Toward a Critical Race Curriculum

Tara J. Yosso

Chicana & Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara

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This article addresses critical race theory as a framework to analyze and challenge racism in curricular structures, processes, and discourses. Racism and its intersections with discrimination based on gender, class, language, and immigration status inform curriculum in both macro and micro ways. Critical race theory can be a guide for educators to expose and challenge contemporary forms of racial inequality, which are disguised as “neutral” and “objective” structures, processes, and discourses of school curriculum.

For my purposes here, I focus on the multiple layers of school curriculum. School curriculum is not merely the information included or excluded from a textbook or in a class discussion, but it also includes the structure of the class and the processes by which students are placed in the class. Understanding that curriculum includes both formal and informal methods of presenting knowledge means that we also understand decisions are made about what knowledge is presented and who will have access to that knowledge. Thus, it is important to broaden understandings of curriculum beyond the visible materials teachers present in their classrooms to include less visible curricular structures, processes, and discourses.

Indeed, this essay begins to reveal the need for educators to utilize critical race theory as a tool to analyze and challenge racism and other forms of subordination that pervade U.S. school curriculum structures, processes, and discourses. Curriculum includes what structures are in place so that specific classes are designated to present specific knowledge. Curriculum also encompasses the processes designed to place students in certain classes, wherein they are presented with specific knowledge. Furthermore, curriculum is supported by discourses that justify why some students have access to certain knowledge while others are presented with different school curriculum. Traditional curricular discourses distort, omit, and stereotype Chicana/o, Latina/o, African American, Asian American/Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American experiences. These deficit discourses serve to rationalize discriminatory curricular processes that maintain structures of racial, gender, and class inequality in schools (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977). Curricular structures, processes, and discourses inform and comprise classroom interactions at all levels of education, from pre-kindergarten through university.

An example of curricular structures may include magnet or Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), accelerated, honors, and Advanced Placement (AP) college preparatory programs of study. While these structures may offer wonderful resources to the students they serve, they also structure racial inequality starting from preschool and impacting students well beyond college (Castañeda v. University of California Regents, 1999; Daniel v. State of California, 2000). A critical race curriculum exposes the white privilege supported by traditional curriculum structures and challenges schools to dismantle them.

Curricular structures are directly supported by a set of curricular processes whereby students are granted or denied access to magnet or GATE programs, as well as accelerated, honors, and AP tracks (Oakes, 1985, 1986). Whether between or within schools, traditional curricular processes tend to under-prep students of color to go on to attain a higher education (Valencia, 2002). Chicanas/os tracked in a vocational program or placed on a terminal English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) track may not be granted access to the basic requirements to be eligible for a four-year college (Castañeda v. University of California Regents, 1999). Traditional curricular processes often delay and even dissuade many Chicanas/os from achieving their educational goals because students may need to complete at least two years of remedial coursework at a community college before their classes begin to earn them credit toward transferring to a four-year college or university. A critical race curriculum reveals the multiple layers of racialized inequality perpetuated by traditional curriculum processes. Therefore, it challenges educators to recognize deficit-based practices that deny students of color access to “college bound” knowledges. It also challenges universities to...
reassess whose knowledge is considered valid so that K–12 students are restricted from or granted entry to college based on whether their “cultural literacy” is deemed sufficient (Hirsch, 1988).

Moreover, curricular discourses are spoken and unspoken narratives, which serve to maintain racial, gender, and class inequality (Acuña, 1998). Traditional curricular discourses utilize code words such as “excellence” and “reform” in K–12 schooling or “meritocracy” and “diversity” in colleges and universities to disguise racism, classism, and sexism (de la Luz Reyes & Halcón, 1997). For example, the current debates over affirmative action are often centered on notions that universities are meritocracies that encourage diversity (Solórzano & Yosso, this volume). This suggests that college admissions processes are fair and hard work pays off because the system is meritocratic. In addition, it indicates that universities actively seek to incorporate diversity in their curriculum structures, processes, and discourses. In reality, most college admissions processes are unfair because they assume K–12 schooling is equal, which it is not. For example, a hard working Chicana/o may still be denied college access because she or he has been systematically under-prepared. Furthermore, while universities claim to encourage diversity, they often silence and marginalize the histories and experiences of Chicanas//os (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Traditional curricular discourse often serves as a rationale for why schools cater to upper/middle class white communities at the expense of communities of color (Wells & Serna, 1996). As they stand, traditional curricular structures, processes, and discourses reveal a hidden (and not-so-hidden) curriculum that marginalizes Chicana/o, Latina/o students (and other students of color) while they cater to white middle/upper class students. A critical race curriculum is informed by the experiences of marginalized students and challenges discourses that discount “pedagogies of the home” (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Curriculum discourses also are presented in textbooks and endorsed by teachers. For instance, U.S. history textbooks often distort, omit, and stereotype the histories of communities of color (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977). Teachers may not be able or willing to incorporate a challenge to the traditional, Eurocentric versions of history conveyed by textbooks into their class lectures or discussions. Barring textbooks or teachers who bring a multifaceted version of U.S. history to the curriculum, students have little access to academic discourses that decenter white upper/middle class experiences as the norm. Traditional curriculum discourses tend to marginalize the knowledges of students of color. For example, one curriculum unit for an entire year may be dedicated to African American or Native American histories, and even within these units, the perspective is often told from how Whites encountered these “other” people, which re-centers discussions about race back to the “standard,” White middle class. Indeed, even in institutions of higher learning, courses dedicated to examining the knowledges of people of color are not often found outside of Ethnic Studies Departments.

