiteness to experience [mathematics’] full benefit” (Bullock, 2019, p. 91).

As we wrote, 21 students and teachers were taken from their families in Uvalde. Mathematics education is not absolved from the violence endemic to American society. Because mathematics education has always been able to retreat to the adage that mathematics is “just about the numbers,” our field has been complicit in the violence and harm directed towards the defenseless and the disenfranchised. Without confronting and radically reimagining mathematics, we are stuck in a loop where whiteness begets whiteness.

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What do Bans on CRT in Education mean for Native education? Two Teacher Educators Share their Counterstories

Cynthia Benally¹ & Venessa Anthony-Stevens

Abstract

Despite the recent anti-CRT (Critical Race Theory) movement within U.S. education, teachings of Native histories and perspectives have never been accurately taught, or even taught. From their perspectives as teacher educators in predominantly white institutions (PWI), the authors share counterstories from their existing IRB-approved research projects to explore the impacts of CRT bans on teacher education and how the bans continue to perpetuate systemic erasure of Native perspectives. They review how legislators in the Western U.S. passed anti-CRT laws as well as its impact on teacher education. Using the TribalCrit framework with an emphasis on the first tenet, “colonization [being] endemic to society” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430), the authors discuss how Native invisibilization and erasure are perpetuated in predominantly white classrooms by silencing Native perspectives in policy making and curriculum implementation, banning Natives in public education, and explicit refusal of white teachers to learn culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). While erasure and colonization may no longer be explicit U.S. federal policy aims in the education of Native youth, the subjugation of Native rights, cultures, knowledges, and histories remains a contemporary feature of state-sanctioned public education. Telling these stories of structural violence toward Native peoples reflected in the ignorance enforced by mainstream teachers and educational policymakers makes salient the overwhelming need to teach Native history and content at all levels of public education.

Keywords: TribalCrit, Teacher Education, Native Erasure, Counterstories, CRT bans, Colonial Unknowing, Native Perspectives

Introduction

We envision an education that upholds a multicultural democracy. As scholar-educators of Native American education, Native struggles for sovereignty and self-education remind us that since time immemorial, the land currently known as the United States has consisted of diverse peoples and spaces of difference. Mvskoke scholar Lomawaima and Teresa McCarty (2002) stress this reality with their concept of critical democracy founded on the critical construct of the democratic ideal, which “demands that the United States be a nation of educational opportunity for all, not merely a homogenizing and standardizing machine, unable to draw strength from diversity” (p. 281). The

1. Corresponding author: Cynthia Benally, The University of Utah: Cynthia.benally@utah.edu

hysteria and censorship surrounding anti-CRT campaigns do not uphold a critical democratic approach to education and threaten the opportunities all K-12 and higher education students have to learn about and benefit from the rich diversity of their communities and nations. As such, we agree with Shear et al. (2015) and Knopp (1997) that teaching of Native histories, past and present, has never been accurately taught in U.S. public education. As a Native scholar and non-Native collaborator, debates around the teaching of race and racism in public education shine new light on the settler colonial history of the United States.

This article draws from our experiences as teacher educators at predominantly white public institutions (PWI) in the West (Utah and Idaho) and experiences as public educators in tribal, urban, and rural K-12 schools in Arizona. We use data sources—stories, interviews, and observations—from our multiple IRB-approved research projects to critically address the impacts of CRT bans on teacher education at PWIs. We center ethnographic stories as an intentional act of relationality into research to call attention to the contested ways of including Native perspectives in teacher education. We situate our analysis of teacher education within lessons from schooling in Native America—the fight to protect and conserve sovereignty—to illuminate and enrich the national debate surrounding educational issues that affect us all.

To examine the current anti-CRT movements in our states and region, we utilize Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) to address the question: *What are the impacts of a ban on CRT on Native content instruction in teacher education?* We focus on the primary TribalCrit tenet that states that “European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States” (p. 430) and that “educational policies toward Native peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (p. 429). The application of TribalCrit assists with understanding how Native peoples remain invisibilized or erased in teacher education curricula and how bans on CRT further perpetuate the colonial unknowing deeply rooted in teacher education and the American collective memory.

Our analysis reveals how bans on CRT impact mainstream understanding of Native peoples and Native content instruction through 1) the continued silencing of Native perspectives and content, 2) the perpetuation of invisibilizing Natives in public education, and 3) the refusal to learn culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). We close by continuing a call to examine how teacher education is a foundational space of struggle toward a critical and socially just democracy.

Anti-CRT Bans in Idaho, Utah, and Arizona: Context

Idaho, Utah, and Arizona are all states where hyperbolic debates as to whether teaching American history that includes facts of race-based enslavement, Native land dispossession, and institutionalized racial segregation are to be considered “unpatriotic” or in some way “discriminatory” to white people. Proposed legislative bills in these states exemplify how many white-dominated state governments in the U.S. attempt to formally codify teaching American history that includes colonization and race as un-American. When writing this article, 42 states had introduced or passed anti-CRT legislation (Greene, 2022). Research shows that the initial impact of such legislation has a chilling effect directed at educators and emboldens white supremacist ideologies (Pollock et al., 2022).

Here, we briefly profile anti-CRT legislation in the three states where we live, work, and teach. In 2021, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey signed HB 2898 into law; however, the Arizona Supreme Court found these restrictions unconstitutional. The law would have prevented schools

from teaching that certain race groups were superior and that certain individuals were racist because of their race (Newfield, n.d.). In 2022, a proposed amendment to the state constitution called the "Stop Critical Race Theory and Racial Discrimination in Schools and Other Public Institutions Act" was introduced for a public vote in the 2022 election (Center for Arizona Policy, 2022), however, the proposal did not make it onto the ballot.

In 2021, Utah legislators passed S.R. 901 and H.R. 901 Utah Legislative Resolution on Critical Race Theory in Public Education. The resolution “strongly recommended” the Utah State Board of Education to assure that the state curriculum excluded “that one race is inherently superior or inferior to another race; that an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual's race; or that an individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race” (Senate Resolution on Critical Race Theory in Public Education, 2021). The Resolution required the State School Board to make recommendation on how teachers could discuss racism (Tanner, 2021).

In April 2021, Idaho Governor Brad Little (Republican) signed HB 377, Dignity and Non-discrimination in Public Education, into law. HB 377 limits how teachers can discuss race and gender and bans what the legislation calls tenets of critical race theory. Following the passage of HB377, the State’s Lt. Governor assembled a task force to investigate indoctrination in Idaho public education based on claims that schools pushed critical race theory, socialism, communism, and Marxism on Idahoans in K-12 and higher education.

The task force, paid for by taxpayer monies, met for three months and presented no consistent evidence of specific instances of indoctrination in K-12 classrooms or higher education. A bill proposed in January 2022 would amend the law to allow private citizens to file a civil suit against a district that teaches the banned concepts. If the court finds that the district violated the law, the state will withhold a portion of its funding.

Teacher Education

In the 2017-2018 school year, 79.3% of elementary and secondary public-school teachers in the United States were white, and 1% were American Indian. During that school year, white teachers comprised an overwhelming majority of teachers in Idaho, Arizona, and Utah.

Table 1: *Reduced Data of Percentage Distribution of School Teachers by Race/Ethnicity 2017-2018*

	White	Hispanic	Black	American Indian
United States	79.3	9.3	6.7	0.5
Arizona	76.2	13.9	2.7	2.8
Idaho	95.2	2.4	‡	0.8
Utah	93	3.6	‡	‡

Note: Data gathered from National Center for Educational Statistics https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1718_ftable01_t1s.asp

‡ The reporting standards were not met.

Research on the perceptions of a predominantly white teacher workforce finds that fear and discomfort with reconciling whiteness constrain teachers' ability to talk and teach about race in the classroom (Brown et al., 2017). Additional research shows teachers rarely come into the classroom with knowledge of Native peoples and nations or a sense of how Native peoples operationalize their knowledge in relation to land and landscapes (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; McInnes, 2017). Little to no professional development is available to pre- or in-service educators on designing or applying Native-centered teaching and learning nationwide (Castagno et al., 2015; Jojola et al., 2011). An (a)VOID(ance) of Native content exist in teacher education prior to the CRT bans.

Recent changes to state education standards in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Arizona require teachers to build understanding and respect for Native histories, ways of knowing, and tribal sovereignty in classroom curricula and schools (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Benally, 2019; Sabzalian et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2011; Stanton et al., 2019). However, few of these policies have explicit support for teachers in the form of funding for professional development or credentialing mandates for demonstrating competency in tribal histories. Even well-intentioned Native inclusion standards, such as Montana's Indian Education for All, do not require teachers to engage in direct relationships with tribes as equal partners in visioning how school curriculum and pedagogy should include Native history and knowledge (Hopkins, 2020).

Our Positionalities

We both hold faculty appointments in schools of education and teach in teacher education programs. We approach pedagogy and curriculum informed by the tenets of CRT, particularly TribalCrit. Cynthia is a citizen of the Navajo Nation. She taught kindergarten through sixth-grade students in tribal and urban areas and their teachers as an academic coach. Before age eight, Cynthia lived in the Navajo culture and learned that way of being. However, after that age, she lived in numerous middle-class white households in the Southwest. As such, settler schooling indoctrinated her into white society. Because education was void of Native histories or content, her research and teaching focus on ways teachers and other educators can incorporate Native content into their curricula.

Vanessa has over 20 years of experience in educational programming in urban, rural, multilingual, and international settings. She was a K-8 teacher of Native students in Arizona and a director of Native teacher education programs that support Native teachers in the Northwest, USA, and Mexico, respectively. Vanessa is white and identifies as a settler-scholar committed to cultivating relationships for socially just education. She was born and raised in the Chicago region, homelands to many Native peoples, including Potawatami, Peoria, and Miami. However, she had little to no education on the Great Lakes Native histories and presence in her childhood. Vanessa married into an Apache family and is the mother to Native daughters. Vanessa is the principal investigator, and was the founding director of a Native teacher education program in Idaho called IKEEP.

Theoretical Framework

TribalCrit

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) emphasizes that “colonization is endemic in society while also acknowledging the role played by racism” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). Grounded in

the lived realities of Native communities, ways of knowing, and tribal philosophies, TribalCrit consists of nine tenets that underscore the unique legal, political, and racialized identity category of Native peoples. The TribalCrit tenets privilege Native conceptualizations of culture, knowledge, and power; they join story with theory and bring intergenerational transmission of Native knowledge and experience to the forefront as foundational sources of strength in tribal identities. Brayboy (2005) outlines the nine tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory:

1. Colonization is endemic to society
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, white supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Native peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change (p. 429 – 430).

We focus on the primary tenet that states that “Colonization is endemic to society” (p. 430) and that “Governmental policies and educational policies toward Native peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (p. 429). The application of TribalCrit assists with understanding how Native peoples and nations remain invisible in teacher education curricula and how bans on CRT further perpetuate the colonial unknowing deeply rooted in teacher education and the American collective memory.

Colonial Unknowing

Talking about the invisibility of Native people in teacher education is an act of rejecting colonial unknowing. Colonial unknowing is the willful ignorance deployed over and against relational modes of study or knowing. Colonial unknowing, a term, applied by Dolores Calderon and Luis Urrieta in their 2019 work theorizing critical Latinx Indigeneities, helps to unpack the salience of a hegemonic and sanctioned ignorance that allows colonial domination to be nearly invisible in the teacher education curriculum. Colonial unknowing is a practice that renders relational and Native ways of knowing as otherwise, unthinkable, and illegitimate (Vimalassery et al., 2017). Pushing back against or disrupting colonial unknowing is necessary to de-center whiteness and to reject the siloing of knowledge and bodies. What would disrupting colonial unknowing look like as a practice in teacher education?

The study of American Indian struggles for sovereignty and self-education reminds us that the U.S. has always consisted of diverse peoples and spaces of difference. We agree with Lomawaima and McCarty (2002), who argue that democracy and diversity are inextricably linked. The persistence of Native communities to share their cultural, historical, and linguistic knowledge with the next generation of citizens is a vital piece of critical democratic engagement. As tribes have sovereign legal statuses in the U.S. that predate the U.S. Constitution and are recognized by the U.S. Constitution (Wilkins & Lomawaima, 2001), the rights of Native communities to maintain their “spaces of difference” are unique to American Indians. However, as Lomawaima & McCarty (2002) contend, maintaining places of differences, such as the rights of tribes to self-education, does not need to undercut equality of opportunity. Whitewashed settler narratives of U.S. history present whiteness as unmarked and “allowed to represent all that is normal, natural, objective, and privileged” (Dennison, 2014, p. 163). This narrowness thwarts the construction of critical democratic values, the ability to grow critical thinking, and the affirmation of Native personhood. We contemplate the ideal of critical democracy as an ideological blueprint of educational opportunity for all, not merely some (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). As we analyze critical resistance to tribal sovereignty and the settler-colonial whitewashing of Native knowledge and experience, we keep in mind the rebuttals to anti-CRT legislation offered by leading educational researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) that participation in a deliberate democracy involves deliberate conversation—talking—and often that must occur across differences. Understanding the critical democratic persistence of Native communities to share their cultural and linguistic knowledge with the next generation of citizens is a vital piece of democratic engagement.

Methods

CRT in education recognizes the importance of experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), so we use data sources – stories, interviews, and observations – from our multiple research projects and experiences in Idaho, Arizona, and Utah to critically address the impacts of CRT bans on teacher education at PWIs. Our ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods center story, a critical act that (re)emplaces relationality into research and makes visible diverse and messy human interaction for understanding the contested space of teacher education and the inclusion of Native truths in U.S. democracy. Brayboy (2005) states that storytelling has a significant role in theory building: “Locating theory as something absent from stories is problematic...Stories serve as the basis for how our communities work” (2005, p. 427). As Cynthia (2020) writes, storytelling is a way to engage with and demonstrate reciprocity to the Native communities we are accountable to.

Our selection of stories counter majoritarian stories in education – stories from racial or social privilege. Our counterstories collectively form a clear pattern about the erasure of Native peoples and histories from K-12 and teacher education and the ubiquity of whiteness, settler colonialism, and internalized investments in a racial hierarchy that dominate the U.S. school curricula. We draw from our IRB-approved research and everyday observations in teacher education. We situate our analysis of teacher education within lessons from schooling in Native America—the fight to protect and conserve sovereignty—to illuminate and enrich the national debate surrounding educational issues that affect us all. We reviewed our collective data from the past decade and selected stories that speak to the role of Native content instruction in teacher education. We share

the stories from K-12 classrooms, teacher education courses, and interactions with educators, policymakers, and tribal leaders who discussed the needs and desires of Native people in public education.

Our Stories

The Continued Silencing of Native Perspectives and Content

In the summer of 2021, Vanessa was involved in the Idaho Indian Education Summit held on the campus of the University of Idaho. The two-day summit highlighted the innovative and diverse work of Native educators from around the state and region to center Native knowledge in teaching and learning and to disrupt deficit, colonial, and assimilationist tactics in education at all levels. While the sessions spoke of hope and persistence, an attendee representing a tribal cultural resources department voiced in the public session, “When are we going to talk about how this state is trying to keep us from teaching our history?” Vanessa and her colleagues, equally frustrated but attempting to maintain focus on desire-centered frameworks for education (Tuck, 2009), emphasized the importance of not becoming distracted by conflict campaigns and re-framed persistence by stating, “anti-CRT campaigns are nothing new. Just the same old practices of undermining tribal sovereignty bundled in new tactics.” Out of deep concern for what was to come in the 2021-2022 academic school year, Vanessa spent the remaining months of the summer in discussions with law professors, teacher education administrators, and legal aid directors to gain a better understanding of how to both directly address the implications of HB377 and avoid making colonization and racism the only story of Native education. By the fall of 2021, Vanessa was in conversation with a Tribal Education Department director about a local public school that served students from the respective tribe. They shared that in school administration meetings and teacher professional development sessions, the district superintendent, a non-Native, stated there will be “no more culturally responsive or tribal history training” this academic year. The superintendent cited HB377 as evidence that culturally responsive teaching was CRT. The school district serves a 70% Native population.

Experiences such as Vanessa just told underscore the persistent silencing of Native perspectives from educational policymaking and content. While they are urgent, they are not new. As stated in *TribalCrit*, “European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430), so much so that teachers and school administrators act as everyday policymakers to further the assimilationist goals of education and schooling by the refusal to implement state mandates that require respectful Native content instruction (Benally, 2019).

