

Perceptions of Critical Race Theory as a Tool for Understanding the African American Male Educational Experience

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Abstract

This study explored the perspective of eight education stakeholders on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the educational attainment opportunities for African American males in the current system of education in the United States of America. A qualitative research approach was employed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The data gathered from this study revealed that there was a general consensus among participants at an African American Male Empowerment Summit around the favorability and usefulness of Critical Race Theory in understanding the current state of African American males in education.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, African American males, U.S. Education System

Introduction

Why do African American male students continue to fall behind their peers in educational attainment twenty one years into the 21st Century? Many research studies (Butler et al., 2011; Freeman, 2006, Stinson, 2011; Wyatt, 2009) have examined the academic achievement gaps, as well as, the opportunity gaps experienced by African Americans in education. Scholars consistently have found that African American males lag behind their peers in academic achievement (Irving & Hudley, 2008), yet have outpaced them when it comes to the school to prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014). Likewise, African American male teachers are also underrepresented in classrooms across the United States of America (Shabazz, 2006), while as

leaders in education they are often guided toward areas of student discipline and away from instructional and academic leadership (Fenwick & Akua, 2013).

In the last decade there have been nuanced ways in which research on African American males have been framed. Scholars have moved away from seeing the problem with the student, and are more and more framing it as a problem with the school system, society, and the methods used to approach such topics. One emerging framework that has gained a large amount of attention and support in this movement has been Critical Race Theory (CRT). Although the leading seminal work on CRT in education dates back to the 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), this framework is developing more and more each year.

Interestingly, there has been a recent surge in efforts toward Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging that has further sparked debate on the value of CRT and its place in schools among various educational stakeholder groups. One result has been a growing opposition against CRT based on the argument that it is divisive and paints all white people as bad and evil. But, when considering its starting place within scholarly circles, what do non-academics really know about the value of Critical Race Theory? This manuscript seeks to respond to this question by providing the perspectives of eight educational stakeholders on the value of CRT and its power to create change, particularly in relation to African American male educational attainment.

An African-American Male Empowerment Summit was held on the campus of a public university in the southern region of our country. The summit focused on the question, “*Where are African American males now and how do we achieve greater equity in key quality of life indicators?*” There were approximately 140 attendees during the 2-day event, which included participants from a variety of educational stakeholder groups. Representatives from higher education, K-12 education, community leaders, business executives, students, parents, law enforcement, and faith-based organizations were all in attendance to discuss issues impacting African American males in the 21st Century. The purpose of the summit was to:

- Discuss real and relevant challenges experienced by African American males in the 21st Century.
- Discover viable solutions to pursuing greater equity in educational attainment, economic, and social justice for African American males.
- Initiate real change by strategically engaging the entire community.

The summit included keynote speakers, panel discussions, recorded interviews, eating events, award presentations, a cultural experience, a campus tour, COVID vaccination stations, and several networking opportunities for all participants.

Using the summit as context, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of educational stakeholders as it relates to Critical Race Theory (CRT). Given the controversy surrounding CRT and its definition and deployment in education, this was an opportune time to gauge the perceptions of educational stakeholders on their understanding of CRT to better understand if, how, and in what ways CRT is being communicated as a tool for teaching, policy creation, and in any other aspect of schooling. The following section will present an overview of Critical Race Theory as understood by the researchers along with a contextualization of African American Males in Education. The researchers then detail the methodological approach, data collection process, and method of analysis. The study concludes with a report of the findings from the eight semi-structured interviews by educational stakeholders, a discussion of emerging themes and implications for future research are shared.

Literature Review

When considering the contributions of certain historic and legal factors in American history, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides both educational researchers and legal scholars a lens through which they can critique the racialized structures still embedded in the current system of education in the United States of America. To better understand the development of Critical Race Theory as a framework, one must first understand the historical development of race as a social construct and the emergence of racism in the United States of America. Historically, it is evident that race is a large factor in what it means to be American. Since its creation in 1776, Americans have always aimed to classify themselves in relevance to others. Hence, the creation of a hyphenated self (e.g., Native American, African-American, Asian-American, etc.). Moreover, it is through a racialized structure that the contemporary system of education has continued to develop.

States like Alabama, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Missouri, Virginia, and Louisiana began to enact laws, statues, and regulations prohibiting the education of slaves, free negroes, and mulattoes as early as the 1830s (Cornelius, 1991; Missouri General Assembly, 1847; Virginia General Assembly, 1831). We now see that one consequence has been that most of these states remain in the bottom third of national rankings in education across the United

States of America (Baker, 2019). Although slaves were eventually freed, the denial of generations of educated individuals still has a direct impact on the possibility of educational attainment, accumulating wealth, and the ultimate goal of achieving the American dream for African Americans.