Beyond the structures, processes, and discourses in curriculum, there are also formal and informal aspects to the knowledge presented in schools. For example, the formal goal of a magnet program may be to offer extraordinary learning opportunities to students. The informal goal of the same magnet program may be to curb White flight from public schools. For instance, the Long Beach Unified School District Superintendent boasted to the Los Angeles Times about implementing the “reform” of a high school that had apparently lost some academic “excellence” in the wake of demographic changes in its surrounding community:

School officials also launched two magnet programs for gifted and academically talented students that are widely credited as instrumental in [Long Beach] Poly’s turnaround . . . “The magnet programs,” [Superintendent] Cohen said, “were clearly designed to bring in white youngsters from the other parts of the city” (Shuit, 1998, p. A-1).

Formally, the magnet program sought to offer an optimal learning environment for “gifted and talented” students. Informally, the program was designed to offer an optimal learning environment for white students. The comment of the Long Beach Superintendent of schools reveals a hidden curriculum.

Curriculum then has multiple layers, including structures, processes, and discourses, each of which combine to present knowledge that align with formal (overt) or informal (hidden) outcomes. It is important to address the inequality embedded in school curriculum before addressing unequal educational outcomes. Indeed, one of the first mistakes most often made by many educators and policymakers is to look at the inequalities of student outcomes and blame students without looking at the conditions, such as the curricular structures, processes and discourses that create unequal outcomes (People Who Care v. Rockford, 2001). Critical race theory challenges educators to expose and change the racial, gender, and class inequalities created and maintained by traditional school curriculum.

WHY CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION?

Mari Matsuda (1991) has defined critical race theory (CRT) as

the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward
Critical race theory’s recent emergence from schools of education originated from the work of legal scholars such as Derrick Bell (1987, 1992, 1995), Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas 1995), Richard Delgado (1984, 1995a), and Mari Matsuda (1991). Critical race theorists began to pull away from critical legal studies because the critical legal framework restricted their ability to analyze racial injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Initially, because CRT focused on Civil Rights legislation in terms of Black vs. White, other groups have since expanded the CRT family tree to incorporate their racialized experiences, as women, as Latinas/os, as Native Americans, and as Asian Americans. For example, Latina/o critical race (LatCrit) theory is a natural outgrowth of CRT, evidencing an ongoing search for a framework that addresses racism and its accompanying oppressions beyond the Black/White binary (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). LatCrit draws on the strengths outlined in CRT, while at the same time, it emphasizes the intersectionality of experience with oppression and resistance and the need to extend conversations about race and racism to include all colonized and marginalized people of color (Arriola, 1997; Espinoza, 1998; Harris, 1995; Perea, Delgado, Harris, & Wildman, 2000; Valdes, 1997). White scholars have also sought to expand CRT to challenge racism by exposing White privilege. The work of Daniel Solórzano (1997) demonstrates that critical race theory in education is, “a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination in education” (p. 7). At least five themes inform the extension of CRT to education: (1) The intersectionality of race and racism with gender, class, and sexuality; (2) The challenge to dominant ideology; (3) The commitment to social justice; (4) The centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) The utilization of interdisciplinary approaches.

While each individual tenet of CRT may not be especially innovative, synthesizing these tenets into a coherent CRT framework in education is relatively new (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Crosland Nebeker, 1998; Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, 2001; Tate, 1994, 1997). Inside and outside the academy, CRT is beginning to receive more attention, yet much work needs to be done to articulate and implement CRT inside and outside U.S. classrooms. Very little has been published specifically addressing what a critical race curriculum may look like and how it can challenge other curricular approaches (Yosso, 2002).

Underlying the discourse about curriculum is an epistemological debate. Epistemology can be defined as the study of sources of knowledge. Critical education scholars have asked questions such as: What is knowledge and whose ways of knowing are more privileged in schools? These scholars interrogate ways that knowledge is used in school curriculum to reproduce social inequalities (Anyon, 1980; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994). In these debates over epistemology, white scholars maintain a disproportionate visibility that often overshadows the work of critical scholars of color. Within academic discussions of “critical pedagogy” that interrogate the social inequality perpetuated in schools, “[m]ost notably absent are the insights of Chicanas/Mexicanas and Latinas” (Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001, p. 595). Critical race theory in education has begun to challenge the comparable invisibility of scholars of color in the debate over whose knowledge counts. In doing so, critical race scholars in education have extended class-based critiques of the social inequalities produced and reproduced through schools to critiques based upon race, gender, class, language, and immigrant status. Eric Margolis and Mary Romero (1996) explain:

Perhaps due to the influence of Marxism on critical pedagogy, most research on the hidden curriculum has focused on the public education system and on capitalism’s reproduction of class stratification, rather than on gender, race, or other forms of inequality (p. 3).

