



Assignment Negotiation: Critical Race Theory and Educational Leadership Preparation Program

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Abstract

The current tensions around racism in public schooling prompted Dr. Edwards, an assistant professor in educational leadership and policy studies, to teach critical race theory and assign a racism audit for doctoral students to use the theory in practice. Students were to complete their racism audit on their school campus. However, several students refused to complete the assignment. Some students refused for fear of job repercussions, while others accused Dr. Edwards of indoctrinating them with liberal political ideologies. This case explores the complexity and dilemmas that faculty encounter as they engage in antiracism leadership teaching during a time of racial reckoning.

Keywords

critical race theory, preparation program, racial audit

Introduction

Critical race theory (CRT) has been the center of racial political discourse to exclude the teaching of race and racism in public schools. Although the anti-CRT movement weaponizes the legal scholarship term, CRT remains an analytical framework to expose hidden and blatant racism within United States' school systems (Bell, 2000; Crenshaw et al., 1995). In education, researchers have used CRT to address ideological forms of racism that are historically ingrained in organizational patterns of teaching and learning and everyday ways of thinking and acting about race and racism

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(Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Consciously and unconsciously, school leaders sustain and perpetuate institutionalized racism through policies, instructions, and daily practices (Miller, 2021). Although the term CRT is being banned, school leaders must understand how to apply CRT as an analytical tool for antiracist leadership. Attending to how school leaders learn to confront racism during the current racial political landscape, this case presents an incident within a doctoral-level course on antiracist leadership.

Educational leadership preparation programs are faced with the growing demands to prepare school leaders with skills to enact antiracism decision-making. Many programs have implemented curriculum and pedagogical changes to assist school leaders in developing racial consciousness (López, 2021; Tanner & Welton, 2021). Scholars note that educational leadership preparation programs are spaces where current and future school leaders can grapple with issues of race and racism. To prepare school leaders to use their position to confront racism, researchers suggest teaching critical theories, especially CRT, as a part of the preparation program's curriculum. However, higher education is being included in some state CRT bans, which places departments and faculty in precarious positions (i.e., Florida HB 999). This case examines a CRT assignment in a graduate course that includes the ensuing conflict triggered by an assignment and the aftermath for the course instructor and students.

Context

This case occurs at a research-intensive public institution serving an urban metroplex in the southwest. Housed in the College of Education, the educational leadership and policy studies department offers a doctoral degree to prepare antiracist leaders. The demographic of the students in the program is 20% Black, 25% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 2% two or more races, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 48% White. Students are educational leaders across six school districts in the metroplex. In the last 3 years, the faculty in the doctoral program engaged in a curriculum redesign centering on the development of antiracism leadership. The curriculum changes included the addition of one core course on social justice leadership and an elective course on race, racism, and leadership.

Current Racial Political Climate

This case is situated in a state with proposed state legislation to ban CRT in K-12 and higher education public schools. Racism has been and continues to be a part of the United States laws, institutions, and social norms since the founding of this country. The recent deaths of unarmed Black and Brown people by police have caused a collective demand to address systemic racism. As a result, the pendulum has swung in the direction of legislation banning CRT in K-12 and higher education across the nation. The attack against CRT is part of the political framing by conservatives to protect White students from feeling guilty about race and racism. In states run by conservative political officials, the anti-CRT movement bans books, teaching, leaders, and teachers'

professional development around racism. In higher education, professors engaging with CRT can be denied promotion and tenure, fired, and unprotected by academic freedom. The current racial political climate challenges and delays educational reform related to racial equity in United States education.

Case Characters

Dr. Keyshia Edwards is an African American woman who is a clinical faculty member in the educational leadership program. She has been a faculty member for 4 years and led the department's curriculum redesign centering on antiracism leadership. In addition, she was a school leader for 15 years, serving a large school district committed to racial equity and conducting professional development sessions on racism. Dr. Edwards teaches the core course on social justice leadership and an elective course on race, racism, and leadership. She uses a dynamic pedagogical teaching approach that encourages students to use their current experiences as school leaders in the classroom. In past semesters, Dr. Edwards always introduced the theoretical framework of CRT and its use in school leadership. Due to the current public discourse on CRT, Dr. Edwards decided to continue introducing CRT and include an assignment focused on CRT. There were 16 first-year doctoral students enrolled in the course. In this case, we focus on three students as the main characters.

