



The Colour of Schooling: Whiteness and the Mainstreaming of Racism

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Abstract

This chapter applies Critical Race Theory (CRT) to an analysis of racism in contemporary education. I explore the ‘business-as-usual’ forms of racism that saturate the everyday world of schools; and show how so-called colour-blindness closes down critical discussion and denies the significance of racism. Finally, the chapter reflects on the nature of White supremacy in contemporary European societies.

Keywords

Critical Race Theory · Discrimination · Whiteness · Colour evasion · Schooling · Education policy

1 Thinking Critically About Race

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in US law schools in the 1970s and 1980s, and has grown to become an international and interdisciplinary movement (Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Taylor et al. 2016). There is no single unchanging statement that defines CRT; the approach is constantly developing. Nevertheless, there are key

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signature themes (sometimes called tenets) that characterize CRT and, in particular, set the approach apart from traditional perspectives on ethnic diversity. One of the earliest descriptions, focusing on six ‘defining elements’, was co-authored by four of the foundational figures in legal CRT; Charles Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1993, pp. 6–7):

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses scepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of colour.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary and eclectic.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.

Underlying all CRT is an understanding of ‘race’ as a social construct, a recognition that the things that human beings typically use as signifiers of race are entirely superficial – skin colour, hair texture, facial features and the like. These are arbitrary markers in the sense that they have no inherent significance – rather, they have become endowed with meaning through social processes. Contrary to ‘common-sense’ assumptions, ‘race’ is not based on a fixed and natural system of genetic difference; in fact, ‘race’ is a system of socially constructed and enforced categories that are constantly recreated and modified through human interaction. This is why different societies have contrasting beliefs about how many groups are thought to exist and how they are identified; in each case these assumptions reflect the societies’ particular histories of slavery, colonialism and racism. As Warmington (2014) notes, CRT adopts a position that views race “as both unreal (as a scientific category) and real (as a social tool)” (p. 10). CRT is not alone in understanding race as a social construct. However, it does not view racism as merely a complicating factor, derived from another more fundamental social division (such as class) – rather CRT views race and racism as major fault lines in society; becoming more and less prominent at different times but always operating with brutal material force, in ways that may intersect with other divisions, but which deserve to be placed at the very centre of analysis in their own right.

2 Racism in the Everyday World of Schools

As several studies have shown, over the last half-century issues of racism, ‘race relations’ and ‘race’ equity have featured differently in English education policy. From early post-war ignorance and neglect, through periods of overt assimilationist and integrationist policies (Tomlinson 1977, 2008; Mullard 1982). Despite superficial changes in language and tone, for most of the time a constant feature is that race equity has been largely absent from flagship education policy. Superficially there have been significant changes. For example, during much of the 1980s and ’90s successive Conservative administrations – reflecting Margaret Thatcher’s famous assertion that there is “no such thing as society” (Thatcher 1993 p. 626) – insisted that the only fair approach was a ‘colour-blind’ perspective that denied any legitimacy to group-based analyses and claims. In a stark reversal of this language, Tony Blair’s incoming New Labour administration of 1997 openly named race inequity as an unacceptable feature of the education system and even cited critical research that had raised questions about teachers’ role in producing raced inequities in school (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE] 1997). Unfortunately, the tangible outcomes of this approach mostly concerned granting funding to a handful of minority ethnic schools on the basis of a distinctive religious identity, for example creating the first state-funded Muslim schools (Figueroa 2004).

The early 2000s saw a flurry of apparent activity following “The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report” (Macpherson 1999), which identified institutional racism as a serious problem that required urgent action across public services (including the criminal justice system and education). Unfortunately, this focus was soon abandoned; the Department for Education’s “five year strategy”, for example, was published amid great publicity in the summer of 2004. Running to more than 100 pages, the document set out Labour’s proposals for the next five years of education policy. ‘Minority ethnic’ pupils were granted a single mention in the text; a 25-word paragraph headed ‘*low achieving minority ethnic groups*’ (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2004, p. 60). The word ‘racism’ did not appear at all; neither did the more sanitized concepts of ‘prejudice’ and ‘discrimination’. In contrast, ‘business’ and ‘businesses’ appeared 36 times, and ‘standards’ appeared on 65 separate occasions: the latter equates to an average reiteration of ‘standards’ once every page and a half. Clearly, the five-year strategy prioritized an official version of ‘standards’ in education, but one could legitimately ask ‘standards for whom’?

