



Toward a Critical Theory of Partnership, or CritPartnership

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Abstract

In school–university partnership work, critical theories such as third space and funds of knowledge have been whitewashed by the predominantly white, female teacher and teacher educator workforces. In this essay, we present an intentionally and explicitly critical framework based on critical race theory, CritPartnership, that can guide school–university partnership work focused on race, racism, and power. We convey the need for this framework through a brief review of germinal reports on school–university partnership work as well as an example of how a critical framework (third space) has been whitewashed. We present the five tenets of CritPartnership and apply them to two school–university partnership models: professional development schools and teacher residencies. We conclude with suggestions for applying the theory to partnership work and our hope for CritPartnership research.

Introduction

It is well documented that teaching is a profession that is predominantly white, middle class, and female (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). This demographic trend carries over to the teacher educator workforce, which is

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also majority white and female (King & James, 2022). While these trends vary across colleges and universities, this prevailing culture of whiteness shows up in standards and guidance for the profession—what Compton-Lilly and colleagues (2021) have referred to as *whitewashing*. They wrote, “We intentionally chose a term that references whiteness to recognize the role that white educators and scholars have played in gentrifying, diluting, taming, de-fanging, appropriating, and making revolutionary constructs more palatable to predominantly white audiences” (p. 2). They further connected this whitewashing to interest convergence in critical race theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and noted that the act of whitewashing “serves dominant interests while denying that [*sic*] potential these constructs might have for BIPOC communities” (p. 2). For example, the National Association of School–University Partnerships (NASUP), formerly the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS), is a leading partnership organization in the United States. The organization recently revised its *Nine Essentials* (National Association of School–University Partnerships [NASUP], 2021) and included third space theory. However, this was whitewashed, and third space was not contextualized to postcolonialism, which is deeply rooted in racism and power (Beck, 2024). Its use of third space was actually more in line with hybridity theory than with the more revolutionary third space theory generated by Bhabha (1994). This misapplication of the theory removed central concerns of race, racism, power, and politics.

In fact, the only school–university partnership model to date with an explicit focus on social justice or anti-racism is teacher residencies. These programs were founded with the explicit purpose of disrupting teacher education and diversifying the teacher workforce (e.g., Boggess, 2010). However, as the model has shown promise (e.g., Papay et al., 2012), it has proliferated, and the same watering down has occurred among programs implementing so-called residencies that are not true to their original intent and are simply yearlong internships devoid of a critical, anti-racist approach.

In this article, we present central tenets toward a theory of critical partnership, or CritPartnership, based on CRT (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). We use Guha and colleagues’ (2016) identified characteristics of teacher residencies as well as the *Nine Essentials* (NASUP, 2021) to convey possibilities for critical partnership work. This theoretical framework is also meant to be applicable to all types of school–university partnerships, including informal partnerships as well as more formalized relationships, such as professional development schools (PDSs) and teacher residencies. CritPartnership is meant to serve as a guide for school–university partnerships broadly—particularly in light of proliferating demands for these partnerships via accreditation (e.g., Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2022) and calls in the field for these relationships (e.g., American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] Blue Ribbon Panel, 2010). The CritPartnership theory we present is also meant to serve as

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a guide for the more intentional, critical partnerships that occur between the entire team of university staff, clinical residency coaches/mentor faculty, and residents/teacher candidates. Our goal is to provide a theory that is intentionally focused on race and justice in an attempt to prevent the whitewashing that has occurred with other theories, such as third space (cf. Smagorinsky, 2021) and funds of knowledge (cf. Perry, 2021). First, we reflect on our positionalities as scholars before outlining research on school–university partnerships to convey the need for an intentionally critical theory for school–university partnership work. We present the central tenets of CritPartnership last before applying them to extant school–university partnership components and standards.

Positionalities and School–University Partnership Context

When undertaking any critical work, it is imperative for scholars to be reflective about how they enter the work as well as about their positionality. We used Castillo and Gillborn’s (2023) guidance for writing positionality statements: “Researchers should write a positionality statement where they seek to reflect on, understand and address their position/s in society and any potential biases and blind-spots” (p. 4). Author 1 is a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied woman who grew up in a rural area of Louisiana that was and remains socioeconomically stagnant. Growing up in a small town is interesting. Black people in our little town were given the perception that they belonged, but systematically, we were still cast to the margins. I grew up having only two Black teachers at my school: one in elementary and the other in high school. To me, everything seemed like a fight for equity. Whiteness was so normalized that many Black people couldn’t even recognize it or didn’t have the voice or tools to fight against it. But if one were to ask a majority of the white people in that area if racism exists in the town, one would get a resounding no. However, if one were to ask a majority of the Black people, one would most likely get a hell yeah. I understood racism and I understood inequity very early in life. In fact, school was my introduction. It was that moment when my parents could no longer shield and protect me. I have seen firsthand how important educational spaces are for Black people. It can set one on a path of optimal outcomes while simultaneously directing others down a cascade of disadvantageous circumstances (Burrell-Craft & Eugene, 2021).