Todd is a 42-year-old White man in his sixth year as school principal at a predominantly White and middle-class high school. His career goal is to become a superintendent in his current district. Todd regularly participates in classroom discussions and often catalyzes tension-filled debates on race and racism. In addition, he has publicly shared that CRT in schools is divisive and agrees with state legislation CRT bans.

Raven is a 35-year-old Black woman in her second year as an assistant principal at an inner city under-resourced school with predominantly Black and Brown high-school students. She started her teaching and leadership careers at the same school and did not plan to leave. Raven is committed to confronting racial inequity as it hinders the success of the students and teachers at her school. Raven regularly participates in classroom discussions and is vocal about school racial injustices. Consequently, she is often disappointed in the depth of class discussion around racism and other oppressions.

Mateo is a 52-year-old Latino who is a diversity, equity, and inclusion officer at the district level. He has spent most of his leadership career in the largest district within the metroplex, with many students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Mateo is active in class discussions and enjoys sharing the historical context of school leadership. He believes schools and the district have significantly improved diversity, equity, and inclusion, as he was once a student in the same district.

Case Narrative

On the first day of class, Dr. Edwards reviewed the course syllabus and assignments. Dr. Edwards decided to spend a significant amount of time discussing the racial audit assignment due mid-semester, warning that the assignment would be a sensitive topic

given the current racial political climate. Although Dr. Edwards warned, she believed the assignment as written would not interfere with the state and district policies related to CRT.

For the assignment, students were asked to take notes for a week on how they perceived racism and observe how it appeared in their daily work interactions (meetings, student interactions, organizational functions, processes, etc.). Students did not need to conduct interviews, provide public or private documents, or get permission, as the information was only for a class assignment. After a week of observations, students would apply CRT as an analytical framework to explain what was happening at their school site, ask other questions, and create strategic plans to address racism in the given situation(s). The assignment would only be shared with Dr. Edwards to reduce the possibility of the content of racial audits being shared outside of the classroom. Dr. Edwards reiterated that the purpose of the assignment is for students to practice applying CRT to everyday work and developing skills for antiracism decision-making. After explaining the assignment, Dr. Edwards asked if anyone had questions.

Todd objected immediately and roared, “this is an inappropriate assignment that pushes that liberal agenda and could cost us our jobs. I mean, do you really expect us to do this?”

Raven replied swiftly, “Wait a minute, Todd. Do you hear yourself? What makes the assignment part of a liberal agenda? Racism is racism.”

Todd explained,

Seriously, Raven?! This assignment is reverse racism. Liberals are trying to make White kids the bad guys, which is unfair and creates a more divisive environment. I thought we were supposed to bring everyone together to build community. Personally, I believe we have made much progress with race issues, and you people keep wanting to play the victim. Plus, racism does not exist in my school, as all my students matter. So, this assignment focuses on something that is not even real.

Mateo added,

As a district-level diversity, equity, and inclusion officer, while I may not fully agree with everything Todd stated, I agree that this assignment is inappropriate. Not because racism does not exist in our schools but because this topic is too sensitive to bring up in any school setting. With the recent protests of parents opposing books for our newly adopted African American studies courses and teachers feeling censored from discussing any race-related topic, doing this assignment would make matters worse. I have seen and heard of people being fired for just mentioning CRT. Doing this assignment will taint my reputation or, worse, get me fired.

Raven stated,

I guess I am still confused about what ya’ll are saying. I heard Dr. Edwards say to take notes on what you are observing, which does not require you to publicly announce your CRT class assignment. As administrators, we should exercise discretion. Plus, if folks are

not experiencing racism in their school, the assignment would be easier, but I doubt there is no racism. These conversations are the reason we need CRT in schools. And not the extorted conservative version of panic to protect White kids. Also, Todd, I am not sure who the “you people” are that you refer to.

With a raised voice, Todd said,

The people I am referring to are liberals pushing the race agenda, especially around White privilege, systemic racism, and inherent bias. Why do I have to feel responsible for something that happened over four centuries ago? Like enough of the fake news.

Raven responded,

First off, we are professionals, and you do not need to raise your voice. We hear you loud and clear. Riddle me this, though, how do you explain the killings of unarmed Black folks and the continued racial opportunity gaps for students of color? Why are White folks so afraid of the truth about race and racism in this country?

Todd said,

Well, Black people just need to follow the law, and they won't die. I mean, who argues with police officers? Also, parents of color and their kids do not value education. They never attend PTA meetings or school functions to see their kids perform. This is not a White people's problem; we can't always save people of color from their choices.

