Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence as Analytic Tools in Teacher Education Policies and Practices

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In *The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner's (2005) review of studies in the field of teacher education revealed that many studies lacked theoretical and conceptual grounding. The author argues that Derrick Bell's (1980) interest convergence, a principle of critical race theory, can be used as an analytic, explanatory, and conceptual tool in the study and analyses of policies and practices in teacher education. In particular, the author outlines interest convergence as a tenet of critical race theory, conceptualizes some broad themes of "raced" interests in teacher education, applies the interest-convergence principle to teacher education, and introduces an evolving theory of disruptive movement in teacher education to fight against racism in teacher education policies and practices.

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In *The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) emphasized that researchers in the field of teacher education need to situate their research and conceptual discussions more solidly in theory. They wrote, "Without locating empirical studies in relation to appropriate theoretical frameworks regarding teacher learning, teacher effectiveness, and pupil learning, it will be difficult to explain findings about the effects of particular teacher education practices" (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, p. 32) and policies. Similarly, Johnston–Parsons (2007) wrote, "Accounts of teacher education programs and research are often light on theoretical explanations" (p. 1). This critique of the (under)theorization of teacher education is not to suggest that theories and conceptual tools do not exist and are not prevalent in the field to make sense of and to theorize about matters of social justice in teacher education (cf. Banks, 2006; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Sleeter, 2008; Tatum, 1992).

What follows is a conceptual argument that builds on several central and interrelated suppositions: (a) race is under-theorized in education (Ladson–Billings & Tate, 1995), and I argue, to a degree, under-theorized in teacher education; (b) critical race theory—and in particular interest convergence[1]—may be a useful tool to analyze policy and practice in teacher education; and (c) the lack of theoretical framing in teacher education is, to some degree, an epistemological issue as much as a conceptual one. Those of us in teacher education may need to concentrate more directly on how we define and build knowledge, how we theorize about it, what knowledge counts as creditable, and who can construct and deconstruct that knowledge (Ladson–Billings, 1999).

I argue that legal scholar Derrick Bell's (1980) concept, interest convergence, a principle of critical race theory, can be used to analyze, explain, and conceptualize policies and practices in teacher education.[2] In particular, because issues of race and racism[3] are deeply rooted in U.S. society (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993), they also are ingrained and deeply imbedded in the policies, practices, procedures, and institutionalized systems of teacher education.[4] Interest convergence could be used as a tool to help explain and operationalize race and racism in the field. It can serve as a tool to elucidate and help make sense of the salience of race and racism in teacher education policies and practices. Clearly, it is important for those interested in teacher education to name the multiple realities that exist in the field, and conceptual tools (categorical language and concepts) can be useful to study, analyze, discuss, and explain realities that can

contribute to "raced" policy, practice, research, and theory about and in teacher education. Thus, as an African American male teacher educator, I believe that it is important for me to be able to name my *own* racialized experiences in teacher education: experiences that have been shaped politically, socially, and culturally. The following question remains, however: Why study race and racism in teacher education policies and practices?[5]

Through this conceptual argument and in the subsequent sections of this article, I attempt to accomplish four salient goals: (a) to outline interest convergence as a tenet of critical race theory, (b) to conceptualize some broad themes of raced interests in teacher education, (c) to apply the interest-convergence principle[6] to teacher education, and (d) to introduce an evolving theory of disruptive movement in teacher education to work toward fighting against racism in teacher education policies and practices.

Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence

Critical race theory emerged from law as a response to critical legal studies and civil rights scholarship. Critical race theorists are concerned with disrupting, exposing, challenging, and changing racist policies that work to subordinate and disenfranchise certain groups of people and that attempt to maintain the status quo. Derrick A. Bell laid the foundation for critical race theory in two law review articles: "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation" (1976) and "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma" (1980). Tate, Ladson-Billings, and Grant (1993) cited scholarship associated with critical race theory in their analysis of the history of school desegregation law and related implementation. Later, in an article published in *Urban Education*, Tate (1994) referenced critical race theory as a school of thought associated with critiquing stock racial narratives and interjected voice scholarship as a means to build theory and inform practice in the law. Tate argued that this was a sound strategy for education scholarship as he reflected on his educational experiences in a successful urban Catholic school while also describing the tensions created by voice scholarship in academic research. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advanced critical race theory[7] as a theoretical project in education research in a *Teachers College Record* publication. They argued that although studies and conceptual discussions examining race existed in the field of education, the field could further benefit from an explanatory theory to assist in empirical and conceptual arguments related to race.

