



SCHOOL LEADER

AS NEGOTIATOR:

By David Stovall

In the attempt to gage innovative approaches to school leadership, the following account seeks to investigate the possible application of Critical Race Theory (CRT hereafter) to school leadership. Expounding on Solorzano and Villalapando's application of CRT (1997), the hope is to engage the field of school leadership with constructive critique and suggestions for administrators who are dedicated to social justice and the well-being of students and staff.

In turn, the following pages seek to address the question: How can CRT, as theory based in resistance to racial oppression, inform praxis for school leaders? While it is important to incorporate the needs of all students in schools, the following text will have urban schools in communities of color as its central focus.

The Dilemma: School Leader vs. the World

Frankly speaking, because schools are contested spaces, principals and administrators are often easy targets. As teachers, we are often hounded by principals for not turning in what we feel to be benign paperwork that has little to nothing to do

with our work with young people. Researchers and community organizations frequently experience school leaders as gatekeepers focused on protecting their employment instead of addressing issues central to meeting educational needs.

Administrators become de facto adversaries, responsible for maintaining bureaucracy while performing the responsibilities mandated by the central office. Due to our (students, parents, teachers, researchers, etc.) own duties and responsibilities, we are often unaware of the often pressure-filled world in which school leaders reside.

Although this does not excuse the school leader that chooses to administrate in absentia or the domineering tyrant unable to make adjustments, we must recognize the various pressures school leaders endure in addition to the demands placed on students and teachers. As a teacher/researcher who performs most of his work in schools, I was unaware of the fiduciary responsibilities of the school principal. I also had no clue as to the significance of the seemingly countless meetings principals were required to attend outside of those with students, parents or teachers. In short, the job is rigorous. If the occupation is performed at its highest level, the results are often long days and short nights.

From here, the school leader is faced with another challenge in the urban setting: the ever-silenced issue of race. I refer to it

as ever-silenced because it has been engaged superficially at the system level, but is often diluted with buzz-speak (e.g., "diversity," "multiculturalism," "tolerance," "color-blindness"). High-stakes testing replaces socially conscious, community-centered approaches and becomes the measure for student excellence. Vouchers are argued as a viable solution for failing schools in the urban setting. The school leader, responsible for reporting to central office, now is federally mandated to raise test scores and can be removed for failing to do so.

At this moment, it's fair to say that social justice agendas in schools are a hard sell. It's considerably easier to do what you're told. Going "against the grain" is not received with accolades of achievement. In sum, school administrators with a social justice agenda find themselves immersed in the balancing act of meeting the needs of students, while resisting mandated "drill-and-kill" policies that only measure how well a student takes a test.

In addition, the school leader is often forced to accept the harsh realities of race and racism in urban settings. Never to bemoan the point, the facts remain: the vast majority of urban public school settings are populated with students of color. The overwhelming majority of these students of color come from racially isolated communities. Many of these communities have soaring populations of low-income families.

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Critical Race Theory, Praxis, and the Creation of Productive Space

Where schools are viewed as safe-havens for mainstream communities, they can often be viewed as menacing, mock holding cells for others. Most situations are somewhere in between. Without over-exaggerating the situation, the social-justice minded administrator is often given the task of navigating these spaces, attempting to make the school a productive space to learn and create.

Critical Race Theory and Education

The aforementioned drives a particular question set to the school leader that recognizes the detrimental effects educational policy can have on communities of color. What thought processes guide the school leader in creating a space that “engages students in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity?” (Ayers 1999, p. xvii). Can a theory develop a question set by which to assist the school leader in navigating the racial terrain of urban public education?

To assist such recognition, CRT can be used as a tool to aid the school leader in developing praxis to confront issues of race and racism. For the remainder of this account, the CRT movement should be understood as the following:

...a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers

many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order.... (Delgado 2001, p. 3)

From it we are able to view racism as not the isolated actions of an individual, but a systemic structure that disadvantages many based on a set of socially constructed norms.

In education, CRT confronts the rationale of “when I see a child, I don’t see race.” Although not a popular stance, the previous quote should be dissected. Critical Race Theory understands the previous ideology as part of a design to “maintain a White supremacist master script” (Ladson-Billings 1998, p.18).

Where some may view the children quote as naïve, CRT argues it to be reflective of an accepted hegemonic norm, detrimental to the education of students of color. Race, although socially constructed, has “real-life” consequences in many communities. The idea that someone can ignore the fact that assumptions based on perception and physical appearance have systemically denied access to people of color is problematic.