Following a general election in 2010, UK politics shifted to the right and race equity was further demoted. Indeed, a concerted campaign (involving politicians,

media and right-wing think tanks) has largely erased race inequity as an educational concern. One of the most powerful policy and media tropes now presents ‘*White working class*’ students as the most disadvantaged group. Based on a systematic mis-representation of official data (see Gillborn 2010, 2013), this view of White people as an excluded group has continued to gather momentum.

Regardless of the political persuasion of the incumbent political party, therefore, race equity has constantly to fight for legitimacy as a significant topic for education policymakers. This is a key part of the way in which education policy is implicated in White supremacy.

Traditionally, racism is seen as a relatively rare occurrence, usually associated with crude and obvious acts of race hatred and discrimination. But critical researchers have shown that racism also operates in ways that are quite subtle and extremely common, what Delgado and Stefancic (2000) term “business-as-usual forms of racism” (p. xvi). The people involved in racist acts might be completely unaware of their role; indeed, they may be well intentioned. White teachers often find themselves implicated in a series of practices that actively reinforce and remake race inequity, e.g. through their teaching styles, selection of curricular materials, testing regimes and routine decisions about what constitute signs of ability and disorder (see Ladson-Billings 1998).

There is a wide range of qualitative research that documents everyday life inside multi-ethnic schools and universities. Although the studies have been conducted by critical scholars from different ethnic backgrounds, working in a variety of educational systems, the findings are remarkably consistent (Gillborn 2008; Irvine 2018; Lynn and Dixson 2013). Classroom research shows that White people tend to have very different stereotypes of different minority groups. For example, some ‘Asian’ groups (especially Chinese and Indian students) are usually assumed to be hard working, respectful, quiet high achievers; they are more likely to be placed in high-ranked teaching groups, where they access the best resources and are taught by the most experienced teachers. In contrast, Black students (with family backgrounds in Africa and/or the Caribbean) experience the opposite stereotype. White teachers generally expect Black students to present disciplinary problems rather than excel academically. In school, Black students are often placed in lower-ranked teaching groups than White peers with similar test scores; this leads to them covering less of the curriculum, they are frequently taught by less experienced teachers, and they tend to be disciplined more severely than White peers engaged in the same acts. Black adults have complained about similar problems in numerous professions, including education, the criminal justice system, and the health service. Black staff are more likely to be on temporary contracts, more likely to be disciplined, but less likely to be promoted to

senior ranks (Bhopal 2016; Rollock 2019). These problems typically arise from the mundane everyday life of educational institutions. Often the interactions are not at all dramatic, simply *'business-as-usual'* small, routine decisions that keep favouring White people over Black people. Sometimes described as *'micro-aggressions'* (Yosso et al. 2009), the incidents might appear small in isolation but their cumulative effect is extraordinarily powerful and destructive. For example, data on school achievement frequently show systematic inequalities of outcome for certain minoritized groups.

Figure 1 illustrates 25 years of race inequity in examination achievement in England. The data compare the success of students who are categorized as *'White British'* and *'Black Caribbean'* (a term used in the UK census by people with family heritage in the Caribbean). It is important to note that in the UK, ethnic origin does not necessarily denote any difference in citizenship status; both White and Black Caribbean students share many key characteristics; they are overwhelmingly British citizens, born and raised in the UK, and they speak English as their first language. The inequity in achievement, therefore, cannot be simply