Because Cynthia’s educational experience in Arizona included silencing Native histories, she researched how students attending urban schools could obtain a different reality, including a respectful and truthful retelling of Native perspectives. She discovered two long-forgotten laws in Arizona that mandated the instruction of Native history in all Arizona schools (Benally, 2019). The then Arizona Democrat legislator and former Navajo Nation President, Albert Hale, proposed the laws based on his childhood schooling experiences and those as the president of the Navajo Nation. He told Cynthia of one experience as the Navajo Nation President meeting with the Arizona legislators,

I said, “You come to me saying, ‘I will respect you.’ But you don’t know what you are talking about. One simple thing out of that statement says to me is you will respect me, but how can you respect me when you know nothing about me? In return, I know everything about you. I know why you came across the Big Water. I know all your sacred documents. I know your laws. In return, what do you know about me? I know your language. What do you know about me? Absolutely nothing. So, how can there be mutual respect? When you say you are going to respect my treaty, have you read my treaty? Heck no, you haven’t. So, you don’t know what you are talking about.” (Albert Hale, interview, November 21, 2012)

Later, when he became a senator, he explained to the state legislators why he wanted the law passed,

What I want to do through this is, I want to ensure that your children, when they are sitting here 20 years from now, as leaders, and my child is standing here as the leader of the Navajo Nation, I don’t want them to be saying the same thing that we are saying to each other now. I want there to be true mutual respect and understanding, and a step in that direction is to start teaching your children about me. (Albert Hale, interview, November 21, 2012)

About ten years later—the State is not implementing the laws. The State Indian Education website (<https://www.azed.gov/oie>) does not mention the laws.

Albert Hale introduced the bill that became the Arizona Native American history instruction laws to instruct on Native governments, Native sovereignty, Native cultures, and Native histories. However, after deliberations over the bill, the state lawmakers narrowed it to instruction about Native history. Representative Carruthers thought tribal sovereignty was a concept beyond the intellectual ability of Arizona students to conceptualize. He asserted, “I have one point to emphasize, which is that I believe that sovereignty, while it’s important to tribal entities, is not the most important aspect of this...it’s a very sophisticated issue to address” (House Committee of Education Hearing, March 31, 2004). The legislators silenced tribal sovereignty in the state curriculum. These laws that mandate teachers to teach Native American history in all existing content are disregarded resulting in Hale’s vision for a relational futurity between Native and settlers remains unrealized.

The Perpetuation of Banning Natives in Public Education

When Vanessa joined the faculty at the University of Idaho, she was assigned to teach a course titled Teaching Culturally Diverse Learners (TCDL), one of four core education courses required of all teaching majors, PK-12. In 2015, the course exemplified what Villegas (2007) critiques as a “treatment” of diversity that positioned teaching as a technical activity of “transmitting” skills and knowledge from teacher to student, void of critical analysis of personal bias and underlying assumptions about behavior, content, or the broader social and cultural context of education. Vanessa began to re-design the theoretical framework and applied sequence of the course over a five-semester revision process (2015-2017) centered around Ladson-Billings’ (1995) concept of culturally relevant competencies. The readings complemented guest speakers from diverse groups in Idaho and the Northwest region, such as advocates for migrant education, tribal education leaders, and local teachers of color (among others). Pre-service teachers were also required to attend

two “diversity events” outside of class, which offered a previously unfamiliar perspective. The practicum consisted of a 20-hour internship in a local classroom and two half-day practicum field trips to regional schools within a 75-mile range of campus, including schools in tribal nations and rural towns of under 1,000 people.

Over the years, Vanessa paid acute attention to how faculty, school practitioners, and teacher education students received the course and programmatic changes. Some students expressed enthusiasm for the new course content each semester and the opportunities to unpack interpersonal structural inequalities as aspiring teachers of color and white students. However, throughout, some teacher education staff and faculty shared concerns in program meetings about the integrity of the overall sequence and evaluation of the program if students are spending so much time talking about “diversity.” Statements such as, “pre-service teachers just really need to learn the nuts and bolts of lesson planning and classroom management,” or “we just don’t have access to diverse populations,” underscoring logics of colonization in teacher education’s “problematic goal of assimilation” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429).

Each semester, Vanessa listens to predominantly white students reflect on disruptions to ingrained colonial unknowing. One semester, Linda, an Early Childhood/Elementary Education major, veteran, and single mother, wrote a journal reflection on the process of re-evaluating whose identity and personhood counted in the rural region she lives and grew up in and planned to teach in. After listening to an in-class presentation given by the Nez Perce Tribe’s director of education programs and a panel of in-service teachers serving in high-density Native schools, Linda described the mundane, everyday practice of invisibilizing Native people in her life:

...a shameful reality that I have come to learn about myself this semester. I grew up mostly in Idaho near [Collegietown] and to get anywhere you have to pass through Native American Reservations. Growing up, the stereotypes were there and jokes were made by kids and adults alike. The drinking, poverty, laziness, unemployment, stereotypes were unintentionally ingrained in me. It’s almost as if we would look away when driving through these towns.

Through conversations and other assignments, Linda went on the implications of her new consciousness by vocalizing ideas such as, “It is important to examine our own privilege and entitlement and understand that it is our responsibility to do so as educators” (interview, 2017). Linda’s reflection critically reviews the normative practices of settler-colonial erasure and racist ideologies of “othering” practiced among white communities toward neighboring American Indian communities. Demonstrates how the structure of settler-colonialism manifests through the logic of symbolic elimination of Natives from the landscape. Referring to Wolf (2006), Diné scholar Hollie Anderson Kulago (2019) states that the practical elimination of the natives “is a requirement of settler society in order to establish itself on Native territory” (p. 242).

The persistent willful ignorance of Native nations and communities is an infinite regress in which it is difficult to determine what causes the invisibilization—everyday interactions or school curricula. Much like Vanessa’s story in which pre-service teachers and staff maintain ignorance of present-day Native presence, children learn that Natives no longer exist. In December 2011, Cynthia attended an Indian Arts festival in an affluent suburb of a large Southwestern metropolitan city about five miles from a large Native reservation. While admiring a Native artist’s crafts, she conversed with a Navajo artist in Diné about their roots in Navajoland. While in conversation, a young white girl about 12 years old interrupted their dialogue. She asked what language they were

speaking, and they explained it was Navajo. She replied, "What is Navajo?" The artist explained they were Native Americans (Indians), to which the young girl exclaimed, "I thought the Indians were all dead." This interaction is not an unusual experience. The Arizona social studies standards referencing Native Americans included 32 American history standards. Of those, twenty-five, or 78%, were standards before 1860. Of those 25 standards, 17 history standards focused on the period before the 1700s, many on extinct societies such as the Anasazi (Benally, 2021). The vicious circle of colonial unknowing and sanctioned ignorance in state schools perpetuates the invisibilization of Native existence and presence in public schools today.

Refusal to Learn Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

In fall 2021, Vanessa was in the second week of a teacher education course on diversity and learning. The class of 35 students examined how policy impacts what goes on in schooling, including a discussion of Idaho's HB 377 from multiple perspectives. A white male student shared that he did not see anything wrong with banning the teaching of race since "that's what most Idahoans want." Vanessa probed the student to offer evidence to support his claims, especially given he was assigned to read over 1,000 public comments about "indoctrination" in Idaho public schools submitted to the Lt. Governor's office (which overwhelmingly produced evidence Idahoans did not see a need to ban race from classrooms). The student became confrontational. After redirecting his comments in the moment, the student came up to Vanessa after class and stated he had more to say. He had detailed notes picking apart a reading of Ladson-Billings' 2006 article *From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools*. That evening, the student emailed a three-page single-spaced document to explain his objections to being required to take a course on diversity and being forced to read what he called "dribble." Notably, the student shared that his children are 5% Salish and that any critique of the Federal Indian Policy stance of forced child removal and Christianized boarding schools improved Native people and the U.S. His position included claims such as: "by standards of the time, school was mandatory and found to be more humanitarian than some conditions young [Native Americans] faced" and "those schools saved some of those kids from so much worse, and the research I have extensively done paints a hopeful side of these schools on so many fronts...[Native American] people pulled themselves out of the oppression and were able to speak and fight for themselves in a new society because of Richard Henry Pratt." Rattled and upset, the student's vocal refusal to engage in critical thinking about the course material demanded Vanessa's emotional and intellectual energy. Two primary thoughts ran through Vanessa's mind as she considered how to respond to unsolicited communication and unsupported and racist comments from this student: Who in our institution and program is protecting the emotions and well-being of our Native students as such claims are vehemently, and baselessly expressed? And, do I, Vanessa, need to wear a bulletproof vest to the next class? Following a few days of the student holding meetings with department administrators, the student decided he could not continue to pursue teacher certification if it meant classes such as Vanessa's and exited the program.

From 2018 to 2020, Cynthia taught a required course, Introduction to Multicultural Education. This course meets the diversity requirement for pre-service teachers. Her goals for teaching the course were to expose future teachers to content that introduced a more complete history that included Native experiences in contemporary society and those contrary to American exceptionalism. However, the students resisted the course and the content. The most confrontational resistance occurred when she attempted to move past the human relations approach to multicultural

education (which focuses on conviviality, cultural unity, and cultural universalism) to the social justice approach of multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). In this unit, she critiqued the “America as a melting pot” mythology by introducing concepts such as tribal sovereignty, Native erasure, colorblindness, and meritocracy. Many white students conspired to dismiss the unit content presented by the Native professor. For example, one white student told other students and the white teaching assistant that she thought “none of [the course content] makes sense” and asked them if they thought the same. The student said she could confide in the T.A. because she was “nice,” but not the professor because the professor was “scary and mean.” This conversation disrupted the class and upset other students of color.

Conclusion

Our experiences as teacher educators at PWIs in Utah and Idaho, coupled with our work and life experiences in Native education indicate a persistent reality in K-12 and higher education: whitewashed settler narratives of U.S. history present whiteness as unmarked and “allowed to represent all that is normal, natural, objective, and privileged” (Dennison, 2014, 163). Over the past decade, we have witnessed how European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States (Brayboy, 2005) through sanctioned colonial unknowing. This reality is a new phenomenon because “Colonization is endemic to society” (Brayboy, 2005).

The preparation of teachers in major public universities and the everyday interaction in and around schools speak to the enduring legacy of settler-colonial ideologies and logics in public institutions. Erasure and colonization are no longer the explicit policy aims of the U.S. federal government in the education of Native youth, yet the subjugation of Native rights, cultures, knowledges, and histories remains a contemporary feature of state-sanctioned public education (Benally, 2019; Sabzalian, 2019). For us, telling the countless stories of structural violence toward Native peoples reflected in the ignorance voiced and enforced by mainstream teachers and educational policymakers makes salient the overwhelming need *to teach* Native history and content at all levels of public education.

Critical democratic education must include recognizing and providing space for Native nationhood and sovereignty as essential to supporting non-Native and Native students and citizens in becoming democratic citizens who have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions to uphold democracy and defend tribal sovereignty (Sabzalian et al., 2022).

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“It’s Just Good Teaching”: Black Educators Respond to the So-Called “Anti-Critical Race Theory” Backlash in K-12 Schools

Leana Cabral,¹ Sietta Parks & Amy Stuart Wells

Abstract

As sociologists of education, we’re deeply concerned about the growing censorship in our schools and the attack on teaching the truth about our history and present-day inequality. We also recognize how an educational past mired in antiblack practices and policies remains with us today and thus why teachers are still faced with navigating censorship and constraints on what they know are critical and proven pedagogies. This article explores the continued need for “fugitive” practices to employ educational models that de-center Eurocentric narratives and center Black or other marginalized cultures and ways of knowing. We argue that educators committed to antiracist teaching can learn from the legacy of the art of Black teaching and how it was subversively taken up and put into practice by Black teachers over time (Gay, 2002; Givens, 2021; Walker, 2018).

Keywords: Racial Politics, CRT, Fugitive pedagogy, Sociology of Education, Education policy

Introduction

The current discourse and political backlash against the teaching of so-called Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 schools is clearly designed to have a chilling effect on efforts to educate young people about our racialized past and present. This focus on CRT -- a theory generally not taught until graduate school -- is a guise for banning any educational practice that centers the experiences and history of people of color in the U.S. Such approaches are more accurately called antiracist education, culturally relevant education, Ethnic Studies, or African American History. The growing censorship of these pedagogical approaches sits in direct opposition to what many educators and education researchers know are proven and effective classroom practices for increasing student engagement and learning. As Ladson-Billings (1994) explained, sensitivity to race and culture in education is “just good teaching” (p.2).

In fact, there is a growing body of interdisciplinary research, from brain science to learning theory, and pedagogical strategies, which demonstrates that centering issues of race and culture in schools and classrooms supports authentic learning for all students, better enables students to learn from each other and enhances critical thinking abilities (Lopez & Sleeter, 2023; National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2018; Sleeter, 2011; Wells and Cordova-Coba, 2021). Questions then arise about how this anti-CRT political discourse is playing out in the field and how educators are making sense of this moment and navigating the backlash against anti-racist

1. Corresponding author: Leana Cabral, Columbia University: lc3272@tc.columbia.edu

educational practices. Throughout this article we use the terminology of cultural relevance, as coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), because of the theory's roots in the exploration of Black pedagogical practices and its focus on collective empowerment of both students and teachers. This approach encourages teachers to draw on student's cultural experiences as assets. When implemented effectively, culturally relevant pedagogy allows for students' academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. While we find Ladson-Billings' conception of this theory very compelling for understanding the data we discuss below, we also recognize the contributions of Gay (2002), who posited culturally responsive teaching and Paris (2012) who introduced the concept of culturally sustaining teaching. Gay's concept of culturally responsive teaching extends from Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy and both were developed to move the field toward the same goals, and are often used interchangeably (Mensah, 2021), while culturally responsive teaching focuses on teaching curriculum through students' cultural frames to improve academic achievement.

More recently, the culturally relevant approach has been expanded to include culturally sustaining pedagogy, which encourages an expansion of both of these theories (although it builds more directly on culturally relevant pedagogy) by asserting that this type of teaching should actively maintain and foster the plural cultures and identities of students. In this pedagogical model, students are encouraged to critique their institutions and take ownership of their relationship to schooling (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). Although we will use the language of culturally relevant teaching, as noted above, we want to uplift all scholarship on pedagogical practices that encourage opposition to the status quo and commitment to acknowledging and fostering students' cultural identities.

This article highlights our key findings from interviews with 27 educators who self-identified as "Black or African American" as part of our study with a broader diverse sample of more than 100 school- and district-level stakeholders, mainly teachers and school administrators, who attended a four-day professional development institute – the Reimagining Education: Teaching, Learning and Leading for a Racially Just Society Summer Institute (RESI) at Teachers College, Columbia University. RESI was founded in 2016 by a core group of TC faculty to support educators in becoming more culturally relevant and antiracist. The Institute grew from 130 educators its first year, to 1,200 in 2021. The mix of big picture Plenary Sessions, deep-dive Community Dialogue Sessions and hands-on Workshops makes RESI unique in the professional development space. In fact, it is the largest and longest, continuously running PD session on antiracism in Pre-K-12 education.

We decided to study past RESI participants because we saw them as experts on both the value and challenges of antiracist teaching strategies as well as the burden of trying to utilize such strategies in the current political context. Using the RESI registration lists from 2018-2022, we sent out emails asking who was willing to talk to us to share their stories of trying to take RESI "home." Thus, our research questions ask:

- 1) How do educators understand the value of such antiracist practices?
- 2) How do they make sense of the recent heightened backlash against CRT anti-racist practices and how has it impacted their classrooms and schools?
- 3) How are they navigating implementing such practices amidst the current "anti-CRT" political backlash?

Our findings highlight how educators are able to implement antiracist strategies in their classrooms and schools, the barriers they face when trying to implement these strategies, and how they are both encountering and confronting this political moment. Our methodological approach included a brief survey focused primarily on the barriers educators faced when trying to implement antiracist education practices followed by in-depth interviews with each RESI participant who responded to the survey and was willing to be interviewed. In total, our larger research team interviewed a total of 103 educators over the last four years, including a wide range of teachers, counselors, and school and district leaders whose racial and ethnic varied, with about 60 percent white and 30 percent Black educators. These respondents live in every region of the U.S., including “red” and “blue” states, and urban, suburban and rural districts. They work in a wide range of mostly K-12 schools, public, private and charter schools, and they teach different grade levels and subject areas. What they all have in common is their interest in learning more about various antiracist approaches to educating children in a multiracial democracy. And, yet, as we illustrate in this article, the educators of color, particularly the Black educators, often came to this work with a deeper, more historical understanding of why this work is important and the strategies needed to implement this form of pedagogy in this political moment.

Looking Back to Move Forward

Given this backdrop of current Black educators trying to implement antiracist educational practices within a politically challenging context, we utilize Jarvis Givens’ (2021) concept of “fugitive pedagogies” to frame our inquiry and guide our interpretation of how the current efforts by educators, especially Black educators, to serve their students through culturally relevant pedagogy are situated within a long history of Black educators before them who, for decades, have taken risks to empower, educate and care for their students (Givens, 2021; Siddle-Walker, 2018). As Givens explains, fugitive pedagogy “is a social and rhetorical frame by which we might interpret black American’s pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning” (p. 11). Fugitive pedagogy illustrates these subversive acts as central to the legacy of Black teaching or as “the metanarrative of black educational history” (p. 11). Givens recognizes the pattern of teachers engaging in fugitive educational tactics over time, beginning with enslaved Black people learning in secret through schooling in Jim Crow and into our present moment.

Importantly, our attention to this current moment of political polarization, heightened legislative bans and surveillance of curriculum is not to suggest that antiracist practices have ever been fully or widely embraced or that we were operating under a utopia prior to Trump’s attack on the 1619 project and the associated obsession with CRT—as explained below. Culturally relevant educational practices have gained academic recognition and popularity in recent years, but this work is not new and has historically often been subversive and furtive work.

