



THE OTHER CRT



Sparked by a [viral commentary](#) in a periodical published two years ago by a conservative think tank, critical race theory (often referred to as simply CRT) has become a rallying point for the right as [the majority of states](#) have taken steps toward banning educators from teaching about it in schools. Seventeen of these states have adopted legal restrictions or prohibitions.

However, the theory—which helps people understand the systematic nature and impact of racism—was rarely taught in K-12 schools (at least not until students and teachers started focusing on this interesting idea in the news). As of the summer of 2021, fewer than [one out of 10](#) K-12 teachers reported to the EdWeek Research Center that they’ve ever even discussed it with their students.

A different approach to education that just happens to have the same acronym, is relatively common in elementary and secondary schools. [Culturally relevant teaching](#) is the idea that learning is front and center, that education should incorporate at least two different cultures (students’ home cultures plus at least one additional culture in order to develop cultural competence), and that students should not only understand what they are learning but why they are learning it and how it is relevant to their lives.

Not exactly controversial.

Only now it is—in large part because it shares the same initials as critical race theory and, as a result, has been caught up in that debate.

“If I don’t like it, it’s critical race theory,” NEPC Fellow [Gloria Ladson-Billings](#) told *Educa-*

tion Week recently. “It’s probably feminism. It’s probably special education. It’s probably bilingual education. It’s whatever I don’t like.”

Ladson-Billings should know. Now a professor emerita of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she not only helped develop the concept of culturally relevant instruction, she also was one of the first scholars to apply critical race theory, which was created by legal scholars, to the study of K-12 education.

She noted that her development of culturally relevant pedagogy pre-dated her work on critical race theory and was thus not influenced by that framework.

“Culturally relevant pedagogy, I wrote that proposal in ‘88, it got funded by the Spencer Foundation in ‘89,” she told *EdWeek*. “I didn’t start reading critical race theory until ‘91 when I got to Wisconsin, and I didn’t publish anything until ‘95.”

In her *EdWeek* interview, Ladson-Billings highlights the irony that culturally relevant pedagogy is under attack by some of the same critics who support [parental involvement in the K-12 curriculum](#).

“Culturally relevant teaching is probably one of the biggest [drivers] of parent involvement and parent engagement,” she said. “While the debate is about, ‘you’re not letting parents have their say,’ culturally relevant pedagogy has always encouraged parents and community members to participate in schools and classrooms.”

In the meantime, advocates for Criterion Referenced Tests are warily standing by, to say nothing of advocates for Charitable Remainder Trusts, Crisis Response Teams, and Cathode Ray Tubes.

NEPC Resources on Critical Theory and Pedagogy

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