Indeed, critical race theory’s intellectual origins incorporate Marxist critiques of schooling, yet also look to the critiques offered by U.S./Third World feminism, cultural nationalism, the internal colonial model, and in the work of critical legal studies and ethnic studies scholars (see Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The power of critical race theory is not that it offers a “new” critique of school inequality. Scholars have long identified the role of curriculum in particular as a tool for enforcing cultural assimilation (Flores, 1973), gender role reproduction (Weiler, 1988), and market-place reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Instead, critical race theory brings each of these various critiques together to present a more comprehensive challenge to traditional curricular structures, processes, and discourses that marginalize students of color. Critical race theory is unique because its challenge to the racialized, gendered, and classed structures of educational inequality is accompanied by its approach to creating more equitable conditions in schools and society by drawing on the knowledges of people of color. Critical race theory has the benefit of hindsight in drawing on previous critiques of educational inequality to expose and challenge macro and micro forms of racism disguised as traditional school curriculum.
Critical race scholars in education utilize the historical experiences of communities of color to analyze race- and gender-based epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000). They describe the importance of building curriculum from knowledges that originate from the very people who have been pushed to “the bottom of society’s well” (Bell, 1992, p. v). This has not been the traditional method of curriculum development. While some scholars have advocated for curriculum to facilitate critical thinking and even critical consciousness so that students would be prepared to create more equitable societal conditions (Freire, 1973), traditional school curriculum is grounded in a model of social efficiency (Kliebard, 1992). The social efficiency model aims to fill students up with knowledge so they can supply society’s needs. Paulo Freire (1970) termed this the “banking method” of education, wherein schools deposit knowledge into students and society withdraws that knowledge from students to reproduce itself.

Socially efficient curriculum structures, processes, and discourses are based on “scientific management,” as outlined by Frederick Taylor in 1911. Inspired by the productivity of the industrial revolution, scholars theorized that the functionality of the industrial assembly line should transfer to the curriculum—to the schoolhouse. This meant developing school curriculum that could produce top-of-the-line students (Bloom, 1966, 1969; Bobbitt, 1918, 1924).

Ralph Tyler (1949) drew on the ideas of social efficiency when he set out a rationale for setting, implementing, and evaluating educational objectives. Curriculum was predetermined and students were expected to acquire a socially useful body of knowledge. Tyler’s approach epitomizes the traditional curriculum approach that has functioned for the most part of the 20th century in U.S. curriculum theory and practice. The epistemological implications of the Tyler rationale are twofold: (1) Curriculum is defined as a tangible product, such as a plan or a document for teaching specific subject areas; and (2) curriculum knowledge is defined by specialists, passed on to teachers, and deposited into students (Feinberg, 1990). Following this argument, the formal school curriculum is presumed to be neutrally developed and objectively evaluated. This contradicts the subjective purposes of informal (hidden) school curricula which work to produce an effective citizenry, prepared to take hierarchically arranged social, political, and economic positions. Traditional school curriculum prepare white and upper/middle class students to make decisions and problem solve so that they can become leaders in the workplace. For example, Peter Cookson and Caroline Hodges Persell (1985) explain that:

The people who founded American boarding schools during the time of robber barons were far from innocent or naive about how the world worked. . . . They recognized that unless their sons and grandsons were willing to take up the struggle for the preservation of their class interests, privilege would slip from the hands of the elite (p. 24).

For white upper class boys and girls then, the school curriculum functions to maintain hierarchical social and economic power. In contrast to an intellectually stimulating curriculum, public schools too often prepare students of color and low-income students to take direction without question, memorize without critical analysis, and focus on remedial, manual labor-focused curriculum rather than a college bound curriculum. Indeed, the traditional curriculum prepares students of color to serve upper and middle class interests (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; McLaren, 1994), which simultaneously upholds white privilege. Through the curriculum, students of color are socially, politically, and economically marginalized (Young, 1990). While their white counterparts are “preparing for power” (Cookson & Persell, 1985), students of color are prepared to fill the ranks of the working class through a curriculum that minimizes their intellectual growth and maximizes opportunities to teach menial labor skills.

While the traditional curriculum purports to be objective, neutral, and meritocratic, it prepackages knowledge to serve economic and social purposes. According to the socially efficient, traditional view, knowledge is static and defined by “experts” who have a vested interest in the system (Kincheloe, 1993). In contrast, a critical race epistemology recognizes people of color as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM IN CHICANA/O EDUCATION

To contextualize how the traditional curriculum impacts people of color, I forefront the experiences of the largest and fastest growing communities of color in the United States—communities of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os. The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that Latinas/os are at least 13% of the entire U.S. population, and Chicanas/os comprise an estimated 62% of the Latina/o population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) asserts that “in educational research, it is important to remember that Chicana students experience school from multiple dimensions, including their skin color, gender, class, and English language proficiency” (p. 561).