The Political Backlash Against So-Called CRT in K-12 Education

In 2020, conservative pundits began using the term “CRT” as a proxy for anything to do with racial justice or equity work. It has even become associated with less critical or extensive efforts to address inequality under the umbrella of “diversity, equity and inclusion.” More recently, the backlash against so-called CRT has grown to include more racially neutral concepts such as social emotional learning. PEN America, a non-profit organization that tracks free speech issues, has compiled the 81 educational legislative gag orders, intended to limit curriculum and instruction

related to the racial history of the U.S. Many of these state policies vaguely define what is and is not acceptable, including language banning the discussion of “certain concepts,” which generally alludes to issues of race and racial inequality past and present. They’ve also documented efforts in 33 states to expand such work, underscoring the current polarization of these issues, often delineated by regional and political affiliations (Pen America, 2022). Enhanced efforts on the political right to undermine or stifle critical thinking on the nation’s relationship to racism can be associated with rapid-fire backlash to the racial reckoning and the growth of the Black Lives Matter Movement that occurred during the summer of 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd by police. As Lewis-McCoy (2021) explained, “This is a rhetorical and very clearly a political strategy by those on the right to silence any kind of racial recalibration, any addressing of the social movements that have become more public in 2020 and to push back against those and say we will not change, and in fact we will dig deeper into making sure that the hierarchies that exist can be solidified” (Lewis-McCoy, 2021).

In late 2020, Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, devised the right-wing political strategy to use Critical Race Theory as the catch all phrase to attack any efforts on the left to be inclusive when it comes to issues of race. Thus, CRT, which is rarely if ever taught in K-12 education, became the rallying cry for white people who are afraid of demographic change – a.k.a Replacement Theory – or what they consider to be reverse discrimination. This anti-CRT rhetoric has made its way into school board elections, other local elections and federal policy. President Trump adopted Rufo’s anti-CRT rhetoric and began targeting the use of the 1619 project in schools. In September of 2020, they released a memo to all federal agencies to cease all training on ‘critical race theory,’ ‘white privilege,’ or any other training or propaganda effort.” And a few days later, Trump announced the formation of the 1776 Commission, followed by his *Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping*. Importantly local legislation banning critical race theory and The 1619 Project in public schools uses much of the same language found in this executive order.

This larger context of racial politics and efforts to ban teaching about race in thousands of U.S. schools is clearly problematic when we think about the changing demographics of the country and the urgent need to not only assure the success of students of color who have too often been marginalized in school curriculum and context, but also in terms of how we prepare children for a multi-racial democracy. Another irony of this anti-CRT backlash moment is that it comes at a time when the scientific and social science evidence supports teaching and learning about race and culture in K-12 schools more than ever. Still we recognize before such pedagogical strategies were widely researched or proven, they were intrinsic to the approaches of many Black classroom teachers.

Thus, we frame the findings from our study of educators trying to teach in this current context within an exploration of the history of Black educators in the U.S. and their strategies of a prior, Jim Crow era to persevere with race-conscious curriculum and pedagogy in a political context that forbade it. What we learn from the lessons of the Black educators of the past informs the struggles and hopes of current educators trying to do good race-conscious teaching today. Thus, our primary focus in this article is on the contemporary Black educators from our sample—who were often aware of this powerful history of the Black community’s struggle for meaningful education.

In 2020, during the “summer of George Floyd,” educators who were well trained in culturally relevant pedagogy and the power of antiracist approaches felt empowered as schools and dis-

tricts across the country created Equity Committees or DEI Take Forces. And then came the political backlash against CRT, which was intended to shut down this surge in racial justice work following the brutal killing of Mr. Floyd. Our research coincided with this crest and the backlash that followed, hence our work, situated in the early 21st Century, is informed by a body of research that looks to the past, to the history of Black educators who persevered at the peak of Jim Crow segregation and the violent and racist backlash against Reconstruction during the 20th Century, providing antiracist curriculum and teaching within segregated Black schools.

Black Educators: Drawing Lessons from the Past

Resistance to antiracist educational practices, ethnic studies or the decentering of European focused history and curricula has always been an obstacle for teachers committed to ensuring the material they present in their classrooms is accurate, unbiased, and relevant to students of color. In other words, this backlash is not new, and neither are the subversive acts on behalf of educators. Importantly, a commitment to culturally relevant and related practices has a documented history among Black educators and other teachers of color (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1993; Siddle Walker, 2005). Additionally, research finds such curriculum and pedagogy to contribute to positive learning experiences and outcomes for ALL students (Dee and Penner, 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales et al. 2016).

Jarvis Givens' (2021) framework of fugitive pedagogies is instructive for thinking through this moment and its connection to the past. His book *Fugitive Pedagogies* excavates the creative acts that Black teachers employed to overcome the constraints of white mainstream education and the surveillance that came with it, like the teacher who placed the actual instructional book that she used with her Black students on her lap and the other formal curricular book on her desk that she drew from when guests entered her classroom. Givens explained such defiance as strategically disguised by "deference to the coercive regime of school authorities" (p. 6). Teachers finding and utilizing curriculum that countered Eurocentric narratives and instead offering opportunities for Black self-knowledge was an effort to insist on Black humanity. *Fugitive Pedagogies* underscores how such practices have always been at the heart of Black teaching.

Givens' work builds on that of Vanessa Siddle-Walker, who documents the work of educators she calls "hidden provocateurs" (2018) and their covert efforts to educate Black children. Through several works, Walker (1996; 2001; 2018) has demonstrated how Black educators in the South were able to refuse Eurocentric pedagogies and instead continue to offer Black students a high-quality education—including teaching that we would now consider culturally relevant—despite the realities of segregation. She emphasizes that Black educators worked together, in community, to create caring environments for students that addressed all of their needs, from the personal to the academic. These educators built and utilized strong networks to ensure that no one was acting alone, and that each teacher was instead surrounded by a community that offered insulation and protection from threats like job loss. These networks also allowed Black educators to act strategically when sharing information, so that it would not end up in the hands of someone who might use it to harm them. Walker shares that the educators she studied were often described as "mother-like or father-like" and that they had "high expectations, motivating students to excel" and provided "resources to address perceived needs" (2001, p. 33). Walker's work demonstrates that Black teachers over time have remained committed to meeting their students' needs despite circumstances that have made their work difficult, and even dangerous.

As our findings demonstrate, there continues to be a need for fugitive tactics and practices to employ educational models that de-center Eurocentric narratives and center Black or other marginalized cultures and ways of knowing. Those committed to antiracist teaching can learn from the legacy of the art of Black teaching and how it was subversively taken up and put into practice by Black teachers over time. Such work also makes clear how an educational past mired in antiblack practices and policies remains with us today and teachers are still faced with navigating censorship and constraints on what they know are critical and proven pedagogies.

Methodology

Beginning in late 2020, we surveyed and interviewed educators who had participated in some form of antiracist PD, including RESI, to learn about their key takeaways from these PDs and the obstacles they faced when attempting to implement antiracist and culturally relevant practices in their schools and districts. At the time of writing, a total of 102 educators had been interviewed. This sample consisted of a slight majority—nearly 60 percent—of white educators. The majority of the interviewees were classroom teachers, and the rest were a mix of school and district administrators, school counselors, social workers, deans and coaches.

The interviews we conducted were semi-structured, utilizing a formal protocol with several constituent questions and noted probes for issues and details we hoped to understand across the respondents' different contexts. We sought to learn more about their educational, pedagogical, and anti-racist journeys, as well as more about the local context in which they work and the obstacles they face in trying to implement antiracist practices. All of our interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Dedoose CAQDAS software. We identified several key themes and sub-themes by reading through the transcripts and creating descriptors for each respondent. We then coded the transcripts according to the emerging and analytical themes.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate steady resilience and strategizing among Black educators specifically—whose practices have meaningfully centered the racial identities and cultures of their students and continue to do so despite the targeting of and backlash against such practices. And we see a connection to the literature on the rich history of Black educators reviewed above and the ways in which contemporary Black educators continue to act on this legacy of Black educators—both of whom can serve as a guide to help other educators face inevitable subsequent waves of resistance.

Our broader research includes educators representing various racial and ethnic backgrounds, regions of the country and grade levels who share a commitment to culturally relevant teaching and anti-racist practices in spite of the heightened backlash around such approaches. Our interviews illustrate how the blind critique of CRT has for some had a chilling effect on any racial reckoning about our history in classrooms and schools. It is clear that this on-going backlash and the sense of empowerment conservative groups are feeling has created a climate of fear and uncertainty for many educators committed to anti-racist work. However, we found that the Black educators we spoke to defined these practices as wholly central to their pedagogy and that this specific political moment was not going to change that. They stood undeterred in their commitment to these practices because of their commitment to their students.

Learning From Black Educators: Yesterday *and* Today

Our first major finding drawn from the Black educators in our study is that, when considered alongside Walker's and Givens' research, their insights into the current struggle toward a more racially just education system takes on a much deeper meaning that is about more than the here and now. We view the practices and commitments of the Black educators we studied as part of the legacy of Black educators' practice of culturally relevant teaching—despite ongoing yet shifting barriers over time. Importantly, educators shared that their racial identity, and other intersectional identities are central to their pedagogy and practice and informs what they do “more than anything.” Our participants demonstrated that their own racial identity, as well as their student's drives their commitment to CRP even amid pushback.

Centrality of Racial Identity

One of the most prominent themes to emerge under this larger finding is that the Black educators we interviewed understood that their race heavily informs their practice, to the point that it's impossible to see a separation between their racial identity and their teaching and/or leadership. When asked to describe how she understands the connection between her own race and her teaching, a teacher from the northeast told us,

...It would be difficult not to include my background, who I am, what my experiences are, the reasons why I'm here...I feel that it is a part of what I'm doing. To separate the two, like what you see is a Black woman, that is what it is, right, and so you understand that from my afro to how I speak and the things that we talk about. I feel like it is all intertwined.

When asked about her Black identity, one high school administrator from the west coast told us, “It is the star with which I point my curriculum, my pedagogy, my leadership because it powers me in everything that I do.” She goes on to describe how she sees the students' racial identities as central as well, and feels compelled to guide the students in acknowledging and understanding their identities,

I know the power that comes with having a healthy racial identity...at the end of the day all of the history we teach, all of the concepts we teach are so that our students have a healthy racial identity, a healthy gender identity, and I kind of feel that way about teachers, I feel that way about being a parent, like I have to have a firm understanding of who I am before I can help students help figure out who they are.

Another idea that emerged is the importance of recognizing the role of lived experiences in relation to identity when teaching. Educators expressed that going through certain experiences utilizing the lens that their racial identity afforded them helped them to improve their practice, including a teacher from the northeast who stated,

My experience as a Black woman has informed my pedagogy more than anything. My experience being a recent graduate from TC, because I went back to school to build my

toolkit...and there are many people who have not, and...who have kept the same detrimental traditions of teaching. So, I think more than any term, my experience has informed my pedagogy.

Although we know that many Black educators have had similar experiences and have overcome the same challenges, we also understand that Blackness is experienced differently by folks across the nation and around the globe. Our participants emphasized the importance of intersectionality and what that means for both how they see themselves and how they teach.

Intersectional Identities

The participants intentionally acknowledged their intersectional identities, including gender identities, linguistic identities, and sexual orientation, as well as how these identities intersect with their Blackness. They demonstrated a deep understanding of these intersectional identities as well as a desire to guide children in learning and understanding all of the unique parts of themselves that make them who they are. For example, a multiracial teacher from the northeast shared, “I was raised with multiple languages in my household, so I try to normalize that... I try to raise the bar a little bit and normalize that there is...benefit and warmth in connecting something outside of what is our mainstream.”

Speaking of her identity as a Black person *and* a woman, a principal from the Midwest shared:

So, you know obviously I’m a Black female and I tell people in a heartbeat, like I am definitely a feminist. In fact, I have a children’s book displayed in my office...it’s called *My First Book of Feminism*...I am definitely a champion for girls and just empowering them to lead because I know that that’s an opportunity that we haven’t always had. So, that comes across a lot in my leadership.

Lastly, a social worker in the northeast shared about how her experience coming from a family of immigrants shapes her practice,

My parents came from another country for a better lifestyle. I’m able to connect with my West Indian students who are from Jamaica because I have Jamaican in me also. So, we’re able to talk about those similar things of just coming and creating better opportunities.

Many of the educators in our sample also recognized how bringing their own racial and intersecting identities into the classroom supported their efforts to recognize and affirm their students’ identities. A social worker at a school in the northeast shared,

I identify as an Afro-Latina, my parents are from Panama, and I think who I am heavily influences how I interact with my students... I feel as though they’re the next generation and so we have to invest in them. We have to guide them. We have to give them those tools to make them become successful. We have to love on them...and whatever a student needs, that’s what I try to give to them.

Most of these teachers also discussed how their student's cultures and interests drive the content they teach. One teacher mentioned that her commitment to student centered teaching means including her students in the brainstorming of the curriculum and finding out what it is that they need to know or want to learn. A Black teacher from Long Island shared how her pedagogy is deeply child centered. She described, "They are really driving what I do on a daily basis. There's always these beautiful teachable moments that I really just thank God for because they happen so often and they really drive what I do in terms of instruction."

These findings demonstrate that despite any right-wing agendas or apathetic attitudes toward learning and understanding the impact of racism on all parts of our society, our Black educators continue to center their own and their students' racial identities and experiences in their pedagogy. This understanding of the centrality of racial identity is closely related to our other major theme of commitment and care.

The Power of the Commitment & Care of Black Educators

Our second major finding revealed how Black educator's commitment to and care for their students deeply shaped their pedagogical practice and approach. We discuss this powerful finding by focusing on several sub themes within that all illustrate this commitment and care via different manifestations of their classroom pedagogy and leadership strategies. The care that educators have for their students is in part demonstrated through their meaningful practice of CRP as "good teaching." Their care and commitment to their students then becomes a guide for their CRP practice. Relatedly, the educators we spoke to described their commitment to CRP as a responsibility, not simply an optional or in vogue strategy that they're trying out. And finally, their commitment is evidenced through their continued focus on the meaningful development and evolution of their pedagogy.

Demonstrating Care

The Black educators we spoke to understood the need to demonstrate deep care and invest in their students as part of their culturally relevant and antiracist practice. The educators believed this required showing their students love and celebrating their Blackness to build up students' self-esteem. When asked to describe their classroom pedagogies, the strategies Black educators shared were student-centered and were driven by an ethic of care. They specifically named the importance of utilizing these strategies with marginalized and students of color, including students who identify as Black, Latine, ENL, and immigrants to the U.S. The care-focused strategies they discussed included building relationships with students, cultivating nurturing spaces, and meeting students' needs. The use of these practices extends beyond while also enhancing their classroom instruction.

Building relationships with students was one of the Black educators' most common strategies for showing students that they care. Our participants felt that developing strong relationships required knowing the students, beyond their academic abilities. Several of the educators we talked with shared that their pedagogical approach relied on the practice of intentionally learning about students, including who they are as people, their interests, and their home lives. Several teachers' approaches could be described as familial, as they developed relationships that incorporated aspects of mothering or parenting and including an entire village in the children's education. For example, a high school social worker in New York City shared that she treats her students the same way that she would treat her own children:

With my kids, I always tell them, like you could be my kid, just because they are at the age where they could be my child. So, whatever advice I would give my own 18-year-old, I give to them about everything, relationships, the world, you know, how to carry ourselves, not to get in trouble, because I feel as though they're the next generation and so we have to invest in them.

Some participants also mentioned that they find it important to develop relationships with their students' parents and engage families in their student's learning. In addition, educators authentically developed relationships with their students through openly sharing parts of their own identities and lives. As one elementary teacher in Long Island shared, "I think my kids in my classroom follow my heartbeat because I literally beat it every day. They know me because I allow them to know me. Their parents know me because I allow...I want them to know me. I want them to go home and talk about what we did in class." The teachers felt that these practices of treating the students and parents with the same respect and care that they would extend to their own families allowed them to build strong relationships and contribute to their students' overall development and wellbeing.

The educators we spoke with also expressed the importance of cultivating spaces for students where they felt nurtured, and one way they achieved this was by consistently affirming students' intelligence and worth. The Long Island elementary school educator quoted above also shared:

I make them...affirm themselves almost every day. I say to them, who are you?...Sometimes they struggle...I say, who are you? Smart. Who are you? Strong. I said, then be strong, be great, be that because greatness is in you...I just need them to know that somebody sees it...That's what I'm trying to leave, that message.

As we discussed, the Black educators felt a responsibility to remain culturally relevant in their teaching, despite the circumstances or environment that they faced. The belief that educators must build confidence and a sense-of-self in their students of color is one example of that sense of responsibility, and highlights that care is not simply a perk of good pedagogy, but rather a prerequisite for effective teaching.

Another example of a strategy used to cultivate nurturing spaces is the educators' practice of providing opportunities for students to feel heard. This became increasingly important after the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, as Black educators felt that students should have a place to process, ask questions, and share their thoughts or feelings. One elementary teacher in New York City stated, "I want to have a place for them to fill in the gaps and to understand a little more what is happening and how can I be a better human in a developmentally appropriate way."

