

Opinion

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Challenging “Divisive:” A Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy



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Abstract

Although the United States is a relatively young nation, it has a compact and complicated history regarding race and culture. Recently, social movements throughout the country have sought to dismantle what many have identified as systemic racism. These attempts to right historical wrongs have inspired schools across the country to adopt policies and practices that provide a more accurate and “decolonized” public school curriculum and approaches to teaching. In some instances, however, these honorable efforts have been met with resistance from educators, administrators, and even parents. Feeding upon these apprehensions, many politicians have made and continue to make campaign promises to redact such policies and endeavors, claiming that critically examining American and international historical truths and diverse cultures is “divisive.” The aim of this opinion piece is to reject the dismissal of historical truths and the vilification of critical frameworks and individuals who support them. Further, we seek to highlight the slippery slope of censoring frameworks such as Critical Race Theory. To do so, we first provide an example of an executive order banning Critical Race Theory in the state of Virginia. Then, we make a case for using culturally relevant pedagogy to foster inclusiveness and critical thinking skills among all students, including students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Keywords: United States; Critical race theory; Culturally relevant pedagogy; School; Teacher; Anti-racism

Opinion

In recent years, the United States has seen growing social unrest in response to systemic marginalization and inherent oppression of minority races and cultures in the nation. This turmoil has resulted in social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Stop Asian Hate) as well as protests and counter protests; some of which have resulted in injury and death. In response, many U.S. public schools are reconsidering their approaches to teaching American and international histories, opting to decentralize the dominant American narrative (e.g., the Eurocentric experiences and perspectives of white Americans) and instead examine the influence of race and culture on social policies, programs, and practices. As with other social movements, however, this pedagogical shift met resistance from parents and other stakeholders. Taking advantage of this unrest, many political candidates recently used it as an election platform, maintaining that critically examining history and culture is ‘divisive.’ These same politicians promised to redact policies and efforts specifically designed to deconstruct the existing and often one-sided historical perspective and explore topics such as racism, colonialism, and ableism. Unfortunately, many of those politicians were successful.

The aim of this opinion piece is to detail why educators, administrators, and parents should reject all efforts to dismiss the teaching of historical truths and demand politicians to cease the unfounded villainizing of frameworks designed to encourage critical thinking and deliver comprehensive content. To do so, we first provide an example of an executive order banning Critical Race Theory in public schools. Then, we make a case for adopting and implementing culturally relevant pedagogy.

On his first day as Governor of the state of Virginia, U.S., Glenn Youngkin issued Executive Order One, titled “Ending the Use of Inherently Divisive Concepts, Including Critical Race Theory, and Restoring Excellence in K-12 Public Education in the Commonwealth” [1]. Within this executive order, Youngkin tasked Jillian Balow, the newly appointed Superintendent of Public Instruction (SOPI), with promptly removing “inherently divisive concepts” (defined by Youngkin as concepts that advance “ideas in violation of Title IV and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” [1]) from all dimensions of public education. Accordingly, within 45 days of receiving her charge, the SOPI issued an interim report rescinding policies, programs, and resources that “promote discriminatory and divisive concepts” in K-12 schools

across the state [2]. Notably, until Youngkin took office, many of the identified texts within that report were used to facilitate necessary and robust discussions with students on equity, race, and culture, as well as the role each plays in Virginia's complex history (e.g., colonialism, slavery) and present social climate (e.g., protests and demonstrations). Correspondingly, under a broad stroke definition of 'divisive,' the governor has not only threatened Virginians' constitutional rights of free speech, but he has also overlooked the considerable role of culture in the education system and within larger social macrosystems. Further, this order exacerbated the controversial misconceptions of Critical Race Theory as a racist curriculum or a teaching approach that shames or ostracizes students, cultures, lived experiences, or historical/current events.

Moreover, banning and misrepresenting Critical Race Theory manifests a dangerous spiral to ostracizing individuals who are already pushed to the margins of society - notably, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Specifically, for individuals with I/DD experiencing intersecting identities (e.g., individuals who are also People of Color, immigrants), theoretical frameworks such as Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) are essential for more deeply understanding and unpacking the atrocities that they have experienced due to ableism, oppression, and systemic inequities. More importantly, ignoring or intentionally avoiding the investigation of and candid conversations about such atrocities will do more than leave generational trauma unresolved. It could also lead to the reintroduction and normalization of the historically abhorrent treatment (e.g., eugenics, institutionalization) of students with I/DD.

At the heart of these crucial conversations is culture. Culture is a culmination of the "customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" [3]. Recognizing the importance of incorporating culture, including disability culture, in the classroom, many educators use culturally relevant pedagogy, a theoretical model that supports students in upholding their cultural identities while simultaneously equipping them with the skills to develop fluency in other cultures [4]. Culturally relevant pedagogy provides educators with a framework to encourage students to develop critical perspectives that challenge societal inequalities, altogether instilling the crucial skill of cultural competence into the future generations of society [4]. Additionally, educators who employ culturally relevant pedagogy frequently practice reflexivity.

Reflexivity represents an engagement in conscious efforts to recognize how what we hear, say, and do may impact others based on our beliefs, experiences, and biases [5]. Contrary to what Virginia's Governor posits, reflexive educators do not "instruct students to only view life through the lens of race" or "presume that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive..." [1]. In contrast, reflexive educators engage in ongoing efforts to respectfully consider and embrace the multifaceted and dynamic intersecting cultural influences that exist in America. This includes acknowledging the impact of culture on historical American events. By embracing culture and practicing reflexivity, educators model mindfulness; when educators mindfully teach factual, comprehensive history, they provide students a safe space to learn.

Because the charge of Executive Order One directly conflicts with these research-based practices, Youngkin's efforts are not supported by a significant number of Virginia educators. On March 10, 2022, the Executive Director of the Virginia Association of School Superintendents sent a letter to the SOPI on behalf of all 133 of the state's school superintendents opposing the recommendations of her interim report. That letter stated that "gross assumptions have been made, without evidentiary support..." and that "Division superintendents disagree" with her "having rescinded much of the Education Equity work by the Department of Education" [6].

Instead of banning materials that demonstrate cultural inclusiveness and accurate representations of history, the SOPI should encourage educators to expand their knowledge of culture and steward the development of respect among all Virginia students. Doing so will foster classrooms inclusive of multiple, intersecting cultures and embolden students to ask questions about and gain comfort in unpacking "inherently divisive concepts."

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