

Chapter 16

Not White Saviors, but Critical Scholars: The Need for Gifted Critical Race Theory

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ABSTRACT

Gifted Black and Brown students are not voiceless; their voices are suffocated under the knee of systemic racism and white supremacy. This chapter proposes that the field of gifted education advocates for needed structural and systemic change through the discourse of critical race theory. A model of gifted critical race studies (GTCrit) is presented and described as both a way to understand race and racism in gifted education and to drive social change. GTCrit theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, ability, potentiality, and deficit ideology are built into daily interactions and discourses, informal and formal policies and procedures, and systems and structures of education, which disproportionately impact students of color qualitatively differently than white students.

INTRODUCTION

In the days, weeks, and months after George Floyd's murder at the knee of a white officer, yet another clarion call was issued to the white community. Scores of specialists, interventionists, consultants, and researchers awakened and joined the equity train, vowing to *help those without voices*, find new and better ways to fix children, fix curriculum, fix parents, fix tests, fix criteria, etc. And yet, *George Floyd was not voiceless*. Floyd's voice was *heard*, it was viscerally audible that day and in the days, weeks, and months after, as he begged for his life to no avail. Gifted Black and Brown students are not voiceless; for far too long, Black and Brown gifted students' voices have been suffocated under the knee of systemic racism and white supremacy. The typical/past reaction of white helpers: Let me speak for you. I propose: stand on my shoulders so you can be heard while I work to transform the system holding you down.

Ijeoma Oluo wrote that those with privilege maintain the status quo because of how the system was built; it "works according to design" (Oluo, 2021, p. 4). This design is the culture of white supremacy,

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often conflated with white male mediocrity. In a recent equity-focused article, a white male researcher wrote that “as one of the more privileged human beings on the planet... I try and remember that with privilege comes the responsibility to help those who are less privileged” (Peters, 2021, p. 2). If this calls to mind heroes and saviors, a similar concept is the Peter Parker Principle, popularized and named after the Spider-Man comics and generally attributed to the character of Uncle Ben: with great power comes great responsibility. Interestingly, the phrase originated in the comic as a narrative caption rather than from Uncle Ben, it was used in Superman prior to Spider-Man, and different iterations were uttered by politicians such as William Lamb, Winston Churchill, and William McKinley long before Stan Lee picked up a pen (Seland, 2018). Termed the white savior complex, this idea of the benevolence of the rich, powerful, or dominant needing to save the Black and Brown children from their circumstances reinforces the systemic racism. It is the post colonial iteration of noblesse oblige, that the nobility of one’s birth obligates generosity towards those of lower stature, just without the powdered wigs and corsets.

This chapter proposes an alternative: abandon the white savior complex of old. Use whiteness, and even more, the privileged power that comes with the cross-section of whiteness and gender identity, as an intentional act of resistance in the role of a co-conspirator and abolitionist (Love, 2019), advocating for structural and systemic change. Gifted education stakeholders need a common understanding of our past and present with a commitment to an antiracist present and future, the use of shared vocabulary, a rejection of white-washed history, and an agreement to discontinue reliance on pseudoscience. Above all, a commitment to social justice as a society, to equitable reform and/or transformation guided by and through critical research, is foundational to the advancement of the field. Gifted education needs critical race theory.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS CRITICAL RACE THEORY?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) started in law and policy domains before being ushered into education by Billings and Tate (1995). Critical race theory scholarship is based on seeking answers to two essential understandings: “how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, ...examin[ing] the relationship between that social structure and professed ideals such as ‘the rule of law’ and ‘equal protection’” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii) and “second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). Thus, critical race theory is both a research lens through which we work to understand systemic racism, and a tool for social justice and change. Gifted education stakeholders can work towards solutions to decades old problems in gifted education through-not another new fix-but by meaning-making and social justice, as accomplices, as co-conspirators, and as abolitionists, using CRT as a discourse for transformative change.

CRT operates within and across disciplines; within education there are tenets that inform research, theory, and pedagogy (Solorzano, 1997; Solorozano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2017). These tenets and principles of CRT are discussed in the following sections, with traditional explanations along with examples in the gifted field.

The Intercentricity of Race and Racism with Other Forms of Subordination

Race and racism are both central ideas in how our society operates; this is not a preference; it is stating a fact. We cannot start the discussion with “does racism operate here?”; it does. We start with naming it and defining it. Subordination in differing forms, the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ability, phenotype, sexuality... all coexist and intertwine and create a shroud of oppression. In gifted education, twice exceptional, or 2e, describes students that are gifted and have an identified exceptionality; traditionally, this has typically been a learning disability or neurodiversity. Collins’ (2020) multiexceptionality (3e) model showcases the intersectionality of giftedness with two or more exceptionalities, acknowledging the additional form of subordination in the oppression a gifted child faces due only to the color of their skin.

