School Social Work Association of America
Resolution Statement

Statement on Legislative Efforts to Restrict Teaching about Racism and the History of People of Color in the U.S.

During the pandemic, existing inequities were exposed and heightened due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. In addition, there was widespread attention to racial justice and calls for police reform after the murder of George Floyd and a difficult political context. Due to this call for social justice and the impact of COVID-19, many school districts are, for the first time, having conversations about race and racial inequities. Other school districts that were already engaged in equity work prior to the pandemic are working to deepen these conversations and further this work. School social workers have and continue to play an important role in facilitating, supporting, and advocating for this equity work and racial justice. The School Social Work Association of America supports holistic and culturally responsive education that includes a comprehensive understanding of the history of the United States. When students experience a holistic and culturally responsive curriculum, they are more engaged in school and experience better academic and social emotional outcomes (Donald, 2016).

Despite the benefits of creating space for conversations about race and equity and offering culturally responsive curriculum, there is a counter movement, seeking to prevent teachers or other school staff from discussing race, gender, or class oppression. This effort to stop conversations about structural inequities and lived experiences of minoritized populations weaponizes the term "critical race theory," using it for political purposes. Any conversation in a school that deals with current or historical inequities is labeled as "critical race theory." Even initiatives like culturally responsive practice, restorative justice, LGBTQ clubs in schools, diversity training, ethnic studies, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline have been categorized in this way regardless of how or if they are informed by critical race theory (Sawchuck, 2021; Schwartz, 2021). As a part of this movement, Republican legislators in over 20 states have introduced bills that restrict how teachers discuss issues such as racism, sexism, or other inequities (Schwartz, 2021).

What is Critical Race Theory?

The actual definition of Critical Race Theory (CRT) differs from the way it's been characterized by opponents in the media, who describe it as divisive. Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s as lawyers, legal scholars, and activists noted that advancements in racial justice were losing momentum and in some cases had come to a halt (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Eventually, critical race theory expanded to other disciplines. The basic principles of CRT as laid out by Delagdo and Stefanic (2001) are the following:

1. Racism is endemic. Structural and systemic racism is infused in our everyday experiences, and these everyday experiences of discrimination perpetuate historical oppression.
2. Racism is rooted in our laws, policies, and structures. Thus when we claim to be race neutral, there can still be inequitable results.
3. CRT acknowledges that race is complex, and that it is a socially constructed concept. Although socially constructed, it has very real, harmful consequences for those who are racialized. Racialization refers to ascribing racial meaning to people, culture, resources, or organizations (Omi & Winant, 2014; Ray, 2019).
4. CRT also means that we challenge racialized narratives about groups of people - for example, there may be implicit biases and racialized narratives about Latinx students or Black students that lead to disproportionate representation in exclusionary discipline, dropping out of school, or special education. CRT would uncover these implicit biases and bring these inequities to light.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary, and draws from legal studies, sociology, education, and social work for example.
6. CRT emphasizes outcomes rather than individual beliefs.

School Social Work and Critical Race Theory: Why Does it Matter?

As school social workers, we often struggle with identifying theoretical or practice frameworks or models that help us work effectively with minoritized populations (Constance-Huggins, 2012). Day to day practices often reproduce whiteness, and frame diversity as something that has to be "managed" rather than framing our work as anti-racist practice (Jeffery, 2005). CRT elevates discussion of inequities to include activism, going beyond an approach that manages diversity or considers it an extra skill to learn, and instead focuses on transformation. CRT speaks to the NASW Code of Ethics, where race is specifically addressed as one form of social diversity that must be considered in anti-oppression work and calls for social workers to take action against social injustice (NASW, 2021).