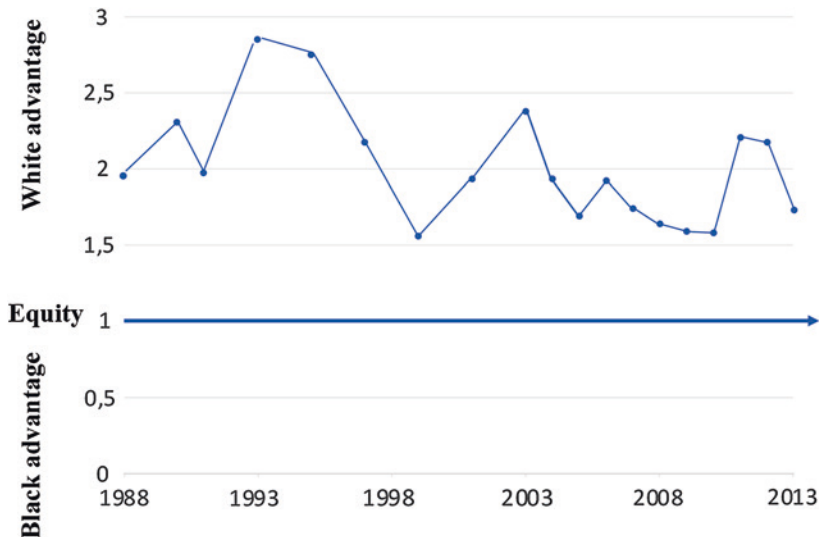


Fig. 1 The odds of success: White students relative to Black Caribbean peers (England, 1988–2013). *Source* odds ratios taken from Gillborn et al. (2017), based on official statistics 1988–2013

explained in terms of deficit analyses that view Black students as outsiders to the society and education system.

Figure 1 uses a calculation of ‘*odds ratios*’, which compare the chance of success for White students relative to their Black peers: an odds ratio of 1 would denote that the two groups had an equal chance of success; a score *less* than 1 would indicate that White children had less chance of success, and a score *greater* than 1 shows how much *more* likely White students are to achieve the required grades. *The data indicate a consistent and significant pattern of White racial advantage.* During the quarter century covered by the data, White students have always enjoyed a greater chance of success, sometimes at more than twice the Black level. Mainstream commentators and policymakers often try to explain such disparities by invoking supposed deficits on the part of Black students; a common argument is that the disparity really measures *class* not *race* disadvantage, that is, that Black students are more likely to live in economic disadvantage and this depresses their attainment. However, recent studies have shown that Black achievement inequities are actually *greater* when comparing students from relatively advantaged economic backgrounds (Rollock et al. 2015). It is not the case, therefore, that race inequity is simply a reflection of socioeconomic differences.

The English education system has a long-established track record of producing outcomes marked by Black racial disadvantage. Despite successive governments claiming to value equality of opportunity, it is clear from the evidence that policy has failed to eradicate race inequity in education. In part this reflects policymakers’ unwillingness to focus on the needs of minoritized students in general, and Black students in particular. This is because policymakers’ first and overwhelming concern is to protect the interests of White people, especially White elites. Of course, this strategy is not presented in such bold terms; indeed, policymakers frequently excuse their inaction on race inequity as a principled stand reflecting a so-called ‘colour-blind’ approach.

3 Whiteness and White People

It is useful to remind ourselves that Whiteness and White people are different things. In general terms, *Whiteness* refers to a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites. People who identify or are identified by others as *White* often act in the interests of Whiteness, but that is not automatic nor inevitable. White-identified people can challenge Whiteness, just as people of colour can sometimes become

vocal advocates for Whiteness. As Zeus Leonardo (2002) notes, “‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (p. 31).

4 From Colour-Blind to Colour Evasion and Racism Denial

“I think that the true racist sees everything in terms of race, or colour. Surely what we should be aiming to be is colour blind.” Philip Davies, Member of Parliament (as cited in Sweney 2014)

This statement was made by a Conservative politician criticizing a company’s moves to increase the diversity of its employees. His comments are a perfect example of a long-standing attack on measures that seek to directly address race inequity; the position argues that a focus on race is by definition racist; therefore, the only legitimate way ahead is to refuse to recognize race – to be ‘colour-blind’.

Numerous studies have shown that a claim to be blind to colour – to simply treat all people alike – tends to benefit the already powerful by defending and extending White racial advantage (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Burke 2019; Haney-Lopez 2007). Advocates of colour-blindness often portray themselves as occupying the moral high ground by rising above petty racialized disputes in order to see the worth of people as *individuals*. In practice, however, colour-blindness has become an argument to *ignore* race inequality and *silence* critical discussion of racism in all but its most crude and obvious forms. Indeed, Annamma et al. (2017) argue that we should abandon the term ‘colour-blind’ and replace it with the more accurate colour-*evasiveness*:

Color-evasiveness as an expanded racial ideology acknowledges that to avoid talking about race is a way to willfully ignore the experiences of people of color, and makes the goal of erasure more fully discernible. In other words, to use the term ‘evade’ highlights an attempt to obliterate. (p. 156)