Using the story of 23-year-old Elijah McClain, who begged for his life, explaining he was just different and saying that he would do anything, including sacrifice his identity if it would help, as police subdued his unarmed slender body using a carotid hold and paramedics subsequently injected his slight Black frame with ketamine, Collins 3e model (2020) shows 3 intersecting and overlapping rings of exceptionalities. Two of these rings are learning exceptionalities, giftedness and a (dis)ability, as in the traditional definition of 2e. The third ring holds cultural exceptionalities, social categorizations; these impact students in markedly different ways than just the first two rings. Students like Elijah McClain, whom rescue workers said had a heart attack on the way to the hospital, and, brain dead, passed away days later. Because of the way the rings overlap, “every gifted student from a culturally underrepresented group is inherently a 2e learner as well, and therefore, appropriate accommodations and additional support services should be provided. When all three are present, they should more accurately be referred to as 3e.” (Collins, 2021, para 3). Thus, there is a specific impact of race on gifted education within cultural exceptionalities and the 2e/3e framework.

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

Traditional educational structures make claims of objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy. CRT pushes against the traditional education system, specifically the deficit thinking ideology used by teachers, administrators, and researchers. CRT operates within the belief that the educational systems’ claims of race neutrality and equal opportunity are masks for power and privilege in the self-interest of the dominant group in society. Gifted education is not exempt from this dominant ideology: as a basic simple example, when the field talks about the “traditional characteristics” of gifted students, and then labels the cultural characteristics of Black and Brown students as “non-traditional” characteristics, or typical and atypical, it is subscribing to the dominant ideology. A 1994 collection of handouts created by teachers of the gifted for William Carey College, currently accessible through the ERIC database, provides a summary of research on ‘atypical’ gifted groups and their characteristics (Diket & Abel). The categories of learners (phrasing is from Diket & Abel, 1994) include socioeconomically disadvantaged, underachieving, disabled, learning disabled, ADD, African-American, American Indian and Alaskan Native, and female; the remaining four handouts in the course pack are domains of giftedness. Non-traditional or atypical, it is clear: white male gifted students are the dominant ideology, and those that do not fit those lists, that we are creating new, alternate lists for, are the “other”. This is terminology used when describing gifted characteristics- it sets up the systemic view of a racist structure, no doubt- but this is a semantic example, as compared to deeply ingrained deficit thinking, implicit bias, and domi-

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nant ideology that is evidenced in the identification process from teacher rating scales, the nomination process, to assessments.

To be clear, the problem of identification in gifted education, while epic in nature and overwhelming in practice, is merely symptomatic. The disease, the true pandemic, is racism, the culture of white supremacy, the reliance on the dominant ideology. CRT challenges aspects of the dominant ideology, as Dr. Donna Ford (2010) shares, the three constructs that exacerbate underrepresentation are deficit thinking, colorblindness, and white privilege.

The top (but not only) four categorical roadblocks to representation are: (a) lack of teacher referral, (b) students' differential performance on traditional intelligence and/or achievement tests, (c) stagnant and outdated policies and procedures for labeling and placement, and (d) social-emotional concerns and eventual decisions of Black and Hispanic students and their primary caregivers about gifted education participation. But these four issues are symptoms of three larger problems—deficit thinking, colorblindness, and White privilege. (p. 32)

In a content analysis published by Goings and Ford (2018), almost half of the scholarly articles' exhibited a deficit thinking ideology. For example some studies placed the impetus on the student for being resilient to the learning environment- a deficit perspective on the part of the student, how the child is lacking, instead of putting the weight on the school's shoulders, as a structural entity, or on the adults in the learning environment as a systemic view, in order to make the environment more welcoming, a more resilient homeplace. Other studies in their recommendations used deficit focused language, making assumptions about the students, families, or communities. It is clear that the dominant ideology is pervasive throughout gifted education, despite frequent claims of race neutrality and equal opportunity. CRT challenges these claims as masks for power and privilege in the dominant group's societal self-interest, and works to unmask and uproot the structures in place in favor of equitable policies, practices, and procedures.

The Commitment to Social Justice

In CRT, social justice in education is a transformative response to oppression: racial, gender, and class. This tenet may inform policy, curriculum, and pedagogy as much or more than research and theory, as it works towards the eradication of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowerment of minoritized populations. Gifted education has operationalized aspects of social justice education within curricular models, however the use of resources outside gifted, but equity aligned would push the field further along this social justice through education commitment, e.g., *Cultivating Genius* (Muhummad, 2020) with differentiation for the gifted, and an analysis of abolitionist teaching as professionals (Love, 2019).