Most importantly for school social workers, CRT asks us to center the lived experiences of people of color, informing our practice and research with this knowledge. For example, race neutral theories that consider issues of resilience or "grit", fail to detect the suffering and mental health concerns of Black students (McGee & Stovall, 2015). CRT asks us to critically examine such theories for their impact on students of color. CRT also asks us to challenge those dominant, deficit-oriented narratives in the schools about minoritized populations. School social workers play an important role in fostering inclusive school climates, and these legislative actions may limit the degree to which we can create space for discussing race, gender, or other social identities that shape student experiences. Furthermore, some of the legislation also bans "action civics." This could impact evidence-based practices such as critical service learning, a therapeutic strategy that empowers youth to bring about change in their own environments (Johnson & McKay-Jackson, 2017). Another evidence based intervention that could be impacted is what is known as transformational social emotional learning (SEL). Transformational SEL is intended to promote equity with a focus on race and ethnicity, is grounded in justice-oriented

citizenship, and emphasizes institutional and systemic change (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019).

Furthermore, directly supporting students of color means creating space for conversations about race and inequities. Children as young as 3 years old have negative associations about some racial groups, and by elementary school, children understand that people may be treated differently based on skin color (Ward, 2021). This understanding is particularly evident among children of color, where many have already had experiences of discrimination and injustice. In order for children of color to heal from these experiences of racial trauma, the hidden wounds of racial oppression must be directly addressed. In fact, healing begins with affirmation and acknowledgement of those racialized experiences (Hardy, 2013). For white children, enhancing their cross cultural competency and racial literacy skills enhances their lives and benefits our society. Finally, utilizing ethnic studies material in our interventions, and supporting the inclusion of ethnic studies in school curriculum also benefits all students, with particular academic and psychosocial benefits for students of color. Again, white students gain the culturally informed perspective and empathy necessary for success in a globalized world, and students of color experience improved attendance and academic performance; and reduce their risk of dropping out of school (Donald, 2016). Effective and evidence-based practice in schools means that we must continue to support interventions at all levels of practice that center the needs of minoritized students and promote equity and inclusion.

Resources to Learn More about Critical Race Theory and Education

SSWAA has dedicated resources to support school social work leadership in addressing systemic oppression and racial inequities. Visit the Racial Equity and Social Justice Resource Page on SSWAA's website to continue to ground your practice in "cultural humility by engaging in critical self-reflection; recognizing clients as experts of their own culture; committing to life-long learning; and holding institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility" (NASW, 2021). Furthermore, the following resource is an easy to read introduction to Critical RaceTheory with examples to illustrate the theory and help to think about what it means for practice as well as navigating opposition to culturally responsive practices:

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press.

For school social work educators, please refer to the following resources that further substantiate the value and ethical obligation of colleges and universities in upholding Critical Race Theory as a framework to educate students about the historical and present role, and impact of racism in our society: AACU Statement and CSWE - What teaching from an antiracism perspective looks like.

Taking Action

The School Social Work Association of America recognizes the need for educational professionals to navigate our ethical responsibilities and the legal mandates in states which have banned mentioning specific race related topics in the classroom. School social workers

continue to play a crucial role in equity and racial justice work in the school setting. Advocacy and Action: Changing the Conversation around School Social Work illustrates how advocating, promoting, and impacting the realization of social justice is one of the fundamental aspects of our practice. Thus, school social workers can engage in the art and science of advocacy by collaborating with key allies to address these unjust policies at the local, state, and national levels.

Conclusion

The School Social Work Association of America supports holistic and culturally responsive education that includes a comprehensive understanding of the history of the United States. School social workers must center the lived experiences of students of color to inform practices that address barriers and promote assets in the pursuit of equitable educational outcomes for all. Engaging in critically reflexive practice and incorporating critical theories such as CRT is necessary to positively impact communities of color (Meza, 2020).

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Approved by the Board of Directors, August 19, 2021

Suggested citation: Villarreal Sosa, L., Thompson, L., & McCoy, C. (2021). *Statement on Legislative Efforts to Restrict Teaching about Racism and the History of People of Color in the U.S.* London, KY. School Social Work Association of America