The second author is a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, monolingual woman who grew up in a rural area that was socioeconomically depressed. At an early age, she understood the injustices of schooling and the inequities in school funding but did not fully understand the structures that caused these inequities until she was an adult. Her experiences with these injustices gave her a channel for understanding other inequities and oppressions, such as systemic racism, and she actively pursues learning experiences to better understand how race, racism, power,

and oppression operate and how to disrupt them. As a white, middle-class woman, she benefits from the privileges afforded to these groups and from those afforded to tenured faculty at research-intensive universities. In addition to her own learning, she has supported white teachers in unpacking their privilege in a white ally affinity group. She regularly engages with critically conscious white colleagues to foster her own growth, in addition to attending workshops and other professional development experiences.

Although we work at two different universities now, we met and began our collaboration at a research-intensive university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Our work together has centered around a teacher residency program that, for the purposes of this article, we will call the Tidewater Teacher Residency (TTR). Healthy, reciprocal relationships are embedded in our positionalities as researchers. Through countless hours of discussions about our work, and the successes we have had (and continue to have), we continuously reflect on and assess how we can share our knowledge and skills with others. For example, one metric of success was our ability to recruit, prepare, and retain a more racially diverse cohort of teacher candidates. As noted in the report from the Task Force on Diversifying Virginia's Educator Pipeline (Education Preparation Task Force, 2017), 49% of PK–12 students identify as students of color, while only 21% of Virginia teachers identify as people of color. Since the first TTR cohort in 2015–2016, the cohorts have become progressively more racially diverse. The racial diversity of the cohorts has grown from 31% students of color in Cohort 1 to more than 92% in the last cohort under our team's leadership and guidance. We would be remiss if we did not mention that once our direct, collaborative partnership ended, so did the effectiveness, intentionality, and growth of the diversity in the teacher residency cohorts, lending further support to our conviction that partnership work has to be centered critically and justly between all stakeholders, with a focus on issues of race, power, and marginalization. When one piece is off, the other pieces become strained.

This upward trend in the diversity of the cohorts in the TTR mirrors the scholarship on teacher residencies that has suggested that teacher residencies are more likely to be racially diverse than traditional teacher preparation programs because such programs remove the financial barriers to entry that disproportionately affect individuals of color. Guha and Kini (2016) found in their study of a national network of residency programs that more than one-third of residents were people of color, which is twice the national average of new teachers of color entering the field. As both researchers and practitioners, we sought to conceptualize our partnership work so that others could have a tool to strengthen the work they do. The critical facet that this theoretical framework unveils is the relationship we have with our research as practitioners and critically conscious advocates. We use *critical consciousness* to refer to Freire's (1970) work on critically reading the world, or *conscientização*. Critical consciousness is in opposition to the banking model of education, whereby learners are passive recipients of information within oppressive societies. A person

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who is critically conscious can read and make sense of their sociopolitical environment. Our goal in our teaching and research is to raise critical consciousness around teacher education and, for the purposes of this article, school–university partnership work specifically. The CritPartnership framework highlights the factors that play an instrumental role in our decision-making and partnership work.

While the growth in the racial diversity at the TTR is promising with regard to disrupting the prevailing culture of whiteness in education, our work is often in conflict with the sociopolitical context of the state in which the residency is located. We describe this context here knowing that many school–university partnership stakeholders are dealing with similar racist and homophobic policy environments not only in their states but also at the federal level. In his first few moves as governor of Virginia in early 2022, Glenn Youngkin banned the teaching of CRT and then established a tip line to report teachers who were allegedly teaching CRT. Although the tip line was quickly spammed and eventually shut down, this move sent a message that race and racism should not be discussed in schools. The same type of practice was just enacted at the federal level with the Department of Education’s [enddei.gov](https://www.ed.gov). In Virginia, just 1 year later in 2023, the same administration released guidance on transgender students that required parents and guardians to be notified of students’ gender identities, which could put some students at risk of hostile home environments. This same policy also requires students to use bathrooms and locker rooms that align with their sex assigned at birth. These policies are at odds with our beliefs about the importance of affirming students’ intersectional identities and many of the resources we use in the teacher residency and our teacher education courses. This becomes problematic for field experiences in schools when partners feel limited in what they can say and do—some are fearful of even using terms like *social emotional learning* and *equity*.