To better understand the development of Critical Race Theory as a framework, one must first understand the historical development of race as a social construction and the emergence of racism in The United States of America. The U.S. has a long history of creating systems to benefit some and hinder the progress of others particularly as it relates to education and wealth. Post-slavery, American leaders have continuously worked to ensure that there was a clear segregation among individuals labeled as white and those seen as others to ensure the prosperity of Eurocentric values. For example, with the passage of the 1831 General Assembly Act, it was officially forbidden that any free people of color be taught to read or write. Anyone caught teaching former enslaved people and mulattoes to do so was considered to be breaking the law and were subject to corporal punishment. This act codified hindering educational attainment for the population that would later be labeled African Americans. This was a genesis of legal challenges to educational progress for African Americans. Deliberate acts of racial separation can be seen in many other instances throughout American history such as the Missouri Compromise (1820), the passage of the Jim Crow laws (1865), and the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision (1869). It was not until the mid-1900's that America started to see a cultural shift in relation to race. The *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* decision in combination with the Civil Rights Act of 1954 where the first time in American history that it was legally declared that racial segregation was forbidden and unlawful. As it pertains to education, there have been decades of debates on the place of race as a factor in decision making related to the classroom and the effect of segregation on the current system of education. Recent research (Bourdier & Parker, 2021) has suggested that while there is no federally mandated segregation in the classroom, there still exists a de facto racial and now growing financial segregation among students and families.

In recent years, there has been increasing numbers of conversations on how to address this issue to further provide equity and equality for all students. One response that has grown exponentially has been the usage of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytical framework for educational researchers. CRT in education allows researchers to position the voice of minority

students at the center of the research through the usage of mainly qualitative methods. It is through CRT-based research that scholars can make sense of numerical phenomena such as the overrepresentation of African American males in special education and the overrepresentation in suspensions and expulsions (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Kunjufu, 2009a; Skiba et al., 2006).

Critical Race Theory

When considering the contribution of certain historic and legal factors in American history, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides both educational researchers and legal scholars a lens for critiquing the racialized structures still embedded in the current system of education in the United States of America. It emerged from Critical Legal Studies, initially through the work of scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, with a focus on “the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (Delgado, 1995, p. 2). CRT holds that “racism is a permanent component of American life” (Bell, 1992, p. 13). Delgado (1995) extends this thought further suggesting that racism not only maintains a certain permanence in American society, but it is normalized. CRT also holds that racism functions as both conscious and unconscious acts that are embedded into American institutions. Although CRT allows for a diverse set of theoretical concepts and applications (Crenshaw et al., 1995), there is consistent overlap in frequently cited themes such as: (a) counter-storytelling (Matsuda, 1995), (b) permanence of racism (Bell, 1992), (c) Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), (d) interest convergence (Bell, 1980), and (e) the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988). Matsuda (1995) describes the importance of counter narratives as a challenge to the dominant discourse and a vehicle for marginalized voices to be heard. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) use the intersection of race and property to examine school inequity using the premise that Harris’s “property functions of whiteness” (p.59) fundamentally affects how education is deployed in American society. Bell (1980) argues that African-Americans gain as they pertain to civil rights converge with the self-interests of Whites. A final commonality of CRT, the critique of liberalism, deals with three basic notions: colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change. Of particular interest is the notion of colorblindness, which CRT scholars argue is a way to ignore and erase the impact of race-based policies (Gotanda, 1991).

Critics charge that Critical Race Theory’s focus on the use of narrative and focus on subjectivity instead of objectivity and following uniform rules is dangerous. They consider it to be too dismissive of the status quo and un-American of recent, critics such as Sawchuck (2021)

claim that CRT in any capacity has no place in the scholarship and application of teaching, learning, and instruction. Particularly critics of the theory take umbrage at the centering of *racial difference* at the expense of fundamental ideas to Americanism such as meritocracy, exceptionalism, and capitalism (Mocombe, 2017). Regardless of the current controversy, CRT does provide a lens to better understand African-American male educational attainment and the past and present challenges for this specific student population. Ladson-Billings (1998) use of CRT to critically examine models of education that “presume that African-American students are deficient” (p. 19) provides a rich opportunity to explore our current research project through a qualitative methodology. Given the scholarship that points to the utility of using CRT as a framework to better understand the challenges African-Americans face in social institutions such as education, we thought it was important to examine the perceptions of CRT within a specific context with educational stakeholders.