Finally, a third way that our participants' demonstrated care was through the intentional practice of meeting their students' needs. Learning about students in the nurturing environments they created allowed them to tailor their pedagogies, approaches, and lessons to the specific groups of students that they served, as they understood that teaching cannot be effective when offered through a one-size-fits all approach. They emphasized that helping students to overcome barriers required them to assess what may be missing or ineffective and adapt their leading or teaching to better serve the students. An elementary administrator from Long Island shared a story about their

process of developing a special program, or a “school within a school,” designed for a specific group of students. This program was inspired by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) and her book *The Dreamkeepers* and relied on a model where six Black teachers stayed with the same group of children from the 2nd through the 5th grade. Speaking of the decision to design this program, the participant said the following:

...What if we really just gathered around these children and their families and did something different, can that work in their favor?...It’s like a hit or miss if you get a “good” teacher or a strong teacher or a caring teacher because the reality is that school systems are not made up of all perfect teachers. I couldn’t chance that because I saw what was happening in 1st grade...So, there’s no rushing, they just kind of take their time to get things right.

Our participants differentiated their pedagogies and instruction by first considering who they were teaching. They felt that students’ identities (including gender and cultural/racial background), their learning type, and their career or educational trajectories should determine what and how they are taught. This student-centered approach may not have been the most popular or acceptable approach in each of the educators’ contexts, but they believed that putting their students first was the right way to teach. In essence, they felt a responsibility to teach the way they know is best for their students—and of course, is also “just good teaching.”

Sense of Responsibility

Much like the Black educators that Walker studied, the educators we interviewed continue to do the work of antiracist education regardless of the circumstances within their contexts. Many of the educators shared that they received backlash from their students’ parents, resistance from their fellow teachers, and a lack of leadership from their administration in relation to antiracist and culturally relevant teaching. The participants expressed the sentiment that even though the work could be dangerous, isolating, and exhausting, they felt driven to continue. Much of this drive came from the Black educators’ feelings of responsibility for ensuring that the work continued, particularly due to their own Black identity and the lack of other Black educators in their schools. One educator we spoke with, a multiracial teacher in the northeast, shared “I always felt this sense of kind of paying it forward. There also are, of course, very few educators of color, so I felt a very profound kind of responsibility to, you know, join in and help as best I could.” Another teacher we interviewed stated that because he was the only Black male at his school, he was expected to lead the antiracist work. He went on to say, “It’s draining, but it’s the work that just has to be done since I’m the only one.”

The Black educators we spoke to continue with this commitment and responsibility to affirm and guide their students even amid the increased risks promoting CRP and antiracist practices in their schools and classrooms carries in this moment of heightened scrutiny. Several teachers understood this more theoretically and others perceived this as a real threat or had already experienced such resistance within their school community. However, despite these varying levels of risk, the Black educators we spoke to maintain their commitment to such work.

The kindergarten teacher from the Northeast explained that she works hard to foster strong relationships with her students and their parents and that this supports the work she’s able to take on in her class on scaffolding difficult but truthful conversations about race and racism. She ex-

plained how she very intentionally weaves in conversations about race with her kindergarten students and she declared, “I’m not scared. I’m not worried because I know every day, I’m affirming them.”

Several of the educators we spoke to highlighted a commitment to teach about history or the past in a truthful and honest way as part of their practice. They underscored the importance of considering with their students why certain truths are concealed and whose histories are centered and remembered most in historical discourses. A multiracial middle school teacher in Connecticut explained how her commitment to antiracism informs everything she does in her classroom,

all of my pedagogy is anti-racist, I mean, everything I say and do is with a very, very clear sense of the power dynamics at play, and the power dynamics at play in which book I teach, and in which topics I choose to bring up in the books...to what degree I hold the comfort of white people, versus the comfort of others...if the system is racist, anything that’s anti-racist is gonna shake it up and cause a problem.

Such acts of empowerment are done in a way that feels natural and necessary to these educators, but in the face of mounting anti-CRT rhetoric, these acts are revolutionary.

Consistently Working to Improve CRP as a Central Part of their Practice

The educators that we spoke to who had an established antiracist practice described how it requires ongoing reflection and attention to developing and improving one's pedagogy. When asked to describe their antiracist or culturally relevant educational practices and pedagogy, educators emphasized that meaningfully incorporating this work involves much more than simply including more books by authors of color. Teachers described how it requires a deep and ongoing commitment and many spoke of how their practice has evolved and improved. The Black Kindergarten teacher from Long Island also spoke to the importance of it being an ongoing practice that gets refined and strengthened over time. She explained, “it’s ongoing work. It doesn’t stop. We’ve gotta keep doing this, we gotta keep having these conversations, we’ve gotta keep cultivating them in order for them to become the next activists...the next political leaders.”

The educators we spoke to who had a foundational antiracist approach were strongly committed to ongoing refinement and improvement of their practice. The Black educators we studied, channeling the spirit of Black educators in the past, have dug in and persevered, striving to become even better teachers. As one noted about attending antiracist professional development institutes such as RESI, “I have to go every year. I must make sure that that’s just part of my summer regiment, that I go to get a little tune up, to make sure that I’m in tune with what’s happening so that I can be revamped and ready to go for the next year.”

They described how they see the evidence of the strength of such work through their students’ responses and the increased engagement they demonstrate with the material. Hence, they seek out professional development experiences such as RESI to continuously improve their practice. As one educator explained:

[RESI] put a fire under me. Yeah, it definitely put a fire under my teaching. Again, I’ve always been on that road, you know, to teach our students about places where they come from and the people who sit close to them what their culture is about. But then it was like

I said, after attending the workshops I was definitely more into trying to find ways to increase the technology or decrease the digital divide.

The Black educators we spoke to felt steadfast in their commitment to culturally responsive and antiracist teaching because of the evidence of how it is “just good teaching.” This understanding emboldened teachers to metaphorically “close the door” and rely on their own professional knowledge and experience to deliver the material that they see as important for all students to learn and discuss.

Conclusion

What has emerged from our data is not so different from prior texts that chart the legacy of Black teachers who are dedicated to “emancipatory pedagogies” (Foster, 1997). This legacy is evident in our research and can continue to be used as a guide and tool for those educators newer to such emancipatory educational practices. As discussed above, we found that it is the educators of color, and Black educators, in particular, who have the historical knowledge and wisdom needed to persevere with “good teaching,” even when it is under attack. Just as Siddle-Walker (2000), Foster (1997), Givens (2021) and others have demonstrated, Black teachers created enriching classrooms in “valued segregated schools” where their students could thrive while also learning about white supremacy and how to navigate it. They did this work despite the obstacles that came with racially segregated, under-resourced schools and formal racist state curricula.

Importantly, our findings demonstrate that such practices are not wholly unique to only Black educators and that many educators from all racial and ethnic demographics, from all across the country are committed to cultivating antiracist classrooms in spite of the current political discourse and backlash against such efforts. However, we believe all educators can learn and benefit from the rich legacy of Black educators who have affirmed their students’ identities and taught the truth. A commitment to such a practice today does not exist without obstacles, but many of the educators we spoke to remain committed and spoke of their efforts to “identif(y) with student needs and aspirations” (Walker, 2000). Such legacies live on within Black educators today; the impetus and conditions for such fugitive practices has changed but the furtive nature of teachers closing their doors to deliver what they know is good teaching, has not.

In light of this historical backdrop of Black educators from the past and how their legacy has informed Black educators today, we have several recommendations regarding what school and district leaders should consider moving forward as well as what state and federal policy makers who want to support antiracist education should be advocating for in these perilous times:

1. Support “Good” Teaching Despite the Backlash: Educational leaders need to understand and appreciate the relationship between antiracist education strategies of the past and present and research on good teaching, the relationship between learning and culture, and child development. As we noted above, the preeminent scholar and Black educator, Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us that culturally responsive and antiracist education is “just good teaching.” Plain and simple. The connections between antiracist approaches – be they ethnic studies, critical multicultural education or culturally responsive approaches – and age-old progressive education strategies that affluent parents pay high tuition rates for are strong and demonstrate the power of a student-centered and project-based approach to learning. The power of an institution such as TC

- providing RESI each summer is symbolic to those who attend that the research and evidence supports the benefits of antiracist education for all students.
2. Ensure Good Teaching through Antiracist Professional Development: TC's Reimagining Education Summer Institute (RESI) is but one example of how important professional development can be for educators who seek support to become the very best, student-centered and culturally responsive educators they can be. Our data is replete with examples of how and why educators found the supportive RESI community to be central to their goal of building better, stronger relationships with their students and being more strategic in how they expose students to new content and scaffold their learning experience to assure success. We know of other antiracist PD opportunities that educators have found to be critical to their success, particularly when working with students of color. Education is a profession, and like all professions, it requires ongoing training and support for educators to grow. Districts, state departments of education and the federal Department of Education should provide more funding and support for educators to improve their practice.
 3. Defend the 1st Amendment Rights of Educators and Students: Censorship is the enemy of democracy, and censorship of educators assures that the next generation of voters will be uniformed. Like the seeds that Black educators of yesteryear sowed for the Civil Rights movement through teaching the history of Black people in the U.S. to Black students, so is the role of antiracist educators today as they valiantly strive to prepare children for a multiracial democracy against mounting odds. They desperately need policy makers and school leaders who support their right to teach and our children's right to learn.

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Enwhitened Spaces: A Critical Race/Critical Whiteness Content Analysis of Whiteness, Disinformation, and Amazon Reviews

Lorien S. Jordan,¹ Rachel R. Piontak, Kadesha Treco, & Stefanie L. McKoy

Abstract

Since September 2020, Fox News spawned an anti-critical race theory (CRT) disinformation campaign, that has reverberated in the whitestream's echo chamber. The disinformation largely appeals to white people who refuse to see racism, unless they feel it is impinging their rights. The campaign against CRT has penetrated the e-tailer site Amazon.com where books identified by Fox News as CRT texts have experienced increasingly hyperbolic and disinformed customer reviews. Encountering these reviews, we questioned how Amazon reviewers used a mundane platform to reify whiteness, while feigning hurt and ignorance. In this article, we present results from a qualitative critical race content analysis of Amazon.com customer reviews of four books identified by Fox News. A dialectical engagement between the tenets of CRT and key concepts of critical whiteness studies guided our analysis to describe how Amazon reviews enforced en/whitened postdigital spaces. Our results indicate that reviewers transmitted emo-social whiteness, discursively keeping white racism implacable yet, off the table. Framing our discussion, we examine current violent movements resulting from the anti-CRT echo chamber and its impact on education.

Keywords: *critical race content analysis, critical whiteness studies, white emotionality, disinformation, white ignorance*

Introduction

In the fall of 2020, critical race theory (CRT) became a catalyst for a conservative whitestream public to organize against increasing calls for racial justice. On September 2, Fox News denounced CRT as a "destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology" presenting "an existential threat to the United States" (Wallace-Wells, 2021, p. 6). The segment purposefully pronounced CRT as "weaponized against core American values" (p. 6), establishing it as the "perfect villain" for the conservative culture war (p. 5). Since the broadcast, policymakers, and the media have rallied around anti-CRT disinformation, stoking white people's fears of "woke education" (p. 7). CRT has become a lightning rod symbolizing the whitestream's fear of an impending deep indoctrination of revisionist history (Kreiss et al., 2021).

Fox News broadcasters subsequently fomented a vitriolic anti-CRT campaign with on-air

1. Corresponding author: Lorien Jordan, University of Southern Florida: lsjordan@usf.edu

mentions increasing steadily, peaking in at 901 references in June 2021 (Power & Savillo, 2022). Fox News coverage has weaponized a misinformed public by providing increasingly pointed disinformation about CRT, painting it as anti-American (read: anti-white). Ultimately, the disinformation has been effective, as policymakers mirror key falsities repackaged in public protest. The disinformation has crept into all aspects of US culture, including the inundation of anti-CRT rhetoric in negative reviews of CRT-identified books and their authors on e-tailer sites, such as Amazon.

In this article, we explore how Amazon reviews became a site for transmitting whiteness-centered disinformation through a critical race content analysis (CRCA; Pérez Huber et al., 2018) informed by critical whiteness studies (CWS; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). First, we briefly examine anti-CRT disinformation in the postdigital era (Matias & Aldern, 2020). Next, we describe our methodology, positioning our analytical engagement with CRT and CWS, before moving to a presentation of the findings. To conclude, we discuss the inherent dangers of CRT misinformation, examining the echo chamber of emboldened whiteness and the anti-CRT legislative impact on education.

"The Perfect Villain": Critical Race Theory in the Whitestream

Critical race theory is a transdisciplinary social and academic movement centering around the consensus that theory can actively address, call into question, and dismantle the knowledge and powers which have perpetuated race, racism, and the structural and systemic inequalities therein (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). With foundations in critical legal studies, early CRT scholars interrogated the intersections between the law and race in the United States, critiquing the racist groundings, policies, and practices of American liberalism in the legal system (Bell, 2023; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Since then, CRT and its composition of tenets have crossed disciplines to examine and challenge racism and white supremacy in multiple aspects of U.S. society, including education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

Core tenets of CRT derive from the acknowledgment that race is a social construct created to advance the racialized social system, centered on developing a white race deemed civilized and supreme above all Othered races (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Given that race was created to distance, there can be no race without racism, and disparate racial outcomes are results of social, structural, and institutional dynamics rather than the actions of individuals. The intercentricity of race means that racism is a structural and relational, normative and ordinary phenomenon integral to institutions and social practices in the U.S. (Bell, 2023). Following this proposition, CRT scholars critique dominant ideologies of liberalism to instead prioritize race-conscious approaches to social change, including the advancement of counternarratives guided by intersectional and anti-essentialist epistemologies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The *whitestream*—the discursive, material, and physical spaces that pass as the mainstream but are structures intended to serve white interests (Grande, 2003)—has long villainized CRT (Tate IV, 1997). The theoretical orientation entered public consciousness in the early-1990s during Lani Guinier's confirmation hearings for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. During the confirmation proceedings, the political right discredited Guinier's scholarship and legacy, provoking a white public's fears that nominating a Black woman to the highest court would set a dangerous precedent for radicalizing the *mainstream* legal system through the *fringe* concerns of CRT (Tate IV, 1997).

In the summer of 2020, white conservatives seeking a counter to protests against the brutalization, police murders, and citizen vigilantism against Black people homed in on CRT. When Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson denounced CRT's "racial orthodoxy," influential figures enthusiastically embraced the message. Following Carlson's segment, the then president signed an executive order labeling anti-racist education and critical social theories, including CRT, "offensive" and "anti-American" (Pettit, 2021). Since then, numerous states have introduced legislation banning CRT in schools (Pettit, 2021).

The anti-CRT campaign has driven out school board members and faculty and divided neighbors, attracting national-level attention and dollars as different organizations have profited from the controversy. As the anti-CRT legislative firestorm surges, scholars and activists argue that the vilified CRT is no more than a "poorly drawn caricature" (Pettit, 2021, p. 2), evident in public protests where parents and concerned community members echo disinformation presented in the news. The white public has been galvanized to support CRT bans by the systematic creation and dissemination of disinformation in digital spaces.

Disinformation is factually incorrect and deceptive information created to purposefully mislead people and has become an increasing focus of study since the 2016 U.S. federal election (Freeon & Wells, 2020). As a political tactic, disinformation rapidly spreads in digital spaces, which offer unfettered access, instant sharing, and minuscule fact-checking. Specifically for the anti-CRT conservative movement, there are dedicated websites (e.g. PragerU), memes, Twitter threads, Facebook petitions, and viral videos which broadcast disinformation about critical race theory, how and where it is taught, and the subsequent risks to white America (Benson, 2022). The success of digital disinformation exacerbates the issue that U.S. citizens primarily get news and do research from sources that align with their beliefs, "masked as objective and accurate; where what constitutes news and factual information is blurred into whatever one wants to hear" (Benson, 2022, p. 4). For white people and racialized others indoctrinated into the whitestream, the abundance of disinformation about CRT allows for the theory to be discredited, simultaneously dismissing the value of "revealing race-related knowledge...redirecting attention away from the responsibilities of knowing" (Pham, 2023, p. 300).

Postdigital Whitestreaming

As with other digital spaces, such as seen across social media (Matias, 2020), Amazon's unmoderated platform for opining provides a compelling space to study the postdigital spread of disinformation and whiteness. Postdigitalism is the intersection of daily life and digital technologies, where the digital world is no longer differentiated from human interaction (Knox, 2019). In the field of education, where, to date, digital technology has been mostly treated as a neutral supplement to learning, postdigital studies explore how the digital world shapes and is entangled in the pedagogies, social practices, and systems driving education (Jandrić & Knox, 2022; Knox, 2019). With this focus, postdigital scholars describe how cultures of surveillance, capitalistic desires for data, and neoliberal impulses for performance and measurement merge to influence how, what, why, and where teaching and learning occur (Jandrić & Ford, 2022)..

