



The Education Trust



Fels Institute  
of Government  
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

# ASSESSING REPRESENTATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULA

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## Introduction

This literature review seeks to find best practices for Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) for classroom utilization in English Language Arts (ELA), across secondary schools. Culturally Relevant Teaching is an intersectional school of thought that combines social justice, equity, inclusion and cultural competence. It can be used to teach literature in a way that is better receptive to students and incorporate real-life experiences in the classroom. In compiling sources and preliminary research for this literature review, I sought to find best practices for teaching literature in the classroom that is culturally sensitive to all students from all backgrounds. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a pioneering researcher in this field describes CRT as being about “...questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exists in society.”<sup>1</sup>

As an organization, The Education Trust “seeks to drive conversations about how the state’s public education system can better serve students of color and students with low-income backgrounds, through pre-K through college and career.”<sup>2</sup> They are “committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system”<sup>3</sup>. In engaging with the Fels Institute of Government’s Fels Lab, they sought out a partnership to design this literature review to discover and compile best practices in the classroom to assist their students’ ability to academically excel.

## Explanation of Research Methods

To gain a full scope and better understanding of CRT, I utilized the University of Pennsylvania library’s educational research database, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and searched specifically for the following terms: “culturally relevant teaching”, “culturally relevant pedagogy”, “critical multiracial education”, “culturally responsive practices” and/or “language arts”, while filtering for research papers and gray literature that were published within the last five to ten years. Any research that was outside of this timeframe was used as a resource for background information on the subject matter. Throughout this literature review, Gloria

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<sup>1</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2022. *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://edtrust.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Ladson-Billings' *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995), will be referenced—as this seminal work is the origin of this school of thought and has paved the way for countless other research papers and gray literature.

### Background

CRT as a framework stems from several schools of thought but appears at the intersections of social justice, cultural competency, and inclusive teaching. Earlier research, such as *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and *A High School English Teacher's Developing Multicultural Pedagogy* (Cook, Amatucci, 2006) is referenced and inspired by later and more contemporary research on this topic. CRT is not exclusive of “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy”, “Multicultural Pedagogy”, or “Culturally Responsive Practices”. All of these schools of thought fall under the CRP school of thought and feed into the same idea that teachers/educators should utilize personalized and culturally relevant approaches within their learning environments for students. In Cook and Amatucci's work, they reflect on Kristi Amatucci's experience as a new high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher and how her personal upbringing shaped the way she learned to teach. “Her early interviews indicated that, as a teacher, she would not repeat those practices from her own education and that she was committed to searching for more representative literature for her students.”<sup>4</sup> Amatucci's 2001 graduate education program implemented several strands that committed aspiring educators to implement inclusive practices in their teaching practices that include, but as not limited to:

- Acceptance of language diversity
- Recognizing, identifying, and addressing stereotypes, discrimination, and other manifestations of problematic material in school curriculum
- Understanding cultural biases and how they impact teaching and learning
- Identifying and understanding how race, class, gender, and ability impact differential access
- Adopting a cross-cultural understanding and putting it into practice through teaching
- Developing classroom material and curricula that promote inclusion and social justice for all students (University of Georgia 2001)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cook, Leslie and Amatucci, Kristi. 2006. “A High School English Teacher's Developing Multicultural Pedagogy.” p. 223

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Amatucci's dedication to the strands listed above assisted her in her first years of teaching, to better connect with her students. *A High School English Teacher's Developing Multicultural Pedagogy* (2006) was at the forefront of the CRT conversation and research. The needle for inclusive teaching practices has moved in the last 20+ years, but the experience that was documented in that research paper, much like Ladson-Billings' work, has contributed to the ongoing research of this theoretical framework. Many of the ideas that we see today started with the seminal works of the late 1990s, and early 2000s.

### Systemic Factors

According to the 2020 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in 2019 Black and Latinx students scored an average of 27.5 points lower than their white peers in the reading literacy category.<sup>6</sup> While many factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, and/or household makeup can be attributed to these results, it is clear that this is an equity issue. The academic achievement gap, is defined as "when one group of students (e.g. students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (US Department of Education)<sup>7</sup>. For some Black and Brown students, their test scores are reflective of their current classroom experiences and the lack of connection to the academic material. In Ladson-Billings' research (1995), she found that "...other explanations posit *cultural difference* (Erickson 1987, 1993; Piestrup, 1973) as the reason for this failure and, as previously mentioned, locate student failure in the cultural mismatch between students and the school."<sup>8</sup> Though Ladson-Billings' research was conducted in the 1990s, we can still see this issue in the modern day. Within classrooms, there has been and still is a need for expansive and inclusive teaching practices that benefit all students, especially the most marginalized.

