

## Do we need a dose of CRT?

Matthew Knott (SMH 1/9/21) reports that in many states of the USA communities are being torn apart by ideological division centred on perceptions of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Some parents believe *their children are being targeted by left wing radicals on a mission to divide students on the basis of race*. In reviewing proposed curriculum, new subjects, like Ethnic studies, are being conceived under the banner of CRT and causing alarm amongst communities, to the extent of it being banned in some states.

### What is CRT?

According to the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia* CRT is an *intellectual movement and loosely organised framework of legal analysis based on the premise that race is not natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of humans but socially constructed (culturally invented) category that is used to exploit people of colour. Critical race theorists hold that the law and legal institutions in the United States are inherently racist insofar as they function to create and maintain social, economic and political inequalities between whites and non-whites especially African Americans.*

### How did it originate?

CRT origins can be found in the critical legal studies (CLS) movement of the 1960s and 1970s focused on how the law and legal institutions favoured the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalised. It acknowledges that judicial decisions are influenced as much by non legal- political and ideological- factors as by the precedent and principles of legal reasoning. Therefore, CRT it is not new, but was labelled in 1989.

In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2001 Delgado and Stefancic list as basics tenets:

1. *Race is socially constructed, not biologically natural*
2. *Racism in the United States is normal, not aberrational: it is the common experience of most people of colour,*
3. *legal advances (or setbacks) for people of colour tend to serve the interests of the dominant white groups,*
4. *members of minority groups are attributed various sets of negative stereotypes,*
5. *no individual can be adequately identified by a single group,*
6. *people of colour are uniquely qualified to speak on the behalf of other members of their group.*

## **What is CRT trying to do in schools?**

In *EdWeek* (18/5/21) Stephen Sawchuk in *What is critical race theory, and why is it under attack* explains that CRT is not the teaching approach that emerged in the 1990s which sought to affirm students' ethnic and racial backgrounds and is intellectually rigorous. But CRT is related to it in that it aims to help students identify and critique the causes of inequality in their own lives. It encompasses such issues as racially segregated schools, the understanding of majority Black and Latino school districts, disproportionate disciplining of black students, barriers to gifted programs and selective admission high schools and criteria that reinforce racial ideas.

The murder of George Floyd, the subsequent race riots across America and the expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement have pushed state legislators to respond with changed curriculum. But the change seems to have been both too much, too soon and an over reach by the strongest advocates of the principles underpinning CRT.

While some states are legislating curriculum change, and CRT in particular, the curriculum doesn't always match the objectives of CRT and in the context of parent and community concerns, teachers are unlikely to take many chances on implementing controversial parts. It also seems that some more extreme CRT curriculum writers have captured the pen and included content that advocates far left policies and ideologies making it difficult for teachers to implement within their communities, hence the parent rebellion and the banning of CRT in some states. In California, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said the curriculum was *offensive in so many ways* and vowed it would *never see the light of day*. But a final version was approved in March 2021 with its provocative content stripped but allowing individual schools to add their own content. Across America, CRT often in the form of Ethnic studies is being taken up as communities demand a curriculum approach to addressing racism.

Sawchuk points out that *much of the current debate appears to spring not from the academic texts, but from fear amongst critics that students- especially white students- will be exposed to supposedly damaging or self-demoralising ideas.*

## **Does the Australian curriculum need a dose of CRT?**

Some might argue that the Australian context is different to the USA. They would be right. Our history is different, our African-American and African-Australian communities are small and as an island we have more control on who comes here and what the ethnic composition of Australia is. But past and recent events suggest that all is not well when it comes to racism in Australia.

Anyone who has viewed the Adam Goodes documentary, *The Australian Dream* would realise that despite many good features and actions, for example the seriousness that the various football codes are now taking on racism, there remains underlying racism in the Australian community. Similarly, those who have examined the indigenous history of Australia or taken an interest in the social disadvantage statistics for different groups of Australians including Aboriginal incarceration or listened to the stories of refugees and migrants to Australia would reach a similar conclusion - racism is alive and well in the Australian community. How vaccines have been distributed, especially to Aboriginal people, to those outside cities and to disadvantaged communities, all raise equity and justice issues and some accusations of racism. Privilege, for example the Latte line, can be viewed culturally and racially as well as

economically and the Australian chapter of Black Lives Matter demonstrates that many Australians feel that race discriminates within Australian institutions, workplaces and communities and that schools are no different, tinkering with the issue and not addressing it full on.

Since the history curriculum from the 1980s provided a greater emphasis on Australia's Indigenous history which became mandatory in the 1990s, there have been debates about invasion or settlement and about the inclusion of massacres and other parts of Aboriginal history that many Australians feel uncomfortable about. Years of denial, finally addressed?

Curriculum change in the 1990s saw a new K-6 HSIE syllabus that required Aboriginal studies and mandatory courses for Years 7-10 in Australian history and geography further strengthened by tests at Year 10. But outside the Australian history Years 7-10 compulsory course only Society and Culture and Legal Studies Years 11-12 aligned with the premises underlying CRT and carried any form of cultural or legal analysis. The PDHPE curriculum across primary and secondary schools has potential for studies in this area with its focus on identity, stereotyping and difference and, depending on text selection, English could contribute. But are teachers comfortable, trained and willing to focus on such matters or do they give them cursory treatment and place deeper analysis, possibly leading to disagreement and controversy, in the too hard basket?

The revision of the national curriculum to date has shown little interest in embracing any of the substance of CRT. In fact, there remains among curriculum writers and authorities a long-standing aversion to including culture or any content that might be considered controversial to those more privileged in our society. Without a strong curriculum focus, schools wanting to move forward on these matters have had to address issues of race through school-based additional curriculum programs with varying success.

