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Full Length Research Paper

Critical race theory and its impact on African: American student retention

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Abstract

Critical Race Theory continues to serve as a premiere educational construct by which the lens of African-American student retention is viewed. It addresses the racial stereotypes, campus climates and divisions that are in direct conflict with African-American students attending Predominately White college campuses. This article focuses on Critical Race Theory and its impact on student retention of African-American college students attending predominately White Institutions. African American students at PWIs were survey and results concluded a strong correlation between campus climate and student retention. African American students seek to be a part of a diverse body and through lens of Critical Race Theory.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Racism.

INTRODUCTION

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is one of the premiere theoretical constructs linking racism and educational inadequacies to the social and academic injustices against African-American and minority students. Matsuda (1991) defined critical race theory as the progressive work of legal scholars of color who attempted to expand jurisprudence accounting for the role of racism in American law and education and to eradicate racism as an integral part of all forms of subordination. Critical race theory originated in the 1970s as discourse of legal scholarship depicting the injustices of traditional civil rights litigation to produce ongoing racial reform initiatives (Lyn & Adams, 2002; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Parker & Lyn, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998).

The early writings in critical race theory began with Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who took an interest in the slow progression of racial reform within the United States (Lyn & Adams, 2002). These individuals argued that traditional approaches to racial reform, such as protests, marches, filing briefs, and moral appeal to sensible citizens, received fewer gains than in previous times (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Through their efforts, other legal scholars began to share their frustrations with the early civil rights initiatives.

The parallel movement caused a paradigm shift throughout the Civil Rights Movement, which continued through storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lawrence, 1995). Stories provided the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and inferring. Ladson-Billings suggested that “the historical and contextual nature of law and other science render the voices of dispossessed and marginalized group members mute” (p. 13). Storytelling gave voice, which provided power to the legal and educational inadequacies of racial injustice. Delgado (1990) posited that people of color spoke from experiential knowledge about the racist structure of society, which gave their stories a common platform warranting the term voice. Voice gave an imputed importance of intellectual and social means to critical race theory to deconstruct, reconstruct, and construct (Ladson-Billings). According to Delgado, deconstruction derived from oppressive discourse and institutional barriers; reconstruction was a human agency, and construction offered the equitable and social relations of power.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory moved to the educational arena in the 1990s, addressing social and academic injustices of African-American students (Zeus, 2004). The academy began to see an increase of reported incidents of racism and differential treatment on college campuses. Educational scholars employed Critical Race Theory in the late 1990s to address issues of race and institutional barriers affecting African-American and other minority students at PWIs. Educational practitioners and scholars addressed racism and other forms of subordination of marginalized groups with five modalities presented by critical race theory to build a framework of racial inequality in higher education. Critical Race Theory addressed five modalities in education, covering racism, research methods, and pedagogy. The five themes are as follows:

The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism: Critical Race Theory focuses on the central role of racism and school practices, and intersection of all forms or subordination including sexism and classism. In addition, critical race theory endorses such practices as objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, curricular practices, tracking teacher expectations and intelligence testing. Critical Race Theorists take the position that racism has at least four dimensions: (a) macro and micro components, (b) institutional and individual forms, (c) conscious and unconscious elements, and (d) cumulative influence on both the individual and group.

- The challenge to dominate ideology: Critical Race Theory inspects the academic and social hierarchy of educational inequality. Critical race educators confront dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture, intelligence, language, and capability through pedagogical research.
- The commitment to social justice: Critical Race Theory continually builds constructs of social justice and offers liberatory or transformative responses to racial, gender, and class subjugation (Matsuda, 1999). The vision of social justice research eradicates all forms of racism, sexism, and poverty among minority groups.
- The centrality of experiential knowledge: Critical Race Theory acknowledges the voices of experience are legitimate and appropriate for the understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination. Critical race educators use various methods to convey the experiences of African-Americans. These methods consist of storytelling, narratives, chronicles, family history, biographies, and parables to draw on the strength of lived experiences.
- The interdisciplinary perspective: Critical Race Theory focuses on analyzing racism in both historical and modern contexts (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Yosso (2000) defined Critical Race Theory in education as a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that identified, analyzed, and transformed those structural, cultural, and interpersonal areas of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of African-American students. Yosso's Critical Race Theory analyzed the challenges of racism in curriculum and discourse. Racial boundaries and discriminatory acts based on gender, class, language, or immigration status affect curriculum on both macro and micro levels. These discriminatory acts affect African-American performance at various institutions. The curriculum does not embrace minority students nor provide instructional practices that benefit these students.

The hidden or colorblind ideology in curriculum differed for minority students: colorblind ideology distorted, omitted, and stereotyped their experiences (Yosso, 2000). These deficit discourses supplied a rationale for discriminatory curricula that maintained racial, gender, and class inequalities in schools. Curricular discourse exhibited racial inequalities starting from preschool through college. Yosso posited that traditional curricula did not fully train or equip African-American students to attain higher education; instead, they revealed manifold layers of racial inequality, setting the stage for racial microaggressions.

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Racial microaggressions served as racial slurs against African-American students. They were subtle or overt comments, such as: you're different from other African-American people; references to those people; or what does the head-wrap symbolize. These standard insults are frequently launched toward marginalized groups at PWIs. Solorzano et al. identified racial microaggressions as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are put downs of African-Americans by offenders" (p. 61). These researchers also found that the overt and conscious acts of racial defamation experienced by

African-Americans attending PWIs perpetuated racial climates that affected student retention and academic success for students of color. Racial microaggressions set the tone for low expectations and achievement in African-American students. Solorzano et al. found that it produced unsupportive college campuses, faculty, and staff members who undermined the existence of African-Americans on their respective campuses and in their classrooms.