The school-to-prison pipeline has created new obstacles to academic achievement for Black and Brown students. "Black students are three and a half more times likely than White

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/xplore/NDE>

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<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/#:~:text=Achievement%20gaps%20occur%20when%20one,than%20the%20margin%20of%20error>

<sup>8</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1995. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal*.

students to be excluded from school due to disciplinary issues and are twice as likely as their White peers to drop out of school” (Cramer et al., 2014)<sup>9</sup>. Systemic racism and implicit bias can lead to students being perceived in ways that lead to hyper-punishment. The presence of White people in non-white communities, implicit bias feed Black and Brown students into the school-to-prison pipeline and expands the achievement gap, as mentioned earlier. Writing off a student’s inability to connect with learning materials as behavioral issues and sending them to the principal for punishment hurts academic absorption. The student is less encouraged the next time to even engage in the classroom lesson because punishment is now associated with this particular book or topic. Identifying and combatting internal unconscious bias and discouraging discriminatory behavior in the school environment will have a lasting impact on all students. Children of all ages constantly learn from their peers, parents, and older adults around them and lead by example. Breaking cycles of bias helps foster an inclusive community that welcomes social justice ideas, celebrates diversity, and appreciates cultural differences.

### Key Findings and Themes

Though different researchers used varying research methods and practices, many of the same recurring themes were present in their findings—and remained relevant to the seminal work of Ladson-Billings. There are certainly systemic issues that play a part in the quality of education and access that communities have, however, inclusive classroom environments, the relativity of literature themes to lived experiences, and increased cultural sensitivity among teachers are themes that have appeared across several bodies of research. Culturally Relevant Leadership is an adjacent pedagogy that incorporates school leaders and parents/community members to ensure that the overall academic experience feels more inclusive of the surrounding community, rather than isolating students when they come into the classroom.

### Indigenized, Local Identities & Language Diversity

In *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, Davis, Khalifa, and Gooden find that a culturally responsive administrator assists in the development of teachers by “developing teacher capacities for culturally responsive pedagogy”, designing “collaborative walkthroughs”, and “use

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<sup>9</sup> Jacobs, Brown, Washington, O’Connor, Lundin. 2022. “Disrupting the School to Prison Pipeline: Using Culturally Responsive Classroom Practices to Support Black Students”. *School Leadership Review*. Vol 16.

school data to see cultural gaps in achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services”<sup>10</sup> In doing so, teachers are allowed to explore professional development that enables them to better connect with and understand their students and the communities from which they come. In designing a more culturally inclusive school environment, teachers are encouraged to “accept indigenized, local identities”, “build relationships with students to reduce anxiety” and “acknowledge, value and use Indigenous social and cultural capital of students”<sup>11</sup>. For teachers that are hired in school districts that differ from the communities in which they grew up—connecting to the customs of the students they teach can be difficult. The cultural differences translate into issues in the classroom environment. For instance, for some students, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), street ‘slang’, and their first language (if not English) are used at home. Rather than correcting students’ use of language in a ‘proper’ sense and potentially isolating/embarrassing them in front of their peers, it can be accepted in the classroom and included in the discussion. “As part of a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Evaluation (NCATE) in 2001...adopted six additional strands for preparing professionals to work in diverse, global communities...II. Recognizing that language diversity is enriching and not something requiring remediation;” (University of Georgia, 2001)”<sup>12</sup>. Coming into the classroom and presenting their true, authentic selves while being fully received by their teachers assists students in feeling better connected to the material that is assigned to them, and comfortable in the classroom. Students that do not feel pressured to conform to a certain standard or correct themselves to be heard by others are more likely to engage and excel at what they are learning.

