



Carrying the CRT Legacy in Perilous Times: Educational Research and Practice in the Social Science Under Florida's Stop WOKE Act

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ABSTRACT

Florida's House Bill 7, also known as the Stop Woke Act, is one of the most controversial legal measures in educational history, increasing the supervision of teaching and learning about anti-black racism in social studies education. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has legally banned teaching CRT (critical race theory) from K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. In this paper, I analyze specific points from Florida's House Bill 7 (2022), unpacking its legal divisiveness that upholds white supremacy in the social sciences. This blatant denial of America's tragic racial history has intensified a hostile and superficial learning environment for teachers of social studies education. As a Black woman, educator, and researcher, there is an added layer of betrayal teaching about race under intense legal scrutiny. In this article, I intend to unpack my experience as one of the last groups of doctoral students to learn CRT at a Florida public university, revisiting the political shift against CRT and how it has impacted my research and practice.

Published July 2024

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DOI [10.29173/assert74](https://doi.org/10.29173/assert74)

Pages: 5-14

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Keywords Social Studies Education, CRT, antiracist teaching, HB 7

How to cite this article (APA): Bennett, E. S. (2024). Carrying the CRT legacy in perilous times: Education research and practice in social sciences under Florida's stop WOKE act. *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers*, 6(1), 5-14.
<https://doi.org/10.29173/assert74>

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2020, prior to the crusade against Critical Race Theory (CRT), America appeared to be at the nexus of racial advancement driven by the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and police brutality against Black and Brown people. This period, popularly known as the “Summer of Racial Reckoning,” was the most overt and intense support for Black lives witnessed in decades, characterized by grassroots antiracist activism elevated through promoting diversity and inclusion, removing of confederate monuments, renaming public institutions honoring individuals with racist histories, and disseminating anti-racism advertisements (Bradley, 2021; Chavez, 2020; Clark, 2020; McLaughlin, 2020). These efforts were short-lived as CRT’s tenet of racial realism predicts reoccurring and transient changes in racial attitudes due to the permanence of racism (Nguyen et al., 2021). Many scholars have challenged the effectiveness of this period, naming the Summer of Racial Reckoning a period of performative politics lacking evidence of racial progress (Bradley, 2021; Burkhard, 2022; Williams, 2022).

Amongst transient changes, they included the scrutiny of CRT, which began shortly after the Summer of Racial Reckoning in 2020. By June of 2021, CRT reached mainstream headlines after Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 7, or the “Stop WOKE Act,” into law, banning instruction on CRT in Florida public schools. Governor DeSantis claims his efforts to eradicate CRT from schools were executed to prevent “teaching kids to hate their country and hate each other” (DeSantis, 2024). However, DeSantis’ efforts demonstrate that the lack of understanding of CRT contributes to false narratives spread by politicians rallying against it. (Patterson et al., 2023). As of 2021, an alarming 42 states have initiated bills to ban CRT in schools, limiting how race and gender can be discussed in classrooms (Berman et al., 2023).

THE RESEARCH

The demonization of CRT, which unfolded shortly after the Summer of 2020, reveals how symbolic racial ramifications can be disguised as racial progress. CRT and intersectionality scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw theorizes the “cyclical dimensions of race, reform, and retrenchment” (Crenshaw, 2022, p. 1707), which can be applied to this rapid change in attitudes on race. The retrenchment of racial progress can be linked to perhaps the most controversial CRT tenet, the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Goodman, 1993; Milner, 2017), underscoring the impossibility of overcoming deeply ingrained racist structures that dominate our institutions, legal system, and social conventions with society as we know it.

CRT is a theoretical framework that examines the functioning of racism in society. It was introduced to academic scholarship in the late 1970s as a response to the ongoing racial inequality following the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Scholars in CRT argue that racism perpetuates inequality and suffering for marginalized groups. They also emphasize that race is a socially constructed concept rather than a biological marker of difference (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT comprises five core principles: prioritizing the significance of race and racism, questioning prevailing narratives, dedication to promoting social justice, recognizing the value of experiential wisdom, and embracing an interdisciplinary approach (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). CRT scholars analyze the intricate relationships between race, power, oppression, and the pursuit of social justice. CRT shapes our understanding of the social world and influences attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward racial differences (Omi & Winant, 2014).

