

Control of Education: Opposition to Critical Race Theory in the United States

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring 2022

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Abstract

United States compulsory education lacks the multi perspective narrative necessary to understand the entirety of the nation's history. Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents the true relationship between racism and American policies. This paper examines current American history curricula and discusses the importance of the inclusion of the pedagogy in K-12 education.

Introduction

Critical race pedagogy provides an understanding of the legacy of racism throughout American history. The framework has been described as a scholarly movement that seeks to uncover and dismantle systemic racism while rejecting incrementalism (Clark, 2020). Those that oppose the addition of CRT in compulsory education deem the framework to be “destructive” and “anti-white”. However, these narratives are gross exaggerations of the pedagogy. United States history is glossed over in K-12 education, thus it is essential that our future generations understand the racial unfairness that has been woven into the fabric of our institutions. CRT is used to understand issues such as housing and education segregation, unconscious bias, and criminal-justice reform (Clark, 2020). Within those issues, discussions transpire on determining and evaluating the course of actions that led to the effect on American societies today. Rejecting critical race pedagogy in compulsory education actively dismisses an accurate depiction of United States history.

Current Education System

The current system for public school education in America is established by each state, as they each retain their own curriculum. Standard guidelines, or learning goals, are usually developed by committees of educators, curriculum specialists at the state department of education, academics, and community members (Schwartz, 2021). Since there is no national curriculum on what students should be learning, there is no national consensus on what is being taught in the classroom. In many states, there are institutionalized approval processes that determine what textbook will be used (Mineo, 2022). This in turn leaves many states equipped with differing learning materials on our nation's history.

Textbooks' proclivity to differentiate their linguistic valence in racially biased ways persist in many contemporary textbooks (Jimenez, 2020). In an examination of 50 U.S. social studies textbooks published between the years 1860 and 2016, authors employed common rhetoric that relieved white people from their perpetrating roles. For instance, many of the analyzed texts consistently implored their readers to empathize with whites' suffering – even when treasonous—before approximatively describing non-white Americans' hardships (Jimenez, 2020). In addition, only 24% of analyzed textbooks discussed blacks' suffering, the same proportion attributed to soldiers experiencing hardship (Jimenez, 2020). Minimizing the adversity faced by domestic marginalized groups, while accentuating whites' hardships, fabricates a distorted reality of the past. Identifying how textbook authors may selectively use these stylistic discourses in biased ways has significant implications for understanding and addressing not only history instruction, but for contemporary civil rights struggles as well (Jimenez, 2020).

Recent studies from New York Times analyzed the differences between commonly used textbooks in Texas and California with the exact same author and publishers. The research noted, however, that contents sometimes diverge in ways that reflect the nation's deepest partisan divides (Goldstein, 2020). Examining those that were issued in 2016 or later, the textbooks utilized by California included more content on black progress, gender and sexuality, and immigrant and native perspectives. For instance, textbooks marketed to California note the "suburban dream" of the 1950s was inaccessible to many African Americans, while the books used by Texas do not mention housing discrimination at all (Goldstein, 2020). For the majority, the details may seem minuscule, however, they are essential for painting the entire picture of our nation's history because it is the truth. African Americans, as well as other minorities, were not afforded the same opportunities as white Americans.

Instead of focusing on mere facts, publishers are tailoring their textbooks to each state. As a result, public schools are guided to teach U.S. history based on their state's political views. This is revealed in the varying textbooks when describing the Reconstruction Era. California teaches students that Southern whites resisted Reconstruction because they did not want African Americans to have more rights (Goldstein, 2020). However, Texas offers a supplemental rationale that reform costs money, which signifies higher taxes (Goldstein, 2020). Political socialization in public institutions becomes apparent as the state pushes its political agendas onto public institutions' history courses. Not only are classroom materials shaded by politics, but they are also aiding in shaping a generation of future voters (Goldstein, 2020).

Interconnecting History

The Reconstruction period was a very prevalent and powerful time for African Americans. A factor of critical race theory is to emphasize where minority history and white history coincide. For over a century, celebrating Confederate history depended on erasing the many movements led by African Americans within the region (Parry, 2021). Nonetheless, minority perspectives are rarely ever shown in public school history classes, but that does not denote that important events were not occurring.

Particularly in the south, many African Americans worked for social change and never surrendered to white supremacy or institutionalized racism (Parry, 2021). White southerners were not welcoming of the reorganization of their states and they made that abundantly clear. History textbooks mention the effects of their vengeful impositions; however, they lack the diverse perspectives that had experienced the racially motivated animosity and acts of hatred. Reclaiming these narratives brings both complexity and accuracy to our understanding of the past and of the South — and it challenges political efforts seeking to manipulate the past to advance white supremacy, then and now (Parry, 2021). Although this era began with the emancipation of slavery and the downfall of the Confederacy, African Americans were only given an extremely small fragment of equality, which they would hold on to for almost 100 years.