Educational research by Chicana/o scholars Gilbert González (1990, 1997), Martha Menchaca (1995, 1997), and Richard Valencia (1997, 2002), verifies that Chicana/o communities historically experienced racism in many forms, including school segregation, cultural
marginalization, and linguistic elimination. Indeed, for at least the first half of the 20th century, traditional curricula presented knowledge to Chicana/o students with little regard for their language, culture, or potential to think critically. This “banking method” (Freire, 1970) was intended to prepare socially productive citizens by depositing “American” knowledge into Chicana/o students. This curricular approach relied on traditional notions of appropriate behavior and management. Behaviorist curricula also emphasize sorting children into levels of development, both cognitive and physical (Slavin, 1994).

Yet this supposedly neutral and socially efficient method of developing knowledge did not take place in a social vacuum. Guided by a model of deficiency that centered the experiences of white middle class students, biological and social scientists repeatedly attempted to “prove” that people of color were either innately or culturally inferior to Whites (Menchaca, 1997). This pseudo-science provided the justification for educators to stratify curricular knowledges —and also students— according to societal “needs” (Banfield, 1970; Dunn, 1987; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969; Lewis, 1969). Chicana/o students were not only physically segregated from their white peers, but they were also exposed to differentiated curricular knowledge. This “academic apartheid” (Padilla & Chavez, 1995, p. 9) or “apartheid of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, this volume) was rationalized as a tool of “Americanization” (González, 1997). Historian George Sánchez (1993) explains:

In the schools, socialization in American values and language skills were even more emphatically combined with a goal of social stability...at the primary level...two-thirds of class time was spent on “decorative subjects” such as music, dancing, art, needlework, cooking, and other manual arts. The pedagogical impetus behind this curriculum was that the “Mexican genius expresses itself through activities rather than abstractions.” At the secondary level, citizenship classes were integrated into vocational training for laundries, restaurants, garages, household work, and agriculture (p. 105).

So while white students learned to problem solve and think critically, Chicanas/os were being schooled about “proper” hygiene, “standard” English, manual arts, and menial labor (Menchaca, 1995; Sánchez, 1997).

Conservative scholar E. D. Hirsch’s (1988) “Core Curriculum” movement extends upon the Americanization curriculum from the first half of the 20th century. Like his predecessors, Hirsch (1988, 1996) draws upon deficit theories that purport to benefit “disadvantaged children,” while enhancing “the literacy of children from middle-class homes” (Hirsch, 1988, p. xiv). Hirsch’s school curriculum purports to “give” low-income children culture and literacy, while it enhances the cultural literacy that middle class children already have. Besides wrongfully assuming that the concept of culture is static, Hirsch also makes assumptions about who “owns” knowledge and culture. Hirsch (1996) writes “students from good-home schools will always have an educational advantage over students from less-good-home schools” (p. 43). Kristen Buras (1999) argues that such a statement “does not address why the cultural traditions, linguistic practices, or social mores of one home are considered good, while others are viewed as symptomatic of illiteracy, ignorance, and cultural deficit” (p. 81). Hirsch’s deficit model centers on his own white middle class, politically conservative knowledge base and pretends this knowledge base is not only neutral, but also universally available to all Americans. Limited by his own deficit discourse, Hirsch fails to recognize “that children—whether non-white, working-class, or Spanish-speaking—bring to the classroom lived experiences, cultural traditions, and languages that are diverse and rich resources of knowledge” (Buras, 1999, pp. 82–83).

It is no surprise that the formal curriculum for Hirsch (1988) envisions schools dedicated to having students memorize a list of “essential names, phrases, dates, and concepts” as the basis for cultural literacy. For Hirsch (1988, 1996), cultural literacy precedes socioeconomic success in America, but omits and distorts the knowledges and cultural resources that students of color and low-income students bring from home to school. By listing the preordained essentials of cultural literacy, Hirsch centers the experiences of white middle class, English-speaking families and marginalizes any other knowledges. At the same time, Hirsch reveals his belief that students are vessels into which knowledge is deposited. A “banking method” of education ignores that students have agency—they are acting, thinking, and capable of reflection (Freire, 1970). Hirsch’s model of “What Every American Needs to Know” reflects the Tyler (1949) rationale in its prepackaged design that discounts student agency.

Building an entire school curriculum around Hirsch’s list of “5000 essential names, phrases, dates, and concepts” means that students may have access to only 27 terms that can be attributed specifically with Chicanas/os:

| 1492 | Diego Rivera |
| Adiós | Fiesta |
| Alamo | Gracias |
| Alto | Gringo |
| Aztecs | Hector |
| Basta | Macho |
| Chicanos | Maestro |
| Conquistadores | Mañana |
TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE CURRICULUM

Critical race curriculum is the approach to understanding curricular structures, processes, and discourses, informed by critical race theory (CRT). According to the five tenets of CRT a critical race curriculum would: (1) acknowledge the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in maintaining inequality in curricular structures, processes, and discourses; (2) challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, objectivity and meritocracy; (3) direct the formal curriculum toward goals of social justice and the hidden curriculum toward Freirean goals of critical consciousness; (4) develop counterdiscourses through storytelling, narratives, chronicles, family histories, scenarios, biographies, and parables that draw on the lived experiences students of color bring to the classroom; and (5) utilize interdisciplinary methods of historical and contemporary analysis to articulate the linkages between educational and societal inequality. In order to examine the possibilities of a critical race curriculum, I offer the following description of these five tenets.