### Cultural Competence & Divestment from Settler Logic

Students that feel empowered and connected to their teachers are more likely to better engage with the learning process. Cultural competency, “being aware of your own cultural beliefs and values and how these may be different from other cultures”<sup>13</sup> and a general awareness of

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<sup>10</sup> Khalifa, M.A., Gooden, M.A., Davis, J.E. 2016. “Culturally Responsive School Leadership”. pg 1283-1284

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Cook, Leslie and Amatucci, Kristi. 2006. “A High School English Teacher’s Developing Multicultural Pedagogy.” p. 224

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<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/culturalcompetency/culturalcompetency2/#:~:text=%22Cultural%20competency%20means%20being%20aware,of%20those%20you%20work%20with.%22>

socioeconomic issues that affect Black and Brown students contribute to success for teachers and their ability to implement CRT. An awareness of issues like systemic racism/discrimination, mass incarceration, poverty, and how whiteness (or the presence of whiteness) in communities that are predominantly non-white can be intimidating and impact educational reception. How does the presence of whiteness impact Black and Brown students? Unconscious bias and preconceived notions attributed to systemic racism and the criminalization of Black and Brown students also bleeds into the learning environment. For some communities, white people solely exist in authoritative positions such as police officers, school administrators, and educators, and punishment is associated with this systemic power. This can be especially true if there is no sense of personal connection to the community that they are hired to serve. Django Paris' *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and Our Futures* (2021), explores this idea as “divesting from whiteness and the ways whiteness and castes White normed practices and bodies are superior.”<sup>14</sup> To detach and remove oneself from norms that attach whiteness with superiority is to take steps closer to the CRT framework and welcome a social justice space for all students. Gender, race, ability, and socioeconomic status have historically been obstacles for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students, as well as the preconceived notions that are attached to their existence.

In Carolyn Gadsden Holliday's *Culturally Relevant Coaching: Empowering New Teachers*, she found that many educators “(feel) challenged by curriculum constraints”<sup>15</sup> and, teachers can find ways to relate traditional American Canon themes to their students in impactful ways. Classic American literature is introduced to students at all levels, which is traditionally written by white male authors, and holds little-to-no relevance in the lives of Black and Brown students at face value. However, by utilizing cultural competency, a teacher may be able to relate recurring themes in the novels to the lived experience of their students. Huckleberry Finn's story of a complicated relationship with a parent may be relevant to a student in the classroom. Discussions surrounding thematic ideas and why they are both important and present decades after the publication of these pieces of literature help to keep students engaged with the material.

It should be noted that some of the language that is used in ‘Great American Novels’ is outdated and harmful. To respect the boundaries of students in the classroom, a discussion

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<sup>14</sup> Paris, Django. 2021. “*Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and Our Futures*.” *The Educational Forum*, vol. 85, no. 4. 364–376.

<sup>15</sup> Holliday, Carolyn Gadsden. “*Culturally Relevant Coaching: Empowering New Teachers*.” *English in Texas* 51, no. 1 (2021): 33–41.

surrounding the problematic usage of slurs and other words should be held to educate all students on the harmful effects. A part of maintaining a culturally responsive classroom with CRT is to maintain an environment that is inclusive and culturally competent. Glossing over uncomfortable conversations surrounding problematic language/slurs and their presence in the reading material does not serve any students—regardless of their background. For students that are affected by these slurs, or find the reading material offensive/irrelevant to their lived experiences, it can help to know their teacher understands them. Reading a difficult novel with a teacher that goes above and beyond to provide cultural comfort and relevance to the material can make all the difference for the student that apathetic about the literature.

### The Ethic of Caring

Another theme that was present in the CRT research was the ethic of caring. Teachers must care for their students to make the classroom environment a safe space. Ladson-Billings cites Patricia Hill Collins, creator of Black feminist thought, and her four pillars of theoretical grounding that can be used to connect to Black and Brown students within the classroom in a way that is racially empowering.<sup>16</sup> Connecting to students in the classroom through literary themes and cultural competency takes a level of empathy and understanding that extends beyond the surface level of the classroom and the students themselves. It may be a teacher's ability to have a presence in the greater community via extracurricular activities or having a direct and constant line of communication with parents, but there has to be a form of deeper and compassionate thought behind their ability to connect with their students. Sometimes, it may come in the form of listening when a student needs a trusted individual to talk to, or in the form of after-school tutoring. The student must feel cared for and valued by their teacher. Active listening within the classroom is another organizational tool that can be utilized to keep students aware and engaged during class discussions. Culturally Responsive Teaching humanizes the learning experience—for teachers and students alike. Teachers should view their students as individuals that they should empathize and care for and students alternatively feel seen, heard, and valued by their teachers. It welcomes a culture of comfort and acceptance in academia and in turn—allows students that traditionally may not connect with literary material to thrive.

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<sup>16</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1995. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal*.