Critical Race Theory in Education and African American Males

In considering CRT as a dynamic framework for understanding race and race relations in America, the question still lingers, how is CRT understood to be useful to non-researchers? In considering this question in combination with the previous literature, the following research questions were explored:

1. What is your perception of Critical Race Theory?
2. What impact would Critical Race Theory have on our current system of education?

Hence, the researchers aimed to understand how CRT could be used to explain the state of African American males in education in the 21st Century. The next section will discuss the methodology including the data collection process and method of analysis used in this study.

Methodology

This research endeavor is a snapshot of the perceptions of eight educational stakeholders responding to the questions, “What is your perception of Critical Race Theory?” and “What impact would Critical Race Theory have on our current system of education?” These questions were presented to educational stakeholders during an African American male empowerment summit. Using the summit as context, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of educational stakeholders as it relates to Critical Race Theory (CRT). Given the controversy surrounding CRT and its definition and deployment in education, this was an opportune time to gauge the perceptions of educational stakeholders on their understanding of CRT as a way to

better understand if, how, and in what ways it is being taught or as a tool for teaching, policy creation, and in any other aspect of schooling. Although many believe it to be actively taught in law schools.

We invited educational stakeholders who attended the African American male empowerment summit to engage in 20-30 minute interviews to share their perspectives on the questions presented in a semi-structured interview protocol (See appendix). It is important to note the sample of participants and the location of the data collection was purposive to the project. Given that we were interested in context, specifically the context of an event centered on educational attainment for African American males, the sample and location were selected with intention. According to Denscombe (2002):

Social researchers can opt to focus on instances that are anything but representative or typical. Extreme instances may be selected deliberately because they have certain qualities that exaggerate the influence of a particular factor that is of interest to the researchers. (p. 147)

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 10 items that were open-ended questions, two of the questions presented were the focus of this study (See appendix). Prior to conducting the interviews with the educational stakeholders at the summit, the researchers presented the CRT questions to six participants during a previous forum. These specific questions were developed to generate relevant responses about CRT and gather the perceptions of educators and educational stakeholders.

There were nine educational stakeholders who participated in the semi-structured interviews; however, one chose to have their responses omitted from this study. Of the remaining, seven participants were African American males, and one participant was female (not African American). Among the eight interviewees, there was representation from higher education, as well as, K-12 education. All participants were voluntary attendees at the African American empowerment summit. Each interview was audiotaped and stored on a secure drive that was password protected and could only be accessed by the research team. The audio recorded by the researchers was transcribed into an electronic file. The transcripts were stored on electronic devices accessed by the research team via secure passwords. The researchers reviewed the recorded responses of the participants and the transcripts were analyzed. Through constant

review of the data, themes emerged that were grounded in the participants' language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dresser (1998) stresses that the first and foremost purpose of administrative protocols and ethical reviews was to protect research participants. Ramos (1989) highlights three problem scenarios for qualitative studies: (a) the researcher/participant relationship, (b) the researcher's subjective interpretations of data, and (c) the design itself. Although Kvale (1996) considers an interview to be the most important aspect of qualitative data collection, the interaction between the researcher and participant is considered equally important. How the researcher perceives the interview and its effectiveness and subsequently analyzes the experience are largely influenced by the nature of the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Punch, 1994). To that end, the researchers had the interviewees sign a consent form explaining the purpose and potential risks and benefits of the research. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and one participant did withdraw. The names of the interviewees were coded by the researchers, and the interviews were conducted in teams of two. Two researchers worked together for each interview, and the researchers had two distinct teams.

Findings

The findings for this study are reported from the responses of the eight educational stakeholders who participated in the semi-structured interviews and cannot be generalized to all representative stakeholder groups. The responses from each participant to the two questions related to Critical Race Theory are highlighted in this section, and the emerging themes are shared. The researchers used direct quotes from study participants and analyzed all responses to identify the common themes that developed from participants' responses.

Perceptions

The first question that study participants responded to was, "what is your perception of Critical Race Theory (CRT)?" The responses mainly focused on a historic perspective of CRT, the current debate around CRT, and the potential benefits of CRT. The general consensus of CRT among the study participants was mostly favorable, although one participant insisted on remaining neutral while two other participants admitted to not fully understanding CRT. "What I know about it (CRT) I think (it is) beneficial to me. I mean I know there's a lot of pushback in

certain areas of the country probably within our state as well but I think it's necessary," stated the female who participated in this study. Another participant responded:

My perception is CRT [is] important, and I think that's why they're trying to divert from teaching that school is important to know your history because history happens every day and some people are trapped in history and history happens to them and it's important to move forward as a nation we have to understand what has happened and how do (did) we get to this point.