1. The Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism: Critical race educators recognize the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, and classism curricular structures, processes, and discourses. Drawing on the foundational work of Afrocentric and Chicanocentric scholarship in Ethnic and Women’s studies, a critical
race curriculum (CRC) insists that the knowledge of people of color be a central rather than marginal part of public schooling (Asante, 1987; Banks, 1997; Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 1969; Sleeter, 1989, 1991). A CRC is unapologetically race-centric, which means it centralizes race and racism while also focusing on the intersections of racism with other forms of subordination, based on gender, class, culture, language, immigration status, phenotype, sexual orientation, and accent (Crenshaw, 1989; Cruz, 2001; Espinoza, 1998; Harris, 1995; Johnson, 1998; Montoya, 1994).

Historically, race-centric approaches in education have been charged with developing a “feel good” curriculum that lacks the rigors of scholarly investigation. Sonia Nieto (1995) asserts:

The charge from the conservative right that multicultural education is self-esteem boosting “ethnic cheerleading” needs to be evaluated....Our traditional Eurocentric curriculum has always been a prime example of self-esteem “ethnic cheerleading,” but the ethnic group in this case, has been the dominant White, English-speaking, male, and middle class culture (p. 209).

Indeed, Eurocentric discourses may be found in the form of classroom discussions, teacher-student interactions, textbooks, student–student interactions, and overall campus racial climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Yet these race-centric discourses are perceived as standard and natural because they are centered on Whites (McIntosh, 1989).

Critical race theory in education asks why Advanced Placement (AP) courses are structured to offer opportunities to earn extra grade points for university admission, yet enrollment in AP courses is disproportionally offered to white students over students of color. Indeed, because CRC foregrounds race, it reveals that disproportionate numbers of Latina/o and African American students are tracked in “regular,” remedial, and special education classes, while White students are tracked in accelerated, honors, and AP classes. AP and college preparatory courses are less likely to be found in schools whose population is predominately students of color in comparison to schools with high numbers of white and upper class students (Oakes, 1985, 1986, 1990; Oakes, Rogers, McDonough, Solórzano, Mehan, & Naguera, 2000). Even within schools that offer AP courses, students of color are disproportionately denied access to those courses in comparison to their white and Asian peers (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). At the same time, the average freshman admitted to University of California, Los Angeles in 2002 had taken 18.4 AP courses (“New UCLA Admissions Data,” 2002). A CRC argues that racially differentiated curricular structures such as AP courses and curricular processes that deny access to AP courses are supported by racially-charged discourse, which blames students of color who are not granted university admission for not working hard enough. A CRC would challenge such a racially unequal system of denying university access to students of color and would demand that schools prepare all students to go straight into four-year universities.

2. The Challenge to Dominant Ideology: Critical race curricular structures, processes, and discourses challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, meritocracy and equal opportunity, which otherwise marginalize students and communities of color. It is through schools that racial and economic stratification is legitimated and perpetuated in society. Curriculum that purports to be objective actually maintains the status quo and sustains a normalized system of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia from inside the classroom. Multiple attempts to “reform” schooling, which have been generally unsuccessful in elevating educational outcomes for communities of color, are not dissimilar to “traditional remedies” in the law, which have failed to distribute racial equality (Bell, 1992; Rodriguez v. LAUSD, 1986). Understanding that the traditional curriculum is historically tainted by deficit theorizing, a CRC would not blame students of color for perpetuating educational inequality, as in a deficit viewpoint (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Instead, a CRC would examine the curricular structures, processes, and discourses in schooling that maintain inequality. A recent example of cultural deficit discourse can be found in an interview given by the African American economist John McWhorter about his book, Losing the Race (2000):

The sad and simple fact is that while there are some excellent black students...on average, black students do not try as hard as other students. The reason they do not try as hard is not because they are inherently lazy, nor is it because they are stupid...these students belong to a culture infected with an Anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace school-work too whole-heartedly (George, 2000, p. E3).

McWhorter ignores the unequal educational playing field and instead blames “black culture” in the tradition of deficit theorizing. Critical race curricular structures, processes, and discourses refute the deficit idea that an educated student of color is an oxymoron.

