

Critical Race Theory: Follow-up from the 1/19 Panel Discussion – YOUR Questions Answered!

Q: What is Critical Race Theory?

A: Critical Race Theory (“CRT”) is a school of thought that was founded on the writings of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Allen Freeman, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. It rejects the idea that *“what is in the past is in the past”* and looks at this country’s history of white supremacy and its relationship to modern-day systems and laws.



*PLUS...
Dr. Brian Gibbs
(UNC School of
Education)
answers
additional
audience
questions!*

Q: What, if any, counter-messaging would be most effective against misrepresentations of CRT?

A: This is a crucial and difficult question. At this point, misrepresentations of CRT are coming from across sectors of society from state legislation, multiple media outlets, community members, and many others. Some of these are targeted misinformation attempts, while others are the victims of the misinformation. Effective counter-messaging depends on who is speaking, what they are saying, who you are, and where the conversation is taking place. What is necessary is counter-messaging on what CRT is and is not, and what culturally relevant, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and justice-oriented pedagogy are and are not. The bottom line is the reality of what CRT is and what culturally relevant, sustaining, and justice-oriented pedagogy are need to get out. This means engaging in the difficult discussion with family and friends, neighbors and community members, writing letters to the editor and Op-Eds, and directly responding to misinformation. In personal conversations, asking a question is often more important and powerful than beginning with an argument. "How do you define CRT?" and "how do you see CRT being used in schools?" can be very enlightening in that the person you are speaking with is either unable to clearly define and explain or that their explanation is rife with misinformation and misunderstanding. This can give you an entry point in either directing them to specific information or engaging them in conversation once they have revealed their specific level of knowledge. Again, *what is important is the engagement*. I also think that with community members, neighbors, friends, and family, it is important to remember that these need not be one off conversations, but a series of conversations. Not only can this be a way to get authentic knowledge into the community, but it could also create community between yourself and the person you have been speaking with and begin to create real change.

Q: Why is there so much apprehension about telling the truth of the events of American history? It can only make us stronger.

A: Unfortunately, this is not a new tension. The teaching of American history has always been, but with few exceptions, a nationalist endeavor. That is, American History is typically presented as an unfurling of greatness with bumps along the way that were remedied over time by great Americans. Enslaved people were freed and given rights. Women were allowed to vote. Members of the queer community are gaining rights and acceptance. The United States, like many countries, and even organizations, hang onto cherished myths of our beginnings and how, despite conflict and difficulty, we have been able to endure becoming even more powerful and true to ourselves than before. The reality is of course quite different. Racism and misogyny are inscribed in the United States Constitution. For some time to offer a critique of the United States or to point out discrimination and violence was to be anti-American. This has experienced a serious uptick in the run up to the 2016 presidential election and the election of President Trump. In the cult of personality that developed around President Trump to critique him was to critique the country. In response to the growing movements and growing traction of the Black Lives Matter movement and the New York Times 1619 Project, which offered a more (*continued onto next page...*)

rich, full, and authentic history of the United States, expanding and deepening the history of enslaved and formerly enslaved persons and the institution of slavery, the Trump Administration responded with the 1776 Commission. The 1776 Commission presents American history in mythic, uncomplicated, and uncritical fashion. The commission presents the Founding Fathers as unimpeachable heroes rather than complex historical actors. It seems in the simplest terms that telling the truth of American history makes some uncomfortable with the historical realities and causes a fear that an honest accounting of our past will somehow weaken us and degrade the sacrifices made by our ancestors. This of course, oversteps and avoids the reality that all of our ancestors were not treated the same, but all need to be known and understood. A central tenet of the anti-CRT school-based legislation like H.B. 324 here in North Carolina is that students should not be made to feel bad while studying our history. The legislation seems focused on white students, particularly that they are not responsible for the past and should not be made to feel poorly because of it. Discomfort is part of examining the truths. It can raise trauma particularly amongst students who are of color. This is not a reason to not engage in this work, but we are cautioned to do this teaching thoughtfully, with a strong classroom community and that we are mindful of student reaction as it is taught.