In 2022, Florida passed HB 7, popularly known as the Stop WOKE Act, banning the teaching of CRT in Florida schools while subsequently solidifying white ideology as dominant in teaching and learning about race, gender, and power in America (Hutchens & Miller, 2023). Florida institutions that violate HB 7 face heavy financial penalties, including ineligibility of performance funding for the next fiscal year after violations are discovered (Pettit, 2022). HB 7 section 42 also indicates that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, testable, and defined” (FL Individual Freedom Act, 2022). History taught under these pretensions excludes the historical accounts of diverse voices, facilitating a rigid view of the past. Presenting America’s history as solely “factual” disregards the historical perspectives of marginalized communities, posing challenges for social studies teachers in fostering inquiry and critical thinking within the curriculum (López et al., 2021). Excluding histories misaligned with white ideology is not new to the makeup of the American school. The US social studies curriculum has sustained power structures through the null curriculum, or what is left out of the social sciences (Eisner, 1985; Flinders et al., 1986). HB 7 also criticizes more subtle forms of racism, such as neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness, as being racist or sexist (FL House Bill 7, 2022), all of which impact minority students, teachers, and administrators.

The anti-intellectual regulation of race-related content in Florida due to HB 7 has contributed to racial battle fatigue (RBF), or the psychological and physical stress experienced by Black educators from overt and subtle racist experiences (Smith, 2003). Many social justice and equity-positioned teachers and researchers are avoiding or leaving Florida colleges and universities altogether, fearing they will be penalized for conducting CRT and equity-based work (Crawford, 2022; Need, 2022; Topalidis & Austin). Following the passing of Florida’s HB 7 2022, Black educators are compelled to conceal how racism systematically marginalizes minorities, including their own experiences with

racism. Teaching under these conditions has constrained educators' decision-making in assignment selection, textual resources, and even feedback on student work (Graddick, 2023; Strom, 2023; Toppo, 2022). It has also made Black educators reluctant to address marginalization in their classroom, masking how racism impacts education and their own lives.

FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

White fragility, as demonstrated in Florida's HB 7, disregards the legacy of racism and the daily realities experienced by minorities in our racially stratified society. White fragility is understood as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 247). The conciliation of white fragility is evident in the language of HB 7, stating "a person by virtue of his or her race or sex, does not bear responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex" and "an individual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is not necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin" (FL House Bill 7, 2022). White fragility evident in HB 7 shelters whites from honest reflections about race, permitting them to disengage from the racial reality they inherently benefit from (DiAngelo, 2018). It is clear that Florida's HB 7 not only fails to acknowledge the lasting impact of racism but also hinders honest reflection and engagement with racial realities. As educators, it is our responsibility to equip students with the necessary tools to navigate and understand the complexities of race and racism in our society, as these issues pervade every aspect of our lives and institutions.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Ignorance is a primary motivator behind the campaign against CRT. I encourage all educators read impactful CRT research in education—especially Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) "Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?"—which introduced CRT to the educational sphere. https://defendinged.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Just-what-is-critical-race-theory-and-whats-it-doing-in-a-nice-field-like-education_.pdf and her recent work "Critical race theory- What it is not!" (2021) https://www.biknotes.com/files/ugd/b8b6dc_c130ecf51e404a0c94a163eb73db6c20.pdf#page=55
- Incorporate diverse voices in the curriculum to facilitate discourse and critical thinking on issues concerning race and racism (Berman et al., 2023).

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- Make a connection to real world issues proximal to students lives by incorporating current events surrounding issues of difference. Allow students to share their perspectives on these issues.
 - Include lessons on grassroots activism in social justice education to demonstrate how individuals and communities have resisted injustice. Students need to know they are not powerless in the fight towards equity.
 - Anti-CRT laws is a nationwide concern. Get political. Know your state and local laws and VOTE. See this resource “Understanding the Attacks on Critical Race Theory” (2021) from the National Education Policy center that synthesizes anti-CRT policies across the US. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED616105.pdf>

Suggestions for Racial Battle Fatigue

- Set boundaries to maintain your emotional capacity.
- Practice reflective journaling to reflect on your experiences with race and racism schools.
- Find other school community equity-based educators who appreciate and appreciate your experiences.
- Engage in advocacy and activism within and outside of school.
- Set realistic expectations under the ramifications of anti-CRT laws.

