

## **Critical Race Theory as Policy as Curriculum? (1972 words with title)**

### **Objectives**

The Black Lives Matter movement, while protesting policing of people of color, has also called for a greater responsiveness in the curriculum materials, resources, and representations of BIPOC peoples in the schools. On the heels of the call(s) within the educational system for culturally relevant/responsive/sustainable pedagogy there have also been calls for inclusion of studies around white privilege and white supremacy. Subsequently there has been greater focus on ethnic studies and efforts toward 'expanding the curriculum' to embrace the history and the contemporary living conditions, social mores, and cultural values of 'all people' past and present.

At the time of the writing of this paper, conversation and discourse related to the critical study of race—Critical Race Theory (CRT)—has shifted outside of academia, circulated through popular forums (including social media) and currently having been written into state legislation rules and regulations across the country.

While CRT has existed for several years in legal, sociological and academic conversation, it now spins in controversy, on display at often contentious school board meetings. While explicitly about curriculum (i.e., what *should* we teach in school), implicitly it can be seen as a generative space for educational policy study. Using curricular tools we aim in this paper to conduct a policy analysis of state legislation seeking to ban the teaching of CRT. We will focus on Wisconsin and Georgia where we, respectively, engage in curriculum work. Deeply contextual, CRT works as a "frame" (Lakoff, 2004/2014), provides a compelling example of a proxy for other agendas.

A major objective of this paper is for contemporary curriculum theorizing to include the social, cultural, historical, and political influences when examining policy and what happens in schools every day. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the policy milieu using different curricular lens(es). Of particular interest are policies informing or leaving an impression on school culture. Conversation and discourse which began in academic circles (*habitus*) has/have circulated through popular forums, most particularly in social media and social networks.

### **Perspective(s) or theoretical framework**

There has been a general increase in focus in higher education around initiatives in diversity, equity and inclusion over several years, but these efforts have only increased since the murder of George Floyd by police. Rising to prominence in conversations around educational policy, *The 1619 Project* and its conflation debates around the validity or perniciousness of a particular legal framework, Critical Race Theory, have muddied the waters, confused issues between theory and practice. One way to think through this moment lies in the application of the tools of curriculum studies to an analysis of policy.

Critical Race Theory is now the subject of debate and consternation as it has been weaponized, used in a political manner as a pejorative to attack what some argue is a retreat from 'traditional American values' as expressed in the nation's schools. Furthermore, state governments and political actors both at the official level (elected representatives) and at the local level (concerned citizens showing up at school board meetings) see CRT (for short) as an attempt by government and 'state schools' (public) to indoctrinate children to an ideology they are alarmed by. Lumped together under CRT are actually a host of grievances against public education and teacher unions. The turmoil resembles the resistance to 'Common Core State Standards' (derided by some critics as 'Obamacore') a decade ago.

Using an historical perspective we are able to imagine *policy as curriculum*.

CRT is imagined to be by some, once again, as an attempt by government to take over schools and indoctrinate students in 'anti-Americanism'. During the 1940s Social Studies educator Harold Rugg and his textbook series were characterized as 'red' (Evans, 2007). In the 1950s, critics like Arthur Bestor and Admiral Hyman Rickover raised concerns about Progressive Education, citing it as 'anti-intellectualism' (Bestor, 1953); a 'Back to Basics' movement followed.

Leaping forward to the 1990s, 'culture wars' were waged by conservative historians funded by the Bradley Foundation (Evans, 2004), who argued that radical educators were engaged in 'historical revisionism'. And as mentioned, in places like Wisconsin, protestors took over the state capitol in opposition to the Common Core State Standards (author, 2014). Resistance then revolved interestingly around statism and corporatism and against perceived local, community tradition.

The point is that during each of these historical epochs, schooling and the curriculum often served as a *proxy* (another word for strawman) for other deeper, cultural fissures or social problems, unresolved outside of the classroom.

Much of the fevered pitch concerning CRT (and lest we forget, the hot issue over the last year of how to do school under Pandemic—masking or not, vaccination or not, opening schools or online education) indicates a perseveration over the always contentious conversation 'what should we teach the children' (Evans, 2004). That parents and community members are exercised about CRT does not necessarily indicate a lack of civic participation, rather it is a question of what are the underlying concerns and conditions expressed under this latest umbrella. It should also be noted that equal numbers of parents are greatly interested in expanding the curriculum and have also called for 'browning the curriculum', to be more fully inclusive of all the students in all of the classrooms across the United States of America.