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Q: What can be done about parents/school boards that want to ban books from school/public libraries?

A: Sadly, again, this is not something new. The banning of books in schools has been a common practice for decades. A text titled, *What Johnny Shouldn't Read: Textbook Censorship in America* provides a strong historical overview of this crisis and the politics behind it. In short, what we need to do is resist. While there have always been parents and other community members who have pressured schools to remove certain books and not teach them, it has been raised to crisis levels more recently. Possibly inspired by the January 6 insurrection, community members and parents, labeling themselves as activists, have taken over school board meetings, shouted down school board members and others and pressured school boards to remove texts from their shelves. School board members are choosing to resign and not run for re-election under pressure and threat. This places all authentic teaching and particularly history teaching, at risk. This also seems connected to the larger trend of distrust of experts that we are also seeing play out in the anti-vaccination crusades. While schooling should be democratic, inclusive of parent and community voice in how children are educated, teachers, principals, and other school-based professionals are well-educated and should be listened to and have the final word in the organization of curriculum and pedagogy. (Continued).

What should be done is counter-action and protest. This highlights the importance of voting in and running for your local school board, as well as visibly showing up to libraries and speaking directly to librarians, educators, and others in support of the books and of the professionals who often feel very exposed and unsupported as they work to preserve the texts in their libraries.

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Q: What do you recommend educators do in order to defend [anti-racist curriculums] to opposed parents?

A: The attack on anti-racist curriculum is not going to go away. Like the other questions in this section, it is not new. Too many Americans want an unapologetic, less than truthful, glorification of our past that is patriotic and nationalistic. The best defense for teachers is strong, thoughtful, and pedagogically-sound teaching – a classroom that has built a community and one where students are engaged, their voices are heard through discussion, investigation, inquiry, and sharing. This will not save any teacher from a critical phone call or an upset message to a principal, but strong, engaged teaching and thoughtful support of students as they make their way through difficult material counts the most. I have spoken to parents who are highly critical of an anti-racist pedagogy and then followed them to the teacher who was engaged in justice-oriented teaching that I was going to interview next. When I asked the parent about this, she said, “The teaching makes me nervous, but my daughter loves this class. She is learning so much and talks about it all the time. I don’t like the teaching, but I would never take my daughter out of this class or speak specifically badly about her [the teacher].” This teacher and the parent would become allies over the course of a year, of the teacher having students interview their parents for their points of view, of having the students speak to their parents about their thoughts on particular historical events and record their parents’ reactions. (Continued).

It ended up building community and allyship amongst some of the parents, certainly not all. It was not a miracle cure. What surfaced though was the teacher understanding that the parents fundamentally misunderstood what an anti-racist pedagogy was. Rather than anti-white, it was pro-truth, pro-examination, pro-reflection, pro-discussion, pro-students finding their voice, perspective and finding their way. Students not only learned about prejudice, discrimination, racial violence, but learned how to engage in acts of change for themselves, and their community. This again is part of the difficulty. Those who are opposed typically have a misunderstanding of what it is. If we can speak to them, listen to them – often times more than once, we can begin to build an understanding, but this can be difficult. Also, it is important to show up. Show up to schools to support teachers when they are targeted, to agree to be interviewed, write Op-Eds, letters to the editor, members of Congress, donate money to organizations that support this work, educate yourself on the curriculum so you can speak authoritatively about it, attend school board meetings, speak at them, vote, and encourage others to do the same. In short, find your way to speak and refuse to remain silent.

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Q: Given that critical theory examines major shortcomings in American history, what should patriotism look like today?