Matias and Aldern (2020) furthered the goals of postdigital studies suggesting, "with postdigitalism, we need to consider how whiteness operates even more multidimensionally...enacted in novel ways through multiple spaces over time" (p. 336). The digital world is primarily perceived as raceless, obfuscating how platforms, infrastructures, content, and sociality are undergirded by and reproductive of white supremacy (Noble, 2018). Within education, postdigital whitestreaming

enforces the "normality" of whiteness through micro-interactions and macro structures developed to capitalize on extractive labor and data harvesting in processes linked to colonialism (Kwet, 2019). In microenvironments, for example, a pre-service teacher who shows TikTok videos in class is operating on a platform that uses algorithms known to prioritize the content of white users, which is culturally appropriative and normalizes white culture through cyber-stereotypes (Davis, 2022). Within macrostructures, Matias and Aldren (2019) described the mechanisms that postdigital spaces provide for institutions to profit from the physical presence and intellectual labor of racialized faculty and students while simultaneously silencing faculty and students who speak out on the ways the institutions perpetuate racialized injustice.

Given our interest in postdigital whitestreaming, the ongoing attack against CRT, and the ways that digital technologies provide fertile ground for disinformation, Matias and Aldren's (2020) call served as a point of departure for our analysis, illuminating how reviewers parrot CRT disinformation through book reviews. Anyone can leave an Amazon review without purchasing or reading books, while positioning the reviewer as an authority on the topic. Therefore, book reviews offer insight into the mundane processes people engage to maintain white "ignorance" in the postdigital era, addressed through the following question: *How do reviewers reproduce whiteness in their attempts to sway future readers of CRT texts?*

Methodology

As we were concerned about the permeative reproductiveness of whiteness in postdigital spaces, we conducted a critical race content analysis (CRCA) in dialectical engagement with the tenets of CWS. Pérez Huber et al. (2020) developed CRCA to centrally locate tenets of critical race theory in analyzing embedded racism in children's literature. These tenets include attending to the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression, the need to uncover white supremacist ideologies, and an overarching commitment to social justice through centering the experiences of racialized people and incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives. Through analytically applying these tenets, a CRCA can reveal how power operates within literature, which discursively encodes and perpetuates racialized inequities, among other social oppressions (Pérez Huber et al., 2020). Given that whiteness attempts to invert the logic and tenets of CRT, we applied concepts of critical whiteness studies to guide our analysis.

Critical Whiteness Studies as a Theoretical and Analytic Guide

CWS is a transdisciplinary orientation developed to interrogate the societal functions of whiteness, including how people embody, perform, and internalize whiteness. Whiteness is a multifaceted ideological property and discourse with material, political, historical, cultural, mental, physical, and relational impacts on all people and institutions in the United States (see Cabrera et al., 2017 for a review). The structural dimensions of whiteness maintain and constrain "cultural practices, values, and attitudes by determining what is normative and simultaneously invisibilizing and naturalizing white supremacy" (Jordan, 2023).

In response to whiteness, critical whiteness studies is a transdisciplinary project, known by different names (see Matias, 2022a; Matias & Boucher, 2021 for reviews), that aims to name, deconstruct, and debilitate the structures and processes of whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Grounded in the early works of racialized scholars and artists who studied whiteness as an act of resistance and survivance in a racially-hostile society (Baldwin, 2013; Du Bois, 2018; Matias,

2022), whiteness scholars suggest that "the bonds of whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity" (Nayak, 2007, p. 738).

Core to our engagement in CWS is our embrace of Mills' (2007) warning that white ignorance, an ignorance that "*resists... fights back*"; is "*militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, and ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly... presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge*" (p. 13; Italics in original). This ignorance is an agentic and collective effort to maintain the racial contract through an "inverted epistemology" that produces "the ironic outcomes that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills, 1997, p. 2). While CWS scholars focus on a variety of components, we were driven to understand how white emotionality (Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016) and white sociality (Sleeter, 1994; Yoon, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2006) became discursive acts used to maintain ignorance, thereby eliding culpability in white supremacy and responsibility for racial justice (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Matias, 2020; Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

White Emotionality

Matias (2016) described white emotionality as emotional weaponry that white people employ when confronted with hegemonic whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy. Emotions, such as anger, defensiveness, denial, guilt, and sadness, serve to either deflect or distance the feeler from the topic, thereby shutting down dialogue and denying the pain and violence of racialized people. Matias (2021) explores the psychology of enacted emotional whiteness as rooted in the "psychological connection between whiteness and Blackness. Meaning, whiteness has no merit on its own, instead, it can only be defined by its ontological opposite: the vilification of Blackness" (p. 175). Given this reality, the enacted emotionality of whiteness is a symptom of deeper trauma, related to the fact that white people's humanity is wrapped into the dehumanization of Others (King, 2019).

Leonardo and Zembylas' (2013) focus on how these emotional enactments become a technology, in the Foucauldian sense to allow people to discursively perform an ignorant yet "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369). These affective technologies are "instrumentalized, containing certain social norms and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion with respect to one's self and an Other" (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 151). White technologies of affect include the policing of others' emotions as irrational, while simultaneously positing that white emotions are reasoned and proof for the emotion itself. For example, if a white woman feels fear at the sight of and subsequent interaction with a Black man, and takes her fear as proof that the Black man means her harm, she establishes to herself that she has rational evidence to call the police (Nir, 2020).

White Sociality

Given that so much of the emotionality wrapped into whiteness occurs in relationship to power and people, we were also interested in how whiteness maintains itself relationally through creating a society built for the comfort, benefit, and exaltation of white people. For this analysis, we were drawn to the work on white racial bonding, which Sleeter (1994) defined as "interactions that have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of groups of color, and drawing conspiratorial we–they boundaries" (p. 261). Boundaries are established through linguistic acts of white people that connote alliance with whiteness and affinity with each other, akin to a verbal wink and nod, or as Yoon (2012) described,

"whiteness-at-work" (p. 608)-the microprocesses embedded in daily interactions to preserve and recenter white comfort.

While there are many ways that white racial bonding occurs, we were particularly interested in the semantic moves that reviewers used, which stem from U.S. societal discourse. Primarily we were led by Bonilla-Silva's (2006) argument that the dominance of colorblind ideology in legal systems is a form of racism developed to allow racialized disparities and violence to progress unabated. To be "colorblind" offers white people a powerful tool to deny the presence and impact of racism and their complicity in white supremacist systems (Matias, 2021). Colorblind racism² goes hand-in-hand with white emotionality as people who attempt to persuade others and themselves that they "do not see color" are often confronted with the realities of racism and respond with deflective emotions (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). In efforts to keep up the mask of colorblindness, they hold tight to arguments that one's experience of racialized disparity is that individual's fault because the United States is a meritocracy, where material success is a function of hard work and ethos rather than living in a white supremacist system (Tatum, 2017).

A Note on Subjectivity

Engaging critical whiteness in our analysis is core to our commitments as scholars concerned with white perpetration of mundane violence. The first author, a white ciswoman, grew up in South Carolina, the seat of the confederacy, seeing racial injustice and hatred in Ku Klux Klan rallies, not understanding that it was committed by more than confederate flag flyers. The second author reflects her Midwest semi-rural upbringing: white, middle class, evangelical, loosely tied to eastern European roots. Her sense of self came from an acidic mixture of Christian-infused whiteness politics that, until adulthood, guided her decision-making. The third author is an international student from the Bahamas pursuing higher education at a Mid-South predominantly white institution. She is a Black, cisgender, queer/questioning woman with a disability, who was raised in a Christian-dominant society that maintains complicated relationships of race and ability. The fourth author, a white cisgender woman, grew up in the rural Midwest in a lower-middle-class family with a stay-at-home mom and a father who identifies as a right-wing Fox News viewer. As authors and friends, we share solidarity in this work, albeit from different stances. Most importantly, we interrogate our manifestations of whiteness, seeking to understand how colorblind ideologies have shaped our beliefs and actions. We remind each other to be accountable for disrupting the power of language and its violent tendencies.

As Matias and Newlove (2017) described, the current practice of emboldened and en/whitened epistemology "persists because ... a White supremacist society that naturalizes Whiteness as Truth" (p. 923) rejects the knowledge, experience, and humanity of those who are not white. Here, we commit to making visible the invisibilized and violent language of whiteness by examining Amazon reviews of CRT-themed texts through the lens of CWS.

2. In this article, we draw from Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work and therefore use the terminology of color-blind racism. However, we recognize that Annamma et al., 2017 suggest color-evasive as a better terminology that does not lean on ableism (i.e., connoting blindness with ignorance) while describing how white people actively evade the reality of racism and white supremacy.

Procedure

To initiate this study, we read and watched a selection of Fox media to understand what texts broadcasters targeted as being CRT-oriented, naming authors who discuss race and whiteness regardless of their association with CRT. For example, Fox News broadcast a segment featuring a senator from Arkansas who introduced a bill to ban critical race theory. In their reporting, Fox aligned Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo with critical race theory, specifically naming their books and misaligning the authors as critical race theorists (Dorman, 2021). Fox News also highlighted authors and books aligned with CRT, as seen in Wulfsohn's (2021) article that describes Crenshaw, Delgado, and Stefanić as "authors of the introductory textbook on CRT" (para. 4).

Ultimately, we identified four texts for our analysis, which included identifying four books: Delgado and Stefanić (2013), Crenshaw et al. (1996), Kendi (2019), and DiAngelo (2018). We then collected all Amazon reviews for each book posted from September 3, 2020, to August 31, 2021, resulting in 1,379 reviews in total. We also collected metadata, such as the reviewer's username, the date posted, the star-rating given, if the book was a verified Amazon purchase, and how many readers found the review helpful. During the time period of our analysis, we read each text if we had not read it prior to this study.

When analyzing existing content from online sources, there is no assured process to determine demographic details, such as age, gender, or race. However, in this study, we were more interested in the discursivity of reproducing whiteness (Matias, 2020) than who was spreading disinformation. Amazon reviews are part of the public domain and are exempt from human ethics approval. Nevertheless, to protect reviewers' identities, we created pseudonym-handles mirroring the tenor of the original handles.

Analysis

Through the lenses of white emotionality and white sociality, we sought to understand the strategies reviewers employed to recenter whiteness in their arguments against the place of CRT in society. As seen in Table 1, we adapted Pérez Huber et al.'s (2020) critical race content analysis (CRCA) framework to include components of CWS discussed above. Applying the concepts of white emotionality in frames two and three, we focused on how white emotional responses decentered racialized experience while at the same time arguing for rationality and reason. In frames one, four, and five, we focused on how reviewers recentered colorblindness to align with whiteness in inverting the logics of critical race theory.

Table 1: *Framework for a Critical Race-Critical Whiteness Content Analysis*

	Critical Race Theoretical Tenets	Critical Race Content Analysis Components	Critical Whiteness Components That Invert Logics of CRT	Guiding Analytic Questions
Frame One	Centricity of race and racism	Recognizing that race does not exist without racism, a condition which mediates cultural storylines and texts	Denying that whiteness is a structural, ideological, and cultural mechanism that reproduces race, and therefore white supremacy in society	What characteristics do reviewers assign to the authors? To the public? How do the reviews, reviewers, and books become

				raced? Or how are they described as raceless?
Frame Two	Challenging dominant ideologies	Revealing the operations and ideologies of white supremacy that undergird literacy devices	Reinscribing a "hermeneutics of whiteness" (Matias & Newlove, 2017), wherein the ideologies of white supremacy are rooted in commonplace speech.	What dominant ideologies are performed and reproduced within the reviews? How do they operate relationally? Emotionally?
Frame Three	Centrality of experiential knowledge	Centering the experiences of people of color	De-centering the experiences of people of color through white emotionality and experience	How are the realities and experiences of racialized people represented? How is the perspective of reviewers represented? Who is centered in this review?
Frame Four	Interdisciplinary perspectives	Integrating intersectional knowledge to inform the contexts in which reviews are written	Integrating whitewashed perspectives to deny the contextual reality of the time and place books were written	How do reviewers contextually situate race and its intersections? What contexts and standpoints are overlooked?
Frame Five	Commitment to racial justice	Committing to social justice to challenge and transform inequity in writing	Advocating for a colorblind approach to justice and equality	How is focalization of the review constructed (perspective of the reviewer)? How does power operate within the linguistic devices of the review?

Note. This table displays the elements of our analytical approach, which merged Pérez Huber et al.'s 2018 critical race content analysis (CRCA), with tenets from critical whiteness studies. Each frame describes the tenet of CRT and CRCA component, as delineated by Pérez Huber et al. (2018), and then a component of critical whiteness studies which inverts the logic of CRT.

Utilizing abductive coding, we maintained dialectical engagement between subtextual meanings, the key theoretical propositions of CRT and CWS, and our orientation to the data. The first phase of analysis began with data familiarization, reading each review and condensing the data set to focus on unfavorable, mixed, and ambivalent reviews. While it could be valuable to understand affirmatives responses to the reviewed books, our interest was in understanding how disinformed whiteness was performed in book reviews, and therefore we opted to exclude reviews

that were favorable, such as RobertC's review, "An incredible book that is about so much more than racism or people, instead ideas and action and deep reflection on deeply ingrained thoughts and beliefs are unearthed." The process required a close reading to determine if a review was genuinely supportive or if it teetered between affirming and dismissive. For example, one review stated, "If you want to learn what CRT is all about, this book is great. Having said that, I am not a fan of the theory. It's a half-baked, recitation of socialism" (Potatoes). The reviewer gave the book a 5-star rating but dismissed the theory using a disinformation tactic of comparing CRT to socialism. However, in another example we excluded a 3-star review that stated "The overall concept is good with the distinction between the person and the policy. Disliked the excessive use of the 'F' word. It added Nothing to the dialog" (ConsumerReader), as the reviewers did not use their concern of Kendi's use of explicatives to demean the overall work. To triangulate the decisions of Authors 2 and 3, Author 1 read all reviews and memos to reach an agreement on the eliminated and maintained reviews, resulting in a final data set of 744 reviews.

During the second phase, Author 1 open coded a random selection of one-fourth of the data to create initial codes, which were tentative and focused on overarching concepts such as the code "emotional display," or "politicizing." Authors 1–3 then met to develop the codebook from these codes, utilizing language from CWS. For example, we re-coded the data initially labeled emotional display, to be more precise in what was occurring within the reviews, using codes, such as "hiding fear," "masking guilt," "feigning outrage." During the third phase of analysis, Authors 1–3 undertook the abductive analysis utilizing the codebook and *process coding*, which utilizes gerunds, or -ing words, to highlight the discursive strategies underlying a written text (Saldaña, 2021). Author 1 moved between our guiding theoretical frame and codes to integrate and refine categories and identify significant themes. For example, one of the process codes, "pearl clutching", became an overarching category label and ultimately a theme that encased multiple codes within. Authors 1–3 memored throughout the analytic process, noting initial interpretations, questions, and provocations encountered within the data. During the final interpretative writing stage, the authors developed labels and definitions of the themes and subthemes and identified exemplar illustrative quotes.

Findings: Emo-social Strategic Whiteness

Specific to the goals of this study, we sought to illuminate how Amazon reviews became a form of protest against books identified as CRT texts through reviewers' oppositional re-centering of whiteness. We grounded our analysis in the reviews' focalization with specific interest in how power operated, how issues of race and racism were contextually situated, and how dominant ideologies were performed. Overall, our findings indicate an interconnected display of *emo-social strategic whiteness* to maintain the racial contract, permitting white people to validate their moral superiority and feign racial ignorance (Mills, 1997). The prefix, *Emo-* represents the emotionality often aligned with white peoples' displays of anger, discomfort, and fear when confronted with discussions of race, racism, and whiteness (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Our analysis revealed countless displays of reviewers' abandonment of reason, throwing aside "objectivity" to indulge in the primacy of white emotions. This yielded our first theme, *pearl clutching*, comprised of the subthemes *affective technologizing* and the *emotional dynamics of distancing*. The social aspect of emotionality described in this paper indicates how reviewers manifested linguistic white racial bonding to solidify a connection to other white readers and protect whiteness (Sleeter, 1995). Our

second theme, *working whiteness*, describes the socio-emotional bonds and contains the sub-themes *color-binding through color-blinding* and *meritocraticizing*. We describe these themes alongside relevant text from the reviews.

Pearl Clutching: The Emotionality of Re-centered Whiteness

Pearl clutching refers to the illustrative metaphor of a person (typically a woman) who, when shocked, grabs at her pearl necklace in a demonstration of offense at what she perceives to be morally wrong. Today, the turn of phrase indicates when a person's dramatic display of outrage exceeds typical responses. Here, it describes reviewers' feigned melodramatic white emotionality. From asserting that the authors promote violence to locating the offenses internally through shame, emotionality was evidenced throughout as reviewers characterized the books as "hatred in book form" (Ken), an "instrument of doom," and "bible of hatred and chaos" (VanaWhite). Two sub-themes comprise pearl clutching—*affective technologizing* and the *emotional dynamics of distancing*—which present distinct displays of emotionality and attempts to discredit and detract.

Affective Technologizing

The subtheme *affective technologizing* refers to reviewers' discursive operationalization of fear in stating that the books are "designed to divide people and create hate" (Summer) and are harbingers of the destruction of the "American values that make this country so Great!" (Topher). As discussed in the above, affect as a technology of whiteness concerns how white people police emotions, describing what and who can feel which and how much emotion (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). In the reviews, affective technologizing warned "Americans" that CRT books were not written "to create a more equal playing field for all" but to "support the creation of a different group with power" (ItinerantJew). Such technological pearl clutching escalated when other reviewers described efforts to remove the threat physically: "I hid every copy of this at my local store" (Kate).