This is where Albright and colleagues’ (2023) abolitionist teacher residency work aligns with our focus on criticality. We all must create and foster spaces that support and unpack our various roles and our work. States are facing different, but similar, racist educational bans and censorship against diversity, equity, and inclusion. The creation of affinity groups, professional development, and counterspaces is instrumental in continuing the work in today’s educational climate. While we have to be selective in how we position our work to fit within the dominant structures and politics, we do not stop the work. As abolitionists, we just modify the way we play the game. Next, we present a brief overview of school–university partnership research to frame the context of our presentation of CritPartnership in the following section.

School–University Partnership Research

Since the 1980s, there have been calls for closer relationships between PK–12 schools and colleges of education (AACTE, 2018; CAEP, 2022; Holmes Group, 1986; NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel, 2010). We add to this call in advocating for at-

tention to race, racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion to be embedded and central to this work. To date, these calls have been generic in simply identifying the need for closer relationships between school–university partners and have lacked criticality, which is evident across major reports since the 1980s. We demonstrate this void through a brief review.

In 1986, the Holmes Group presented a “shared agenda” (p. 3) for teacher education reform. Its goals included increasing the intellectual rigor of teacher education, recognizing differences in novice and veteran teachers, creating standards of entry to the profession, fostering school–university partnerships, and making schools better places for teachers to work and learn. However, this agenda was devoid of criticality. Nine years later, in 1995, the same group released its third and final report, *Tomorrow’s Schools of Education*, in which it noted the importance of increasing the racial diversity in the teacher and teacher educator workforce. In her book chapter on this report, Faison (in press) has tracked the progress in the overarching goal of diversifying the teacher and teacher educator workforces since the report was released. She summed,

Still, the overarching research finds a lack of high-quality support for practicing BIPOC educators. A lack of racial/ethnic composition in schools creates a windfall of challenges for BIPOC teachers including the negative effects of tokenism and feelings of isolation, being confronted with negative biases and racial stereotypes by predominantly white colleagues or parents, hypervisibility and constant scrutinization, and feeling pressured to engage in additional non-contracted labor. . . . Since severe challenges related to BIPOC teacher retention have been noted, a solutions-focused agenda that leverages school–university partnerships is ripe for future research.

Although the Holmes Group was attuned to issues of diversity, there are still problems of racism, power, and oppression in schools today. Future reports on school–university partnerships should have issues of race, racism, and power at their center.

In 2010, the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel report authors suggested turning teacher education “upside down” (p. ii). They wrote,

To prepare effective teachers for 21st century classrooms, teacher education must shift away from a norm which emphasizes academic preparation and course work loosely linked to school-based experiences. Rather, it must move to programs that are fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses. (p. ii)

We argue that school–university partnerships must go further than strengthening their connections and must have a coherent, critical focus on issues of oppression and power. In fact, simply increasing the hours that teacher candidates are placed in the field could be harmful if those settings are not critical of these issues. Well-meaning candidates could learn to inflict harm on students, and already marginalized teacher candidates could be further harmed through placements in schools or even participation in teacher preparation programs that lack criticality.

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Most recently, in 2018, the AACTE released its report on clinical practice and outlined key vocabulary. However, the lexicon of practice is devoid of anything related to race, racism, diversity, equity, or power, as are the proclamations—including the partnership proclamation. The latter reads, “Clinical partnerships are the foundation of highly effective clinical practice” (p. 21). The three tenets within this proclamation likewise lack criticality. The report does include a mutual benefit proclamation, but it does not address any potential power differentials or the systemic racism that is ever present in these interactions.

The Need for CritPartnership

In school–university partnership work, the theory of third space has been used extensively since Zeichner applied it to the field in 2010 (e.g., Beck, 2020; Klein et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). Through its expansion in school–university partnership research, it has been whitewashed and removed from its postcolonial roots (Beck, 2024). This whitewashing has been explored extensively elsewhere (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2021), but in short, third space has been used to describe hybrid spaces created between PK–12 schools and universities where multiple ways of knowing are honored. However, this work is often devoid of mentions of race, power, colonialism, and politics that are central to third space work (Bhabha, 1994). Thus a critical theory of partnership is needed that foregrounds race, racism, and power in school–university partnership work.

