

LISTENING TO BLACK FATHERS: CRITICAL RACE THEORY PRODUCES COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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Critical Race Theory (CRT), with roots in law and social justice, has limited integration or familiarity in education - particularly in Early Childhood Care and Education. CRT provides opportunities to enhance Anti-Bias Pedagogies, Advocacy, and Activism in ways that support teachers in understanding Black fathers. CRT supports teachers, educators, and practitioners in challenging biased perspectives about the roles of African American fathers, while empowering them to create an inviting environment where these men feel welcomed.

Statement of Problem/Issues/Research

Black fathers are actively involved in their children's lives through intentional interactions, robust caregiving duties, and rich language (Wilson, 2018a; Wilson, 2018b). Yet, mainstream narratives consistently depict Black fathers from a deficit perspective (Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Teachers of young children bring their biases into the classroom, and their reaction toward Black children reflects that bias (Gilliam et al., 2016), and perpetuates it. The intersectionality of various oppressions compounds, exponentially, the impact of racism (Crenshaw, 2012). Black fathers experience prejudice in ways that restricts collaborative relationships with educators, teachers and other school personnel.

Theories/Perspectives

Critical Race Theory (CRT) came out of legal studies in the mid-1980s by Derrick Bell and colleagues (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; 1998). Initially developed to examine society and culture in law, this theory has placed the impact of race, racism, and oppression at the center of its investigation. CRT has been described as “a long tradition of resistance to the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines in America” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 1). Critical Race Theory aims to eliminate all forms of oppressions, while centering marginalized voices through counternarratives (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Five key components assist this study:

1. Centrality of race and racism

2. The use of an interdisciplinary perspective
3. Challenging the dominant ideology
4. Commitment to social justice and
5. Commitment to experiential knowledge, by explicitly exploring how it contributes to the exploration of African American fathers (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005, pp. 274-6).

Methodology

Counternarratives exist throughout various cultures and individual groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Nebeker, 1998). Learning to listen and seeking to understand requires a shift in focus, away from the hegemony of the dominant culture, and an open, listening spirit (Edwards, 2016). Content analysis of transcripts of Black fathers provided researchers access to counternarratives to the ways the media often portrayed them (Wilson, 2018a; Wilson, 2018b).

Findings

Researchers analyzed self-reports of Black fathers describing the incongruity between their lived experience and the ways the media portrayed Black fathers. While not surprised by these inconsistencies, they valued and appreciated opportunities to express their point of view, to share their stories. Critical Race Theory (CRT) guided this analysis by centralizing the intersectionality of race and gender.

Implications

Teachers who seek to counter their own bias need support in changing lenses. CRT provides teachers a framework to promote counternarratives, while amplifying voices often ignored. Learning to listen and engage people of color in dialogue provides a lens to support teachers in understanding Black fathers.

Outcomes of Presentation:

Participants will explore the role of Critical Race Theory in elevating counternarratives, providing a lens to support teachers in understanding Black fathers. Uncovering bias in our early childhood profession is merely the first step; now we must actively support teachers in crafting intentional anti-bias strategies to overcome resistance to learning how actively engaged Black fathers are in the lives of their children.

Reflection Questions:

Milner (2007) established a framework that includes the following four features 1) Researching the Self, 2) Researching the Self in Relation to Others, 3) Engaged Reflection and Representation and 4) Shifting from Self to System.

1) Researching the Self

- In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? How do I know?
- How do I negotiate and balance my racial and cultural selves in society and in my research? How do I know?

- What do I believe about race and culture in society and education, and how do I attend to my own convictions and beliefs about race and culture in my research? Why? How do I know?
- What racialized and cultural experiences have shaped my research decisions, practices, approaches, epistemologies, and agendas? (Milner, p. 395)

2) Researching the Self in Relation to Others

- In what ways do my research participants' racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they experience the world? How do I know?
- How do I negotiate and balance my own interests and research agendas with those of my research participants, which may be inconsistent with or diverge from mine? How do I know?
- What are and have been some social, political, historical, and contextual nuances and realities that have shaped my research participants' racial and cultural ways or systems of knowing, both past and present? How consistent and inconsistent are these realities with mine? How do I know? (p. 395)

3) Engaged Reflection and Representation

4) Shifting from Self to System

- What is the contextual nature of race, racism, and culture in this study? In other words, what do race, racism, and culture mean in the community under study and in the broader community? How do I know?
- What is known socially, institutionally, and historically about the community and people under study? In other words, what does the research literature reveal about the community and people under study? And in particular, what do people from the indigenous racial and cultural group write about the community and people under study? Why? How do I know?
- What systemic and organizational barriers and structures shape the community and people's experiences, locally and more broadly? How do I know? (p. 397)

Conclusion

Consideration of the intersection of various forms of oppression, such as race and gender, helps early childhood educators open their ears to hear new voices, counternarratives. Accounting for ways many EC educators expect families to behave in stereotypical normative ways requires teachers to change, to shift from their familiar and enter into the homes and culture of their children. This embrace of all children, regardless of how unconventional their family appears, happens best when all family members are welcome into the class culture and school society. While the problems of racism are systemic, and schools have a tremendous amount of transformation to do to disrupt the cycle of oppression, it is individual teachers in collaborative partnerships with families that will truly move the needle and create the change we all want. Listening to Black fathers affords teachers an opportunity to transform education, by following the child.

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