3. The Commitment to Social Justice: Because a CRC challenges racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in formal and hidden curricular structures, processes, and discourses, it has the potential to facilitate movement toward critical consciousness inside and outside classrooms (Freire, 1970, 1973; Smith...
& Alschuler, 1976; Solórzano, 1989; Yosso, 2002). Because “racism seems right, customary, and inoffensive to those engaged in it,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1992, p. 1288), being conscious of the intersecting roles of race, class, gender, and sexuality in subordinating people of color is foundational for a liberatory, transformational education (Freire, 1973). Critical pedagogy combined with critical race theory challenges curriculum “experts” who attempt to squeeze “multiculturalism” into texts by writing about the foods and holidays of people of color, or “adding ethnic content to the curriculum in a sporadic and segmented way” (Banks, 1993, p. 202). Instead, a CRC begins with the experiences of communities of color and structures schools around these lived knowledges.

Theorists of critical pedagogy most often critique curricular approaches that fail to address the dynamic relationship between culture and power in the classroom (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). For instance, curricular discourse that merely questions prejudice and stereotypes is too often a classroom exercise to develop “tolerance” rather than to take social action to change the status quo (Banks, 1996; Sleeter, 1989). Informed by critical pedagogy, CRC critiques mainstream approaches to multicultural curriculum that: (1) essentialize notions of culture; (2) trivialize histories of people of color into neat curriculum units; and (3) emphasize sympathy for “helpless minorities” instead of empathy with and action alongside communities of color (Banks & Banks, 1993; McCarthy, 1990; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). In addition, a CRC critiques multicultural curriculum approaches that de-emphasize Whites taking responsibility for racial privilege and struggling against structures of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, in press; Tatum, 1997).

Critical race educators seek to incorporate social justice as a central goal of curricular structures, processes, and discourses (Cummins, 1986b; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This is important because students are exposed daily to macro and micro forms of racism and sexism in schools, media, and community, yet are not often provided with the tools to analyze, critique, and challenge this societal curriculum (Banks, 1995a; Cortés, 1995). In order to challenge the dominant ideology as presented in the societal curriculum, inside or outside the classroom, CRC must seek out, participate in, and promote consciousness about struggles for social justice (Banks, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Freire, 1973; Sleeter, 1991).

4. The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge: CRC acknowledges that the lived experiences of students of color are generally marginalized, if not silenced in classroom discourse from K–12 through the university (Margolis & Romero, 1996; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). A CRC differs from traditional curriculum by explicitly listening to and learning from the experiences of people of color. CRC does not push students or teachers towards “discovering” a monolithic, Chicana/o, Latina/o, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native American, or African American experience, but instead explores and utilizes shared and individual experiences of race, class, gender, immigration status, language, and sexuality (Montecinos, 1995).

For example, parent “involvement” is currently a buzz-word in the field of education, but much of this debate has unfortunately been drawn upon notions of parent involvement that, again, utilizes the experiences of white, upper-middle class parents as the standard. Parents who do not have the economic means to take off work to attend school functions and be “involved” as defined by educators, are often labeled “uninterested” in their child’s welfare. For instance,

School participation is usually deemed as attending PTA meetings, parent/teacher conferences, and back-to-school nights, participation in the children’s classrooms, and individual parent/teacher and parent/principal meetings. This definition of school participation is from the dominant group’s perspective and not from the Latino parents’ view of what is possible or desirable for them (Hurtado, 1997, p. 320).

Because school discourse about parent involvement is based on the experiences of white parents as the norm, it is mistakenly assumed that parents of color do not place a high value on education.5 Creating a school environment that facilitates parent involvement, means coordinating meetings that take into consideration the multiple jobs often held by Chicana/o parents. It means that language support should be available for all interactions with the school and when needed, transportation should be provided to parents just as it is for their children who are bussed often two hours a day. Instead of acknowledging the restricted nature of school-defined parent involvement, too many educators insist that parents of color simply “do not care” if their child is unsuccessful in school.

The traditional definition of “involvement” carries a passive tone, wherein the school sets the parameters of appropriate interaction and then expects parents to become “involved” on the school’s terms. Many parents are economically unable to conform to a school’s prescribed manner of “involvement.” Schools often explain such realities through cultural deficit discourse about parents of color who somehow do not understand the “value” of being “involved” in their children’s education. In addition, linguistic limitations of school personnel restrict communication between school representatives (teachers, administrators, counselors) and parents of color. Just as schools tend to misinterpret the economic circumstances that shape Chicana/o “involvement” as cultural deficiency, white middle class parents, whose school involvement is deemed “culturally appropriate,”
often treat Chicana/o parents with condescension. Listening to the experiences of parents of color means admitting that la escuela (the school) is traditionally structured as a linguistically and culturally intimidating environment. A CRC learns from this knowledge base and shows how la escuela utilizes racialized cultural deficit discourse to attempt to justify “involvement” parameters that dismiss the socioeconomic realities facing many families of color.