Bettina Love’s (2019) foundational work unapologetically proclaims that abolitionist teaching is built on the creativity, imagination, boldness, ingenuity, and rebellious spirit and methods of abolitionists to demand and fight for an educational system in which all students thrive, not simply survive. Albright and colleagues (2023) have built off her work and presented a framework for abolitionist teacher residencies, which is an important, critical turn in school–university partnership scholarship. They described how the critiques of teacher education over the last decade alongside teacher attrition, particularly Black teacher attrition, have led to an increase in alternative routes to licensure programs. They explained how teacher residencies were one response to neoliberal reforms in the field. They likewise noted the lack of criticality (i.e., attention to issues of race, racism, power, and marginalization) in Third Space teacher education research, as well as historical, critical responses when this criticality was absent. They presented their efforts toward an abolitionist teacher residency built on freedom dreaming and vision-driven justice. Their nonnegotiables for abolitionist teacher residency include the following: is rooted in local geosociohistorical and political contexts, is democratic/participatory in nature and centers those most marginalized, has an onto-epistemological orientation rooted in critical theories and abolition, and emphasizes learning for liberation. We see our CritPartnership framework as entering this critical conversation around partnership work. We hope it will inform anyone setting out to

establish school–university partnerships, teacher residencies, research-to-practice partnerships, community schools, or any other relationship between a PK–12 school district and an institution of higher education. We also hope that CritPartnership will support existing school–university partnerships in focusing their missions, visions, and praxes more pointedly on issues of race, racism, and power.

Theoretical Foundations: Critical Race Theory

Frameworks are essential to bridging the gaps in research and practice. Frameworks aid in setting goals, priorities, and relationships between variables. According to Jabareen (2009), a conceptual framework connects the theories, assumptions, beliefs, and concepts behind the research and presents them in a pictorial, graphical, or narrative format. This definition is in line with Ravitch and Riggan’s (2017) definition of *conceptual framework*, “an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. xv). This is in contrast to a *theoretical framework*, which Anfara (2008) defined as “any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena” (para. 1). In light of these definitions, which we recognize are contested in the field (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), we present CritPartnership as a theoretical framework for supporting and evaluating partnership work.

Centering race and using it as an analytic tool for understanding school partnerships, we conceptualize five tenets that align with Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995; see also Ladson-Billings, 1998) theoretical perspective of CRT in education. Though politicized, villainized, and used incorrectly in mainstream media, CRT is a form of race-based oppositional scholarship (Bartlett et al., 2005; Brayboy, 2005; Calmore, 1992; Liu, 2009; B. J. Love, 2004) that challenges Eurocentric values, especially those that systematize these values to the detriment of individuals who are not white.

CRT research can be traced back to the critical legal studies movement, which gave rise to CRT (Crenshaw, 2011; Tate, 1997). In the 1980s, a noted group of legal scholars, including Derrick A. Bell Jr., Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, questioned the role of law in maintaining and further constructing racially based social and economic oppression (Lynn & Adams, 2002; Taylor, 1998, 2009). These early critical race scholars sought to challenge prevailing racial injustices while committing themselves to interrogating racism’s continued presence in U.S. jurisprudence and stalled advancement of civil rights legislation (Manning & Muñoz, 2011; Stanley, 2006; Yosso, 2002). Therefore contemporary critical legal scholarship builds on an already robust literature base (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

As a theoretical framework, CRT examines the “unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines” (Taylor,

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2009, p. 1). CRT is a movement comprising scholars committed to challenging and disrupting racism and its associated social, legal, political, and educational consequences (Patton et al., 2011). As previous critical race academics (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Parker & Lynn, 2002) have observed, the task of applying a CRT framework to educational scholarship is complex and multifaceted.

CRT as a methodological approach allows us to study the complex phenomena involving race, racism, and power in and across disciplines in education (Parker & Lynn, 2002). It allows us as researchers to critically examine the experiences of marginalized people within educational spaces. This approach is essential because schools work as institutionalized microcosms of society (Sullivan & A'Vant, 2009). CRT provides a way to theorize, examine, and challenge how race and racism covertly and overtly impact the social structures, practices, and discourses within an educational setting (Yosso, 2005).

Theory-Building Process

In understanding race and property as they intersect with inequities in education, our tenets center partnership work and complement the foundational work that has already been done by scholars in the field, such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Solorzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) Latino CRT or LatCrit, Annamma and colleagues' (2016) disability critical race theory or DisCrit, Iftikar and Museus's (2018) AsianCrit, Gillborn and colleagues' (2018; Castillo & Gillborn, 2023) application of CRT to quantitative methods or QuantCrit, and BlackCrit (Dumas & Ross, 2016), to name only a few. Ladson-Billings's (1998) five central tenets that provide the foundation for this work are as follows: (a) racism is normal, (b) the use of counterstorytelling, (c) critique of liberalism, (d) whites have primarily benefited from civil rights legislation, and (e) interest convergence. To generate CritPartnership, we aligned Ladson-Billings's (1998) five central tenets with school–university partnership research, on which we elaborate next.

In generating the AsianCrit framework, Iftikar and Museus (2018) described their work: “The AsianCrit framework consists of seven interrelated tenets that can be used to understand how white supremacy shapes the experiences of Asian Americans” (p. 940). They drew on decades of scholarship on Asian Americans' experiences with racism in the United States. We used a similar approach in creating CritPartnership through drawing on extensive research on school–university partnership research. We synthesized this research with Ladson-Billings's (1998) five central tenets of CRT to illustrate how race, racism, and white supremacy shape school–university partnership work. Thus our focus was not on a population, like Iftikar and Museus (2018), but on the work that occurs between institutions of higher education and PK–12 schools. We turn to this next.