Reviewers deflected the realities of white racism by suggesting that their reviews were merely warning of the books' potential societal impact. MissRia wrote, "we are once again entering into a very dark time in the history of this nation if we allow this hatred to continue unchecked" through books that "fuel the fires of racial hatred," thus suggesting that the United States is a post-racial society, and it is because of CRT texts that we risk returning to darker days.

One reviewer encapsulated the affective technologizing displayed in pearl clutching writing as follows:

A toxic philosophy of nihilism and hatred...Anyone who sincerely engages with the message of this book will be sent down a recursive rabbit-hole exactly like the one found in brainwashing cults. Beware!... Critical race theory is not simply daft. It is extremely powerful and lusts after power, which is its actual agenda....Their agenda is nothing less than the destruction of history, western art, language and thought as well as family structure. Though not explicit in the text, it is very easy to find the author's declarations in other media, as she does not make a secret of them. THIS IS A VERY VERY DANGEROUS BOOK (Laney).

This review exemplified several discursive technologies displaying Laney's emotionality and shock at the book. Words such as "toxic," "brainwashing cult," and "Beware!" and the use of ALL CAPS evinced urgency mixed with fear to dissuade. Laney also anthropomorphized CRT, suggesting that it has motives, thereby writing the theory into existence as a literal bogeyman (allusions to the use of bogey as a derogatory term for Black men intended; for further discussion, see Safire, 2004). Finally, Laney stated that "their" agenda—painting an *us-versus-them* division—is meant to destroy "western" society, thus decrying the downfall of a society built and maintained on white supremacy. Therefore, what we conceptualized as the technologies of whiteness employed in pearl clutching was illustrated by dire warnings of the coming dangers stemming from CRT's "senseless message... that will cause a great deal of harm" (PlantarFascia), in the authors' attempts to "Make the world black!" (ItinerantJew).

Emotional Dynamics of Distancing

While reviewers exhibiting *affective technologizing* warned readers of the books' destructive potential, in the *emotional dynamics of distancing* subtheme, reviewers displayed overt and covert white emotionality. As discussed above, the emotionality of whiteness consists of what Matias (2017) wrote as, "those racialized feelings that surface when teaching and learning about race that can either hinder (e.g., guilt, denial, resistance, anger, silence, etc.) or better support (e.g., empowerment, acceptance, determine, love, etc.) the fruition of racially just education" (p. 119). Within this analysis, reviewers openly displayed fear, resistance, guilt through their writing, as well as warning potential readers from engaging the books, lest they also feel these feelings.

Reviewers alluded to emotionality through linguistic removal, blaming the authors for trying to elicit emotions, as illustrated in statements such as "The writer simply shamed all white people" (Matthews) or "it attempts to make you feel guilty for the way you were born" (Ansley). The attempt to disembodify the emotional self while being overly emotional was evident in David's review: "This is a book for 'woke' self-hating or guilt-ridden white people and virulently racist blacks. Decent, INTELLIGENT whites and blacks will avoid it like the COVID-19 virus." Here, the reviewer used emotionality to demarcate *us* from *them*—us being the civil and them being the unintelligent.

Regardless of the authors' perceived intentions, reviewers posited that they were not susceptible to such emotional "tricks." This protestation appeared in Peter's review: "do not expect me to feel like a bad person for who I am. How dare you!!!" Kris also suggested that DiAngelo's attempts to create guilt were "Complete nonsense!! I am a White Male (oh my!) and in no ways a racist. I will not be made to feel like a racist, nor will I teach my children they are racists." Kris's feigned horror at being white and male, indicated by the pearl clutching parenthetical aside of "oh my" juxtaposed with an insistence of not being racist, is a tactic we saw throughout the data.

Reviewers also described the physically emotional experience of being white in a CRT world. Jack illustrated the tendency to reference the pain of encountering these books, writing, "I'm sick to tears..." while Debbie wrote, "When I opened this book and looked through it I got sick to my stomach..." Overt displays of emotionality were also apparent in the linguistic formatting of reviews. Reviewers indicated their anger and frustration in ALL CAPS, as in BlueCan's scattershot of emotionality beginning with "ARE YOU PEOPLE OUT OF YOUR MIND!!! ... YOU ARE SICK!! RACIST SICK!! YOU NEED HELP!!" It is unclear who "you people" are, but one assumes it is anyone who believes that white supremacy is ongoing. BlueCan proceeded to share

that they are "A WHITE AMERICAN AND I AM PROUD OF IT!! MY NATIONALITY ANCESTORS WERE SLAVES TOO!! BRUTALLY TORTURED!! GET OVER YOURSELF!" By alluding to the ancestral enslavement of Europeans, BlueCan suggested they have "gotten over it," as should descendants of enslaved Black people—a favorite quip of white Americans who do not want to face the legacy of US white slaving. BlueCan then suggests that DiAngelo's text is an affront to the principles of colorblindness and Christianity as "GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS IMAGINE, YES JESUS WAS A JEW, BUT WOULD IT EVEN MATTER IF HE WAS BACK, BROWN, RED, PURPLE, OR GREEN???? OF COURSE NOT!!" because we "ALL BLEED RED BLOOD." BlueCan suggested they were "NOT RAISED RACIST AGAINST OTHER PEOPLE OF ANY COLOR!!" stating others should "SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN!!" This one review illustrates the extreme emotionality of white people, displaying how deflection intertwines with contempt and outrage—the metaphorical hand rising to the throat to clutch one's pearls.

Working Whiteness: Reinscribing White Solidarity

The theme *working whiteness* captures the social processes through which white people maintain the power of whiteness while denying that whiteness exists. Guided by elements of CWS, we were interested in the ways that reviewers' alignment with and affinity to whiteness was maintained through how they engaged the readers as acts of white racial bonding. Within our analysis, we noted reviewers bonding on multiple discursive levels, from the use of overt sarcasm, seen when PeanutButter wrote "Tried it [i.e., being anti-racist], not as fun as being proracist," to semantic eye-rolling represented by rhetorical questions, such as "Do I have to break it down, or is it obviously stupid to everyone but him?" (Santa). Beyond reviewers' linguistic choices, we noted their semantic moves (Bonilla-Silva & Foreman, 2000) as a process of developing solidarity within the Amazon reviews. The most common semantic moves were inscribing colorblind (subtheme one) and meritocratic (subtheme two) ideologies, thereby reinscribing racist beliefs about racialized peoples.

Color-Binding through Colorblinding

In the subtheme *color-binding through colorblinding*, reviewers promoted solidarity in de-racialized whiteness through colorblind discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Core to this stance was that the reviewed books did not deconstruct racism but instead promoted racial injustice for white people. The denial and racism in proclaiming racism appeared as a tactic to bind white people. A common refrain in reviews was that "the best way to rid ourselves of racism is to STOP TALKING ABOUT IT" (Army). This quote (attributed to Morgan Freeman) encapsulates how reviewers tokenized the decontextualized words of people of color (POC) to bolster support for white people's painstaking desire to avoid racism. Such semantic tokenizing elevates the work of certain POC over others because it neatly aligns with white people's desire for comfort.

While centuries of scholarship and the arts point to the violent reality of white supremacy, reviewers heavily relied on translations of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work, imploring others to listen to "those that follow MLK Jr.'s beliefs and teachings" (D&L), so that his words "echo in EVERY person's ears and hearts, no matter what your skin color is" (ThreeMenandABaby). Ultimately, reviewers argued that instead of the "divisive" language of CRT, we should base our judgments on "the content of one's character, not the color of one's skin" (a sentiment paraphrased by 12 other reviewers).

The white twist of colorblind logic also appeared in reviews, making plain the cognitive dissonance of those who deny that racism exists while elevating the "plight" of anti-white racism. Reviewers decried being "discriminated against because of the color of my white skin...picked on relentlessly" (ShoppingSleepingEating). Swoozie took umbrage at the idea of white privilege, having "taken enough hits off of black & brown people because I'm white to last me a lifetime." Finally, LetsGo stated, they have "had 11 interactions with cops in the past decade. The two in this post's screenshot were both ready to draw their weapons. Another tailed me home. Don't you dare tell me I have WHITE PRIVILEGE!" These reviewers made themselves symbols of racism against white people, conflating their potentially uncomfortable experiences with the violence of living within a system not made for POC.

Meritocraticizing

The "meritocratic mythology" remains a core investment that guides colorblind ideologies in resisting deep understanding of the role of white supremacy in U.S. society (Gotanda, 1995, p. xxix). Within our subtheme *meritocraticizing*, we observed reviewers leaning on meritocratic discourses to bolster their promotion of colorblindness while confirming racist interpretations of racialized POC. These discourses are semantic moves meant to mask privilege based in white supremacy and gain the buy-in of likeminded white people (Leonardo, 2004). Among the more common moves was the denial of white privilege: "IM STILL WAITING ON MY WHITE PRIVILEGE CARD TO COME IN THE MAIL" (Sammy). Instead of seeing white privilege as real, reviewers affirmed that the US system rewards hard work and perseverance. Through meritocraticizing, we witnessed the social act of writing reviews from a position of moral authority to suggest, as Cringe did, that the reviewers would do better to "focus on reminding them [POC] that we all have the equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome."

BigCasino noted that blaming social inequality on racism is akin to "lumping all hardworking black people in with anyone living off handouts and unwilling to work or contribute in any way to even their own community because, hey, that's their culture." As in this quote and across the data, reviewers displayed overtly racist beliefs predicated on centuries of depicting POC as lazy, writing in a matter-of-fact rhetorical style in an attempt to mask racism while expressing it.

Reviewers argued that although we live in a meritocracy, "white Americans have been burdened by affirmative action for nearly 60 years" (Brantley), a familiar protestation that US policies aimed at equity purposefully disadvantage white people. Yet such policies are routinely dismissed as failing, as seen in ItinerantJew's argument that Kendi "ignores the fact that all past efforts to do that [promote equity] have failed over the last 7 decades. Affirmative action, Welfare, Medicaid are all efforts to create equity that have not succeeded." Routinely in the reviews, mentions of failed policies were coupled with blaming racialized people for their failure, as seen in Utah's statement that "instead of lifting people to a point of self sufficiency it has done the opposite to most of the African American community, as these communities are still suffering with getting motivated to seek an education and to strive for their dreams and self sufficiency in life," utilizing the racist language seen in white-dominant spaces that the problem of inequality is the problem of the racialized. After all, "if the country was racist, there would be absolutely no upward mobility for anyone who is not white" (Rhizome).

Discussion

In this CRT/CWS analysis, we explored the emo-social ways that Amazon reviewers weaponized and repackaged disinformation about CRT to persuade the reading public against the theory. Our findings lead us to agree with Matias and Boucher (2021) that it is not enough to engender "white racial epiphanies" (p. 3); instead, we must interrogate how whiteness spreads in ordinary spaces. While we cannot know the racialized identities of all reviewers, in many cases the reviewers noted being white, undergirding how our findings demonstrate that white people do know whiteness and get angry when confronted about being white. At the same time, the omnipresence of whiteness within postdigital society means that all people living in the United States are at risk of knowingly, or not, spreading the disinformation that fuels white supremacy and ignorance.

We saw this anger in the dramatically feigned contempt for the reviewed texts in our first theme, pearl-clutching. Feigning has taken a front seat in US political and infotainment outlets, seen recently in Justice Jackson's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Throughout, Republican committee members displaced the primacy of Judge Jackson to center their incoherent paranoia about CRT (Gyarkye, 2022). For example, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) waved a poster-sized replica of a page from Kendi's text "Antiracist Baby" at Jackson, asking her "Do you agree with this book that is being taught with kids that babies are racist?" which Jackson deftly responded while distancing herself from CRT (Associated Press, 2022). The feigned outrage and fear became a circus of emotionality, also displayed throughout the Amazon reviews. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) described these processes as technologies of whiteness, drawing attention to how "emotions, beliefs, and actions... may appear as authentic expressions of our mentality, but they are socially organized and managed" (p. 159). Maintaining whiteness through technologizing affect draws boundaries around who belongs and whose emotions count. Just as Senator Cruz was welcomed to emote overtly, Jackson was expected to embody "composure," for which white Democratic senators praised her (Gyarkye, 2022).

Similarly, Amazon reviewers spouted anger, rawness, and dejection while suggesting that POC should "get over it." Technologizing in reviews privileged the wellbeing of whites while policing all others. While the affective technologizing subtheme was drawn from data across the four books, primarily, the emotional dynamics of distancing subtheme came from reviews of DiAngelo's text. We found twisted irony in observing how reviewers created an ipso facto display of white fragility—the thesis of DiAngelo's book.

Technologizing and "fragility" matter owing to the power of CRT disinformation. Currently, 24 states have banned CRT or are considering banning it in schools—legislation aimed at subjugating the lives of POC in the service of white comfort. The reviews normalized white feelings about CRT, providing shorthand proof that CRT in schools is harmful, blocking the potential to analyze racism in the classroom, and ensconcing "aggrieved" white people in the shroud of innocence.

In the theme working whiteness, reviewers engaged white-racialized language reifying the "(un)common sense" of white superiority (Matias & Aldern, 2020, p. 330) through colorblind and meritocratic tropes. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) described white people's semantic moves to mask racialized beliefs while conveying racist perspectives. In the Amazon reviews, semantic moves played out in an interwoven process whereby the intersections of *colorblinding* and *meritocracy* formed a tautological argument against CRT. Reviewers argued that we should only judge

people on the basis of "character" when defending whiteness, leading to the next subtheme, embracing meritocracy. By prioritizing one's character, the reviewers lambasted CRT and the books' authors and made generalized arguments about the inherent worth of (mostly) Black communities.

The intersection of meritocracy and colorblinding is core in the spread of disinformation about CRT. We see states, like Georgia, passing executive orders declaring that the state is not racist, therefore, there is no place for CRT in school; instead, students and parents must simply "work harder." We cannot overlook how this positioning of a colorblind meritocracy has had and will have lasting effects on students of color as white teachers, administrators, parents, and children pretend that white success is due to hard work rather than racialized dehumanization.

Today, anti-CRT rhetoric coalesces around disinformation "designed to manufacture white grievance in the service of white power" (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 9). Books utilizing "CRT-terms," such as "structural inequality," "critical self-reflection," and "racial prejudice," are banned (Wisconsin Assembly Bill 411). Provocations of "indoctrination" led to the Florida legislature's removal of 41% of math textbooks which the legislature decided referenced CRT topics, infringing on students' freedoms (Pérez-Carrillo, 2022). These legislative moves are just one aspect of an expansive echo chamber reproduced in Amazon reviews in the direction of causality so intertwined it is impossible to untie.

Ultimately, our findings point back to Mills' (1997) racial contract—the social system that was developed by settler colonizers in the United States to justify genocide and enslavement and establish settlers as white, superior, and civil (Jordan & Dykes, 2022). To maintain the pinnacle emplacement of white people, they must deny that white supremacy exists; otherwise, white people must confront that their humanness is predicated on the dehumanization of Others (King, 2019). Therefore, white people have developed a purposeful and agentic "inverted epistemology" of ignorance. Our findings indicate that this ignorance was displayed in reviewers' emo-social feigning and alluded to a "particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)" used to maintain the racial contract, albeit through white ignorance (Mills, 1997, p. 2).

While studying the fevered attacks against CRT through Amazon reviews might seem tangential, we argue that it is crucial for surfacing the cyclical and dangerous nature of disinformation. Disinformed whiteness not only spreads hate and fear, which sidetracks any meaningful conversation and acts towards racial justice, but the response to disinformation—seen in states like Florida, where bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Diaz, 2023)—writ large, leaves a vacuum of knowledge. In creating the vacuum, racialized people's knowledge, theorization, and experience, and ultimately, their humanity is at risk of erasure, making way for the whitestream to continue as always, unquestioned and ignored by white people. This vacuum is one that, given our postdigital society's hunger for content, is rife to be filled by whatever theory best aligns with the goals of white supremacy. For example, on the eve of submitting this article, a white man killed 10 people in a grocery store with a gun inscribed with the N-word (Peters, 2022). Citing "great replacement theory," the terrorist justified his actions as saving the American (white) way of life. It is no coincidence that in his tenure at Fox News, Tucker Carlson (who also catalyzed the current anti-CRT movement), has discussed replacement theory over 400 times. This theory proposes that *[insert minoritized group here]* is superseding white culture and, in 2019, was the cudgel for a man in El Paso, Texas, who killed 23 people and a man in Christchurch, New Zealand, who murdered 51 people (Peters, 2022).

We name these mass shootings to acknowledge that our focus can no longer be on revealing whiteness to white people or that postdigital spaces are innocent. That Fox News allowed one of

its most popular pundits to air the grievances of replacement theory is proof enough that white people are well aware of the racialized social system and are willing to kill to maintain and profit from it. The refrain of replacement theory echoed in the disinforming words of Amazon reviewers, who argued that there is no white privilege, white supremacy is over, and if *anyone* should be aggrieved, it is white people, whose star is diminishing. Banning CRT simply creates the space and non-critical-thinking skills for "theories" such as great replacement to breed.