Although its beginnings are in legal scholarship, it has since been adjusted to address education. Its relevance for the school administrator comes in the form of developing a lens by which to unpack and address issues of race and racism internal and external to the school setting. In doing so, five tenets of CRT presented by Solorzano and Villalapando (1997) would assist the school leader in grappling with race and racism in schools.

1. The centrality and intersectionality of racism.
2. The challenge to dominant ideology.
3. The commitment to social justice.
4. The importance of experiential knowledge.
5. The use of an interdisciplinary perspective. (Solorzano & Villalapando 1997, p.213)

Although conservative factions may reduce racism to individual acts of bigotry, there is sufficient evidence supporting the contrary. For those who still may have doubts about the systemic intersections of race, I offer the 1999 example of Decatur, Illinois, and Glenbrook North High School in 2003.

The former involved seven African-American males who were attending Eisenhower High School in Decatur, Illinois. During a football game in October of that year, an altercation ensued that was

captured on videotape. Although there were no reported injuries, the seven students implicated in the fight were barred from attending schools in Decatur for two years. With ensuing protests headed by Jesse Jackson Sr. and the Rainbow Coalition, students were allowed to attain their high school diplomas. During the ordeal, local and national news programs would feature stories referring to the students as "savage," "a pack of dogs," and "criminals." The case was heard in federal court in December of 1999, declaring the decision of the school constitutional under the laws of the state of Illinois.

Currently, 32 White seniors attending Glenbrook North High School were caught participating in a hazing ritual in a forest preserve in Northbrook, Illinois. The event, also videotaped, shows senior girls throwing feces, garbage, paints on a group of junior girls while beating them with bats. Unlike the Decatur incident, two girls were taken to the hospital to treat injuries from the event. At the time this account is being written, all of the assailants have been suspended for the state maximum of 10 days (Pickett & Fuller 2003, p. 6). In reference to the event, local and national media has chosen to focus on whether or not these girls will get into college and how "emotionally scarred" the juniors will be due to this incident.

Interestingly enough, I've been in schools where students have been suspended for the state maximum for not being in proper uniform. Other suspensions have been longer for the same offense. In Chicago Public Schools, more than 20 unexcused absences in a school year requires instant summer school and possible retention for the following year. In a worst case scenario, a student could be retained for growing out of their shoes (also considered part of the uniform)!

Where the following may seem insignificant to some, the discourse surrounding both incidents is crucial in the analysis of how members from different racial groups are described in the public sphere. Where the publicizing of the two events may not be categorized as "racist," the discourse surrounding both instances contributes to derogatory beliefs concerning communities of color. Returning to the second tenet of Solorzano and Villalapando, this challenge to dominant ideologies remains integral in unpacking the endemic nature of racism.

Counterstories: School Narrative and the Underpinnings of Race

In developing the aforementioned te-

nets, CRT theorists engage narrative to support "counterstories" to popular discourse surrounding race. Although debated in legal scholarship as highly subjective, counterstory is rooted in the experience of the deliverer.

From here, stories diverge from the "we're all immigrants" ideology promoted in many multicultural texts and staff development trainings. Speaking to an oft-ignored history of racial conflict in the United States, CRT scholars in education encourage teachers and school leaders to place the stories of students and communities of color in historical context.

Examples would be placing the Great Migration of African-Americans in the context of World War II. A project of African-American students collecting their grandparent's experience would uncover an oral tradition addressing what is often overlooked in texts. From the counterstory, the "hero-worship" in many history courses is questioned, challenging dominant ideology. In it we find the stories of families moving to Chicago for employment and the racism they endured in the process. Although well documented in the work of Anderson (1988), Watkins (2002), and Winant (2001), it still is not received as central to U.S. history.

Similar to court testimony, school leaders often find themselves listening to countless stories of students, teachers, parents, and concerned community members. As in many formal complaint processes, the stories compacted with empirical data are crucial in making a case for educational policy. Where ethnographic researchers consider it "data collection," the school leader is charged with collecting the various accounts when s/he is called to present their case to central office. Often in the urban setting, these policies can decide anything from the disciplinary code to curriculum, to school closure.