Ladson-Billings's (1998) first central tenet is that racism is normal. We connected this to program design and coherence, as we are aware that systemic racism

in education is entrenched in racial disparities in systems and policies and that it permeates almost every aspect of the U.S. education system (Smith, 2023). Common examples of this include inequitable funding, a lack of diverse curricula, and an underrepresentation of teachers and administrators from diverse cultures. Hammerness (2006) noted that “university-based teacher education programs consist of a set of disconnected individual courses; separate clinical work from coursework; and lack a vision of teaching and learning” (p. 1241). This issue of fragmentation has also been cited by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2005), yet research has demonstrated the importance of teacher candidates’ ongoing exposure to issues like multiculturalism (e.g., Bodur, 2012). Hammerness (2006) has also noted that program coherence can result in powerful teacher candidate learning. This is where we advocate for critical frameworks to guide action. The first tenet of CritPartnership is that it is driven by anti-racist, just frameworks.

The next CritPartnership tenet is challenging systems, and this tenet is aligned with two of Ladson-Billings’s (1998) CRT tenets: racism is normal and critique of liberalism. CRT theorists were concerned with the slow pace of change during the civil rights era. Similarly, those who are doing CritPartnership work must recognize that they are operating and complicit in systems that uphold racist practices, such as teacher licensure and standardized testing (e.g., Beck, 2023; Shahjahan, 2011). To ignore these racist systems would be to condone these practices. At the same time, teacher educators, for example, must support teacher candidates in passing racist licensure exams. Thus those dedicated to CritPartnership work to find ways to navigate these systems while recognizing these injustices and challenging them.

The third CritPartnership tenet is disrupting racism in education. This tenet is based in the notion of praxis (Freire, 1970) and entails direct challenges to racist practices in PK–12 schools and higher education. For example, most state standards for PK–12 instruction are not written with diverse perspectives and lived experiences in mind. In Virginia, there is an entire social studies unit devoted to five of the first U.S. presidents because they were from Virginia, while recognition of the massive contributions of the Black folks who built many structures and cities in the Commonwealth are not highlighted in the standards. Teacher education programs can disrupt racism through preparing teacher candidates to flip these standards and make them more representative and reflective of the children they actually serve (e.g., Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017). This tenet is aligned with Ladson-Billings’s (1998) CRT tenets of counterstorytelling and racism is normal.

Intersectional identities are central to CritPartnership, and this is the fourth tenet of the theory. Currently the field of education has more middle-class, white teachers in classrooms than any other demographic (NCES, 2023). This tenet is aligned with Ladson-Billings’s (1998) CRT tenet that whites benefit from civil rights legislation and interest convergence. Leslie Fenwick (2022), in her book titled *Jim Crow’s Pink Slip*, exposes the decades-long repercussions of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision: the systematic dismissal of Black educators from

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public schools, which ultimately benefited whites. Interest convergence, a concept introduced by Derrick Bell (1980), suggests that progress for marginalized groups often occurs when it aligns with the interests of the dominant group. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruled that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. While this ruling was a victory for Black students and civil rights advocates, some scholars argue that it occurred only because desegregation also served the interests of white elites and the U.S. government. At the time, the Cold War was in full swing, and the United States was trying to present itself as a leader of democracy and equality on the world stage. The Soviet Union frequently pointed to America's racial segregation as evidence of hypocrisy. Desegregating schools helped the United States improve its international image while also addressing domestic racial inequality. This illustrates interest convergence because although the decision benefited Black students, it also aligned with broader political and economic goals that served the dominant white majority (Bell, 1980).

The final CritPartnership tenet is employing counterstorytelling, and this is directly aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1998) same CRT tenet. The deficit narrative around teaching and education can be traced back decades to *A Nation at Risk*, in which U.S. education was likened to a threatening foreign power (American National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This narrative is also evident in teacher preparation programs, which are often maligned, according to the website of the National Council on Teacher Quality (<https://www.nctq.org/>). Counterstorytelling is a powerful tool in CritPartnership work to push back on these deficit narratives and reveal the powerful work of teachers, community members, and colleges of education working in partnership with diverse communities. In conceptualizing this framework, the following section provides supporting reasoning, relevant applications, and critical moments to partnership work expanding on the aforementioned central propositions.

CritPartnership

In this section, we present five central tenets of CritPartnership that are aligned with CRT to remain committed to a critical approach and, in particular, Freire's (1970) concept of *praxis*. To illustrate each tenet, we also provide a critical moment that was an amalgamation of our experiences doing school–university partnership work.