For postdigital studies of education understanding how whiteness and disinformation intertwine in digital spaces is crucial. From where teachers obtain their content, to the ways that students and parents think about the role and goal of education, disinforming whiteness continues to go viral across digital platforms. Disinformation feeds the fires of white ignorance, "designed to manufacture white grievance in the service of white power" (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 9). Problematically, the response to conservative mobilization has rested on pointing out that the CRT portrayed in these campaigns is inaccurate. However, our analysis of Amazon reviews shows that people are not looking for accuracy but assurance that they will not be made liable for white supremacy. As educators and researchers, we should not waste our time arguing "but that is not CRT" with those who are committed to not hearing this. Instead, we must make plain that the humanization of white people, hinges on white ignorance and supremacy predicated on the dehumanization of non-white people (King, 2019). To counter feigned ignorance, we must hold a united front against disinformation, calling out how the justification of banning antiracism in the classroom exemplifies political and legal systems' support of white-humanization through Othered-dehumanization (Kreiss et al., 2021). To do so would be to embrace the spirit, the knowing, the scholars, and the goals of CRT.

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“A Bunch of Liberal, Nazi Communists”: Equity-Oriented Educational Leaders’ Response to the Anti-CRT Phenomenon in Iowa

Leslie Ann Locke¹ & Ann Blankenship-Knox

Abstract

On September 22, 2020, Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13950, titled “Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.” While the order has been revoked, as of May, 2022, 34 states, including Iowa (HF 802), had passed or were considering legislation prohibiting the use of critical lenses, such as Critical Race Theory, in public K-12 schools. In this study, we interviewed equity-oriented leaders in Iowa about how they are navigating HF 802, Iowa’s “anti-CRT” law, while remaining committed to their work. Qualitative analyses revealed three significant themes titled: Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy; Informants and Attacks; and Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802. Recommendations for leadership practice and policy change are included.

Keywords: *anti-CRT, critical race theory, educational leaders*

Introduction

On September 22, 2020, then President Donald Trump issued Executive Order (EO) 13950, titled “Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” (Trump, 2020). Alleging to promote “unity in the workplace,” the EO sought to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating” (Trump, 2020, p. 60683). While the EO did not prohibit the use of critical race theory (CRT) explicitly, its definition of what constitutes “divisive concepts” included several of the fundamental tenets of CRT, including the ideas of systematic racism, meritocracy, and privilege (Trump, 2020, p. 60685). Despite vociferous challenges by those in the civil rights community and a legal challenge claiming that the EO violated individual rights to free speech, equal protection, and due process, the EO resulted in the cancelation of at least 300 diversity and inclusion trainings (George, 2021). While President Biden revoked the EO on his first day in office, the damage was done. As of June 2021, 25 states had proposed legislation or EOs issued (or were in the works) that prohibited the use of CRT in public schools (Kim, 2021). This number escalated to 34 states by May 2022. As of this writing, 18 states have passed and implemented their versions of “anti-CRT” legislation, nine states have proposed or have similar legislation in process, and 17 states have vetoed, stalled, or overturned “anti-CRT” legislation (World Population Review, 2023).

1. Corresponding author: Leslie Ann Locke, Minnesota State University, Mankato: leslie.locke@mnsu.edu

With nearly identical to passages of Trump’s EO, Iowa’s anti-CRT law—House File (HF) 802—enacted in 2021, largely prohibits “race or sex stereotyping” in workplace trainings in government agencies, including public schools. HF 802 does not explicitly prohibit the use of CRT; however, it does explicitly ban the use of some of its key tenets in workplace trainings (e.g., the institutional and systemic nature of racism, myth of meritocracy, and race privilege) (H.F. 802, 2021, Section 1(2)). And while the law does not prohibit teachers from addressing topics such as “sexism, slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination” (H.F. 802, 2021, Section 1(4)(d) in the classroom, it does prevent teacher trainings that support teachers in learning how to present this curriculum with a critical or culturally responsive lens. Further, the law protects against “discomfort” a teacher or other employee might feel in trainings when engaging topics like racism, sexism, history, inequities, and so on (Faison, 2021, n.p.). Important to note here is the co-opting of language. To this point, Matias (2017) wrote that the use of co-opted terms and phrases, we argue like “race or sex stereotyping” among others in HF 802,

... are strategic maneuvers used to mask white supremacist ideologues who have co-opted Civil Rights vocabulary or American freedom terminologies for the purpose of masking their bigotry as the moral, patriotic way. As a result, racists today are often even more emboldened to parade their racism in some perverted and twisted application of the 1960s Civil Rights vocabulary or American freedom fighter rhetoric. (p. 122)

Another important point to make at this junction is the use of the term “discomfort” in HF 802. Being that comfort and discomfort are emotions that are highly subjective and individual, banning “discomfort” reflects a refusal to hear about race (racism) and/or sex (sexism) as “key factors in educational practices and policies” (Matias, 2017, p. 127) and reaffirms white comfort (white, male comfort more specifically) as paramount and untouchable.

White people feeling discomfort in Iowa is an interesting consideration as the state is majority white. However, while Iowa is predominantly white, public schools across the state are becoming more racially/ethnically diverse, and are sites where demographic change is clear. The percentage of white students in Iowa’s public schools has been on a slow, downward trend for several years, while the percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students has been on a steady rise (see Locke & Schares, 2016). Currently, nearly 26% of students statewide identify as non-white, the majority of whom identify as Latinx (12%) and Black (7%) (Iowa Department of Education [IDOE], 2022). Similar racial/ethnic diversity among the educator workforce has not kept pace; 3% of teachers, 4% of principals, and 2% of superintendents identify as people of Color statewide (IDOE, 2022).

In a state like Iowa, where the majority of students are white (despite some demographic shifts), and the *vast* majority of educators are white, a ban on CRT in schools seems unnecessary, as it almost certainly has never existed in schools. Furthermore, and despite an anti-CRT law on the books, Iowa schools (like others across the country) have perpetuated and reinforced class, racial, and gender stratifications in egregious ways (Glanz, 2006). Many students have felt “discomfort” as a result of these stratifications, particularly students of Color (Crenshaw, 2010). However, their discomfort is not addressed in HF 802.

In this study, we trouble this context with self-identified equity-oriented educational leaders who are seeking to follow seemingly conflicting legal directives. Our goal with this study is to interrogate the following research question: *How do equity-oriented educational leaders, charged with providing equitable educational opportunities for all students in Iowa, stay committed to their*

work while navigating HF 802? In the second part of this article, we provide a brief review of literature on Critical Race Theory, its use in schools, and legislative attacks against it. In the third section of this article, we provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks we used as we conceptualized this study and analyzed the data. In the fourth section, we provide an overview of our research methods and results. In the fifth and final section, we discuss implications for practice and conclusions.

Literature Review of Critical Race Theory in K-12 Schools

Numerous scholars have set out to define CRT and its tenets, and each definition varies a bit. For the purposes of this study, we rely on the following to understand the tenets of CRT as they have developed from critical legal studies (CLS) and as they apply to K-12 schools (among other contexts): Permanence of racism (Tate, 1997), or the ‘ordinary-ness’ of racism as well as its inheritability and power in supporting the interests and mobility of whites (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Interest convergence, or the idea that whites will support racial reforms when the reforms also benefit whites (Bell, 1980). Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), or the embeddedness of racism in U.S. society and relatedly, how whiteness operates and legitimizes benefits that white people enjoy simply because they are white. The critique of liberalism, or the troubling of ‘colorblindness’ and incrementalism, both of which allow for the perpetuation of racist policies and practices (Crenshaw, 1988). Counterstory or counternarrative(s), or the highlighting of stories and experiences from those who have been marginalized by policies and practices based on aspects of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, age, immigrant status, religion, and so on) (Delgado, 1989).

It is imperative to recognize that CRT is not a specific curriculum but rather a critical lens with which to analyze history, praxis, policy, rules, and so on (see Gilborn, 2013; Locke & Grooms, 2022; Matias et al., 2014; Parker, 2003; Tate, 1997). Crenshaw specifically describes it as “a practice. 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” (as cited in Karimi, 2021, para. 5). Crenshaw goes on to note, “Like American history itself, a proper understanding of the ground upon which we stand requires a balanced assessment, not a simplistic commitment to jingoistic accounts of our nation’s past and current dynamics” (as cited in Karimi, 2021, para. 10). CRT requires interrogation of our past and present with a critical lens and a more inclusive understanding of our history; it does not, as some argue, teach students to “hate their country” (Kaplan & Owings, 2021, p. 2).

As CRT is an analytical tool it is almost exclusively applied by faculty and advanced students in higher education circles, not in K-12 contexts. Yet, in the midst of the “culture wars,” CRT has been attacked and weaponized by those in the media, Republican law makers, conservative political groups and activists (e.g., the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism [FAIR] and their associated state-level “Parent Alliance” groups, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Manhattan Institute, and The Heritage Foundation), claiming that CRT is a Marxist ideology that threatens “the American way of life” (Karimi, 2021, para. 2). Principals and other school leaders, however, play an integral part in building and maintaining high-quality and inclusive educational spaces (DeMatthews et al., 2021). In an educational context in which low-income students and students of Color have been disproportionately segregated, disproportionately disciplined, and over-identified for special education services, it is imperative for school leaders to understand how educational systems have and continue to function for the benefit and to the detriment of students

(U.S. Department of Education, 2018); furthermore, they must be able to navigate the “intersectional and complicated co-relational forces of oppression (not limited to racism, ableism, sexism, nativism, xenophobia) that interlock and intersect in ways that maintain exclusion” (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 5). In this study, we focus on a group of equity-minded educational leaders attempting to navigate a system in which they are trying to deconstruct these systems of oppression in a hostile policy context.

Theoretical Frameworks

While CRT is a policy focus of this article and it informs our approach to this work, we did not use it as an analytic framework. Rather, we used two alternate theoretical frames to inform this study: transformative leadership and equity-based systems leadership, as we believe both frames are imperative for providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. Unlike transformational leadership, which focuses on system change generally, transformative leadership requires leaders to create change by challenging power dynamics and systemic inequities (Nevarez et al., 2013). According to Nevarez et al. (2013), “transformative leadership is a social-justice oriented approach undergirded by notions of democracy” (p. 143). Transformative leaders ground all of their work in equity, beginning with themselves; transformative leaders regularly engage in self-reflection to ensure that their work is not clouded by bias (Shields, 2017).

Equity-based systems leadership compliments transformative leadership in that it “challenge[s] and seek[s] to redress racist, oppressive, and deficit-based systems and structures that have sustained educational disparities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p. 6). Educational leaders are well positioned to disrupt inequitable systems and structures because they can “couple their understanding of power, privilege, and the political nature of schooling with advocacy to redress existing inequities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p. 7). With a greater focus on the drivers of high-impact leadership practices and how they work to deconstruct oppressive structures (Wilson et al., 2013), this frame is particularly helpful in approaching topics related to educational laws and policies (and those who seek to disrupt them). Both frameworks helped us approach and make meaning of a policy context in which equity-oriented leaders are forced to challenge systematic constraints to adhere to what they understand are best practices for all students and to uphold their own educational values.

Without restrictive policies like HF 802, transformative and equity-based systems leadership could manifest in several ways. For example, equity-oriented educational leaders could explicitly plan and implement anti-racist professional development to support teachers as they engage in reflection and introspection, adapt curriculum, grow in their pedagogical skills, and embrace culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Paris, 2012). Further, these leaders could be free to create equity-oriented teams inclusive of educators, community members, and students with various responsibilities to openly critique and challenge lopsided policies and practices, and to ensure that equity, anti-racism, and supporting *all* students, remains at constant center in schools (Irby et al., 2020).

Positionality

Researcher positionality informs every aspect of the research, from conceptualization of the research problem to interpretation and meaning-making. We want to be transparent about our

own positionalities so that readers may use that knowledge to inform their reading of the research (Holmes, 2020).

I (Leslie) am a first-generation high school graduate, cisgender, white woman. While my parents did not graduate from high school, the narrative around education in our house was counter to what many colleagues and fellow educators assume (that my parents don't care about or support education). The very opposite was the reality in our house. My parents discussed how they wished they could have finished school and would have been able to have different opportunities as a result. It was my parents' narratives that guided me toward studying education. I finished high school, attended a community college, then a major university, then went on to receive a master's degree, then a doctorate. I don't know if any of those things would have happened without the support of my parents and their strong narratives about education (Locke, 2017).

While I do not experience the privileges that come from being raised in a middle or upper socioeconomic class home, nor do I experience privilege based on my gender or sex as compared to white cisgender men, I do experience privilege as a white person. As a scholar who is interested in understanding how education systems continue to underserve students, families, and communities who also experience systemic oppression and marginalization, I know that my perceptions and experiences as a white woman with a Ph.D. influence what I see and how I interpret and interact with others and with institutions.

I (Annie) identify as a white queer woman who was raised in an upper-middle class household and has had the opportunity to obtain two graduate degrees in law and educational leadership. I am also a wife and mother of two boys—I want them to have more than what our current world provides—more compassion, opportunity, and harmony. While my higher education identity has always included a social justice lens, my commitment to systematic change has intensified since becoming a mother. I believe that all children should have access to 1) educational spaces that support deep, critical learning; 2) factually accurate information about history and the tools to make meaning from it; and 3) learning materials that allow students to feel represented. While I attempt to approach data and analysis from a neutral place, my identities, privilege, and values certainly inform how I see the world.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis

In this study, we used a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The focus of this methodology is to capture how participants make meaning of their experiences. By engaging in in-depth, semi-structured, and interactive interviews, we were able to gain a deep understanding of how our participants collectively were making meaning of a shared experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, this methodology allowed us to understand our participants' experiences within their specific and shared contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2012). Specifically, this approach allowed us to uncover patterns of experience of equity-minded leaders who are trying to protect and promote equitable learning environments while navigating the new legal landscapes of HF 802.

To accomplish this goal, we used purposeful and snowball sampling to identify public K-12 building or district leaders in Iowa who self-identified as equity-oriented leaders. We invited seven leaders who represented a variety of schools and districts across the state, as well as diverse geographies (representing urban and rural schools and districts located in various parts of the state), to participate in the study and each accepted our invitation. Each educational leader participated in a 45-60 minute virtual interview. A profile of the participants is included in Table 1. In addition

to interviews, we also reviewed secondary data, which included reviews of websites, policies, and public meeting minutes/videos.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Role	School/District Geography	Years of Experience in Education	Gender (self-identified)	Racial Identity (self-identified)
Ana	Assistant Principal	urban	10	woman	Black
Jada	Leadership Partner	urban	15	woman	Black
Glen	Department Head	urban	25	man	Mexican American
Ben	Associate Superintendent	urban	20	man	White
Norm	Associate Principal	rural	10	man	White
Tom	Principal	rural	10	man	White
Joe	Principal	urban	12	man	White

We used inductive qualitative analyses as we collected the data. With this approach, we did not start with a predetermined list of themes based on an organizing framework as we would when using a deductive approach; rather, we identified themes and conclusions by focusing exclusively on the participant experiences (Thomas, 2006). This method involves immersing oneself in the data until the concepts and themes associated with the research question unfold (Curry et al., 2009). In inductive analysis, “although the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from *a priori* expectations or models” (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Means to establish trustworthiness beyond multiple forms of data collection included debriefing with each other as we collected and analyzed the data and with a trusted peer-colleague (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also conducted member checking with participants during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Results

Before expanding on the thematic findings, it is important to point out a few foundational and fundamental ideas that were shared across all the participants. First, they agreed that CRT is not being taught in their schools and districts. One participant noted, “*up until about a year ago,*

[many] knew nothing about CRT.” Second, they agreed that HF 802 is a means to limit teachers’ capacity to discuss racism and other systemic means of oppression purposefully with students. Some participants described HF 802 as a “gag order,” and a “muzzle.” And third, the participants agreed that this legislation is particularly hard on educators. Being seen as “sinister,” and called “a bunch of liberal, nazi communists,” “socialist pieces of shit,” and being accused of being “untrustworthy indoctrinators who are polluting everybody’s agenda and ruining their kids’ minds,” is taking its toll. However, they agreed that there is a lack of guidance on how to lead under this new legislation. Tom (Principal/rural district) aptly described their collective sentiment, “Nobody knows what to do. Nobody knows what violates 802. There is no guidance.”

We now move on from these foundational agreements to discuss the thematic findings. Our inductive analyses revealed three themes we have titled 1) Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy, 2) Informants and Attacks, and 3) Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802. Each theme is supported by subthemes. We use the participants’ perspectives to provide vivid representations of each theme and subtheme.

Leaders See the Critical Reality: White Supremacy

The leaders viewed HF 802 through critical lenses. They reported on its implicit motives of undermining equity and harming all students, but specifically and intentionally, students from marginalized groups. Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) and Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) agreed, noting that HF 802 “is a great example of white privilege in our white system” and that the law “... is trying to maintain a Euro-centric process,” respectively. In the end, as Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) said, “802 is trying to further marginalize the existence of our students of Color.” Further the leaders understood the intent of this legislation to be to impede teachers from helping students make connections between specific ideas and events to larger systems of oppression. For example, Jada (Leadership Partner/urban district) said, “The bill really tries to prevent teachers from acknowledging systems of oppression and to avoid particular topics and conversations.”