In the case of youth of color, we exist in a society that criminalizes youth without "reasonable doubt." An example would be the Gang Congregation Ordinance of Chicago in 1992 prohibiting "street gang members from loitering with one another or with others in any public space" (Dohrn in Ayers et. al. 1999, p. 102). After being declared unconstitutionally vague by an appellate court, the city passed a revised ordinance stating that a group of three or more persons could be considered a gang if one known gang member is present. The police would then have discretion as to whether to ask the group to disperse or to hold the entire group for questioning.

From a critical race perspective, one would have to ask another set of questions, highlighting the underpinnings of race. If a

policy such as the former is in existence, what racial/ethnic group accounts for the majority of arrests, and where do the majority of these arrests take place? In Chicago, from 1992-1995, 42,000 arrests were made and 89,000 dispersal orders were issued (p. 103). Of these arrests and dispersal orders, the majority of detainees were people of color.

Returning to the school, a principal may have a building populated with students with these experiences. Some may have had this experience within the confines of the school. It is not an uncommon occurrence for students to be arrested or removed from a building during school hours. Many high schools in Chicago have makeshift satellite police stations that can process a student and house criminal records.

Again, all would be considered counterstory, in that they are dismissed as integral to the function and operation of the school. Instead of being considered "horror stories," the CRT project understands the former accounts as commonplace in many school settings. The school leader, as responsible to the function of the school's ability to serve students, is immersed in navigating these spaces, still with the charge of fostering a learning community.

Engaging CRT Praxis

Returning to the Solorzano and Villalapando CRT tenets, points three through five speak more to the day-to-day challenges of the school leader. The commitment to social justice brings into question the culture of the school. Experiential knowledge (including the principals own) serves as an informing agent for school leaders who must make challenging educational decisions. The use of an interdisciplinary perspective enables the teacher to use non-conventional approaches to address issues of race in school. All must function simultaneously in creating a productive space for young people.

For principals, teachers, and researchers with a social justice agenda, the question becomes "since we know this about racism, what do we do?" In this sense CRT poses a call to work. It's one thing to know and analyze the functions of race. It is yet another to engage in the practice of developing and maintaining a school with an anti-oppressive, anti-racist agenda in an age of conservative educational policy.

Yamamoto (1997) challenged CRT legal scholars to engage in a praxis that bridged theoretical concepts to everyday practice. In it he proposed that legal scholars spend less time with theory and more

time concentrating on “anti-subordination practice” (Yamamoto p. 873). For the socially conscious school principal, a CRT “race-praxis” in education involves forging relationships with parents, students, community organizations, student-teachers, and first-year and veteran teachers.

All should be considered counter to popularized dogmatic approaches to school leadership. From the experience of those in the school body, we are able to address the “messy and conflictual racial realities” of the public school (p. 875). Here is where the situation gets difficult and requires humility from all concerned parties. The following are a series of narratives and suggestions that envision a blend of CRT and socially-conscious administration.

Suggestion #1: Race and Professional/Staff Development

The school leader has to deal with the racial reality of schools. Urban public school students are predominantly people of color. The majority of the teaching force remains white. Often the teaching group has little to no experience in dealing with communities of color. Some hear the word “race” and think they’re being called a racist. For the school leader, the dynamics are tension filled.

As a suggestion for professional/staff development and staff retreats, the school leader should take particular interest in the facilitator chosen to engage staff on issues of race. From this space a conversation can begin between school leader and facilitator as to the particulars of the school and how to engage effective dialogue. The issue is not to “change” the person. Instead the intent is to provide effective strategies in understanding the dynamics of students of color in the urban setting.

Unfortunately, many diversity and cultural sensitivity workshops sanitize race and attempt to promote false senses of unity. Coupled with the negativity many teachers associate with staff/development days, challenges to the principal rise. Instead of confronting the difficult issues that race can present, some trainings amount to “we’re a multicultural society and we should get along better.” This is not enough.

Instead, the CRT project would support professional development to confront the issue of race directly in a productive manner. One effective strategy I’ve witnessed was facilitated by a community organization. The school had a majority white staff and a population that was one hundred percent African-American and Latino/a. The facilitator began the session stating the issues to be discussed would

be of a sensitive nature, but were necessary in addressing tensions within the school. After a barrage of moans and groans from the staff, the facilitators engaged a dialogue about the construction of racial identities and how these racial identities play out in the school setting. Conversations ensued about student reactions to White teachers and productive strategies to address said issues.

Where some might group the following session as one about discipline, CRT would argue that this should be considered a discussion of curricular relevance. Principals and teachers understand that if students find material interesting, discipline problems dissipate. Central to developing a safe space for students, the social justice minded administrator engaging CRT can incorporate Ladson-Billings’ overarching tenets of cultural-relevance in literacy.