Central Tenet 1:

CritPartnership Is Driven by Anti-Racist, Just Frameworks

In aligning Proposition 1—that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States—Tenet 1 centers the CRT tenet of racial realism: that racism is ordinary and will never be fully dismantled but must be challenged. CritPartnership is driven by anti-racist, just frameworks that pervade the program. Stakeholders must be reflective about their positionalities and identities

and acknowledge systems of oppression and power. The work is ongoing and not finite, with continual iterations of reflection and action.

Critical Moment

To illustrate this tenet, we turn to a critical moment in a partnership meeting that we experienced. During a stakeholder meeting, a principal noted how the purpose of the partnership was to prepare teachers for “urban” schools. He used “urban” in a coded, problematic way to refer to Black and Brown students. He went on to explain that teacher candidates from the university often did not want to teach in these schools and/or were unprepared for teaching in “urban” environments. He argued that the partnership provided an opportunity for these candidates to experience urban schools and learn about teaching in them. A university faculty member picked up on his problematic language and pushed back on his use of “urban.” She also argued that teacher candidates were not “broken” and did not need an intervention. The two stakeholders went back and forth about this for some time without the principal truly understanding what she was saying. While stakeholders will inevitably have different levels of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), and such debates are unavoidable, this moment also illustrated that the guiding mission and vision of the partnership was generic and how differently each stakeholder conceptualized the partnership and its objectives. It also illustrated widely different and potentially problematic approaches to teacher education. The school partner was using a deficit approach both to K–12 students and to teacher candidates, whereas the university faculty member recognized how oppression and power were at play in their exchange.

Central Tenet 2:
CritPartnership Challenges Systems

CritPartnership is transparent and direct. Educational systems are multilayered and political. CritPartnership questions the role systems play in enacting or dismantling policy at the school, district, regional, or even state level. Much of the school–university partnership research focuses on successful collaborations rather than engaging with problematic policies or systems. It is also important to report on how stakeholders hold each other accountable in the work. Relationships must be reciprocal, intentional, and protected in nature and purpose.

Critical Moment

In working with various school district partnerships, navigating these spaces requires carefully crafting strategic plans and abolitionists who are positioned accordingly. In our work with one district, we had two main district contacts: one who meant well but was not racially versed in equity and another who knew how to get

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things done and provided opportunities for marginalized, nontraditional teacher candidates. The general partnership structure of this district was fairly new and still needed some uniformity and structural guidance. As a result of this lack of structure and guidance, a few teacher candidates were having racial issues at work with microaggressions, inequitable job responsibilities, and uncomfortable work environments due to the rise in Make America Great Again—era propaganda. To manage situations such as this, we paired a strong, culturally responsive university faculty member to work with the district. We knew we needed to be strategic and purposeful in the layering of our partnership supports. There is no one-size-fits-all in partnership work. You have to know your district, its culture, climate, and nuances. Keep in mind that it does take an abolitionist on the inside to be able to coplan this type of partnership to really be effective. Dismantling takes longer this way, but it has proven effective.

Central Tenet 3: CritPartnership Disrupts Racism in Education

Schools are a microcosm of the larger systems of racism and oppression in the United States. From an inequitable distribution of resources based on racist systems of housing to standardized testing rooted in eugenics, schools oppress and marginalize children of color in countless ways. Those stakeholders engaging in CritPartnership work to disrupt racism within their schools and programs. Within this tenet, curriculum, frameworks, and training must be decolonized and center inclusivity of race, gender, and linguistic diversity.

Critical Moment

Teacher candidates in an elementary education course expressed concern about attending class on site at a partner school because they didn't "feel safe." These teacher candidates were mostly white and were at the beginning of their teacher education program. Throughout the course, the instructor provided course readings that debunked myths about communities of color and brought in guest speakers from the communities the school serves—including teachers. Candidates also completed a community mapping exercise in which they studied and learned about the communities and mapped out the various assets and resources in the neighborhood. The residency program also implemented racial affinity groups that met monthly to support this effort for preservice teachers. For instructional coaches, the university team held bimonthly meetings to foster their professional and personal development in their journey to be disrupters of the system. Not only have these teacher leaders been instrumental in decolonizing the curricula in their classrooms; they have been able to make departmental changes and hold professional development sessions with their schools. For administrators and other teacher leaders, an advanced, culturally responsive leadership training session has

been offered in the last 4 years, prior to the start of the school year. Each year, we reach capacity.