Retaliation and Resistance to Change

Jada (Leadership Partner/urban district) discussed HF 802’s impetus. She said,

It is cookie cutter legislation, and is a clear retaliation and retribution of the protests of 2020 and the momentum regarding racial justice and understanding. HF 802 stopped all of that. The attitudes of people who were starting to pivot to understanding what it is like to have to fight for equity and justice, all of that was shut down with the law. A lot of liberal teachers, I hear them say, “well I was gonna do something, but now I can’t because of this law.” Now they have an excuse for not doing the work—there is a law against doing things. The law exposes a lack of sincerity and lack of intention...and now it’s an excuse for lack of progress.

The leaders went on to note that some people just do not want to hear the facts. Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) shared that “802 limits and restrains teachers from presenting certain ideas. It is a means to intimidate educators and get us all to act a certain [the same] way.” Similarly, Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted that “...in effect, 802 has done what it was designed

to do and that was to stop teachers from speaking out on topics that are historical fact.” Jada summed up the retaliation and resistance to change aptly when she said, “This law intended to create fear and shut down conversations, and it has done that.”

Confusing and Silencing Teachers

The participants described how HF 802 is confusing teachers about content that they can and cannot discuss in class, and, as a result, is creating an environment of silence. Joe (Principal/urban district) described how the teachers in his building are “on eggshells.” In Norm’s (Assistant Principal/rural district) school, “for some teachers, it is not worth the risk to potentially violate 802. The easiest road is to avoid it,” even though his school serves majority Latinx students. To this point he continued:

It is better now that we are not in the presidential election cycle...But still, most of our staff just avoid topics around systems of oppression. There is still a lot of confusion and teachers are really conscious of not bringing up anything controversial at all. It’s not worth the risk, so they just avoid it to be on the safe side.

Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) shared similar experiences in his district. He said,

The biggest shift for teachers is that they have stopped talking about anything that they felt like even approached the line. For example, our 3rd grade teachers had a unit that mentioned slavery, and they were all up in arms about it, like ‘we can’t teach this, we are going to get in trouble.’ Even though I have dug through the law, talked with our district lawyers about it, provided professional development for the teachers on what they can and can’t say, the teachers still see anything that might be considered controversial, they won’t talk about it in class.

Informants and Attacks

We asked the leaders to talk about any pushback they have experienced since HF 802 went into effect. Many of the leaders explained that the pushback, often communicated through parents, is informed by students and staff who are inside the schools. That is, students and staff inside the schools report out to parent groups, who then reach out to the leaders with their concerns and complaints. As a result, the participants detailed experiences where their sense of trust has been compromised; they are fielding attacks from mob-like parent groups who often escalate complaints to school boards and to the state Board of Education.

Lack of Trust and Mob Mentality

Many of the leaders noted that parent complaints are frequently centered on books used in classes, or on particular teachers’ behaviors. In one school, a parent group brought a complaint to the state Board of Education about a book used at the junior high and the teacher who uses it. Regarding this event Tom (Principal/urban district) said the following:

The book is fiction but a boy in the story gets shot by the police. The parents said that the book is anti-police and violates HF 802. The superintendent pulled the book, but in the end, we allowed the book to be used in a choice format. But some folks in this parent group are still going after the teacher and she is a great teacher who builds great community in her classes. But some of those kids' parents are not on board with her no matter what. They are still complaining about her. Now they are complaining that she has a Black Lives Matter sticker on her computer.

Tom went on to discuss how this parent group is receiving information, and how trust inside his school has been compromised as a result. He also pointed out the mob-like mentality and efforts of the parent group. He said:

We have staff and students inside the school that are feeding this group information. When parents call, they are directly quoting 802. There are certain phrases that they are being instructed to say in their phone calls and write in their emails. We have some staff members within our building who support 802 and they feed information to these squeaky wheels. Once the can is open, they want blood. It's hard to build a community when you can't trust the kids in the class, or in a school when you can't trust your colleagues. It's a witch hunt.

Joe (Principal/urban district) referred to this mob-like phenomenon as "...the gotcha police. Teachers are being monitored pretty heavily--particularly by conservative kids who let their parents know."

Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted that the source of the problems may be that "Some of the school staff do not believe in equity, that all means all." He went on to describe a similar belief he perceived among parents. He said:

I feel like the majority of our parents don't care about all kids, they only care about their own [kid]. The mentality is that it's a race. And some parents are willing to do whatever it takes to put their kids in front of other kids in that race. Our white middle class families don't want to have any kid placed in front of their kid. So when we change practices to be more equitable for all, these parents get upset because they think it's not fair and places their kid at a disadvantage.

Leading, Navigating, and Subverting HF 802

When we asked the participants to talk about their leadership related to 802, they agreed that "There is a lot of confusion about how to lead on 802" and there is "a lot of gray area." Regardless of the ambiguity around the law, the leaders discussed how they are navigating it as well as subverting it. Their means of leading and subverting often included changing the ways they presented some topics, or semantics, as well as supporting teachers in their efforts to provide a critical education for students despite the law. They also noted that most students desire and are self-advocating for more critical education.

Semantics and Changes in Approach

The leaders discussed how they worked with teachers regarding what they can and cannot do according to HF 802. In some schools, the leaders provided workarounds for the buzzwords in HF 802, but instructed the teachers to stick to the content. For example, Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) said:

I tell the teachers that they can't say there is a system or that racism and sexism are ingrained in Iowa laws, not that they were doing that anyway. But I tell them you can't say this is what we mean when we say systemic racism. I think teachers are being creative with communicating the message that there are systems of oppression, but they can't explicitly connect the dots for the students.

In other schools, the law has resulted in more significant change. For example, Glen (Department Head/urban district) said:

HF 802 is a deterrent to the equity work we had going. So we decided that we were just going to call the equity work something different. But the other side is catching on. Now they are couching anything related to diversity, equity, and inclusion as CRT, I mean even social-emotional learning and Black History Month. We have had to change our professional development and our practice, particularly with some subjects, and be selective and careful of how we talk about things.

Supporting Teachers and Critical Education

Norm (Assistant Principal/rural district) noted that he is willing to absorb the pushback for teachers because "Systems of oppression and our actions throughout history are important for kids to know. Because how do you improve if you don't know the history and what it's doing and perpetuating itself?" In a similar vein, Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) commented, "I am not afraid to push the envelope. If I am upsetting this [anti-CRT] group, it reaffirms to me that I am doing something right." Tom (Principal/urban district) also commented that he supports his teachers and their freedom to teach. He said:

I don't want 802 to take away from teachable moments. If something happens in the news, we want to talk about it with the kids. I'm willing to fight that fight. If we can't talk about life, that's not education. I want the kids to have tough conversations and be able to handle difficult things. And not just get behind a computer and say whatever they want.

The participants were adamant that while they are supportive of critical education in their schools and districts, they were clear in their conviction that this is still not CRT. To this point Ben said,

I don't see CRT as equivalent to diversity, equity, inclusive practices, supporting transgender kids, making sure that our students from marginalized groups have a positive experience at school. That is not CRT. That is just being an inclusive environment for all kids.

Student Advocacy for Critical Education

Even though CRT is not being taught in their schools and districts, participants reported that students value and are self-advocating for more critical education. For example, Glen (Department Head/urban district) noted that in his district “We have heard from some students who worry that what we are doing is not enough. That we are not pushing hard enough.” In other schools and districts critical education may be more common. For example, Ana (Assistant Principal/urban district) recalled

When the kids find out that there is a law that your teacher can’t say this, this, or this. And they get fired up. Our Black Student Union did a session on CRT where they tried to teach their peers what CRT was, and alert them that ‘hey, this might be why your teacher seems like they might be tiptoeing around things.’ So the students are trying to have their voices heard in the face of legislation that is trying to silence them and marginalize their experiences.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Iowa’s anti-CRT law, HF 802, has its origins in Trump’s Executive Order and the movement of racial reckoning that occurred post-George Floyd’s murder. It is a retaliatory and oppressive school policy. The critical, equity-oriented, and transformative leaders who participated in this study clearly see the law as a means to support white supremacy and to suppress the struggle for equity in education, and as a disservice to education, educators, and students—particularly those who represent marginalized groups (Nevarez et al., 2013). They saw it as a “gag order,” “a muzzle” to support whiteness. We agree.

Although it has not removed CRT from the schools, as it did not exist there in the first place, HF 802 has proven effective in its ulterior motives (Kaplan & Owings, 2021). Through the strategic use of ideological and co-opted language (Matias, 2017) it has confused and intimidated teachers, censored conversations, and interrupted progress regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (Kim, 2021). It has worked to deprofessionalize education and further exhaust teachers. It has suppressed education about particular historical facts and empowered critics. HF 802 opened the door for teachers to be threatened with their jobs, and their curricula to be surveilled (Strunk et al., 2021) and scrutinized. It has prioritized and emboldened white emotionality and comfort (Matias, 2016; 2017). Supporters of this legislation have purposefully made their way through the door. HF 802 is not only a bully (Kim, 2021), it is an attack (Matias, 2017)—white supremacy wrapped in policy.

The participants detailed their experiences leading within this legal context and sustaining their equity-oriented practice. As transformative (Nevarez et al., 2013) and equity-based leaders who support social justice, they worked to challenge power dynamics and systemic inequities (Nevarez et al., 2013), and implemented systems-level workarounds to this policy and adhered to what they understood to be best practices for their students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). For example, they navigated and subverted HF 802 through the use of changes in language or semantics and by creating “choice” options for some curricula. They “pushed the envelope” and felt validated when they upset the supporters of HF 802. Many of the leaders remarked, however, that the pushback and attacks are constant. Being called liberals, nazis, communists, and socialist pieces of shit is

the least of their worries. More concerning in the midst of these attacks, is the concomitant nationwide teacher shortage. These leaders are rightly concerned that legislation like HF 802 will be the proverbial last straw. They worry that the passionate and quality teachers and administrators will finally leave the profession. To this point Ben (Assoc. Superintendent/urban district) noted:

I was an administrator under George W. Bush and NCLB, and ratings and all that. I would welcome back those kinds of pressures, they seem so benign compared to what we are dealing with now. I mean this is just so scary. We have everything scrutinized by parents and they are doing everything they can to challenge schools, and we are just not used to it. This is the first time in 20 years I have considered getting out of education. I think we are going to lose good teachers and administrators because we are being attacked constantly.

The participants are not hopeful for the future of Iowa. Ben said “The next 5 to 10 years in Iowa look really scary. I think it is going to get worse before it gets better.” In a majority white state like Iowa, this outlook is particularly grim, especially for students of Color and students from other marginalized groups. Moreover, the percentage of non-white students continues to rise across the state (IDOE, 2022; Locke & Schares, 2016). With HF 802 solidly in place, their push for critical education will likely be ignored as their teachers fear attacks for engaging with certain topics. HF 802 will narrow the curriculum for all students and they will continue to receive a half-baked conceptualization of history. Their education will become progressively one-sided, and will ultimately result in a disservice to them individually, to society, and to Iowa.

We agree with Strunk et al. (2021) that educators must be agents of anti-racist change. However, this is impossible inside the shackles of HF 802. Many teachers and leaders alike serving public schools across the country have already lost their jobs due to conflicts over anti-CRT legislation and related political debates (Natanson & Balingit, 2022). Continued public and private support for teachers and finding ways for them to continue to deliver critical content are important, but we fear not enough. Beyond a wholesale reversal of HF 802, and we understand the risk involved, we recommend transformative and equity-based system leaders like those who participated in this study and others in schools and districts across Iowa use their voice and their vote as educator-activists to push back on this legislation. As the participants noted, they may not make much headway in terms of educating anti-CRT proponents and ideologues on what CRT is (and is not). But, leaders can use their position and voice to create alliances and to push back even harder against this institutional censorship (Strunk et al., 2021). They can push for and create spaces for equity and critical education in the face of this white supremacist bully.

Yet, K-12 educators should not have to do this advocacy alone. We have no doubt that this will be a “prolonged project of racial justice” (Matias, 2017, p. 119). We encourage more collaboration and allegiance among K-12 schools and districts with community organizations, policy centers, non-profits, and higher education, to make a consistent and collective push toward change. Collaboration among these groups and pushing new legislation, contacting political representatives, creating petitions, and supporting opponents of anti-CRT laws for seats on school boards and other local and state seats are just a few ideas. However, higher education has unique responsibilities to engage in this effort. As the participants noted, “Nobody knows what violates 802. There is no guidance.” Teacher and leadership preparation programs should be educating their candidates on how whiteness ideology (Matias, 2017) works and manifests in laws like HF 802 and helping them prepare for engagement with it and to develop the mental and emotional fortitude

to persist (Matias, 2017). Further, higher education as well as leadership/professional organizations should provide guidance and skills development to push back against HF 802 and sibling laws in other states. Researchers should be studying how anti-CRT laws are playing out in the various states and how educators are managing it. They should also study where anti-CRT laws may have been defeated and the strategies that were involved.

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Contributors

Dr. Cynthia Benally (Nát'oh Dine'é Táchii'hii dóó Ma'ii Deeshgiizhinii/Dine') is an Assistant Professor of Native American Education in the Department of Education, Culture, & Society at the University of Utah. As a Navajo who was educated in settler schools, her research interests intersect Native education with educational policies, curriculum and instruction, and teacher education. She has published in the *Journal of American Indian Education* and numerous books. Her research has been supported by the Spencer Foundation and the University of Utah.

Dr. Cathryn Bennett earned a doctorate in educational studies from UNC Greensboro's higher education program. Her dissertation research "refugee women and higher education across space, place, and time," a qualitative case study, investigated refugee women's educational experiences prior to arrival and in the U.S. South resettlement context. Her research interests include educational equity with historically minoritized populations including refugee, immigrant, and Latinx communities. As a white working-class queer scholar, she is committed to reflexively engaging her identities in research and prioritizing expansive access to education and the necessary tools for higher educational success.

Leana Cabral is a Teachers College Ph.D. Candidate.

Eric Cordero-Siy is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Boston University. Eric is a former math teacher. He focuses on in-service elementary mathematics teachers' sensemaking as they facilitate equitable classroom discussions focused on representations. He is also exploring the nature of knowledge production in mathematics education research.

Frances K. Harper (francesharper@utk.edu) is an Associate Professor of STEM (Mathematics) Education at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Frances is a former PK-12 mathematics and reading educator. Her current work explores the potential for teacher-family-community partnerships to advance racial justice in PK-5 STEM and mathematics education.

Lorien S. Jordan, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Educational Measurement and Research Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, University of South Florida. Lorien is a critical qualitative methodologist, focused on exploring the sociocultural dynamics and politics of knowledge production to problematize the white-westernized canonization of theory and methodologies.

Dr. Ann E. Blankenship Knox is the Associate Dean of Students and Title IX Coordinator. She is responsible for the Office of Disability Services, Title IX, student conduct, and Clery Reporting. She is also a teacher, researcher, and scholar in the areas of equity, education law, policy, and leadership theory and practice.

Dr. Leslie Ann Locke is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her research, teaching, and service is informed by a desire to understand the barriers students experience in education systems and to broaden access and opportunity for *all* students. Her research interests include justice- and equity-oriented leadership,

schooling for students from marginalized groups, education policy, and critical and qualitative methodologies.

Michael Lolkus (mikelolkus@cpm.org) recently graduated from Purdue University. Michael is a former secondary mathematics teacher, instructional coach and department chair, and now works at an educational nonprofit organization focused on secondary mathematics. He develops and explores the promise of culturally sustaining and social justice-focused mathematics curricula.

Stefanie McKoy, Ph.D., is a teacher of Special Education and Adjunct Professor at the University of Arkansas. Stefanie's research focuses on gifted education, teacher education, and digital ethnography.

Sietta Parks is a Teachers College Ph.D. Candidate.

Rachel Piontak is a Ph.D. Candidate, Public Policy, University of Arkansas. Rachel's research focuses on the impact of whiteness throughout the policymaking process. Using critical whiteness studies as a framework, she is specifically interested in state-level legislation against critical race theory in public education.

Dr. Delma Ramos is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work examines the experiences of historically minoritized populations in higher education from an equity and social justice lens and is unified by its focus on interrogating paradigms and ideologies that sustain inequity in higher education and highlighting assets, agency, and resistance of minoritized communities. Accordingly, her research addresses issues at the intersection of race, class, and gender, within the normative environments of institutions of higher learning, and the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts within which they exist.

Dr. Vanessa Anthony Steven (White/Settler) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences at the University of Idaho. She is married to Dr. Philip Stevens, and mother to two daughters, Carmen and Hazel Stevens. Vanessa's research highlights the gifts of Indigenous community centered education and the tenacity of critical participatory research to advance local educational equity. She is most interested in participating in settler-scholar response-ability to change in colonial institutions such as schools and universities, and delights in bending anthropological tools to build anti-oppressive learning communities. Vanessa's work has been featured in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Diaspora*, *Indigenous*, and *Minority Education*, the *Journal of American Indian Education*, and *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. Her efforts have been funded by various entities, including the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Spencer Foundation.

Kadesha Treco is a Ph.D. Student, Public Policy, University of Arkansas. Kadesha's research focuses on disability studies and the use of critical theories to explore how policies foster access to higher education for students with disabilities.

Amy Stuart Wells is Dean of Bank Street Graduate School of Education.