Interest Convergence

Several years ago, I was invited to give a talk in a moderately large city in the northern region of the United States. During the visit, I was driven around and shown several local schools. My tour guide explained, quite proudly, that the district had begun busing immigrant "non-English-speaking" students to one of the "best" local schools in the district. Even more intriguing for my tour guide was the point that the district had developed agreed-on policies that would just "pour dollar after dollar" into the school during the next 5 years so that the "non-English-speaking" students would "learn to speak English." Finally, what seemed to excite the tour guide more than anything was the reality that "the "English-speaking" students—mostly White, upper-class, English speakers—in the school were also learning to speak "different" languages as well, mostly Spanish.[8]

What appeared obvious from the tour guide's description and responses to my questions about the policies and practices in the district and the school was his interest in the reality that the White students were becoming bi- or trilingual; thus, my tour guide and the policy- or decision-making body on the board for the district realized how important it would be for their children to be educated to speak multiple languages in this increasingly diverse country. The district and school were willing to negotiate and provide the resources necessary for the "non-English speakers" to "learn English" because the majority White students would, of course, benefit from the various racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds that would be present and represented in the school. There was a convergence of interests between Whites and the "non-English speakers."

The narrative[9] above, I believe, provides an example of the principle of interest convergence. Interest convergence stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color[10] will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites. Interest convergence can offer teacher education added language and tools to discuss race, its presence, its pervasiveness, and its consequence in the field. Among other important realities, inherent in the tensions of convergence between Whites and others are matters of self and systemic interests and a loss–gain binary. For instance, Leigh (2003, p. 277) explained that when the interests of Blacks are in opposition to or at "odds with those in power," it becomes increasingly difficult to expose racism and to pursue racial equality. Inherent in the interest-convergent principle are matters of loss and gain; typically, someone or some group, often the dominant group, has to negotiate and give up something

in order for interests to converge or align (Bell, 1980; Donnor, 2005). Self and systemic interests and the loss–gain binary are intensified by a permeating pace imperative, which means that convergence and change are often at the moderately slow pace of those in power. For example, Lopez (2003) asserted, "Racism always remains firmly in place but that social progress advances at the pace that White people determine is reasonable and judicious" (p. 84). Change is often *purposefully* and *skillfully* slow and at the will and design of those in power.

A Self and Systemic Imperative

According to Bell (1980), Whites may support social justice and equity-oriented policies and practices yet still believe that injustice can be "remedied effectively without altering the status of whites" (p. 522). Castagno and Lee (2007, p. 4) explained that those in the majority will advance social justice agendas "when such advances suit" their own self-interests. The point is that people in power are sometimes, in theory, supportive of policies and practices that do not oppress and discriminate against others as long as they—those in power—do not have to alter their own ways and systems, statuses, and privileges of experiencing life. Lopez (2003) maintained that interest convergence centralizes "the belief that Whites will tolerate and advance the interests of people of color only when they *promote the self-interests of Whites*" (p. 84; emphasis added).

The sacrifice necessary for real social change to take place is sometimes too painful or inconceivable; it may be difficult for those in our country to take serious strides toward racial, social, and economic justice because it means that, in some cases, some group has to give up something of interest to it, such as its privileges and its ways of life. The problem is that many worry about how change can threaten their position, status, and privilege (Bell, 1980) and, consequently, the status of their children and future generations.[11] As Gordon (1990) reminded us, it is difficult for a group of people to critique (and work to change) the world, when the world works for that group of people. Thus, as Bell (1980) maintained, "The interest of blacks [and other people of color] in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523). Castagno and Lee (2007) wrote that interest convergence "exposes the selfishness behind many policies and practices that may advance greater equity" (p. 10). In her historical analyses of segregation and desegregation of two midwestern districts in Cincinnati, Leigh (2003) concluded,

> Social justice, in this case access to equal educational opportunities, was afforded the Black children of the Lincoln Heights community only when doing so benefited the neighboring White communities and districts. Avoiding the threat of legal suit and the accompanying negative publicity was a compelling benefit that was a significant factor in causing the interests of Whites to converge with the interests of Blacks. (p. 294)

In addition to self and systemic interests, a loss–gain binary is also inherent in the interest-convergence principle.