Dr. Edwards quickly interrupted,

thank you all for sharing your concerns about the assignment. First thing first, hate speech will not be tolerated in this class space. We should work against language, actions, interactions, and ideologies replicating oppression systems. Class discussions will be challenging; ideas, not individuals, are open to challenge. If you are unsure what hate speech or replicating systems of oppression in the classroom means, please see the readings and videos explaining these concepts on Canvas. That said, you all are still expected to complete the assignment.

Moreover, I can individually chat with students about adapting the assignment observations during office hours. I understand the current political climate around racism and educators' difficulties navigating schooling and race. Furthermore, this doctoral program is still committed to providing you with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about your leadership practices around race and racism. I invite you to choose what is best for you personally and professionally as we engage in difficult conversations and work around racial structural oppression and social change.

Dr. Edwards could sense the tension in the space; therefore, she provided a class break. During the break, Todd approached Dr. Edwards and said,

Hey, I hope you know I am not doing the mid-term assignment; this is ridiculous. As an educator, you should be ashamed of trying to indoctrinate us with liberal political ideologies. I am not taking this. I am leaving and will talk to the Dean about this assignment.

Dr. Edwards was taken aback by Todd's comment and could not respond to Todd as he abruptly left the class. After the students returned from break, Dr. Edwards proceeded with the course readings and did not readdress the assignment.

Two days later, Dr. Edwards received an email from the department chair that Todd had made a formal complaint about the assignment. The chair acknowledged an understanding of how Dr. Edwards' assignment aligns with the department's mission and is needed for the program's students. However, given the inclusion of higher education in the state's proposed CRT ban, he recommended that she not continue with the assignment.

The chair wrote,

As a clinical faculty member, you do not have the same protections as tenure-track faculty members, which can result in negative consequences for you, the department, and students. For example, you may be declined a promotion or a contract renewal. I would hate to lose you over an assignment. Also, we need to discuss our program's focus on anti-racism and the courses we added to keep politicians from looking into our department. Additionally, take some time to reflect on your assignment's impact on the university if this complaint goes any further. Ultimately, I cannot protect you if you choose to proceed with this assignment and teaching CRT, but please let me know how I can support you.

Dr. Edwards replied to the chair with more information about the racial audit and how she addressed students' perceived challenges. She wrote,

The racial audit assignment is to be completed through observations of their daily work interactions (meetings, student interactions, organizational functions, processes, etc.) through the lens of critical race theory. Students were told they did not need to conduct interviews, provide public or private documents, or get permission, as the information was only for a class assignment. Also, it was noted that I would be the only person reading their racial audit report. During class, I added that students could do their racial audit at another school if they were uncomfortable doing the assignments at their campus location. A couple of students thought the racial audit for a CRT lens violated their district's anti-CRT policies; however, the assignment does not challenge these policies due to how it is conducted, and I am the only one seeing the report. Also, students are challenged not by the assignment but by grappling with their belief that racism does not exist in their schools or that previous diversity initiatives have addressed racism. This stance is not a direct issue with the assignment; these beliefs are why we, the faculty, chose to center the program on anti-racism leadership. It is important to note that only two students expressed these concerns, while others are interested in completing the assignment to understand how racism is embedded in their schools.

Dr. Edwards also received an email from Raven about her frustrations with the class discussion on the assignment. She wrote,

I chose this program because of its focus on anti-racism, and I thought students would have the opportunity to have real conversations, especially around racism. Although I am open to learning from the perspectives of my classmates, I was not expecting that we would have to debate the existence of racism.

Dr. Edwards immediately felt horrible for not creating a positive classroom environment for dialog around racism and causing frustrations for a Black woman student. Dr. Edwards apologized to Raven for her classroom experience, validated Raven's frustrations, and reassured her that the assignment was still required. In the course, they will continue discussing racism in education.

Dr. Edwards decided to continue with the assignment as it is an excellent opportunity to reflect on racism, policy, and political theater impacting schools. She stated to a colleague,

They will have to fire me! How can educational leaders address how racism is part of education without knowing what to look for and do about it? I am committed to teaching anti-racist leaders, no matter the cost. So, students do or don't, but I am moving forward with the assignment. As a Black woman and a clinical faculty member, the university and my department would never protect me, regardless of what I taught.

Given the two emails, Dr. Edwards sent a follow-up email to the class about the purpose of the assignment and locations where racial inequities can occur and invited students to address their concerns individually during office hours.

