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Critical Race Theory: An Introduction

by Tanya Christ, Ph.D.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press. ISBN 978-0814721353

Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) book provides an easy-to-read introduction to critical race theory peppered with narrative examples from law, the civil rights movement, and history that illustrate theoretical ideas. This volume is important both conceptually and practically for literacy educators, as the critical race theory movement provides perspectives on race and racism that no doubt inform our pedagogical and advocacy choices.

Critical race theory is defined as a "movement...of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). Delgado and Stefancic underscore the importance of this movement:

If racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures...then the "ordinary business" of society—the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to do the world's work—we will keep minorities in subordinate positions. Only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to meliorate misery." (p. 27)

Given that literacy classrooms are embedded within the institution of our nation's schools, it seems critical to consider how our practices may be supporting change or perpetuating inequities.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) present multiple perspectives from which critical race theorists, and we, can consider these issues:



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- Idealists consider "racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse" (p. 21).
- Realists' perspective is that "racism is much more than a collection of unfavorable impressions by members of other groups...[it] is a means by which society allocates privilege and status...including... the best schools" (p. 21).
- Materialists believe that "one needs to change the physical circumstances of minorities' lives before racism will abate" (p. 25).
- Revisionist history "reexamines America's historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities' experiences" (p. 25).
- Structural determinism forwards "the idea that our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, is ill equipped to redress certain types of wrong" (p. 31).
- Empathic fallacy acknowledges that "most people in their daily lives do not come into contact with many persons of radically different race or social station" (p. 34), and so our own scripts often serve as the script. "The idea that a better, fairer script can be readily substituted for the older, prejudiced one is attractive but falsified by history" (p. 35).

As literacy educators, considering how each of these perspectives might affect our students' success could be the start to identifying important changes that we make

to our pedagogy, classrooms, advocacy, and schools. In fact, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) assert that “critical race theory...tries not only to understand our social situation, but change it” (p. 8).

As I read the book, and considered these perspectives, I thought about several ways that this might apply to my literacy education practices:

- Paying attention to my own language choices;
- Selecting books and primary source documents that present under-represented perspectives that are not part of the traditional school curriculum;
- Engaging students in deep book discussions to challenge racism and stereotypes;
- Teaching students to take a critical perspective when reading, including analyzing power structures, language, and who is included or excluded; and
- Voting to change how schools and local libraries are structured and funded, and for other more institutional-level changes that might address inequities.

I am sure that there are many more ideas, and reading this book as part of a book discussion group might be

one way to generate relevant ideas for your school or district.

If you are a literacy educator who is, or aspires to be, invested in working toward more equitable schools, classrooms, and life opportunities for all students, then I encourage you to read this book. It provides the tinder for new ways of thinking about and practicing our craft to serve children better.

Author Biography

Dr. Tanya Christ is an Associate Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University. She teaches courses related to reading assessment and instruction for K-12. Her research focuses on early childhood vocabulary, comprehension, and digital literacies learning and instruction; culture, access, and equity in literacy education; and literacy teacher education. She has taught both inclusion and general education in Title 1 classrooms in Brooklyn, NY. Her work appears in journals such as *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *Young Children*. She can be reached at christ@oakland.edu.