**Central Tenet 4:
*Intersectional Identities Are Central to CritPartnership***

CritPartnership centers multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity. These partnerships must be intentional about creating access and providing representation. In centering Crenshaw's intersectionality tenet, identity is fluid, ever evolving, and changing, yet it is core to who we are. Our identities intersect and often cannot be separated for the sake of the status quo. Work must be intentional in centering race, ethnicity, linguistic identity, gender identity, and disability. Strategic plans must be put in place to create welcoming environments where all people belong and matter. Professional development plans and training must focus on helping all stakeholders become identity literate (Burrell-Craft, 2021).

Critical Moment

A sense of community must be fostered in CritPartnership work for it to be sustained. One of our transgender preservice teachers was excited about being a teacher, as they had actually majored in theater but had an incredibly high aptitude for math. The path to recruit, prepare, and retain this candidate needed to come from a place of transparency, layers of support, additional courageous conversations, and intentionality. Fostering relationships is what we do, so that part was easy. Once we signed this candidate, we wanted to make sure they had a path that would recognize their talent for arts and math. We placed them in the most supportive school where we already had wrap-around and mentoring support. We intentionally had ongoing conversations with staff, leadership, and students about what diversity and inclusion mean and what it looks like in daily practice. Students are curious, are inquisitive, and often say what's on their minds. Long before that preservice teacher stepped into the building, a plan had to be put in place to protect the preservice teacher and the student population. Everything had to be intentional. Inclusivity, sensitivity, and belonging had to be taught to all stakeholders (students, teachers, staff, and leaders) and to the preservice teacher themselves. We had personal conversations about appearance and professionalism while staying true to self and identity. The CritPartnership framework takes into account the role identity plays in fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and social justice.

**Central Tenet 5:
*Counterstorytelling Is Employed in CritPartnership***

CritPartnership is maintained, bolstered, and appreciated through the use of storytelling and counterstorytelling. Information cannot be silenced but must be

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shared and given voice. In true abolitionist form, partnerships must create, organize, and think strategically. We push back on allies and seek coconspirators who center critical consciousness in their work and in their being.

Critical Moment

A partner middle school was in danger of being torn down due to age. This demolition and the ensuing rebuilding of the school in a new location would have disrupted the Latino families in the neighborhood. Older siblings who attended the middle school would often pick up younger siblings at the elementary school down the street and help them get started on homework while parents and guardians worked late. Thus the geographical location of the school supported working families. The partner school staff organized a town hall meeting to protest the plans and asked university faculty to speak at the town hall about the importance and history of the partnership work at the school. Through grassroots organizing and sharing and highlighting storytelling and counterstorytelling on social media, positive attention was drawn to this community and helped give them a voice. As university faculty, we created projects that centered around what was occurring within our own neighborhoods so that all students, not just education students, would work on solutions that would support all those involved. We do this frequently and intentionally to help all students become more aware of the issues that are going on around them and to include them as social justice advocates for change.

Next, we present possibilities for infusing CritPartnership into the *Nine Essentials* (NASUP, 2021) and the teacher residency model as a means of illustrating the framework in two different school–university partnership models.

Applying CritPartnership to Existing Models

In this section, we apply CritPartnership to two existing models of school–university partnerships: PDSs and teacher residencies. We use established standards (like the *Nine Essentials*; NASUP, 2021) and program components (Guha et al., 2016) to convey the possibilities for this application.

Professional Development Schools

The PDS model originated in the 1980s with the work of the Holmes Group. Since its inception, a professional organization (NAPDS, now NASUP) was founded around the work of these schools and that of journals (*School–University Partnerships* and *PDS Partners: Bridging Research to Practice*). A Google Scholar search for “professional development schools” produced more than 6 million hits at the time of this writing. Although teacher residencies have amassed an impressive amount of scholarship and funding, the PDS model is older and more established.

However, it is also problematic. In this section, we apply CritPartnership to the *Nine Essentials* (NASUP, 2021) that serve as standards for PDS work.

The first *Nine Essentials* (NASUP, 2021) is a comprehensive mission:

A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners. (p. 4)

It is noteworthy that equity, anti-racism, and social justice feature so prominently in the *Nine Essentials*. However, these words disappear in the ensuing *Nine Essentials* and are not included again. For example, Essential 3 is professional learning and leading: “A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry” (p. 4). Within this professional learning and leading, it cannot be assumed that personal education and reflection about biases and privilege are ongoing—these must be stipulated clearly. Otherwise, these efforts risk being whitewashed and made devoid of criticality. If systems are working for a particular group (white people), it is hard for that group to recognize that these systems are problematic or inequitable (DiAngelo, 2021). This problem of white supremacy and its relative invisibility for those who benefit from it is at the heart of this issue of whitewashing. Thus Essential 3 could be rewritten as Critical Learning and Leading. A PDS is a context for continuous self-reflection and examination for all participants, guided by equity, anti-racism, and social justice.