As a challenge to so-called colour-blindness, the term *colour evasion* has several advantages; it makes clear that adopting this stance is a deliberate and destructive act. Colour evasion is neither innocent nor passive; it is an active refusal to engage with race inequality. Regardless of the moral, theoretical, or practical arguments that might be used to defend colour-blind ideology, in practice the position is an assertion that the experiences of minoritized groups are not important enough to be considered or acted on. In essence, colour-blindness acts

as both *colour evasion* (we should not talk about race) and *racism denial* (racism isn't a serious enough problem to justify such attention). The new term also avoids feeding into patronizing and discriminatory assumptions about people with visual impairments. Blind and partially-sighted people are able to perceive the world in great complexity, but the term colour-blindness equates a disability with a kind of ignorance or lack of perception.

5 White People: Not just Another Ethnic Group

A Whiteness trope that is growing in popularity, on both sides of the Atlantic, trades on the assertion that White people are just another ethnic group. This is an unusual tactic because historically Whiteness has gained a great deal of its strength from asserting the absence of ethnicity, as if an ethnic identity is something that Other people have; for example *ethnic* is often used as a code for non-White, and *White* is synonymous with “normal” (Delgado and Stefancic 1997). White racism is quick to morph to new conditions and opportunities (Gillborn 2018); CRT suggests, therefore, that when White people seek to embrace the status of an ethnic group, we should examine how this might serve the interests of White powerholders. Current advocates of Whiteness as an ethnic identity, in the United States and the United Kingdom, construct a worldview where White racism is presented as merely a natural preference for one's own people. Most tellingly, this tactic presents White people's actions in defence of their existing advantages (and their continued oppression of others) as a legitimate form of identity politics. In 2017, for example, Policy Exchange (a London-based rightist think tank) published a report entitled *'Racial Self-Interest' is not Racism*, authored by Eric Kaufmann, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. Kaufmann (2019) subsequently expanded the arguments into his book “Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities”. The latter begins: “We need to talk about white identity. Not as a fabrication designed to maintain power, but as a set of myths and symbols to which people are attached: an ethnic identity like any other” (p. 1).

And so, the second line of the book sets out one of its dominant themes: White identity deserves the same respect and understanding as “any other” (non-majority) identity. The book's release was covered in *The Times* newspaper with the stunningly insensitive (or perhaps deliberately crass and provocative) title “Don't lynch me for spelling out what immigration means” (Hemming 2018). Kaufmann's argument is that commentators have been too quick to denounce White group interests as racist and that this has closed down debate and forced White people towards extremist nationalist positions. Launching Kaufmann's (2017)

report, Policy Exchange's Head of Demography, Integration and Immigration David Goodhart argued:

The challenge here is to distinguish between white racism and white identity politics. The latter may be clannish and insular, but it is not the same as irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group - the normal definition of racism. [...] The liberal reflex to tar legitimate majority grievances with the brush of racism risks deepening western societies' cultural divides. (Kaufmann 2017)

Note that a false distinction is drawn here between White racism (limited to the most extreme and obvious forms of "irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group") and White "identity politics" (which is described as "legitimate" grievances). In this way, racism is redefined in the narrowest way possible as "irrational hatred". This means that systemic inequities that persistently and significantly favour White people (for example in the economy, health, the criminal justice system, and education) are simply ruled out of bounds. Such differences cannot be racist in the Goodhart/Kaufmann universe (even though they favour one group at the expense of others) because they do not arise from plain, simple, deliberate, and overtly fascist politics. In this way, such arguments close down critical discussion of pernicious and widespread structural racism. The move is disguised as thoughtful, even academic, but the consequence of this argument is that White people would be free to say and do almost anything (short of violence) to protect their own racial self-interest. From a CRT perspective White people (in the US, UK, Europe and Australasia) are *not* "an ethnic identity like any other". They are the dominant holders of power, and their move to protect their existing slice of the cake is not a romantic strategy to protect some folkloric image of red-cheeked children in an innocent past; it is an attempt to safeguard an oppressive and racist status quo. Whiteness enforces its power in numerous ways, sometimes subtly, sometimes less so. Kaufmann (2019) strikes an ominous tone early and often:

The loss of white ethno-cultural confidence manifests itself in other ways. Among the most important is a growing unwillingness to indulge the anti-white ideology of the cultural left. When whites were an overwhelming majority, empirically unsupported generalizations about whites could be brushed off as amusing and mischievous but ultimately harmless. As whites decline, fewer are willing to abide such attacks. (p. 2)

And so, the view of White people as just another ethnic group (which happens to control the levers of power across society) is married to an implicit threat: *Don't*

call us racist because you'll make us angry, and you won't like White people when we're frightened and angry.