Fast-forwarding through history, the Space Race was a significant time for the United States. K-12 education teaches their students about Niel Armstrong and John Glenn, as they are remembered respectively as the first Americans to land on the moon and orbit the Earth. In spite of the fact that white men were placed at the forefront of these huge accomplishments, there were many people part of marginalized groups that were forced to remain behind the scenes. For

example, the “West Computers” at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) represented a group of Black women who performed mathematical equations and calculations by hand (Howell, 2020). Kathrine Johnson was among these women and played a prominent role in aiding the first American to orbit the Earth. Although Jim Crow Laws were still in effect during this time period, destigmatizing the idea that Black people were not involved in major American accomplishments is crucial. African American history is American history and must be celebrated as such. Johnson did not receive national media recognition for her contributions until she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States, in 2015 (Howell, 2020). Many more examples of historical figures, such as Johnson, concealed in our nation's history exist. Their stories are just as relevant and should be taught alongside their white counterparts.

Civic Ideals

Particularly applicable in American government and civics courses, the overarching idea of CRT is to dissect systemic racism in the classroom. “The civics theme of power, authority, and government is included in all 51 states’ social studies standards, including the District of Columbia” (Circle, 2012). However, the concept of civics ideas is broad. This allows for each state to have different perceptions of its place and importance in education. Varying course objectives learned in this course is essential in K-12 education because it directly impacts civic behavior and engagement.

American civics and government classes in today's education system lack the impressionable experience needed to offer students a desire to be participating citizens. In a 2006 survey, only 11% of young adult Americans recalled two vital civic themes, “problems facing

the country today” and “racism and other forms of injustice in the American system” (Circle, 2012). The idea of these courses is to offer students the necessary skills to encourage active civic involvement. Through analyzing research, studies showed that civic education was engaging and memorable when it seemed relevant to civic experiences in their daily lives or current issues and problems (Circle, 2012). If course material is not, at least somewhat, applicable to present society, then student interest decreases.

In some instances, young people derive lessons from daily experiences that contrast with messages taught in social studies and civics classes (Circle, 2012). For example, students are taught the fourteenth amendment grants every citizen equal protection under the law. However, some may experience a very different reality. Particularly domestic marginalized groups in America are more likely to experience negative police encounters. In a study of poor to working-class men and women in Jersey City and Buffalo (1998), the majority of white men reported trust in the police (Gabbidon, Higgins, Potter, 2011). On the other hand, in the same study, Latina and Black women had little trust in the police (Gabbidon, Higgins, Potter, 2011). Due to racial bias and profiling, minorities experience higher levels of police stops and interrogations. Statistics from 2020 show that out of all the stop-and-frisks reported by the NYPD, 56% of those individuals were Black, while 9% were white (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2022).

The United States prison and jail population have increased at an unprecedented rate since the early 1970s (Mauer, King, 2007). Additionally, marginalized groups in America experience higher rates of incarceration. The growth of imprisonment is accompanied by an increasingly disproportionate racial composition, with particularly high rates of incarceration for African Americans, who constitute approximately 40.9% of the incarcerated population as of 2007 (Mauer, King, 2007). Since the Black population accounts for roughly 13% of people

living in the United States, the substantial racial disparity in the prison and jail system becomes apparent.

Public trust in the government, measured in 2016, was only at 18% (Shapiro, Brown, 2019). Research suggests that moderated discussions of contemporary issues and interactive activities promote active citizenship later in life (Circle, 2012). With the 2016 presidential election bringing a renewed interest in engagement among the youth, it is evident that succeeding generations are curious about the political scene (Shapiro, Brown, 2019). Topics relating to racial profiling and disparities would encourage students to challenge their own biases. If taught effectively, a civics education can supply students with the necessary skills and dispositions to be engaged citizens.

Analysis

Modern curricula frequently approach topics such as the Civil War and Reconstruction in incomplete and misleading ways (School of Education, 2021). When different states incorporate different learning tools, including textbooks, to instruct these concepts, individual state beliefs are passed down to their students. Textbooks consistently neglected to acknowledge the hardship experiences of domestic marginalized groups and, when their hardships were discussed, their narrative styles were likely to limit readers' inclination to be concerned about their oppression (Jimenez, 2020). Textbook authors employing linguistic valency prove how the manner in which we teach influences students' conceptualization of historical events. The public schooling system should remain neutral in regards to politics and should rather incite critical race thinking as it is extremely prevalent in today's society.