Within the social justice tenet lies interest convergence- Derrick Bell's theory is that advances are made for Black citizens only when these advances will also benefit white citizens. When these advances, or interests, converge; white chips were anted up, and white gains are now part and parcel of the pot alongside Black gains, even if they are not equal to Black gains, the game must be played to win. A subtle example of interest convergence is surface level diversity policies, in which a change is made to accommodate the diversity movement: it is (theoretically) win/win- the gains are made for the minoritized group in the new policy, and the gains are made for the dominant group in good feelings about themselves, their public image, and their outward media perception. "Weak diversity policies fail to change the status quo

today because they trade binding commitment for symbolism and good intentions” (Shih, 2017, para 16). In gifted education, interest convergence is seen in adjusting cut off scores and using local norms. There is a benefit to underrepresented populations, but all populations (white populations) can benefit. Dr. Shih argues that interest convergence provides a lens for keener policy insight, “if the plan is ever broadly perceived as disproportionately benefiting students of color, calls for cutting or eliminating its funding are highly likely” (2017, para 17).

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

CRT places high value in the lived experiences of individuals from marginalized communities and recognizes the importance of these stories in understanding race and racism. The dominant narrative does not tell the story. Consider Ogbu’s theory of acting white, a belief that gifted Black students underwhelm in their performance out of a fear of ostracization. Acting white is based on the idea that according to Black gifted students’ peers, to achieve is to be white, and thus betray one’s identity group. What do Black gifted students think about acting white? Toldson & Owens (2010) indicated through “analyses of relevant research and large national datasets, it can be concluded that the acting White theory for Black education is more fodder for cultural critics” (p. 95).

As an educator, I teach that if you want to know how a Black gifted child feels about something... ask a Black gifted child. It makes my students laugh, but the truth is, we spend a lot of time looking outward for information, when some of the greatest sources are in front of us. Does one child should speak for all Black gifted children? No, that is a direct path into another fallacy. Each year as educators, we meet the needs of the students in front of us, and a credible source of knowledge about them is... them, their families and community members (Gorski, 2020). As researchers, we gather local samples and add to a continually expanding body of literature. Understanding the lived experiences from others’ perspectives is key; hearing through their voices and seeing through their eyes. This sharing of stories and engaging in communal knowledge is not only a part of understanding our gifted learners and community, it also extends to culturally responsive curriculum, building the groundwork for a transformative approach (Banks, 1993).

The Transdisciplinary Perspective

In CRT, it is imperative to consider contemporary and historical contexts, and to investigate cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives as race and racism are analyzed within an issue of study. This is a perspective that is woefully underutilized in gifted education. In a recent paper asking why there is inequality in gifted education, Peters (2021) posits: inequality in America. With this answer, Peters (2021) offers the example, under a heading of negative life experiences, of poverty, which leads him to geographic place, neighborhoods, and lead exposure in a linear fashion. With a CRT lens that uses cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives and takes into account historical contexts, the linear line of analysis would have included race and racism: the impact of the history of redlining and racialized housing practices; the historical and contemporary economics of discriminatory hiring; both historical and contemporary inequitable wage practices that influence housing, job trends, and more; and the environmental racism evidenced by the lead poisoning crisis in the US, just to name a few topics.

Whiteness as Property

In their explanation of the history of critical race theory in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate decry that “more pernicious and long lasting than the victimization of people of color is the construction of whiteness as the ultimate property” (2016, p. 22), and list the property functions of whiteness as: rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property; and the absolute right to exclude. Rights of disposition refers to “when students are rewarded only for conformity to perceived ‘white norms’ or sanctioned for cultural practices (e.g., dress, speech patterns, unauthorized conceptions of knowledge), white property is being rendered alienable” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016, p. 22). Rights to use and enjoyment is the ability of whites to use the societal, economic, and cultural privileges associated with their whiteness, whether it is the smaller class sizes, or the well-kept, extensive school property, it is both performative and pleasurable. The key difference being that some individuals have the right to both use and enjoy the functions and features that schools offer. And some individuals, simply, do not. Reputation and status property is the act of damaging one’s reputation through an assault on their property; “in the case of race, to call a white person ‘black’ is to defame him or her. In the case of schooling, to identify a school or program as nonwhite in any way is to diminish its reputation or status” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016, p. 23). This effect is felt in redistricting school zones, magnet programs, gifted programs or bilingual education programs.