Parental engagement in education outside of the traditional definition of involvement is usually not recognized. What about the Chicano who takes his hijo (son) to his job to show him the difficulties of manual labor and limited options available without an education? What about the Chicana who makes personal and economic sacrifices to put her hija (daughter) in sports, emphasizing the importance of balancing her time commitments, respecting her body, and competing as part of a team, while encouraging her to valerse por si misma (value herself) as an intelligent, assertive, and beautiful person (Villenas & Moreno, 2001)? Traditional curricular discourse and processes tend to dismiss and disrespect the experiences of these Chicana/o parents, while inappropriately blaming them for low standardized test scores or high drop out rates. Indeed, the work of Chicana scholars Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1994), Aida Hurtado (1997), and Rebeca Díaz (2000) shows that Chicana/o parents hold high regard for and are actively engaged in their children’s education.

Curriculum discourse that draws on the experiences of white middle class communities as the spoken or unspoken norm also perceives speaking Spanish as a detriment to student capabilities (Macedo, 1997). In other words, Chicana/o families are said to not only not care if their students fail in school, but they are also said to encourage failure by speaking Spanish to their children. In contrast, a CRC learns from the work of scholars of color, who conceptualize bilingual education to recognize student language, culture, and experience as strengths, not deficits (Darder, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Such scholarship acknowledges that language is raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized (Attinasi, 1997; Cummins, 1986a; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Álvarez, 2000).

A CRC challenges the normalizing of white, middle class experiences and recognizes the ways that traditional school structures devalue “pedagogies of the home,” especially in Chicana/o homes (Delgado Bernal, 2001). As such, a CRC draws explicitly on the strengths nurtured in Chicana/o homes, such as bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to family/community, and spirituality, thus centralizing Chicana/o cultural ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2001).

A CRC that begins with pedagogies of the home “interrupts the transmission of ‘official knowledge’ and dominant ideologies” (Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 624). This can facilitate students’ development of an oppositional language to challenge the deficit societal discourses with which they are bombarded daily. For example, students can critically engage Hirsch’s (1988) list of “Core Knowledge” by developing dichos (sayings, proverbs) that they have learned at home (Delgado Bernal, 2002). This can then spur discussions about why some knowledges are missing from textbooks. Across disciplines, at the K–12 level or in college and university settings, students can look to their lived experiences and the experiences of their classmates in developing storytelling, narratives, chronicles, family histories, scenarios, biographies, and parables (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1984, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Olivas, 1990). Teachers and educators can use these critical race methods with novice teachers to examine and critique the relationship between school and home knowledges (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

5. Interdisciplinary Perspectives: The interdisciplinary, historical perspective of a critical race curriculum allows students, educators, and communities to challenge the “subtle, more indirect” forms of racial subordination (Davis, 1989) while they contextualize their educational experiences within a larger social dialogue. Challenging social efficiency models that have structured school curriculum for over a century requires an examination of interdisciplinary approaches to education. Learning from the progressive strands of Afrocentric/Chicanocentric curriculum, a CRC focuses on Ethnic Studies and U.S./Third World Feminist frameworks to develop more connections between the academy and the community. A CRC would not narrowly define “the community” and would recognize that community can also be developed within schools and within the academy. Just as CRC draws on interdisciplinary strengths from within the academy —in literature, art, sociology, political science, law, etc.— the strengths of community-based activist organizations add strength to CRC.

Organizations that reclaim community history and nurture historical memory can facilitate knowledge creation about the changing nature of racism. Some examples of organizations that do this work include the student-based Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the teen-initiated Youth Organizing Communities (YOC), the nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and the student-initiated, academic-based National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS)⁶. These organizations create clear links between critical race theory and practice. For instance, the Youth Organizing Communities (YOC) describes itself as being a link between educational equity and social justice:

YOC is a network of youth organizers from Los Angeles, Oakland, San Diego and San Francisco, who are fighting for ‘schools not jails,’ educational and
environmental justice, more youth programs, ethnic studies classes and social change. We believe that as youth we are the leaders of today. We believe that change only happens when people organize and fight for justice (http://www.SchoolsNotJails.com).

Activist, anti-racist community organizations inside and outside the U.S. challenge the dichotomy of the academy and the community (Martinez, 1998; Tellez, 2002). Such organizations are reminders that critical race research should inform teaching, and teachers should design and implement critical race research (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Furthermore, the curricular approaches utilized by these community activist organizations connect the struggles to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination in larger society with the goals of the academy.7

**IMPLICATIONS OF A CRITICAL RACE CURRICULUM**

As a political agenda, anti-racism is concerned with changing the ways in which race relations are organized to privilege Whites. As an educational enterprise, anti-racism is concerned with both racial inclusiveness and with inquiry into the ways that race-thinking has shaped what counts as knowledge (Thompson, 1997, p. 29).