One participant from higher education stated:

I think that ... activities that have happened and that are happening are ... folks that don't want it (CRT) taught either they don't want to see what had happened because they believe it's over or they don't want to believe it still happened.

Another participant stated, "It (CRT) all boils down to when you know better you do better ... the opportunity to become educated so that you can understand how to make better smarter ethical decisions." A student participant shared that his perception of CRT is that, "students who deserve to know these things it's not something that you could withhold from a student who wants to learn about this (CRT)." A higher education participant who wanted to remain neutral stated:

I think of people who are not of color... it would help them grow a deeper understanding of the struggles of people of color to understand that you know some people do live a life that's heavily influenced by laws.

These responses reflect the historic context of CRT, the current debate in our society around CRT, and the potential benefits of CRT.

Impact

The second question presented to participants was, "what impact would Critical Race Theory have on our current system of education?" One of the higher education participants stated, "It (CRT) helps people broaden their understanding of different cultures by having it be a part of the educational system." The student participant responded by saying, "I mean it's just like if you take a class on Louisiana politics how can you take a class on Louisiana politics without talking about all of the things that have made Louisiana politics what it is." He went on to further state, "I think in college you should not be able to restrict a school from teaching something when people sign up for courses." Meanwhile, another participant responded:

Just knowing that you know my experience and where I come from maybe different from your experience and I don't even think that we need to make some closures about that but ... just notice it like your experience is different from mine and let's just notice it like we don't need to make any judgments.

One of the K-12 educators stated:

I don't think critical race theory is like the problem... I think that debate is actually impacting educators. They feel like they need to teach in a certain way and I guess they feel like ... if they say something wrong...putting a fear on teachers and it's like that they walk on eggshells.

Another K-12 teacher responded, "I think that's a racial barrier in itself ... public schools especially in Louisiana like that you can see a divide without admitting divide." The final words of one participant stated that until we teach Critical Race Theory, "we are not going to move forward." The quotes from study participants capture some common themes in their perceptions of CRT, as well as, presenting variations in their nuanced thinking about CRT. The responses provided allowed us to address our research questions regarding the perception and impact of CRT. In the next section we will discuss CRT and its impact on African American males in education from the perceptions of educational stakeholders.

Discussion

This study explored Critical Race Theory from a historical and legal perspective, while engaging eight educational stakeholders based on two questions. The first question was, what is your perception of Critical Race Theory? This question allowed participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about CRT. The second question was, what impact would Critical Race Theory have on our current system of education? Question two gave participants an opportunity to articulate their perceptions about the potential impact CRT could have on our current system of education. The following themes emerge from the interviews with the research participants.

Theme 1: The Past

Bodenheimer (2021) wrote, "While "race" as a notion is a social construction and not rooted in biology, it has had real, tangible effects on Black people and other people of color in terms of economic resources, educational and professional opportunities, and experiences with the legal system." Based on the responses of the eight educational stakeholders who participated

in this study, there was a general consensus that Critical Race Theory is a racially influenced historical lens through which to understand the systemic structures that have limited the opportunities of African Americans in the United States of America. Laws that prohibited former slaves and mulattoes from learning to read and write as well as the separate but equal doctrine created systemic inequalities throughout and across the United States government and society. This is significant, in that, it is important now to hear the voices of those who have been marginalized by the historic legal landscape embedded within our systems of government, society, and education.

Theme 2: The Present

Janel George (2021) of the American Bar Association wrote, “CRT is not a diversity and inclusion “training” but a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal academy and spread to other fields of scholarship” (p.1). There was further consensus among research participants that Critical Race Theory should be taught in an effort to teach history from a more diversified and balanced perspective. Ensuring that even the perspectives of marginalized groups were accurately depicted in the “his-story” being taught. The researchers acknowledge that it is extremely important at this time in our nation’s history to engage the societal discourse around CRT in order to reimagine more equitable systems and structures within and throughout our government, society, and systems of education.