Finally, the absolute right to exclude is the white property right in schooling to prohibit blackness. From the initial full restriction of Black children to the right to schooling to separate but equal, the absolute right to exclude continues to this day in the form of school vouchers, magnet schools, charter schools, and zero tolerance policies igniting the school to prison pipeline. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2016) share that within schools, this is evidenced by “resegregation via tracking, the institution of “gifted” programs, honors programs, and advanced placement classes. So complete is this exclusion that black students often come to the university in the role of intruders—who have been granted special permission to be there” (p. 23). The same can be said for Black and Brown gifted students being seen as encroaching upon the typically white gifted programs, by their peers and teachers through deeply ingrained systemic white supremacy, and potentially by themselves, all too often one of a few or even the only child that looks like them, relegated to the “otherness”. This de facto segregation has been plaguing gifted programs since the inception of gifted programming.

THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY

The themes of critical race theory are both theoretical and analytical. As CRT evolved from its initial policy and law foundations into history, social sciences, and education, the foundational binary in which racism was articulated (Black/white) was called into question and expanded. Recently, new forms of discourse emerged: Latina/o (LatCrit), Native American (TribalCrit), Asian American (AsianCrit), Women of Color (FemCrit), LGBTQIA+ (QueerCrit), and Dis/abilities studies (DisCrit). As it has expanded, each part of the CRT family tree has brought with it the experiences of the different identity groups the discourse represents (Yosso, 2017). For example, while LatCrit has the tenet of intercentricity of race and racism, it considers the nuances of immigration status, accent, and surname in ways that the traditional racism binary does not. In making an argument for gifted CRT, all of these forms were

studied in depth; the greatest connections were found with Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit) and its individualized tenets.

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit)

Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit) acknowledges that “racism and ableism are normalizing processes that are interconnected and collusive.... [They] often work in ways that are unspoken, yet racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 7). In this way, DisCrit provides a framework, postulating how the constructs of race, racism, ableism, and dis/ability work both within and among the structures and systems of education, impacting students of color to a disproportionate extent.

A significant aspect of DisCrit is challenging the ideology of normal (Annamma, Boelé et al., 2013). Annamma, Boelé, Moore, and Klinger state that inequities in education are at least partially fostered from “society’s binaric conceptions of normal. By positioning students of colour, second language learners, those with diverse cultural practices and those with disabilities as abnormal, people are more likely to construct these students as having internal, individual deficits” (2013, p. 1286). In effect, this divides the population into normal vs abnormal- a false ideological binary- and with normal set as the societal standard, anything abnormal is thus exposed to structural and systemic bias, discrimination, and oppression. Embedded within this is not just an innate system, then, of standard and substandard, but ingrained superiority, “‘Ableism’ is a set of beliefs that guide cultural and institutional practices ascribing negative values to individuals with disabilities while deeming able-bodied and able-minded individuals as normal, therefore superior to their disabled counterparts” (Annamma, Boelé et al., 2013, p. 1279). This concept can be understood within the context of CRT’s *The Intercentricity of Race and Racism with Other Forms of Subordination* tenet, as an *other form of subordination*, but its centrality to DisCrit sets it apart from other branches of the CRT family tree.

Annamma et al. (2013) offer seven tenets for DisCrit, not to be prescriptive but rather to illustrate content and context from a DisCrit approach.

- (1) *DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.*
- (2) *DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.*
- (3) *DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.*
- (4) *DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.*
- (5) *DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.*
- (6) *DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.*
- (7) *DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11)*

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In a similar vein, based on a scholarly review of both critical race theory and gifted education literature, this chapter offers an additional discourse in the critical race family tree: gifted critical race studies (GTCrit).

GIFTED CRITICAL RACE THEORY

GTCrit is both a theoretical and an analytical lens, through which to make meaning of race and racism in gifted education and drive social change. *GTCrit is a framework that theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, ability, potentiality, and deficit ideology are built into the daily interactions and discourses, informal and formal policies and procedures, and the systems and structures of education, which disproportionately impact students of color qualitatively differently than white students.* GTCrit is grounded in tenets; principles to reference and support the work of meaning making and social justice.

Breaking Down the Definition

In creating the definition for GTCrit, the foundational definitions of CRT were strong models, as was the DisCrit definition, as it has the closest alignment to the field. Essential components of CRT were: *framework* theorizing about *race & racism*, and that it involves *both meaning making and social justice*. GTCrit is not intended to be prescriptive; it is provided as a theoretical lens to make sense of race and racism in gifted education, and a tool for social justice. CRT acknowledges that race is a social construct, not a biological one (Ladson Billings, 1998), but the term race is consistently used (as opposed to ethnicity, for example) in keeping with CRT foundations, and because the issue of racism is a socially constructed issue which must be deconstructed.