A CRC combines the political and educational goals Audrey Thompson’s (1997) epigraph outlines. Specifically, a CRC views traditional school curriculum as having an unacknowledged political agenda, which is implicitly organized to privilege Whites. A CRC also is concerned both with ensuring that classroom curriculum is centered on the experiences of people of color, but also challenging discourses that would discount students of color as creators and holders of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). A CRC draws on and extends the goals outlined by anti-racist educators and by feminists such as Thompson (1998) to challenge the discourse within textbooks and teacher/student classroom interactions, and also to critique racialized, gendered, and classed curriculum structures and processes.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) asserts that theory “is a set of knowledges;” but she laments that “some of these knowledges have been kept from us” (p. xxv). The five tenets of critical race theory challenge traditional school curriculum as it limits access to knowledges and perpetuates inequality. Instead, in response to a history of miseducation, critical race theory recognizes and centralizes the knowledges of people of color (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000). As she describes her work with other Latina feminists, Aurora Levins Morales (2001) explains, “We began making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else” (p. 32). CRC insists that schools begin with such homemade, organic theory. Indeed, a critical race theory in education has the potential to respond to Anzaldúa’s (1990) challenge that “If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories” (p. xxv). Therefore, implications of a CRC also include the potential to (1) challenge racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination; (2) provide students with an oppositional language to challenge deficit societal discourses; (3) empower teachers, students, and parents as they focus on the strengths within communities of color to combat racism, sexism, classism, nativism, monolingualism, and homophobia in education; (4) facilitate movement toward critical consciousness inside and outside classrooms; and (5) utilize the strengths of various critical frameworks to work toward social justice. These five tenets speak to the dynamic nature of racialized subordination in education and to the potential of utilizing multiple methods to challenge this inequality.

It is also important to reiterate that a CRC draws from the strengths of other convergent critical frameworks used to address racial inequality in education. The theoretical strengths of bilingual, multicultural, and Afrocentric/Chicanocentric curriculum and critical pedagogy are numerous. However, a CRC also learns from the limitations of utilizing one singular curricular approach (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). Instead, a CRC examines the ways that theory links with practice in various critical traditions, and listens to the places and spaces where race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, immigration, and language critiques intersect. A CRC notes that these places of intersection cannot be defined in essentialized terms, but that each of these critiques offers a window through which racialized, gendered, and classed subordination can be analyzed and challenged.

Historically, implementation of any “radical” curricular discourse is met with resistance and the discourse is watered down by the time it reaches its intended beneficiaries (Watkins, 1993). Furthermore, critical curricular approaches have not often been implemented as three-layered challenges to the structures, processes, and discourses of educational inequality. Moreover, some critical curriculum approaches have not addressed the intersectionality of racism with other forms of subordination. Such approaches challenge some forms of subordination while leaving other forms unchallenged. Therefore, a CRC must not only challenge traditional curricula, but must also learn from the blind spots of more established critical curricular approaches. The individual tenets of a CRC combine theoretical knowledges and practical lessons from the past and present to offer hope for the future. A CRC exposes the oppressive and
marginalizing power of schools and challenges school curriculum to emancipate and empower.

NOTES

1. Jeannie Oakes (1986) describes:

Poor and minority youngsters (principally Black and Hispanic) are disproportionately placed in tracks for low-ability or non-college bound students… minority students are consistently underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented… Blacks and Hispanics [are] more frequently enrolled in programs that train students for the lowest-level occupations (e.g., building maintenance, commercial sewing, and institutional care) (p. 14).

2. For example, to be minimally eligible for admission, as a freshman to a University of California (UC) campus, high schools students must take a college preparatory curriculum called the “a–f” requirements. These requirements include two years of history, four years of English, three years of math, two years of laboratory science, two years of foreign language, and two years of college preparatory electives. By the year 2003, entering UC freshmen will need to have taken a “g” requirement also, which is one year of a performing or fine arts elective. Not all high schools in California offer the a–f requirements, and within schools that do offer these courses, some students are tracked away from these classes.

3. Chicanas/os refers to women and men of Mexican origin or descent, residing in the U.S. regardless of immigration status. I recognize the political and social history linked with these terms is not discussed here.

4. Latinas/os refers to women and men of Latin American origin or descent (e.g., Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Puerto Rican), residing in the United States, regardless of immigrant status. I use Latina/o as an umbrella term that includes women and men of Mexican origin or descent.

5. An example of traditional discourse that normalizes the experiences of Whites and marginalizes people of color can be found in the comments of Former United States Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, who stated that Latina/o parents deserve much of the blame for the high dropout rate among their children because, “Hispanics have always valued education…but somewhere along the line we’ve lost that. I really believe that, today, there is not that emphasis” (Snider, 1990, p. 1).


7. For example, The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO, pronounced “C-2”) is a racial justice organization dedicated to building a social justice movement led by people of color. Specifically, “CTWO is a 20-year-old training and resource center that promotes and sustains direct action organizing in communities of color in the United States. CTWO’s programs include training of new and experienced organizers, establishing model multi-racial community organizations; and building an active network of organizations and activists of color to achieve racial justice in its fullest dimensions” (http://www.ctwo.org). CTWO also has developed a “Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program (MAAP), for movement activists of color committed to learning the theory and practice of building social justice movements through community and labor organizing” (http://www.ctwo.org).

REFERENCES


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TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE CURRICULUM


Tara J. Yosso is an assistant professor in the Chicana & Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research and teaching focus on educational equity through the frameworks of critical race theory, LatCrit theory, and critical media literacy.