So, the question remains: Is there a need for CRT?

Stan Grant in his article *The School That Tries to End Racism aims high, but risks reinforcing race's power* (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-26/trying-to-end-racism-talking-about-race-reinforcing-power/100489532A>) discusses CRT while commenting on this television program. He says *the program seeks to demystify race and yet inescapably risks reinforcing it* and comments that *CRT helps reveal how race is an organising principle of power*. His evaluation concludes with the statement *Race is the parent of racism they say, and not the other way round. Race is like witchcraft and its power comes from our willingness to believe*. These are thought provoking words and I must admit I was uncomfortable with the use of affinity groups in the methodology implemented but thought the students were amazing and concluded that they are not the problem in implementing antiracism curriculum and programs.

### **Christian perspectives**

Christian teachers will hold a range of perspectives on CRT and it is too easy to be drawn into the cultural wars that CRT provokes. Each person is likely to be more attracted to one side or the other, but it should not be seen as an either/or choice. CRT has some important messages for teachers, educators and governments, but if radicalised it will be a stumbling block for both conservatives and progressives and an invitation to draw battle lines.

What messages does our faith have on these matters? The Old Testament has many passages about the attitude that God's people should take towards the poor, the marginalised and the foreigner.

- *Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner. Exodus 22:21*
- *Defend the weak and the fatherless, uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Psalm 82:3*
- *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8*
- *Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God. Proverbs 14:31*

And in the New Testament Jesus says inter alia:

- *They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Matthew 25:44-45*

And all this teaching is summed up in the great commandment

- *Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40.*

Teachers need to be more immersed in the ideology of our Saviour Christ and less in the ideologies of our day. Having said that, Australian students and the whole community could benefit from a curriculum focus that has a strong dose of CRT which will be consistent with Christians seeking to be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16) preserving what is good and exposing injustice. While only talking about racism is no solution, it is a start, and a way of challenging thinking and the beliefs that underpin that thinking. Without a curriculum context, schools are left to engaging outside programs with varying success. However, overdosing on CRT is not prescribed, as it will cause politicisation and polarisation resulting in either the maintenance of the status quo or as Stan Grant thinks, further entrenching racism in the Australian community.

A way forward involving curriculum contexts is difficult and fraught with issues and problems but what are the consequences of only maintaining the status quo? If students cannot be challenged through a curriculum context how can they be engaged in addressing racism in the Australian community? Surely schools are best placed to explore racism and preferably through curriculum contexts. Stan Grant may well be right, *race is the parent of racism and its power comes from our willingness to believe*. If so, those beliefs need to be challenged through rational thinking and analysis delivered through the curriculum. To do nothing is not an option but a remedy to perpetuate the present.

John Gore

## Letter to the editor

I enjoyed reading John Gore's article *Would you like to try something different?* in the last TCF News Volume 64 No 4 August 2021.

I did observe through my teaching career the reluctance of teachers to embrace change. I heard the comments from a certain executive member *it'll go away* indicating their intention to not adopt the latest *fad* from the Department of Education.

In reference to Mathematics, John said: *the pedagogy to teach and reinforce mathematics learning through homework has long dominated ... schools leaving students with ... a dislike of the subject.*

My son was given excessive mathematics homework in Year 1. He developed a hatred for the subject and didn't progress. In Year 10, I had my sister, who was a mathematics teacher tutor him with success. She taught him sufficiently to pass both his School Certificate and Higher School Certificate and equip him for the mathematics that would have been in his TAFE course post Year 12.

My daughter was in the top class out of twelve classes in Year 10 and earned an A in Advanced Mathematics. In Year 11, 2 Unit Mathematics she was given excessive homework so this was the subject she would drop going into Year 12.

I agree that not all students learn to read the same way, or at the same pace, or at the same age. My daughter at age six found reading a whole word daunting and wasn't allowed to have a reader until she recognised her sight words. I purchased the readers the school wasn't handing out, but progress was slow. I wanted her to repeat Year 2 because she hadn't mastered reading. The primary school principal didn't support repeating but he did employ a teacher to use phonics to work with the Year 3 students who hadn't mastered reading.

My son learned to read in kindergarten. His teacher was using a sentence maker and he would come home with a story he'd written that he could read. I approached, what was at the time called, the Infants Mistress when he wasn't bringing readers home. She told me that he could read encyclopaedias and would read when he wanted to. He rarely asked what a word was because he'd successfully learned word attack skills in the first two years of school.

Dianne Young

## Prayer points

Pray for:

- all those involved in difficult decision making at state, federal and local levels
- teachers, students, and parents who are involved in home schooling and for the staggered return to face to face teaching
- HSC students as they adjust to the new exam dates and timetable
- school and university chaplains as they support students in the current situation.
- Scripture Union activities such as ISCF, camps and family missions which can't operate as usual.
- casual teachers who may not have work.
- give praise and thanks that in all this, God's rule is still supreme and we are not forgotten.

## From the McKay's:

### Praise:

- For God's amazing grace that sustains us.
- For having a wonderful place to stay for so long. It has been a blessing.
- For being privileged to see God saving people here in Dubbo.
- For a supportive church family here.

### Pray:

- That we will live out James 1:2-4. *Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*
- For Colin as he teaches over zoom. It is very hard to do experiments from a distance, with no adults in the room.
- That God will open the way for us to get visas, a certificate of entry and opportunity to return.
- Also that the students and their families will grow in their trust of God to achieve His glory through this.
- For our trust in Jesus to continue to grow.
- Pray for the country we want to return to. It faces increasing daily cases and limited testing.
- That the Modular Study Group team will allow perseverance to do its work in them.

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