



CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

CARE PRINCIPLE #3:

Develop a critical consciousness. Antiracist educators recognize how dominant narratives perpetuate marginalization. Curriculum explicitly addresses power and marginalization. In antiracist classrooms, humility and courage drive dialogues among students and educators that expose the hidden and visible ways racism manifests in individuals and societies.

Critical consciousness is the ability to recognize systems of inequality and the commitment to act against these systems.¹ *Conscientização* began with the work of educator Paulo Friere, who sought to help Brazilians living in poverty learn to read both words and social arrangements. Critical consciousness is a process that combines reflection and action.²

WHY CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

For students in particular, research has linked critical consciousness development with various positive outcomes, both in and out of school. Academically, critical consciousness development in students is tied to higher levels of engagement in school,³ higher grades,⁴ college enrollment,⁵ and reduced likelihood of school dropout in the 12th grade.⁶

Young people with greater levels of critical consciousness also see benefits in vocational development. In a study featuring two urban high schools in the northeastern United States composed largely of students of color, students with higher levels of critical consciousness exhibited progress in the career development process.⁷ More specifically, these students demonstrated higher levels of commitment to their future careers in addition to greater clarity surrounding their vocational identity when compared to peers with lower levels of critical consciousness.

1 El-Amin, A., Seider, S., Graves, D., Tamerat, J., Clark, S., Soutter, M., Johannsen, J., & Malhotra, S. (2017). Critical consciousness: A key to student achievement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98(5), 18–23.

2 Watts, R.J., Williams, N.C., & Jagers, R.J. (2003). Sociopolitical development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1–2), 185–194.

3 McWhirter, E. H., & McWhirter, B. T. (2016). Critical consciousness and vocational development among Latina/o high school youth: Initial development and testing of a measure. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 24, 543–558.

4 McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016.

5 Rogers, J., & Terriquez, V. (2013). *Learning to lead: The impact of youth organizing on the educational and civic trajectories of low-income youth*. Los Angeles, CA: Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

6 Pérez-Gualdrón, L., & Helms, J. E. (2017). A longitudinal model of school climate, social justice orientation, and academic outcomes among Latina/o students. *Teachers College Record*, 119(10), 1–37.

7 Diemer, M. A., & Blustein, D. L. (2006). Critical consciousness and career development among urban youth. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 68(2), 220–232.

Finally, in addition to buffering against negative mental health outcomes,⁸ critical consciousness has been found to promote positive psychological states and social-emotional well-being in youth of a variety of ages.⁹ Specifically, critical consciousness development is tied to a positive sense of self, resilience, leadership skills, and positive youth development.^{10,11}

The benefits of critical consciousness extend far outside of school contexts. Research shows that critical consciousness helps people identify, understand, and challenge inequitable policies, including major social problems such as health disparities and disproportionate incarceration rates.¹²

Crucially, the benefits of critical consciousness also extend to adult learners. For educators, critically reflecting on their own social position and practice is as important as facility with instructional techniques.¹³ This is because education is not a uniform, standardized transaction. Education varies across time, space, and place — no class is ever the same. It will always be unfair to treat every class the

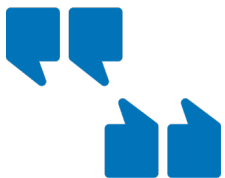
same without considering the context of students' lives. Educators can call a class to order, but if they can't engage students, technical skill is for naught. Teachers should develop their own critical consciousness if they are to create fair classrooms with meaningful opportunities for all students.

Finally, critical consciousness is effective for all learners. While much early writing about critical consciousness dealt only with the benefits for Black and brown students, there is a growing body of evidence showing that critical consciousness helps all children, including white children.^{14,15,16} And new research has demonstrated a strong causal connection between ethnic studies courses that expose a diverse array of learners to new perspectives and positive outcomes including attendance, GPA, and credits earned.¹⁷

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Critical consciousness has three major components: reflection, efficacy and action.¹⁸

- 8 Zimmerman, M. A., Ramirez-Valles, J., & Maton, K. I. (1999). Resilience among urban African American male adolescents: A study of the protective effects of sociopolitical control on their mental health. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(6), 733–751.
- 9 Silva, J. M. (2012). Critical classrooms: Using artists' lives to teach young students social groups, power, and privilege. *Urban Education*, 47(4), 776–800.
- 10 Delia, J., & Krasny, M. E. (2018). Cultivating positive youth development, critical consciousness, and authentic care in urban environmental education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 23–40.
- 11 Clonan-Roy, K., Jacobs, C.E. & Nakkula, M.J. (2016). Towards a model of positive youth development specific to girls of color: Perspectives on development, resilience, and empowerment. *Gender Issues*, 33, 96–121.
- 12 Jemal, A. (2017). Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *The Urban Review*, 49(4), 602–626.
- 13 Gay, G. & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory into Practice*, 42(3), 181–187.
- 14 Campbell, C., & MacPhail, C. (2002). Peer education, gender and the development of critical consciousness: Participatory HIV prevention by South African youth. *Social Science and Medicine*, 55(2), 331–345.
- 15 Thomas, A., Barrie, R., Brunner, J., Clawson, A., Hewitt, G., Jeremie-Brink, G., Johnson, M. (2014) Assessing critical consciousness in youth and young adults. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(3), 485–496.
- 16 Watts, R., Griffith, D., & Abdul-Adil, J. (1999). Sociopolitical development as an antidote for oppression: Theory and action. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27, 255–272.
- 17 Assignment in the course increased attendance 21%, GPA by 1.4 and credits earned by 23. Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1): 127–166.
- 18 Watts, R., Diemer, M., & Voight, A. (2011). Critical consciousness: Current status and future directions. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 134, 43–57.