White people exert disproportionate power and influence. They cannot merely look out for their own interests because, in contrast to Black, Latinx, Roma and other minoritized groups, White movements are not pursuing equity and social justice; they are generally seeking to preserve inequity and injustice.

6 Europe and the Mainstreaming of Race Hatred

The global economic crisis of 2008 sparked a wave of regressive social policies across major ‘Western’ economies that provided a potent breeding ground for ever more vocal and extreme racist sentiment. No European state has been immune to the rise in populism, indeed many have seen electoral gains by right-wing (sometimes far-right/neo-fascist) parties and witnessed growing racist violence, often linked to the so-called ‘migration crisis’ arising from wars in the Middle East and parts of Africa (Amnesty International 2018; Rankin 2018). The rise in racist street violence is an obvious indication of the worsening state of race and racism in Europe and North America, but, as I have already noted, racism also takes more subtle and insidious forms. There is insufficient space here to chart the multiple ways in which White supremacy has extended its grip on mainstream politics; instead I will comment on a single episode that illustrates the further normalization of anti-minority sentiment in Europe.

In 2017 the Dutch general election appeared to offer hope when the far-right xenophobic *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom), led by Geert Wilders, failed to win a majority. The BBC headlined its coverage, “Dutch election: European relief as mainstream triumphs” (BBC News 2017). Henley (2017a) reported that the result was greeted enthusiastically by numerous European governments:

- “a good day for democracy” (Germany)
- “a clear victory against extremism” (France)
- “a show of responsibility and maturity” (Spain)
- “serious politics” (Denmark)
- “responsible leadership” (Sweden)
- “a rejection of populism” (Norway)

The air of celebration, however, misunderstands (or misrepresents) just how far to the right *mainstream* political discourse has now swung. A few weeks before

the election the incumbent prime minister, Mark Rutte, shifted his policies to the right and adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric. Rutte (2017) published an open letter to “all Dutch people”, stating that the country faced a problem because of people who “abuse our freedom [...] while they have come to our country for that freedom”. People who “harass gays, or whistle at women in short skirts, or brand ordinary Dutch people racists”. He went on to say that “if you so fundamentally reject this country, then I’d prefer it if you leave” (Henley 2017b). And so the Dutch prime minister, whose victory was so warmly welcomed a few weeks later, had effectively declared anyone as unfit to live in the country if they dared “brand ordinary Dutch people racists”. This is how far ‘mainstream’ political discourse has shifted to the right. Racist and anti-immigrant sentiment have become normalized to the degree that, even when we think that racist political parties have been defeated in elections, they have often succeeded in changing the political landscape.

7 Conclusions

In this chapter I have applied CRT to an examination of racism in education and society. I have shown how CRT understands racism as a wide-ranging, complex, often hidden aspect of social life. CRT’s ability to unmask the everyday ‘business-as-usual’ forms of racism is especially important. I have argued that even well-intentioned teachers can be caught up in processes that remake and extend racist inequity, for example, through decisions about identifying ability and indiscipline – decisions that frequently encode long-standing racist stereotypes. I have also shown how so-called ‘colour-blindness’ acts as an ideological excuse for inaction, resulting in race evasion and racism denial. The evidence demonstrates that policymakers’ claims of a commitment to inclusion, fairness and race equality cannot be taken at face value. Mainstream assumptions about steady incremental progress are contradicted by long-term patterns of persistent and significant race inequity. These patterns reflect the reality of societies that are structured by historical and contemporary deep-rooted racism and yet where the mainstream discourse continues to treat race and racism as marginal issues. CRT offers a fundamental challenge to these assumptions by emphasizing that a critical analysis should adopt a perspective that takes seriously the experiences and understandings of minoritized people: White people do not have an automatic right to define what is ‘normal’ or important; White people are not always the best placed to say what is fair and just.

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