A: Many scholars have examined the role that patriotism plays in our schools and classrooms and broader society. Patriotism is part of the nationalistic school of history education where each classroom has an American flag, where the Pledge of Allegiance is recited each morning without an explanation of the history of the pledge, the changes added to it, or the contradictions embedded within it. Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (2012) calls into question the singing of the National Anthem at sporting events, the Veteran’s parking space at local markets, and “veterans of the game” at sporting events. She argues that this embeds an uncomplicated patriotism into our everyday life. Bill Bigelow has written that “patriotism is stupid” that it makes students small-minded and unable or less likely to examine the more broad and more complex picture of the story of the United States. Scholars Westheimer and Kahne have talked about multiple types of patriotism taught in schools. Westheimer (2007) argues that there are generally two types of patriotism what he calls *authoritarian* patriotism, or a patriotism that that results in an unquestioning loyalty to country, and a *democratic* patriotism that believes that the country’s ideas while worthy of respect should not be accepted without examination. (Continued).

Being a good citizen and being patriotic are too often conflated. The assumption is that if you are a good citizen, you are patriotic and if you are patriotic, you are a good citizen. I am using the term citizen here as a member of a community rather than as someone who is either born into a country or has become a naturalized citizen. Students are often conflicted about patriotism and its role in schools. Students who are the children of soldiers and students who are the children of immigrants all share a suspicion of blind patriotism taught in schools. They have argued that students should be taught the awesome possibilities of our nation side by side next to its dismal defeats and repeated complications. In many ways students echo the eloquence of James Baldwin (1955) who wrote, "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." In other words, I think that patriotism might be the wrong word. As problematic as the word citizenship is I think the notion of good citizenship or perhaps good community member is what we need to consider. A good community member picks up trash that is not theirs. A good community member intervenes when necessary to disrupt dishonesty and violence. A good community member asks the hard question, votes in the election, supports those who are suffering, works to improve themselves and their community and does this for love of self, neighbor, and community.

Q: What advice would you give educators that feel reluctant to teach accurate history and social justice for fear of a backlash?

A: This is a hard question. My immediate response is that we need to teach an accurate history regardless of our reluctance and fear. The truth needs to be examined, our myths interrogated, and students need to be provided a space to figure this all out. In essence, teaching an accurate history is the job and we are obligated to do it. This is true but also unfair. It is also more complicated than this. How we approach this work as educators relies on so many factors. These factors include the educator's identity markers: what gender, sexuality, ethnicity as well as how many years they have been teaching and how new or connected they are to the community in which they teach. We must also consider the students' identities alongside the grade level and what subject is being taught. This does not mean that any combination of factors should keep a teacher from teaching an anti-racist curriculum and pedagogy, it simply means that there is no one way to do this work. How it is approached and engaged looks differently depending again, on who the educator is, where they are teaching and who they are teaching. (Continued).

The further and more specific advice I would give is organize your curriculum and teaching around philosophical questions. The pursuit of the questions coupled with the right readings, primary sources, and other instructional materials will surface the complexities of the curriculum without the teacher having to point it out. This more democratic approach to teaching is stronger, more impactful, and generally more powerful teaching. Build a community from the beginning of the year or any time in the year where we are going to ask complicated questions, listen to others and engage in often hard discussions of historical truths. This does not mean that students get to issue racial, homophobic, or sexist epithets in class. The teacher needs to use their positional authority to prevent this from happening. Teachers need to be sure to reflect upon the questions they are asking. Two questions used to guide investigations that I come across far too often are “Should we have slavery?” and “Should women have the right to vote?” Both questions are closed questions—that is we already know the answer and have always known the answer. The further problem is that both surface the possibility that we should have slavery and that women should not have the right to vote signaling to students that these are reasonable perspectives to have in the world and to surface in class. They are not.

Teaching is often a lonely profession separated from other adults. I have found that at most schools that have teachers who want to engage an anti-racist pedagogy there are always others who want to as well but don’t know how or are waiting for someone to take the first step. There are allies and others who are with you at your school and in the community; find them and build community. There are organizations that can help you with the pedagogical aspects of this work including Facing History and Ourselves, the Abolitionist Teaching Network, Zinn Education Project, Rethinking Schools, Teaching for Change, Carolina K-12 and many other organizations. It is incredibly important for educators to know their rights and to see they are upheld, particularly in non-union states. In North Carolina there are several advocacy organizations that can help including the North Carolina Education Association (NCEA). Also, reach out to folks willing to help like me.

