A Brief Introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT)

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You just look like you've got a tan.

Do you have hair under your hijab?

Do people eat insects in your country?

I just don't see colour.

I don't think of you as black.

Call it racism.

#CallItRacism

CRT in the field of Education

From its origins in critical legal studies and radical feminism in the United States of America, CRT has sought to transform the relationship between race, racism and power in challenging liberalism and denying the neutrality of the law (Hartlep, 2009:4). CRT has grown to become one of the most important perspectives on race and racism in education internationally. It offers an insightful and nuanced approach to understanding the processes that shape and sustain race inequality in society (Crenshaw, 2002; Tate, 1997).

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that CRT offers an account of society based on systemic, deep-rooted racist oppression that saturates our judgements to the extent that all but the most extreme racism appears normal and unexceptional, simply 'business as usual'. CRT is one of the fastest growing and most controversial fields of contemporary social theory, and education is the discipline where it's most dynamic and challenging work is taking place.

Moreover, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) discuss how CRT considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, and even feelings and the unconscious. They continue that unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and principles of constitutional law.

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… CRT helps educators to question structures, policies, dominant cultures and practices that reproduce unequitable social structures …"

CRT as a Framework

Critical Race Theory is a framework that offers educators/practitioners/researchers a race conscious lens to understand structural racism and educational inequality. It offers a set of tools that aim to disrupt the status quo and seek solutions that promote social justice activism. It is essential in creating an environment where equality of opportunity for all students is valued and it offers students a broader critical perspective of structural injustices that affect certain groups globally vis-à-vis educational opportunities, i.e. access to education, and educational outcomes, as well as future chances. In so doing, CRT helps educators to question structures, policies, dominant cultures and practices that reproduce unequitable social structures that continue to privilege White people. It is thus a tool to "*deconstruct* oppressive structures and discourses, *reconstruct* human agency and *construct* equitable and socially just relations of power" (emphasis added, Ladson-Billings, 1998:19).

There are five major tenets of CRT:

1. Racism is ordinary, 'business as usual' and not aberrational.

2. Interest convergence – Bell's (1980) theory refers to the phenomenon of White people allowing people of colour to progress whilst also promoting their own interests. Taylor (2009) asserts that Whites will only encourage racial equality or advances if it promotes their self-interest.

3. Social construction of race, and the mutating nature of it – i.e. different groups face different forms of racism and marginalisation.

4. Storytelling and counter-storytelling – because the stories of marginalised individuals provide insights into existing inequalities and function as counter-narratives to the normative hegemonic discourse that has largely silenced their views.

5. White people have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation. The overall ethos of majority culture promotes and promulgates a notion of "colour-blindness" and "meritocracy." These two notions are mutually intertwined and serve to marginalise certain enclaves of people – predominately people of colour.

> **"Colour-blindness legitimises racism's need for an "other" in order to flourish and maintain its influence within the fabric of society."**

Colour-blindness and meritocratic rhetoric serve two primary functions:

First, they allow White people to feel consciously irresponsible for the hardships people of colour face and encounter daily and, secondly, they also maintain White power and strongholds within society. First, colour-blindness legitimises racism's need for an "other" in order to flourish and maintain its influence within the fabric of society. Racism and White supremacy are not aberrant, insofar as the oppressors – the status quo – exploit the "others" (the oppressed) in order to maintain their elitist control, as well as to claim that they are neutral. Close examination repudiates this false sense of neutrality. Second, meritocracy allows the empowered – the status quo – to feel "good" and have a clear conscience: many would ask why the powerful would not have a clear conscience since they maintain a majority of the wealth and power in society.

Rollock and Gillborn (2011) in an introductory article on the BERA site discussed how CRT continues to undergo revision and refinement in response to scholarship experiences of CRT academics in relation to new developments in legal doctrine and policy discourse (Gillborn and Ladson-Billings, 2010). They cited a common social constructivist perspective of race and racism and a commitment to understanding and opposing the systems that subjugate people of colour (Bell, 2009).

Intersectionality

Rollock and Gillborn add intersectionality to the tenets, where they state that while CRT is centrally concerned with the structures and relations that maintain racial inequality, it does not operate to the exclusion or disregard of other forms of injustice, recognising that no person has a single, simplistic unitary identity. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is an understanding of the complex and multiple ways in which a number of systems of subordination can come together at the same time (Crenshaw 1989). Adopting an intersectional framework allows for the exploration of differences within and between groups taking account of issues such as historical and socio-political context while still maintaining awareness of racial inequalities (Bhopal & Preston 2012; Brah & Phoenix 2004).

Related to intersectionality is the concept of 'differential racialisation' (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 8) which is concerned with the way in which dominant society racialises and gives focus to different minoritised groups at different times to suit hegemonic arguments of racial superiority and inferiority. An example of differential racialisation in UK education debates positions Chinese and Indian students as both aberrant and unique, 'model minorities' in juxtaposition to their less successful Black and White peers (Gillborn 2008: 146).

Another example of the racialisation regarding Muslim children is how they are perceived through the lens of 'radicalisation' and 'existential threat' (Busher, 2017), which makes them vulnerable to further exclusion and questioning under the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act' (2019).

CRT in Praxis:

CRT scholars see it as a tool that helps educators to situate any discussed theory/notion within a classroom into its societal/legal/regional and historical context through invoking real accounts, from the margins and stories that counter mainstream narrative or that bring to the light the omitted, 'erased' part of the story (Ladson-Bliings, 1998).

Further Reading:

The Anti-Racist Educator (2020) *Unpacking Critical Race Theory with a Pinch of Black British History* (podcast) Available from: https://www.theantiracisteducator.com/post/unpacking-critical-race-theory-with-a-pinch-of-black-british-history 20th July (last accessed 19th August 2021)

Bhopal, K. & Preston, J. (2012) *Intersectionality and Race in Education*. London: Routledge

Brah, A. & Phoenix, A. (2004) 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies. 5*(3): pp. 75-86.

Busher, J. Choudhury, T. Thomas, P. and Harris, G. (2017) 'What the Prevent duty means for schools and colleges in England: An analysis of educationalists' experiences'. Aziz Foundation.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics'. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, pp. 139-168.

Crenshaw, K.W. (2002) 'The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or "A Foot in the Closing Door"'. In Valdes, F., Culp, J. M., & Harris, A. P. (2002) *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J. (2001) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 2001 (2nd ed. 2012, 3rd ed. 2017).

Gillborn, D. (2008) *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?* London: Routledge.

Gillborn, D. & Ladson-Billings, G. (2010) 'Critical Race Theory'. In P. Peterson, E. Baker and B. McGraw (Eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Education*. Volume 6, pp. 341-347. Oxford: Elsevier.

Harlep, N., D. (2009) 'Critical Race Theory: An Examination of its Past, Present, and Future Implications' https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506735.pdf

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998) 'Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, pp. 7-24.

Tate, W.F. (1997) 'Critical Race Theory and education: history, theory and implications'. *Review of Research in Education*, *22*(1): pp. 195-247.

Offensive questions, stereotypes and 'jokes' have a lasting impact on individuals, affecting their mental health, career progression and overall welfare at college or university.

It's time to stop sweeping these microaggressions under the rug.
Call racism out for what it is and challenge unacceptable behaviour.

It's time to take a stand.

#CallItRacism

Call it racism | Challenge racist behaviour | Change racist structures