Segments of the rest of the definition mirror the form of the DisCrit definition, however use vocabulary pertinent to the gifted field. GTCrit is a framework that theorizes how race & racism interact with *ability and potentiality*. Gifted education scholars vary in their definitions of giftedness, but overwhelmingly ability and potential are key constructs; *areas or domains* of ability/potentiality were intentionally not stipulated, nor was a qualifying frame of *academic* ability/potentiality. For the purposes of GTCrit, the label of giftedness, what I refer to at times as the Scarlet G, does not need to be formally bestowed upon individuals by districts or psychologists. In addition, *deficit ideology* is specifically named. Per Goings & Ford (2018) this is a significant area of need in GTCrit discourse. Thus, the first part of the definition might be considered the “what”- the interaction of gifted education (ability and potentiality) with deficit ideology, race and racism.

In this section of the definition of GTCrit, “where” is outlined. Where should we go looking for these examples of intersecting racism/ability/deficit ideology? These can be at micro and macro levels: *daily interactions and discourses, informal and formal policies and procedures, and the systems and structures of education*. These have implications for a variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to students, teachers, parents, community members, researchers, administrators, and policy makers. Daily interactions and discourses involve the learning environment for the student, and impacts the curriculum, engagement, and pedagogy research realms. Culturally responsive teaching is a significant focus area in the field currently that would benefit from a GTCrit lens. Informal policies might include procedures that vary by teachers such as bathroom, homework, and library pass policies that create inequities within

the school and enforce the school as a structure of whiteness as a property right. Formal policies and procedures might include course selection, gifted identification and acceleration policies.

The systems and structures of education are the overarching ways that white supremacy culture has ingratiated itself into the educational system. These filter down into some of the others (such as identification), but are societal and systemic. Characteristics of white supremacy such as either/or thinking, paternalism, and individualism are infused in the structures of the governmental gavel, the school bell, and the church pulpit. These are the very policies that schools have set up in education: why do we group by age- why do all students who are in second grade learn at the same pace, just because they were born within the same 6-8 month time frame? Why do we adhere to a school calendar with three months off in the summer? Why are school resources consistently distributed through racialized lines? In a study where pre-school teachers were asked to predict when behavior was going to become challenging and press a button, researchers used eye-gaze technology to track which preschoolers the teachers were watching when they were expecting trouble. An early example of how systems and structures of racism intersect with education are seen in the findings: when they were expecting challenging behaviors, preschool teachers' gazes fixed more frequently on Black children, and even longer and more often on Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). Notably, this study used deception; there were no incidents of challenging behavior in any of the 12 30-second clips. Daily microaggressions shared by gifted BIPOC students exemplify the ways in which white supremacy has infused the systems and structure of gifted education: not being called on to answer questions, false compliments of "she's so well spoken" with the unsaid "for a Black girl", raised eyebrows as BIPOC gifted youth enters an honors class on the first day of school, followed with "are you sure you are in the right class?" The racist systems and structure have fostered a teacher workforce that is, by and large, not culturally responsive, equitable, or antiracist. It has also created biased and discriminatory policies and practices in identification and programming that propagate the cycle of racism.

The final phrase in the definition is both a how and a why: *which disproportionately impact students of color qualitatively differently than white students*. What are the impacts of these racist actions? They cause impacts that can be measured in different ways that affect students of color differently than white students. Historically minoritized and marginalized students are, by virtue of the interactions suggested for critical study above, further minoritized and marginalized. Consider the how through temporal lenses: what is happening in the here and now, in your school, in your district and community? And what are the impacts of these racist actions, how have they disproportionately impacted students of color in qualitatively different ways than white students *over time*? Over time within a community, over time generationally within a family, or over time within the tenure of a specific student in the schooling experience? And then the *why*: why is it crucial that we engage in gifted critical race theory, as a theoretical lens and as a social justice movement? Because the intersections of racism and ability have been and continue to *disproportionately impact students of color qualitatively differently than white students*.

The problem will not be solved using the piecemeal approach, because the problem is not just underrepresentation, bias, lack of cultural knowledge of teachers, methods of norming, the kind of assessments used, lack of professional learning. These are the surface level symptoms- this is how we can see the problem. The problem is systemic and structural racism; the problem is the culture of white supremacy that has built this house of gifted education in which we live. The idiom "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" comes to mind as I write: *but, wait!* Equity in gifted education requires a both/and not either/or mentality. Don't give up on best practices in culturally relevant teaching, intentional and targeted professional learning, equitable recruitment and retention efforts. Do that AND work on systemic

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change. As I shared in the introduction, as a white woman, I am not here to speak for BIPOC gifted students. But I can offer my megaphone and my shoulders to stand on so they more easily can be heard should they need them, while I listen to them and work to transform the system.