### **Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry**

In taking up our call for curricularists to get involved in the conversations, not only in writing, but in the public arena, we will draw from our own history(s) in this presentation. One of us is a teacher educator having worked long as a K-12 school teacher in urban districts, and is fully cognizant of racial disparities, racism, and the challenges to established norms of curriculum making and enactment that have historically under-represented if not ellipse or denied representation which harms BIPOC students and denies the full expression of their own aspirations as full peoples, contributing to and benefitting from a place at the table in America. Another of us is a long time policy advocate on behalf of professional teacher education and a recently elected school board member, dealing with policy-informed-curriculum issues at the local level, and seeking a means to message and educate an increasingly agitated and vocal public.

Our method will be *curriculum inquiry* drawing social, cultural, historical, and political influences into a complicated, yet incisive conversation on policy matters. We will take into consideration our own engagement with policy matters as a starting point to more fully understand *policy as curriculum*.

There are three approaches that we propose: the traditional, the critical, and the interpretive. Our presentation will share examples of each, while drawing primarily on the interpretive in order to make meaning and sense out of the current moment. As noted, we will compare the current struggles reflected in the policy analysis with past struggles as documented (Kliebard, 1986/2004; Evans, 2004/2007) in *policy as curriculum*.

### **Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials**

Our sources are *state rules and regulations* being imposed on schools and school districts. We take up policy analysis of legal texts and mandates from Wisconsin and Georgia. We analyze the official documents but also reflect upon discussions with other higher education faculty, classroom teachers, administration/school board members, state politicians and the general public, especially local citizens attending school board meetings. Why has CRT become of such interest? When we imagine CRT as a catch all for the politicization of not only the public school, but a lightning rod for national politics (as we and others have found it to be) we are concerned about the effect a debate that further divides society along *cultural lines*. We believe that using our *policy analysis* approach we are engaging in a needed antidote, a publicly open scholarly discussion that does not fall down upon predictable, partisan lines, but rather fosters deeper knowing and understanding.

In Georgia, the State Board of Education adopted a resolution against any public school teaching the superiority of any race, the idea that meritocracy or the structural conditions of education might be racist, or frankly that racism itself is real and relevant. In a state where 3 out of 5 public school attending children are of color and both protests against police violence and for increasing voter turnout were powerful and deemed successful . . . the curriculum question herein resides in thinking through what do these highly politicized efforts try to teach us? Even if the practical impact of hard-to-enforce policies is minimal, how might symbolic policy (Smith, 2006) influence the informal, hidden curricula? How will this period resonate in teacher and leader's decision-making processes? What, in the end, is the lesson we will learn?

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view**

We are of course, first and foremost, educators, professors of curriculum in higher education. We draw powerful lessons from that subject matter and experience from which we have long labored in and subsequently have since studied. Here are a few of those early insights:

The current (as of this writing, 2021) debate around CRT is only the latest in a perennial debate around policy matters as both formally curriculum and informing curriculum itself. We cite that not only in very recent memory the battles around 'Common Core' (2010s), the 'culture wars' in the 90s over history standards, and attacks on 'progressive education' (waged by so-called 'back to the basics' traditionalists) in the 1950s are both emblematic and informative. In each instance—and this is not an original idea but one that needs clear articulation as well as further examples—attacks on progressive education, 'revision' of history standards, and 'Common Core' were held up as *proxy* to other deeper ranging concerns. Indeed, current debates often use a 'straw man' as a punching bag to score political points. We hope to make emphatically clear that we are greatly interested in conversations that are

- *genuine (as opposed to insincere),*
- *informed (as opposed to half-baked, conspiracy theories),*
- *deliberative (as opposed to rhetorical)*
- *generative (as opposed to pejorative discourse that stops or 'cancels' conversation)*

In crafting this paper and presentation we are studying, rather than providing the last word upon. But additionally, while we have our thoughts focused on CRT, we are interested not just in CRT *per se*, but more so we are interested in the conversations, debates and uses a CRT focus is being put to. Our argument is that, little different from the debates around Common Core, CRT is being used in a political manner to push *symbolic* divisions in the body politic and in order to support politician's campaigns for higher office.

In other words, we should learn that these struggles over the curriculum go beyond curriculum resources or materials. They go beyond particular pedagogies. Further still, they (for example, the struggles over CRT exhibited in school board meetings) are indicative of and reflective of the aims, means and ends of peoples contesting for *recognition* in the broader society. The public expressions toward embracing or rejecting any of a range of initiatives emanating in and around public schools reflect different *cultures of interest*. As authors we are focused upon what those cultures of interest indicate about our body politic.

### **Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

This paper as a consequence aims to embrace the current, subsequent, and previous ways in which cultural values are imparted in policy—in this instance in education policy—and why policy matters or should matter to curricularists. Further, we offer side notes concerning how to get involved in policy matters. Finally, we explain why, at the end of the day, these phenomena are actually *curriculum*.

We are not afraid to optimistically imagine more harmonious lines of discourse, of democratic discussion, less toxic weaponization, and the discouragement of persons and places likened to soldiers to be deployed and battlefields to be marshalled for victory.

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