### Diversifying Literature & Discussions Around Censorship

Diversifying the literature that is assigned in the classroom is another way to utilize CRT and connect with students. The Great American Canon is traditionally made up of works by cisgender, heterosexual White men, and thematic ideas are often related to this particular experience. In recent years, book bans targeting literature that reflects on the BIPOC and LGBTQIA experiences have gained movement and prevented schools from allowing teachers to bring these works into the classroom or include it in the curriculum. Though, this varies state-by-state, introducing short stories by non-white authors and/or facilitating discussions with students on why book bans are taking effect and who they affect speaks to the CRT framework. “It is vital to note the current wave of oppressive education politics anchored in [settler logic] that is sweeping the US. These policies echo that of past decades (and centuries).”<sup>17</sup> This contemporary censorship targets BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled authors—trying to silence their stories (fiction and non-fiction) and regress from decades of progressive literature. In some states, students may not be able to read these works as school assignments, but they can independently read and find connections to the literature. Discussing diverse readings, even if they cannot be formally assigned to students, demonstrates a level of cultural awareness and competence in educators. Going the extra mile to expose students to works of literature that reflect their everyday lives or are relevant to some of their experiences outside of the classroom help to show students that their teachers care about them. The American Canon excludes critical literature that exists at the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Rather than aligning with the regressive book bans, students should be aware of novels that interest them and speak to their lived experiences.

Systemic racism cannot be fully dismantled through theoretical frameworks, but it can start within the classroom. Implementing CRT with the intent of expanding the reach of a teacher’s ability to connect with their students can have positive effects on long-term learning. The system effects of the achievement gap has existed for decades, leaving Black and Brown students at a disadvantage. This, coupled with the criminalization of these same students at school (rather than efforts to connect the learning material to their reality) results in isolation and difficulty in the classroom. CRT is a framework that has to be adopted to continue to expand

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<sup>17</sup> Paris, Django. 2021. “*Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and Our Futures.*” *The Educational Forum*, vol. 85, no. 4. 364–376.

both the literature that is introduced to students and the attitudes of the educator. Social justice and culturally responsive pedagogy are non-exclusive and cannot exist without one another.

In 2020, the United States saw a reckoning of unrest in all areas related to racial bias and discrimination. Companies and corporations rushed to implement Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion departments and three years later have begun to quietly dismantle these resources. Teachers and educators cannot afford to abandon initiatives that can change the lives and minds of their students for years to come. Unlike corporations, educators have a direct, lasting impact on the children that enter their classrooms. Incorporating the greater community in the educational process (i.e. intentional connections with students' families, laying roots outside the classroom) humanizes students and educators alike. Leaving unconscious bias at the door is the first step in implementing the CRT framework. Educators have to commit to incorporating social justice ideology and CRT frameworks in their lesson plans and ensure that their students are practicing the same behavior peer-to-peer. These commitments can look like the following practices:

- I. Introducing short stories written by authors of all backgrounds
- II. Intentional 1-on-1 interactions via mentorship and tutoring
- III. Facilitating difficult conversations about non-traditional literature themes (i.e. gender, race, class, social justice and the intersections of identities)
- IV. Discussions around contemporary book bans and banned BIPOC authors
- V. Discussions about BIPOC authors outside of Hispanic Heritage Month, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, and Black History Month
- VI. Allowing students to utilize slang, AAVE, and their first language in class discussions without correcting them

In Cook and Amatucci's *A High School Teacher's Developing Pedagogy*, Kristi Amatucci designed a list of poems that were relevant to the experiences of her BIPOC students so that they could see themselves in the works that they were reading. "...and I also wrote about the kids in my class so that I could get it down, so that I could actually see the racial and the gender representations in class because I wanted to make sure to include poetry that I thought they would identify with and find relevant to their lives."<sup>18</sup> Amatucci's decision to go the extra mile to

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<sup>18</sup> Cook, Leslie and Amatucci, Kristi. 2006. "A High School English Teacher's Developing Multicultural Pedagogy." p. 229

document characteristics about her students and seek out poetry books that would be relevant to their lives fits the CRT framework. Students will engage with literature they can relate to, and educators will see a difference. Divestment from settler logic and beliefs to combat systemic racism is the ultimate goal for educators. Now, more than ever, it is essential to hold fast to CRT and challenge traditional literary practices. All students have the potential to succeed—their teachers have to believe in them so that they can believe in themselves.

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