Theme 3: The Future

Ford and Airhihenbuwa (2010) wrote:

Racial scholars argue that racism produces rates of morbidity, mortality, and overall well-being that vary depending on socially assigned race. Eliminating racism is therefore central to achieving health equity, but this requires new paradigms that are responsive to structural racism's contemporary influence on health, health inequities, and research. (p.1)

The potential benefits of Critical Race Theory could be the opportunity to heal the racial divide, increased cultural responsiveness within our society and schools, and as one participant put it, the opportunity to “understand how to make better smarter (more) ethical decisions” with the hope of eliminating race-based laws and policies. The researchers contend that these significant steps would have a major impact on other quality of life indicators, such as, education attainment and the socio-economic status of African American males and other marginalized groups going forward.

The need for an increase in African American male professionals in our society, as well as, in our schools and classrooms would go a long way to ignite the aspirations of young African American males struggling to envision a more positive trajectory in their lives. According to Williams and Bryan (2017), “Bristol contends that we need more than just Black male bodies in K-12 classrooms to better support the academic and social needs of Black boys” (p. #).

Howard’s (2008) study found the following:

Given the troubling state of affairs experienced by an increasing number of African American males in PreK-12 schools, paradigms must be created which will allow their voices to shed light on the day-to-day realities in schools and challenge mainstream accounts of their experiences. (p.967)

Critical Race Theory based research can not only examine the racial disparities within the K-12 experience of African American males and other marginalized student groups in regards to academic achievement and school discipline, but this research can also provide qualitative studies that allow students to talk about the ramifications that systemic structures, policies, and practices have on their perceptions of school and how they believe their lives are impacted by them.

Conclusion

African Americans continue to seek equity in education and other quality of life indicators in this 21st year of the 21st Century. The school to prison pipeline is having a devastating impact on the quality of life for African American males, their families, as well as the communities in which they live and must be completely dismantled. The absence of fathers, the overrepresentation in special education, the disproportionate suspension rates, the dropout rates, and lower graduation rates all require equitable wraparound services to address the needs of African American males in our society. Critical Race Theory provides a historic and legal lens through which to explore systemic structures that have not provided equitable access to opportunities for African Americans in the United States of America. Du Bois (1935) wrote:

The true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy. What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States? If all labor, black as well as white, became free – were given schools and the right to vote – what control could or should be set to the power and action of these laborers? Was the rule of the mass of Americans to be

unlimited, and the rights to rule extended to all men regardless of race and color, or if not, what power of dictatorship and control; and how would property and privilege be protected? (p. 13)

Du Bois (1935) continued,

This was the great and primary question which was in the minds of the men who Wrote the Constitution of the United States and continued in the minds of thinkers down through the slavery controversy. It still remains with the world as the problem of democracy expands and touches all races and nations.

(p.13)

Teaching the true history of racism in the United States of America will go a long way to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. The current debate around Critical Race Theory must continue with safe, honest, and respectful intellectual discourse allowing all perspectives to be heard with a well-balanced and collective voice. These debates must be followed by meaningful action steps that will promote more equitable outcomes for African American males and other marginalized groups. The path to true equity in the United States of America is possible if we continue to engage the very real challenges of our past to create a more balanced society for all Americans. This study gave voice to educational stakeholders who have different perspectives, yet there is general consensus on the use of CRT to help reimagine systemic structures in our current systems of government, society, and education.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Panel #1)

Overarching Questions: Twenty One years into the 21st Century where are we now and how do we create greater equity in education?

Panel Discussion #1 - Where are African American males academically and how do we achieve greater equity in education? {Facilitators:}

- 1.) In regard to education attainment, where do you see African American male students, teachers, and leaders in our current system of education? (ALL)
- 2.) What are the current graduation rates for African American Males within your institution? What action plans are being implemented to address these outcomes?
- 3.) What barriers exist that negatively impact academic achievement among African American male students and what are some research-based strategies to eliminate those barriers?
- 4.) What supports should be put in place to increase academic achievement among African American male students?
- 5.) What barriers exist that limit the accessibility of African American male educators in classrooms and schools and how can we increase the number of African American male certified educators?
- 6.) How do we provide wraparound services for African American males who are one or more grades behind (K12) or on academic probation in college?
- 7.) Why is it important to increase the number of African American male instructional leaders and curriculum developers?

8.) What does equity in education look like in this 21st year of the 21st Century for African American male students and how can we achieve greater equity? (ALL)

9.) What is your perception of critical race theory and what impact would it have on our current system of education? (Open...anyone can respond)

*10.) In closing, what aspects of education would you recommend as a primary focus in order to reduce and eliminate the academic achievement gaps between African American male students and their peers? (Open...anyone can respond)

Note: Facilitators will direct the questions to the panelists identified at the end of the question; however, other panelist may respond to the question at the direction of the facilitators and if time permits.

**Audience participation questions and comments will follow.*