Q & A WITH EBONIE BENNETT

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

To what extent does your understanding of CRT impact your practice as a critical social justice educator?

Ebonie Bennett’s Response:

Immersing in CRT tenets and literature affirmed my reality as a Black woman and allowed me to see myself and my students in my research. Reflecting on my introduction to CRT during the Summer of 2020, I realize that it has empowered my research lens and teaching practices, allotting me the language to critique the entrenchment of racism in schools. My understanding of CRT significantly informs my practice as a critical social justice educator. It provides a framework for analyzing systemic racism in education and society. This understanding shapes how I conduct research, design curriculum, facilitate discussions, and engage with my students.

Question #2***Teacher's Question:***

How does Critical Race Theory (CRT) prepare individuals to address the complex and divisive nature of racism in education and beyond?

Ebonie Bennett's Response:

Critical race theory prepares educators for the complex and divisive nature of racism observed in schools. It allows educators to address why racism exists and to what end, shifting focus toward dismantling racism in education and beyond. This shift in perspective has been profound for me. Rather than feeling overwhelmed or defeated by the enormity of racism, CRT has empowered me to channel my energy and efforts into tangible strategies for creating change. It has instilled a sense of urgency and purpose, driving me to advocate for equity and justice in education and beyond.

Question #3***Teacher's Question:***

What are the potential consequences of teachers avoiding social justice and equity-positioned teaching—or just leaving the profession entirely—have on the educational landscape in Florida?

Ebonie Bennett's Response:

I asked this same question to a colleague who leads social justice work at a prominent Florida university. Her response was another question: “Who will fight for our students in Florida if we all leave?” As a Florida native, I planned on leaving after receiving my doctoral degree. However, there are people here who need and appreciate our work. I fear that if all equity-positioned teachers leave, our state will attract conservative educators who don't mind omitting racial histories to maintain the status quo.

Question #4***Teacher's Question:***

How does the lack of understanding of CRT among future generations of citizens impact their awareness of the influence of race and racism on teaching and learning?

Ebonie Bennett's Response:

The lack of understanding of CRT among future generations of citizens can limit their awareness of the pervasive influence of race and racism on teaching and learning. Without a critical understanding of how racism operates on systemic levels, individuals may perpetuate harmful beliefs and behaviors, contributing to racial inequality. This lack of awareness can also hinder inclusivity and equity in classrooms.

Question #5**Teacher's Question:**

What resources or strategies do you recommend for educators struggling to remain committed to equity because of fear?

Ebonie Bennett's Response:

I'm not sure if the commitment to equity ever wavers due to fear, but it may dim amidst political turmoil. In response, I urge educators to seek support and encouragement from their communities, particularly from experienced educators who have weathered previous political movements in education. Above all, pedagogy steeped in fear is not true pedagogy. Educators should foster teaching environments where they feel secure and empowered to thrive. While some educators may bravely tackle the challenge of addressing race and racism despite legislative constraints, others may choose to avoid it altogether. This diversity of response is the reality we face, and it is crucial not to coerce educators into promoting equity out of fear but to create a better world for our students.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ebonie S. Bennett

Ebonie S. Bennett is a PhD Candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction Program specializing in Teachers, Schools, and Society. Ebonie's research highlights the negotiation of Black in education, prioritizing the unique perspectives of Black youth. Her research interrogates how the intersections of race and poverty influence scholars to experience oppressive forces imagined while examining narratives, being cognizant of its impact on Black students' attitudes towards school. Through memories, imagery, and self-talk, Ebonie's qualitative research aims to cultivate depth, addressing the density of securing Black educational futures. Ebonie also serves as a school-wide instructional coach and has taught for over seven years in North Central Florida. Outside of professional pursuits, I enjoy caring for my family, cooking, and special home DIY projects.