Tenets

With this in mind, along with the definition of GTCrit, and following the example of DisCrit, I offer tenets of Gifted Critical Race Theory. These are not intended to be prescriptive steps, but ways in which various stakeholders can operationalize GTCrit through issues, research, content, and context in the field. These GTCrit tenets do not replace the previously discussed CRT tenets, as these tenets are still fully in play in GTCrit. The following are suggested to further contextualize CRT within gifted education.

- Check Racism First: Investigate Questions Through a Lens of Racism
- Working with Others: Both Accountability and Compassion with Capacity for Change
- The Here and Now: The Time is Right for Transformation
- Center Students: Treat Them Like Humans, Love Them, Teach Them
- Policy and Practices: Use the Equity Literacy Principles of Prioritization and Redistribution
- In the Field: Review and Replicate Research
- Active Voice is Not Just for Writing...See Something? Say Something!

Check Racism First: Investigate Questions Through a Lens of Racism

The centrality of racism is a standard tenet in CRT, originating from its law beginnings with Derrick Bell and his 1992 book, *Faces At the Bottom of the Well*: racism is a permanent fixture in our society. In her 1998 introduction of CRT to the field of education, Gloria Ladson Billings wrote that racism “is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to the people in this culture... thus, the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (p. 11). The phrasing of this tenet comes from a panel discussion at the National Association of Gifted Children’s National Symposium on Equity for Black and Brown Gifted Students. In discussing a question about the lack of Black male teachers in gifted education, Dr. Ivory Toldson remarked that when in doubt, “check racism first” (August 10, 2021). The assumption is often that Black teachers aren’t applying, or even that Black teachers aren’t qualified for the gifted/talented positions. The reality- when we check racism first, is that Black teachers aren’t hired because *they are Black*. This is due to large structural issues, such as systemic barriers in place, and individual personnel choices, such as their names sounding *too Black*.

Check Racism First as a tenet is not limited to hiring practices; that is just the origin of the nomenclature. Are the numbers of the gifted program disproportionate? Check racism first. Are the recruitment numbers strong, but retention numbers weak? Check racism first. Are your teacher referrals disproportionate? Check racism first. As you reflect on the learning experiences provided in your classroom/school, are they equitable? Are they relevant to the community and lives of the learners versus decontextualized presentation of skills? Check racism first. This is the Occam’s Razor of gifted education and racism; the simplest answer is likely true. Rather than seeking out alternate explanations for why something is happening, check the most obvious first: racism.

Working with Others: Both Accountability and Compassion with Capacity for Change

At the same equity conference mentioned in Check Racism First, Dr. Sally Krisel spoke of the honor of having Dr. Mary Frazier as her teacher and mentor. Dr. Krisel shared wise words from Dr. Frazier about working with others on topics of giftedness and race: “I didn’t change anyone’s mind by making them mad at me first” (August 12, 2021). A significant part of the equity work we engage in as gifted and talented critical race scholars, studying the juxtaposition of race and racism with ability and potentiality, is working with others to change minds and strive for social justice.

In a conversation with poet Maya Angelou, author and activist bell hooks spoke about compassion, and the difficulty of not dividing individuals into groups of oppressor and oppressed, but recognizing that at some point, people have the potential to stand in either of those groups. Specifically, she grappled with the capacity of people to change, to adjust their way of thinking that would positively enhance the collective well-being. She wondered, do we see this potential in people, or do we condemn our brothers and sisters to where they are, in their current frames of mind? hooks acknowledged the difficulty of the question, wrapping up the discussion by saying, “For me forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (McLeod, 1993, p. 7). This quote provides the name for this tenet which, at its crux, states a need for both accountability for what has happened and continues to happen in gifted education with a concurrent need to see within our stakeholders the compassion, the humanity, and the potential for change, reform, and/or transformation.

The Here and Now: The Time is Right for Transformation

Howard (2018) found the impact of both whiteness as property and space as curriculum to be factors in a gifted program’s perpetuation of white supremacy and racism. CRT’s whiteness as property tenet created and fostered the system of racialized tracking, disproportionately classifying “White students into the segregated GT program [that] perpetually separated students physically, socially, and academically. Disproportionate representation was justified through a discourse of high ability used to determine the definition and measures of giftedness that systematically advantage White students” (Howard, 2018, p. 561). Students internalize gifted status and the space in the school building becomes part of their internalized curriculum; this teaches them about racialized power, privilege, and exclusion within the educational landscape. “The overwhelming Whiteness of representation sent a strong implicit message about race, where social and academic privileges were primarily the property of White students. This message was not lost on students who keenly observed the unspoken messages of ability tracking” (Howard, 2018, p. 563). There is never going to be a right time. There is never going to be a better time. The longer we wait, the more systemic and structural racism is taught to students. The time is now.