Office Hours

Typically, Dr. Edwards looked forward to meeting with her students during office hours; however, this day felt different. Mateo decided to attend Dr. Edwards' office hours as he felt no resolution after voicing his concerns in class. Mateo knocked on Dr. Edwards' door,

"Mateo, good to see you!" she greeted him, and he nervously entered.

With some hesitation, Mateo addressed his concerns,

Dr. Edwards, I wanted to meet with you because you did not provide a resolution to my concerns related to the assignment and my professional role. I've been traumatized from witnessing colleagues terminated and their reputations tarnished because they decided to speak up about their experiences with racism on their campuses. You see, Dr. Edwards, my reputation means everything to me, and I've worked too hard to lose credibility and risk my job at this stage of my career.

Dr. Edwards responded, “I understand and hear your concerns. Furthermore, I invite you to think about the positives of the assignment and how it aligns with the assessment work you must do as a district-level Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officer.”

Mateo stated, “I am just trying to keep my head down and not cause any trouble until I reach a higher-up administration position with more authority and decision-making power.”

He continued,

As people of color, we already have a target on our backs and White people watching us, so it is irresponsible of you to place a bigger target on our backs through this assignment. I know you are a part of higher education, but do you understand the implications of bringing such rhetoric when I go to these campuses? I expected better from a Black professor.

Dr. Edwards apologized to Mateo for his feelings that the assignment put him in such a challenging position. Then Dr. Edwards said,

Mateo, I hear your concerns. However, the assignment is still required, but you are welcome to change the location of your racial equity audit. Also, you are welcome to take a zero on this assignment if you feel you cannot complete the work. Knowing this, how will you move forward with the assignment?

Mateo thanked Dr. Edwards for meeting with him and said he needed to reflect on how he wanted to proceed with the assignment.

Todd emailed Dr. Edwards demanding a meeting during office hours to discuss the assignment and the class. Dr. Edwards was uneasy about meeting with Todd after his actions in class and filing a formal complaint against her; therefore, she asked a colleague to sit in on the meeting. As she knew, she had to be careful in what she said and how she spoke to Todd. When arriving at Dr. Edwards’s office, Todd asked, “Keyshia, may I enter?” Dr. Edwards responded, “Do you mean Dr. Edwards? Please do not call me by my first name.” Dr. Edwards waved Todd into her office; he had a folder and notes in his hands.

I was so disappointed with you that I had to leave class early. I pay too much money for this doctoral degree to have to leave class due to your race indoctrination. I am an independent thinker and will not be manipulated by someone I pay. Also, I researched and consulted with some of my friends who are professors at nearby universities to get their take on your assignment. Moreover, I must say, I have enough evidence to explain why this is a horrible idea. So what do you have to say for yourself?

Dr. Edwards smiled patiently and replied,

I see you care and are passionate about your stance on the assignment. However, I invited you and your classmates to select another location to complete your racial audit. Have you thought about where else you may do the assignment?

Todd replied,

When would we have time to observe another campus while working full-time? With all due respect, I will not be completing the assignment. And since you're trying to indoctrinate me with this liberal agenda, I will drop the course and share with the college Dean my experiences with you.

Dr. Edwards thanked Todd for attending office hours and wished him luck in his academic pursuit. Although Todd's absence from the course eased the tension in the classroom and other students could complete the assignment, Dr. Edwards wondered if she made the wrong decision by sticking with the assignment.

Teaching Notes

Theoretical Perspective

CRT originated from critical legal studies as an analysis tool to challenge the racist structures that were missing in traditional legal studies (Bell, 2000; Crenshaw et al., 1995). However, CRT has spread to numerous disciplines, including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The purpose of CRT is to highlight what is taken for granted by analyzing racial oppression through patterns of exclusion due to Whiteness as the normative standard. Ignoring race allows individuals and institutions to overlook all but the most overt racist acts, permitting more subtle and insidious actions to remain unnamed and unchallenged (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In education, CRT is a tool to explain educational challenges and undersourcing while centering on Black and Brown students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT scholars identified five tenets of CRT: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism (Bell, 2000; Khalifa et al., 2016).

CRT Reading Resources

- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 20). NYU Press.
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. (2018). Where are we? Critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(1), 121–131.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). Critical race theory: What it is not! In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (2nd ed., pp. 32–43). Routledge.
- Parker, L., & Gillborn, D., (Eds.). (2020). *Critical race theory in education*. Routledge.

Discussion Questions

1. How did individual contexts and positionalities create opportunities and challenges for the assignment?
2. Discuss the role of preparation programs in teaching controversial theories and their application in practice.