A Loss–Gain Binary

A critical race theory perspective would suggest that the ability, will, and fortitude of Whites to negotiate and make difficult decisions in providing more equitable policies and practices might mean that they lose something of great importance to them, including their power, privilege, esteem, social status, linguistic status, and their ability to reproduce these benefits and interests to their children and future generations. Such loss would be deeply troubling because their property of Whiteness (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) may depreciate. Indeed, there is a tension in the idea that institutions and

> schools, through their organization, structure, and curriculum (both formal and hidden), aid in the maintenance of hegemony by acculturating students to the interest of the dominant group and the students are encouraged and instructed, both explicitly and implicitly, to make those interests their own. (Jay, 2003, p. 7)

This idea relates to Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) point that "curriculum represents a form of 'intellectual property'…and that 'intellectual property' must be undergirded by 'real' property" (p. 54), such as resources in schools. Lynch (2006) explained that the intellectual property argument suggests that "those with 'better' property are entitled to [and experience] 'better' schools" (p. 56). Thus, some in the United States have adopted and nurtured a competitive, binary milieu wherein the caste system is set up such that only some students will have the property that they will need to develop, acquire, inherit, and earn more elaborate forms of property and, consequently, transcend poverty and racial oppression, for instance.

In their analyses of University mascot policies, Castagno and Lee (2007) declared,

> The potential losses to the university are significantly increased if the policy…*prohibited* the use of mascots and the sale of athletic wear with Native logos and refused to schedule any games with teams with Native

mascots, they would most likely also experience a loss of revenue from missed games, alumni discontent, and disapproval from other conference schools. (p. 7)

Thus, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) declared that interest convergence points to "the impact of a threat to the social status of whites" (p. 19). Perhaps even more troubling is the idea that if Whites might lose something, then people of color may gain something. The binary perspectives of "I lose–you win" prevent the convergence of interests. White students, for instance, are sometimes silently (and sometimes vocally) bitter about their (mis)perceptions and (mis)conceptions of affirmative action policies. Students' discontent is grounded in their perceptions that someone—some person of color—has taken their rightfully privileged and earned position at a "better" elite institution, for instance. Furthermore, there are sometimes problematic equity versus excellence debates and democracy versus diversity debates that conceptualize these ideas in binary terms.

Race and Interests in Teacher Education

With a discussion of critical race theory and interest convergence established, I turn now to discuss race and interests in teacher education. For several decades, research interests around race and racism in teacher education have centered on teacher educators (Cochran–Smith, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1996), their students (Cochran–Smith, 2003), and the interrelated interests and needs of P–12 students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999). These issues have been explored, examined, and written about for several decades (cf. J. E. King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999), and they deserve attention before I consider some preliminary applications of interest convergence and teacher education.

Teacher Educators in Teacher Education

Cochran–Smith (2003) stressed the importance of teacher educators investigating themselves and their own practices in addition to investigating students' constructions of race in the teacher education classroom and more broadly in teacher educators' experience. She examined her own work and her student teachers' constructions of race and was able to shed light on the complexities inherent in the teaching and examination of race in teacher education. Ryan and Dixson (2006) wrote,

It is important for all teacher educators and others who work with pre-/in-service teachers, especially those of us who take on issues of race and racism as part of our pedagogical project, to consider the ways in which we participate in and promote, albeit tacitly, White privilege. (p. 181)

Addressing, studying, and understanding the parameters, needs, and consequences of racialized agendas in teacher education can be vexing, troubling, and even tenuous for teacher educators in teacher education. Cochran–Smith (1995a) maintained that she had

become *certain only of uncertainty* about how and what to say, whom and what to have student teachers read and write, and about who can teach whom, who can speak for or to whom, and who has the right to speak at all about the possibilities and pitfalls of promoting a discourse about race and teaching. (p. 546; emphasis added)

Where race and racism are concerned, much of Cochran–Smith's concerns focus on the curriculum in teacher education and how to develop curricula and related experiences that may successfully prepare students for life in the P–12 classroom and also how to study these issues. Student responses to racialized curricula experiences in teacher education vary. For instance, in my own work (Milner & Smithey, 2003) and consistent with Cochran–Smith's (1995a) research, student responses to race-central discussions, assignments, and activities on a classroom level ranged from students' being receptive to them and reporting new levels of insights and consciousness[12] for their P–12 student needs—to students' being resentful and not understanding why or how such foci are necessary. And Brown's (2004) explanation of the lack of interest, growth, and understanding among teachers is consistent with the research of Banks (1995) and Irvine (1992). Brown insisted,

Resentment is frequently reflected on teacher evaluations, whereas resistance is apparent in inadequate pre-class preparation, reluctance to engage in class discussions and activities, and a lack of commitment to required cross-cultural interactions and research. (p. 326)

Still, the knowledge, racial backgrounds of teacher educators, and how they understand and position themselves pedagogically and philosophically remain an interest for some in teacher education (Merryfield, 2000); teacher educators' own experiences with race and race-related matters "is likely to have been vicarious and remote" (Ladson–Billings, 1999). Thus, the racial and ethnic background of teacher educators, their students, and their interests are those that have been considered and should continue to be raised in raced studies in teacher education.