U.S. textbooks have long emphasized elite and white hardships while they have minimized the oppression experienced by people of color (Jimenez, 2020). On a similar note, marginalized groups were kept out of public view during major historical events and have never been recognized. K-12 education should practice inclusive education as people of color have essentially been eliminated from history. This in turn would allow for students with different backgrounds to engage with one another and learn about the collective past. Historical figures, such as Johnson, inspire non-white students to continue to bridge the racial gap in predominately white careers. Education should eliminate racial biases and celebrate their excellence.

Despite its omission in textbooks, systemic racism was no accidental feature of the American colonies (School of Education, 2021). However, compulsory education does not thoroughly inspect the racial unfairness in our institutions. While textbooks often emphasize the US Constitutions' lofty democratic goals, few teach how it guarantees inequality for future generations (School of Education, 2021). Educators should equip their students to be cognizant of how textbooks' discriminating use of approximative language may shape how they remember and process their course content (Jimenez, 2020). Civics education is a great opportunity to teach policy implementations that directly affected those from marginalized groups. Such topics stimulate dialogue that is essential to have in the classroom with instructors to aid in processing information.

Educators should encourage and support dialogue regarding race in the classroom. Although U.S. social studies textbooks have –to varying degrees –gradually increased their celebration of diversity and have begun to acknowledge the oppression of various marginalized groups over time, their continued discriminating use of affect-inducing strategies in discussing marginalized groups' oppression can potentially inhibit readers' from empathizing with their

experiences (Jimenez, 2020). Instead of relying on the media, such topics should be included in our schools' curriculums as K-12 students should not have to remain ignorant to present and past issues.

Counter Arguments

Critical viewpoints deem the pedagogy places too much emphasis on the darker moments of American history, to students' detriment (Schwartz, 2021). However, the misfortunate events of the past are essential to understanding the foundation of America, there is no escaping it. For instance, the Holocaust was an extremely dreadful time period for Germany. Yet, each of the 16 independent states in the country, which set their own curricula, collaborate on the one education matter (Johnstone, 2020). Students are even eager to discuss both the Nazi past and what might be the consequences for our present; they make connections between the experiences of segregation of Jews during Nazi times and the marginalization of present-day groups, like refugees (Johnstone, 2020). Instructing the critical race pedagogy is paramount for reviewing past and present matters. Countless historians have bemoaned that much of what students learn about their country is closer to mythology than history (Sawchuk, 2018). Employing a color-blind way of learning in the classroom inhibits students' way of identifying and critiquing the causes of social inequality in their own lives (Sawchuk, 2021).

Anti-CRT groups also believe the pedagogy vilifies white people by claiming all white people are racist (Sawchuk, 2021). Such critics fail to recognize the academic concept for what it is actively striving to achieve. Nonetheless, CRT puts an emphasis on outcomes, not merely on individuals' own beliefs, and it calls on these outcomes to be examined and rectified (Sawchuk, 2021). Additionally, the main idea of the pedagogy is to acknowledge and unveil how racism has

shaped public policy. The objective is not to discriminate against white students but to rather understand the disadvantages placed upon their fellow students of color.

In some states, lawmakers have tried to restrict antiracism training or the teaching of what they call “divisive concepts” (Stout, Wilburn, 2021). Since critical race theory is not technically incorporated in school curricula, states have been administering adroit legislation to predate the elimination of the usage of the pedagogy. As of 2022, there have been tracked efforts in 36 states to restrict education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics (Stout, Wilburn, 2021). Aforementioned states are directly hindering students' learning on relevant concepts in an increasingly diversifying society.

Conclusion

United States history instructed in K-12 education is taught through one narrative, a white perspective. Racism is systemic and is inherent in much of the American way of life, no matter how far removed we are today from its origins. Compulsory schooling is a crucial time to build fundamental knowledge and challenge critical thinking. Since we live in society beyond our choosing, we should embrace this opportunity to confront America's past and teach more authentic and accurate narratives. Our past informs our present, and our future lies within the next generation. Students in compulsory education will be our future teachers, lawyers, activists, political leaders, etc. The United States has the responsibility of instructing the nation's history thoroughly so that learners are capable of constructing their own comprehensive decisions and opinions.

Accepting the critical race pedagogy would allow for Americans to learn from history, rather than replicating it. Instead of portraying the country as unified after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, CRT allows for instructors to challenge the negative perceptions of marginalized groups in America. Although the majority of the country is trying to eliminate culturally relevant teaching, some states are adding ethnic studies courses or incorporating more about people of color into their learning standards (Stout, Wilburn, 2021). In doing so, students can further be encouraged to probe for such biases themselves, whether in their school textbooks, contemporary media narratives, or even in their own writing.

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