3. Discuss how Dr. Edwards could respond to students with different perspectives on the assignment. Also, how could Dr. Edwards gauge the views of her entire class?
4. What might students gain and lose by conducting racial audits outside their workplace? And within their workplace?
5. How should current educational leaders immerse themselves in the literature about CRT?
6. How can studying CRT advance antiracist leadership at various levels of educational leadership?
7. How does the current racial political discourse around CRT influence the teaching and learning of the theory, especially related to education?
8. Discuss how CRT can be used as an analytical tool to understand the power dynamics within the case.

Navigating Current Racial Political Climate as Faculty

1. After conversations with the department chair, how should Dr. Edwards respond to students? And why?
2. Given the department's mission and curriculum, why does Dr. Edwards have a feeling of uneasiness, and why is she careful in her teaching approach to CRT?
3. Discuss how department faculty professional development and meetings can dialog around navigating the current racial and political climate in and outside the classroom.
4. What are the institutional and departmental challenges and opportunities for including the current racial and political climate?
5. What curriculum and pedagogical approaches can be used in the classroom to navigate the current racial and political climate around racism?
6. What step should the department chair have taken after Todd's formal complaint to support Dr. Edwards?
7. How do the current racial political discourse and CRT bans in K-12 influence what happens in higher education?
8. Discussion of faculty positionalities and experience influences how they incorporate the current racial and political climate with course materials.

Reading Resources

- Diem, S., & Welton, A. D. (2020). *Anti-racist educational leadership and policy: Addressing racism in public education*. Routledge.
- Hill-Jackson, V., Ladson-Billings, G., & Craig, C. J. (2022). Teacher education and "climate change": In navigating multiple pandemics, is the field forever altered? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 73(1), 5–7.
- Miller, P. (2021). Anti-racist school leadership: Making "race" count in leadership preparation and development. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(1), 7–21.
- Ngo, B., & Lee, S. J. (2020). Navigating social justice in the current historical moment. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(2), 135–139.

Racial Audit Activity

1. In pairs or small groups (3-4 persons), prepare a racial audit documentation form and suggest directions for the process of conducting a racial audit. Include,
 - a. A letter to the principal of the school and the applicable diversity, equity, and inclusion director requesting permission to conduct the audit.
 - b. Places and spaces to observe (common areas; Advance Placement courses, honors, on-level classrooms; an event in sports or the arts; staff meetings, etc.)
 - c. Practices to be reviewed (transitions between classes, instruction, tutoring, lunchtime frames, performances, after-school processes, games, parent-teacher nights, etc.)
 - d. Who or the interactions to observe (administrators, faculty, school staff, students, parents, classroom seating arrangements, classroom management, disciplinary behavior management, student to student, student to teacher, teacher to student, student to the environment, etc.)
 - e. Policies and procedures to be reviewed (student code of conduct, common language posted throughout the school, district policies, organizational chart, etc.)
 - f. Document to be reviewed (lesson plan, lesson, scope, sequence, student handbook, student code of conduct, etc.)
 - g. Sections for observation notes and reflection noted
 - (i). In a journal, examine your role as an auditor during the process. Create a four-column table to record your experiences. Include the time, what you are doing, your perspective at that moment, and your professional feedback.
2. Provide steps on analyzing and understanding the data collected through a CRT theoretical framework.
 - a. Consider what purpose the campus vision and mission statements have on the campus.
 - b. Examine the school climate and what influence it may or may not have had on the data collected.
 - c. Evaluate if decisions or interactions were made proactively or reactively.
 - d. Explore and create a list of professional development that could benefit the campus you observed. Include the organization or owner, the target area it would address, and the website address.
3. Outline where and how the racial audit data and analysis will be shared with various stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, teachers, staff, community, district and state staff, superintendent, and policymakers).
4. Draft steps on how racial audit data and analysis can create changes in practice and policies.
 - a. Include areas of need and preferred outcomes

Reading Resources

- Capper, C. A., & Young, M. D. (2015). The equity audit as the core of leading increasingly diverse schools and districts. In G. Theoharis & M. Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (pp. 186–197). Routledge.
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Daphne Warren is a second-year Ph.D. student of educational leadership and policy studies at The University of Texas at Arlington and a behavior instructional intervention specialist for Plano Independent School District in Plano, TX. Her research interests include Black women leadership and retention in K-12, public school policies related to Black student behavior, and developing antiracist pedagogy in public high schools. With 11 years in public education, centering Black women, girls, and boys through mentorship, advocacy, and collaborative efforts in the community has been Warren's purpose in education.