Center Students: Treat Them Like Humans, Love Them, Teach Them

Dr. Asa Hilliard III is a lauded influence on several scholars cited in this chapter, from Dr. Bettina Love to Dr. J. Luke Wood; I am no exception. One of his more popular quotes, and this tenet’s namesake, refers to finding children in any group that are geniuses, stating “There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them” (Williams-Johnson, 2016, p. 10). The field of gifted education has struggled with cohesion as a result of

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varying definitions of giftedness, disagreements as to identification methods, debate as to whether acceleration ‘belongs’ to the gifted, and for that matter who “owns” creativity, differentiation, and eminence. GTCrit as a lens relocates those issues to the perimeter and centers students and their needs in the here and now: honor the students as individuals, love them, teach them where they are and help them grow.

As part of a four-course series for a gifted and talented add-on certification, I ask my undergraduate and graduate students in the first course (on diverse gifted children): Do we need gifted services if education is truly differentiated at every level, every day? We informally revisit this question throughout each course, and then in the final course (which covers many topics, from creativity to professional learning) the same question is formally posed and discussed as we think about advocacy. I tell my students I don’t have a single right answer- but that we should carefully weigh as many perspectives as we can find- what benefits are there to programming? Who is left out? What is the purpose of identification? Who is left out? Does the identification have internal consistency with the programming? Who is left out? What does it mean to say education is truly differentiated at every level, every day? What does that look like? What does that sound like? What does that feel like? What does this require? Who is left out? This ongoing conversation gets at the same point as the above paragraph: GTCrit centers the education of gifted children- not identified children or those in gifted programming, but children with abilities, with potential- and seeks ways to teach these children by honoring their humanity and through love.

Policy and Practices: Use the Equity Literacy Principles of Prioritization and Redistribution

GTCrit tenets are both research lenses and actionable steps for social justice; one specific location outlined in the definition of GTCrit is policies and procedures. Equity literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) outlines four skills of equity literate educators: Recognize, Respond, Redress, and Cultivate and Sustain. First, educators must recognize racism, bias, and/or discrimination, then they must appropriately respond to it. Redressing involves getting to the root cause of the racism, bias, and/or discrimination, and the final ability is to cultivate and sustain an anti-racist, bias-free and discrimination free learning environment. In addition to abilities, equity literacy has principles, which serve to keep equity central to the work. While all are important to equity work within gifted education, in focusing on policies and procedures within GTCrit, of note are the Prioritization and Redistribution Principles:

The Prioritization Principle: In order to achieve equity we must prioritize the interests of the students and families whose interests historically have not been prioritized. Every policy, practice, and program decision should be considered through the question, “What impact is this going to have on the most marginalized students and families? How are we prioritizing their interests?”

The Redistribution Principle: Equity requires the redistribution of material, cultural, and social access and opportunity. We do this by changing inequitable policies, eliminating oppressive aspects of institutional culture, and examining how practices and programs might advantage some students over others. If we cannot explain how our equity initiatives redistribute access and opportunity, we should reconsider them. (Gorski, 2020, p. 1)

Identification and programming are critical policies to examine with these two principles. It is worth noting that without the benefit of interest convergence, in Shih’s (2017) experience, the policy initiative

benefiting BIPOC students will not likely have success. Thus, the crucial attention paid by GTCrit, from both scholarly and practitioner viewpoints.

In the Field: Review and Replicate Research

Why do we do what we do? More often than not, research-based best practice. But whose research? And why? Teachers across the country, and beyond our borders, base their understanding of children's psychosocial development on Erik Erikson and his stages; they form an understanding of students' psychological needs using the work of Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy; and their knowledge of cognitive development comes from Jean Piaget and his ideas of schema and schemata, just to name a few. What do all of these researchers have in common? Even beyond their white male identities, this tenet of GTCrit encourages gifted researchers to reexamine what we THINK we know through a critical lens: what were these early researchers' samples? On whom did they base these conclusions, on which, as educators, we base our everyday decisions and basic pedagogy? White, middle to upper class, most often males, and in Piaget's case, starting with members of his own family. This is not a typical classroom, a representative sample, but yet it is how educators see the world. It is not my proposal these concepts are all false, but that practicing reliable, valid science is important. As gifted researchers engaging in critical race theory work, we must review the research and work to replicate that which was not done with an authentic sample to ensure it is both valid and reliable.