Similarly, Essential 4 (NASUP, 2021) is focused on reflection and innovation. School–university partnerships have an opportunity to leverage their joint work to sustain students’ identities and cultures and support their growth in environments where they are taught to think critically and learn joyfully (Muhammad, 2023). However, this essential is also devoid of criticality: “A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge” (NASUP, 2021, p. 4). There is an opportunity within PDSs, school–university partnerships, teacher residencies, and other models to apply critical frameworks in schools and study these. Infusing the CritPartnership theoretical framework into the mission and vision of the program and carrying this into any memoranda of understanding will further enable this work to occur. The boundary-spanning roles so central to partnership work could operate as brokers that are able to support the application of critical frameworks in schools and advocate for the work of partners. New hybrid roles, perhaps teacher leaders who are released part-time from teaching, could also be created to serve as boundary spanners within policy contexts to advocate for supportive legislation that buoys work around justice and diversity in schools.

Teacher Residencies

Next, we apply CritPartnership to Guha and colleagues' (2016) eight characteristics of teacher residencies: (a) district–university partnerships, (b) candidate recruitment and selection, (c) clinical experience, (d) coursework, (e) mentor recruitment and selection, (f) cohorts placed in teaching schools, (g) induction mentoring and support, and (h) financial support and incentives. In considering the second component, candidate recruitment and selection, the possibilities for application of CritPartnership are varied. Residency cohorts should be diverse not only in race and ethnicity but also in language, gender identity, and many other identities. Candidates should also be open to personal reflection and growth around issues of diversity and racism. Thus recruitment is not only about demographics but also about dispositions for the work.

Mentor recruitment and selection (Characteristic 5; Guha et al., 2016) is likewise multifaceted. Not only should mentors be diverse in a variety of ways but they also need to be committed to personal growth around anti-racism and diversity. There are possibilities here for building capacity at a school level. If leadership (broadly defined) is committed to CritPartnership work, then teacher leaders can be prepared as critically conscious mentors to support work with residency candidates as well as their veteran peers. They can lead through critical consciousness as well as pedagogy.

Conclusions and Implications

We do not intend for the CritPartnership framework to be the answer to all the issues of race, racism, power, and inequity in institutions of higher education and PK–12 schools. Rather, our goal in presenting this framework is to provide a coherent, intentionally critical theory that can be used by school and university partners to describe and lift up their work both in research and in practice: “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1952, p. 169). This seems especially important in the current sociopolitical context, in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are being “banned” (White House, 2025). CritPartnership can extend beyond articles and presentations to serve as a touchstone for school–university partnership work.

To progress in just and critical partnership work, we suggest the following practices in tandem with a coherent partnership mission and vision grounded in a critical framework:

- ◆ **A commitment to individual growth and reflection from each partner.** We understand that this is a huge, aspirational goal, and we have seen for ourselves how difficult the work can be with white stakeholders who are at different points in their critical consciousness and journeys as allies. However, it is important to ensure that each partner is aware of the program goals and vision and has access to professional development and resources to support their ongoing growth. Stakeholders could also be

partnered up to serve as mentors and critical friends in this work. Affinity groups can also support ongoing growth.

◆ **District- or division-level commitment to anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion.** This is politically charged and may even be seen as dangerous by some leaders. However, to enact CritPartnership, space must be created for conversations around race and racism, and it's imperative that school board members, superintendents, and other leaders support these values. Plans should be created for talking with families and other stakeholders about the importance of diversity and inclusion and dispelling myths around CRT.

◆ **Coherent teacher preparation coursework focused on culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2010), and/or sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2014) frameworks central to CritPartnership.** Teacher candidates need sustained exposure to these frameworks to gain deeper understanding and ensure they can implement pedagogies and practices consistent with these frameworks. They will also need opportunities to enact them in schools with critical feedback from coaches and mentors. Similarly, critically conscious coaches and mentors are needed to support teacher candidate and new teacher growth. The growth of coaches and mentors also needs to be bolstered.

We also suggest that teacher educators implementing a CritPartnership approach understand that the work is ongoing and imperfect. Even the most critically conscious partner will make mistakes. It is important to hold one another accountable in everyone's ongoing growth.

We want to conclude our presentation of this framework with our hopes for application of CritPartnership in school–university partnership research. While school–university partnership scholars have likely been implementing elements of the CritPartnership framework, we are excited about the opportunities for applying this framework holistically to programs and studies. Our hope is that multiple tenets can be applied in tandem to reveal new insights about preparing candidates to serve a diverse student body equitably. Owing to the explicit focus on race and racism, we recognize that this will not be easy work in the current sociopolitical environment. Most of all, we hope that this framework is used in more than just research reports. We hope it is lived and embodied daily to improve the quality of education for all students.

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