1. Students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom.
2. Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way.
3. Students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the “official” curriculum.
4. Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory.
5. Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo.
6. Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 117-118)

Where the fourth principle denotes a direct relationship to literacy, a school leader finds a facilitator for staff development capable of incorporating some variation of these principles. Principles five and six may be tenuous to the school leader, but necessary in understanding the school as contested space.

Suggestion #2: The Resource Guide

In supporting teachers and students, a principal engaging CRT understands that students bring the situations they face outside of school into the classroom. Many teachers speak of students who have problems ranging from (but not limited to) physical abuse, drug addiction, and gen-

eral nutrition. To address the issue, some teachers feel no recourse but to call the various social service agencies of the city or state.

Understanding the dire straits young people are placed in the context of many social work agencies, a community organization I began working with developed a resource guide listing the various services available in the neighborhood in which the school was housed. Included in the resource guide were the telephone numbers and addresses of various health care, food delivery, and clothing centers. Teachers, instead of reporting the child, were provided with another resource by which to address student issues.

Parents appreciated the resource guide due to many being new to the neighborhood and unaware of the services provided in the area. Many of the teachers found it very useful and began to develop relationships with many of the organizations listed in the resource guide. From this development, a resource fair is currently being developed for parents and guardians who could benefit from these services.

Again, the CRT recognizes the resource guide as incomplete. As a resource, it has to be utilized by the school faculty and staff. The school leader, as responsible to its student populace, is instrumental in forging relationships within the community.

Suggestion #3: School as Community Center

Probably the most radical suggestion of this CRT project is the physical community presence in the school building. Aside from after-school programs and the occasional parent meeting, communities across the country have engaged the idea of school as an extension of the area in which it resides. The process of making the aforementioned a reality equips public schools with adult education programs, ESL (English as a Second Language) courses, health clinics, job trainings, and community meetings, in addition to the various after-school programs. Schools open as early as 6 am and close at 8 pm, providing parents in the community a place to establish connection with the school as a safe space for all in the community. In making practice from theory (or vice-versa), the school leader engaging CRT becomes immersed in the project of forging viable, lasting relationships with the community.

Currently the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York, has engaged the process. Part of a larger community vision, the High School has been engaged in the process of expanding

its doors to develop a community center with the previous mentioned outlets.

Spencer Math and Science Academy in Chicago, Illinois currently houses an adult learning center, dance classes, art instruction and a breakfast program. Where many may consider the concept as radical, CRT argues the approach as necessary in addressing the lasting effects of systemic inequality in public schools. The lessons of the struggles from both schools could serve to inform those interested in developing similar approaches.

Conclusion: Grounded Theory and the Struggle for a Race Praxis

Often when we speak of a “grounded theory” we speak of a set of experiences that inform a theoretical construct on the function of a phenomenon. By engaging the CRT project, school leaders, teachers, and researchers are challenged with engaging and investigating processes by which to make a school a place for young people to challenge themselves and effect change.

Beyond the rhetoric, developing a race praxis acknowledges that those concerned with challenging dominant ideologies will have to “get their hands dirty.” For the education researcher it means engaging in a scholarship that is reflective of the praxis you engage daily, whether it with your students or within the schools you work. For the school leader it means building relationships with communities that ensure the safety and well-being of the students. CRT embarks on grounded theory due to the centrality of experiential knowledge. Because the experiences of the students, faculty, and staff are valid in the school setting, the principal engages the measures that propose innovative approaches to public schooling.

In critique, the CRT project is incomplete. Throughout this account I have not addressed budgetary concerns or the cen-

trality of class analysis in school inequality. To develop this discourse, CRT must challenge its intersections by giving more attention to how issues of class affect race and racism in schools. In addition, it must challenge itself not to reduce its purpose to a rally cry for the socially conscious. As an alternative, it must engage the reality that these struggles in the worst-case scenario may result in people losing their jobs or never receiving tenure. It is that serious.

Constantly we are again challenged to realize the importance of collective struggle. In the case of schools, our scholarship is not enough. If school leaders engage the space of CRT, they must garner support from the communities they work in and with. This only occurs when the school leader demonstrates his/her accountability through praxis. The road is bumpy. Many days are better than others. All said, the task of engaging the lives of young people in schools requires us to get to work.

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