Many African-Americans students, participating in both qualitative and quantitative studies, noted feeling invisible in and out of the college classrooms (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Davis & Lasane, 1994; Holmes et al., 2001; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Nettles, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Turner, 1994). A study conducted by Solorzano et al. (2000) captured the concerns of African-American students attending PWIs. Through storytelling, the researchers presented the voices of a marginalized student population at a PWI. Invisibility made these students feel like a numerical value, which translated in the classroom as merely, here is another minority. The expectations for excellence were extremely low because of the actions and comments by the professor. One student in the study remarked, “I think that when the professors see that there are fewer of you, they’re less likely to address your concerns” (Solorzano et al., p. 68). The same student experienced another incident directly tied to race. “I was doing really well in the class, like math is one of my strong suits…We took a quiz…and I received a 95” (p. 68). The professor spoke with the student privately after class about coming to his office. The professor said, “We think you’ve cheated … we just don’t know, so we think we’re gonna make you take the exam again.” The student took the exam again with a graduate instructor as monitor and scored 98.

The experiences of racial microaggressions inside and outside the classroom forced many African-American students to leave their respective institutions (Solorzano et al., 2000). The ongoing sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion resulting from racial microaggressions threatened retention and academic success of African-American students attending PWIs. Soloranzo et al. noted the voice of a frustrated student, who stated:

I can’t stand this school and I’m ready to leave. And that for me is how I feel. I know this is the real world and I’ve learned that…I know how I’m going to take what I want to do to get what I need to get…Yet another female student with related experiences is transferring to a historically Black Institution. (p. 69)

Critical Race Theory and racial microaggressions provide a framework that shows how unwelcoming campus climates and racial stereotypes can affect African-American student retention. However, leadership that is positive and promotes culturally diverse thoughts can have a favorable effect on African-American student retention.

FINDINGS

The linear regression model illustrates the influence of predictor variables on the outcome variable. A significant coefficient indicated the predictor variable influences the outcome variable (Hiltz, 1995). Table 1 shows two predictor variables significantly related to student retention.

Table 1: Overall Regression Coefficients for Student Retention to Predictor Variables

Variable	B	SE	β	t	P
Campus Climate	1.382	.389	.485	3.526	.001
Racial Stereotypes	.348	.158	-.301	-2.207	.032
Faculty Relationships	3.900	.275	.192	1.419	.162
GPA	.033	.277	-.016	-.118	.907

Specifically, campus climate (t (54) = 3.526) was significant and positively related to student retention; racial stereotypes (t (54) = -2.207) was significantly and negatively associated with student retention.

The significant levels for African-American students at PWI fell under the $p < .05$ significance level for campus climate ($p = .028$) and racial stereotypes ($p = .042$). Faculty relationships were not significant ($p = .200$). On the other hand, racial stereotypes ($p = .939$) and faculty relationships ($p = .633$) were not significant predictors for HBCU students. Campus climate approached significance ($p = .056$). Although there was evidence of significant relationships between student retention and the perceptions of

African-American students, the significant predictor variables differed for students at the PWI compared to students at the HBCU. The most significant variable predicting student retention for students at the PWI and at the HBCU was campus climate (see Table 2).

Table 2: HBCU and PWI Regression Coefficient for Student Retention and Predictor Variables

	B	SE	β	t	p
HBCU					
Campus Climate	1.329	.643	.649	2.069	.056
Racial Stereotypes	-.033	.421	-.023	-.078	.939
Faculty Relationships	-.221	.454	-.121	-.488	.633
PWI					
Campus Climate	1.533	.665	.348	2.306	.028
Racial Stereotypes	-.424	.199	-.328	-2.129	.042
Faculty Relationships	.847	.346	.391	2.448	.200

The composite outcome variable (overall satisfaction) was significant (p = .001) indicating a difference in performance factors (GPA and graduation rates) for African-American students at the HBCU and PWI. The composite C (overall student experience) was also significant (p = .001).

CONCLUSION

Determining the appropriate diversity initiative for PWI campuses is paramount in retaining African-American students. Institutional leaders, campus policy makers, and teachers can better understand how to develop and implement diversity initiatives by looking at current and past research and taking active measures such as semiannual meetings, open forums, and student and faculty surveys regarding the academic and racial climate on college campuses. These types of ongoing dialogues and surveys explore possibilities and solutions to create harmonious learning communities. Open dialogue and ongoing evaluations provide awareness of Critical Race theory, which allow educational leaders and institutions to craft training and educational programs and forums to create an educational ethos that is conducive, equitable, and fair for all minority students. Policymaking is about creating effective change for all minorities, who feel their campus climate is unwelcoming, who endure racial stereotypes, and feel a lack of satisfactory faculty relationships.

Implications of increased dialogue and initiative may receive both positive and negative attention. From the perspective of African-American and other minority students, it will positively address issues by providing diversity initiatives to facilitate change at their respective institutions. The increased dialogue may appear negative from the perspective of majority students, who may feel that minority students are already receiving enough support due to affirmative action policies.

Every state and higher education institution will have to look at ways to meet the needs of minority students with resource allocation, funding, and professional development training. Student diversity initiatives are not only educational concerns but concerns for society as well. If society perpetuates an ideology of equality, state, public, and private higher education institutions will fall in line**.**

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