The benefits of critical consciousness extend far outside of school contexts. Research shows that critical consciousness helps people identify, understand, and challenge inequitable policies, including major social problems such as health disparities and disproportionate incarceration rates.

Some people are more ready than others to develop critical consciousness. Whether this is because they are exposed to injustice or because their belief systems make them sensitive to it, these learners can proceed more easily toward disequilibrium, a state triggered when learners encounter information that does not fit with their established beliefs about the world. As learners see alternate interpretations of their society — for example, by exposure to new perspectives or cases that contradict stereotypes — they face a choice: either hold tighter to their now-tenuous beliefs about the world or reconsider them.¹⁹

In an ever-changing world, learning to move through disequilibrium is an essential skill for all learners. Through introspection and self-examination — what is commonly called being “open-minded” — learners can feel comfortable revising their frames of reference. Common assumptions about the world that are especially relevant to antiracist work include:

- ▶ The idea that society as it is now is equally just or fair for everyone.
- ▶ The idea that politically or economically powerful groups are generally responsive to the needs of people from marginalized groups.²⁰

When learners encounter evidence that challenges their assumptions they may realize that their beliefs are not unalterable truths and then work to understand how those beliefs were produced and who benefitted from them.²¹ In addition, learners develop a richer, more nuanced sense of self and the world that explains how and why change becomes possible. Understanding that identities

are not fixed, but are instead established in context, opens the door to the idea that identities and core assumptions can change.

As critical consciousness develops and learners see that they can change, they also recognize that they can become agents for change. Sometimes called “critical agency,”²² this involves both an increase in perceived self-efficacy and a commitment to change. Finally, learners display critical consciousness through action against unfairness. These actions might occur at the level of language in individual conversations, or they may involve advocacy in the classroom and beyond.

Although there are several scales to measure critical consciousness, the Critical Consciousness Scale developed by Diemer, *et al.* captures the construct best.²³ It contains items examining three factors: perceived inequality, egalitarianism, and sociopolitical participation.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP THIS?

Critical consciousness is not innate. It can be developed. Approaches such as Youth Participatory Action Research²⁴ and ethnic studies courses²⁵ show tremendous promise for building learners’ critical consciousness and associated skills.

Teach the language of inequality. Critical consciousness begins with the ability to recognize injustice and inequality. In practice, this means making racism visible, including learning about the different ways that racism manifests in society. For example, Seider and Graves found that teaching about the “three eyes of oppression”

19 Saheli, A. (2003). *From nigger to African American: Education and critical consciousness as crucial components to positive black racial label development* (Ed.D.). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Full Text: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (305222955).

20 Pillen, H., McNaughton, D., & Ward, P. R. (2020). Critical consciousness development: A systematic review of empirical studies. *Health Promotion International*, 35(6): 1519-1530.

21 Goerdt, L.M. (2011). *Toward critical consciousness: Internationalized social work education. Doctoral dissertation*, University of Minnesota, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 3457069.

22 McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016.

23 Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Park, C., & Perry, J. C. (2017). Development and validation of the critical consciousness scale. *Youth & Society*, 49(4), 461-483.

24 Diemer, M. A., McWhirter, E. H., Ozer, E. J., & Rapa, L. J. (2015). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of critical consciousness. *The Urban Review*, 47, 809-823.

25 Dee & Penner, 2017

(interpersonal racism, institutional racism and internalized racism) substantially improved students' understanding of racism.²⁶

Teach self-reflection. Meaningful self-reflection is a skill. Effective self-reflection involves analytical introspection, changing knowledge, and recurring transformations of beliefs and skills.²⁷ Repeated and structured opportunities for self-reflection are necessary to build the skill over time. These should include techniques such as reflective questioning, co-learning, and dialogue.²⁸

Build capacity for critical action. As people become more aware of racism and injustice, they are

more motivated to take action to transform their communities. As learners of all ages think critically about their own agency and their own potential, they craft new understandings about the world. These generate improved self-efficacy that brings learners to action.

Show accessible, real-world opportunities to make change. Learners need to build capacity for social action, and one of the best ways to accomplish this is showing opportunities to make change within their schools.²⁹ Learners need to practice change-making just like any other skill: over time, with graduated opportunities. Educators can help with this.

26 Seider, S., & Graves, D. (2020). *Schooling for critical consciousness: Engaging Black and Latinx youth in analyzing, navigating and challenging social injustice*. Harvard Education Press.

27 Stronge, J. H. (2002). *Qualities of effective teachers*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

28 Gay & Kirkland, 2003.

29 Diemer, *et al.*, 2015.

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