In particular, we need to prioritize the research on which we base critical decisions. Mensah and Jackson (2018) found that in both teacher preparation and science education, the curriculum, structure, and pedagogy inherently perpetuate alienation and exclusion for preservice and inservice teachers of color. Their recommendations include rooting out "structural forms of race, racism, and power that manifest through curriculum, structure, and pedagogy..." (Mensah & Jackson, 2018, p. 2) through an examination and reflection of content at the higher education/training level, and that teacher preparation practices must "empower rather than impede progress toward important goals of CRT, and this may be achieved through building stronger relationships with [Preservice Teachers of Color] and Faculty of Color across teacher preparation courses in support of these goals" (Mensah & Jackson, 2018, p. 2). In gifted education, prioritization of review and replication areas are both recruitment and retention aspects: identification, curriculum, engagement, and pedagogy.

Active Voice is Not Just for Writing...See Something? Say Something!

"Until white teachers assume the onus of dismantling the White supremacist structures by learning, talking, seeing, and feeling what race, White supremacy, and whiteness entail, they remain complicit in its maintenance" (Matias, 2013, p. 76). If we see it happen, and we are passive in stopping the effects of our students, Matias reminds us that as teachers, we are responsible. As a doctoral student, I frequently found "strive for active voice" scrawled over my papers- I still need that reminder, I think we all do sometimes, in writing and in life. It is a distinguishing characteristic between "I'm not a racist" and "I'm an antiracist"- actively speaking up, taking steps, rising up in small and large ways against racism. It is "Hey, I didn't think that joke was funny" to a fellow teacher in the hall, to starting an equity audit of the identification practices for gifted education services.

Grantham and Biddle (2014) discuss the role of teachers in acting as upstanders (active) rather than bystanders (passive) in issues of racism and bullying. They share that White teachers first may need to

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develop eyes that can see the incidents happening; to do so, educators may need training on White identity, cultural responsiveness, culture evasiveness (note: I use this term rather than the more popular term color blindness, which perpetuates ableism). Upstanding teachers use their knowledge and confidence to diffuse incidents of racism and/or bullying between students. According to Grantham and Biddle, “at the heart of upstanding is simply taking a stand and adopting proactive roles to address an injustice” (2014, p. 184); this extends the use of upstanding beyond the teacher and classroom role of racism and bullying to the community and beyond, and as such is an example of the “active voice” tenet of GTCrit.

CONTEXTUALIZING GTCRIT: #FIXINJUSTICENOTKIDS

In bringing the chapter on GTCrit to a close, I would be remiss if I left out my purpose in gifted education, what for many educators is their calling to serve, I always say I’m here for the gifted babies. My favorite of Gorski’s (2020) equity literacy principles is the #FixInjusticeNotKids principle.

The “Fix Injustice, Not Kids” Principle: Educational outcome disparities are not the result of deficiencies in marginalized communities’ cultures, mindsets, or grittiness, but rather of inequities. Equity initiatives focus, not on “fixing” students and families who are marginalized, but on transforming the conditions that marginalize students and families. (Gorski, 2020, p. 1)

I teach mostly seniors and graduate students in higher education, and in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, my seniors came to class asking about how they were going to “fix” their students and “catch them up” from all of their learning loss. “Who broke your students?” I asked. They were confused. “Where did you get the message that something was wrong with the students? That they were behind?” All over. School Board. Schools. Tests. Curriculum maps. Media. Everywhere. “Did your students cause the pandemic? Did they cause covid? The school shut down? Why are they to blame? Why are they needing to be fixed for something they didn’t cause- or have any part in creating?” Those are easy questions about the pandemic, right? We can ask the same questions about racism. Colorism. Classism. Sexism. But instead of working on fixing the system, all too often, we create a plan that focuses largely on the kids- here’s how we’ll teach a group of Hispanic and Latinx gifted kids how to adapt to their situation and overcome the odds, or this is a great way to teach a group of Black gifted kids grit or resilience.

CONCLUSION

As gifted education joins the critical race theory discourse, i.e. analyzing present day circumstances through a historical and socio-cultural lens that takes into account white-washed history and the ever-present culture of white supremacy, the field can work together towards real systemic and structural change. This work will move into individual spheres of influence as appropriate, GTCrit in the classroom, as a leader/administrator, as an advocate/community member, and/or as a researcher. It is in the contextualization and use of GTCrit that it holds scholarly significance, as a lens of understanding and for social justice.

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