Examining the Perspectives of Adult Working Learners and Key Stakeholders Using Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

Purpose: This article reports on a Critical Race Theory (CRT) analysis of the perspectives of providers of employer-supported educational opportunities and adult learners, who identified as Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color, and were employed in service industries.

Design/methodology: A review of the literature was used to shape an initial interview protocol. Data were collected from working learners in retail, hospitality, restaurants, and healthcare industries. An “a priori” coding scheme that drew from CRT was applied to transcripts during analysis.

Findings: Analysis revealed that working learners’ skills, experiential knowledge, learning mindset, language flexibility, and knowledge gained from previous learning experiences were not consistently acknowledged by employers. CRT analysis illustrated that endemic racism exists within educational opportunities and in workplace learning.

Originality: CRT has not been widely used to examine adult education practice, especially for workforce development and employer-based education programmes. This research expands the use of CRT in adult education and encourages critical conversations around equity in learning opportunities offered by employers. CRT informed data analysis uncovered barriers to equitable
learning opportunities and workplace learning. A discussion of inequities in work-based learning illustrates there is insufficient awareness of implicit bias, which points to the need for initiatives focused on social justice.
Introduction

On his first day in office, United States President Joe Biden explicitly acknowledged “entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions” (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021, Section 1. para. 1) and that “executive departments and agencies must recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity” (Section 1. para. 2). This charge calls adult education researchers and educators to radically re-conceptualize educational spaces and move toward broader and deeper acts of social justice in order to affect social change. This work is needed not only in the United States but globally, in countries marked by a history of colonialism, inequality, and inequities. For example, a panel of nine international scholars called for citizens and governments to “confront the historical legacy of systemic racism and the enduring inequalities it has created” (Bhambra et al., 2020, para 1). These scholars named countries on every continent that have been affected by colonial and Eurocentric power structures that continue to perpetuate systemic racism.

In the United States, efforts to address endemic and systemic racism have been undermined by those who call Critical Race Theory (CRT) authoritarian and divisive (Krasne, 2020). The Trump administration threatened the cancellation of federal contacts for companies that used anti-racist trainings (Exec. Order No. 13950, 2020). CRT has a contested history in applied research (Brown and Jackson, 2021). Most recently, a number of U.S. states have initiated efforts to quell the use of CRT in educational settings (see Goldberg, 2021). In this divisive climate, it is important that CRT and the groundbreaking work of its founding scholars further the goals of equity in education.
The purpose of this article is to describe how we used CRT to examine the perspectives of adult learners, who identified as Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color, and were employed in service industries such as retail, hospitality, restaurants, and health care. Those who participated in this research were engaged in learning opportunities that may take place within the workplace or off-site and include on-the-job training, on-site learning, and integrated educational training. On-site learning involves classes offered at the place of employment, and can include basic skills, ESOL, and credentials or certificates for skills needed to meet on-boarding or career path needs. Integrated educational training combines instruction in basic skills such as literacy or math with job related training. These learning opportunities could prepare them, if they so choose, to engage in higher education that could potentially lead to a university degree.

**Literature Review**

The research team reviewed research articles, field reports, white papers, labor market analysis, and other published materials. We examined literature defining and exploring educational opportunities available to front line service workers, defined as employees who interact, often in person, with the public as part of their job. The literature explored transitions that adults experience across their education trajectories such as Adult Basic Education to Career and Technical Education to Higher Education.

The literature review revealed the complexities of a shifting terrain aimed to meet the needs of different kinds of employers (Rho, Fremstad, and Brown, 2020) and represented multiple viewpoints (economic markets, workforce development, organizational growth) each with biases and motivations for participating. However, the voice of working learners tended to be absent. Reports discussed working learners in the third person, absent of the learner’s voice.
and agency (e.g., National Research Council, 2012; Shechtman, et. al., 2016). Language used across the literature tended to situate working learners as passive recipients of education, reflected in terms such as “upskilling” or in use of the language of the marketplace (e.g., invest in workers, return on investment, and talent pipeline) (e.g., Deloitte & Aspen Institute, 2015). Most of the literature represented an oversimplification of the complex factors that surround working learners’ choice to take part in learning opportunities such as building foundational skills, English language proficiency, satisfying job requirements, or earning a degree or certificate needed to move into another field (21 CLEO Research Team, 2021).

**Unemployment and Mal-employment**

In the United States, the massive unemployment (Congressional Research Service, 2021) that occurred in 2020 and disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic populations brought existing inequities into sharp focus. This economic reality and the racial reckoning felt in Europe and the United States brought about by the murder of George Floyd (Douglas, Chrisafis, and Mohdin, 2021) provided further impetus to research the perspectives and lived experiences of working learners and adult education stakeholders. Front-line workers’ education often exceeds the education required to perform their job – a condition known as mal-employment (Habibi & Kamis, 2021). Fogg and Harrington (2012) used the term mal-employment to describe the experiences of immigrants. Inequity in employment is also visible, historically, in the experience of Black Americans, especially those who moved during the period of the Great Migration (1915-1970). Tolnay (1998) noted that Black migrants from the south had a similar number of years of schooling as their northern counterparts, but the quality of southern schools was considered inferior. The “miseducation of the Negro” was used to justify systematic efforts to
limit the economic mobility Black Americans (Watkins, 2001) resulting in fewer work opportunities for migrants, an outcome with generational impact (Wilkerson, 2010).

**Structural Barriers**

The continued inequities in education and employment within marginalized communities calls for further consideration of structural barriers. Patterson (2018) identified dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers to learning in adult education programs in the United States. Institutional barriers include lack of support from employers such as release time, cost, and lack of support from immediate supervisors. Patterson’s analysis, however, does not address less visible structural barriers. Even if support or mentorship is provided, if it is “race dysconscious” (Vargas, Saetermoe, and Chavira, 2020, p. 1), racism is culturally reproduced (Vargas, et al., 2020), and learners become disenfranchised and leave the learning environment.

Given the insights from the literature, the research team posed two research questions to better understand the perspectives of the study participants:

- What do the perspectives of adult working learners reveal when viewed through a CRT lens?
- What do the perspectives and practices of adult stakeholders who support work-based educational opportunities reveal when viewed through a CRT lens?

**Theoretical Framework**

Initially developed to examine society and culture in relation to American jurisprudence as created by a racialized society (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Gotanda, 1991; Matsuda, 1991), CRT has been expanded and drawn on as a way to interrogate oppressive structures in a variety of contexts, including education. Critical Race Theory applied to education is not a pedagogy; it is a well-established and recognized scholarly tradition that
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focuses on the transformation of an inequitable educational system that will benefit all people (Closson, 2010; Dixson and Anderson, 2018). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT as a way to analyze and critique educational research and practice. Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Dixson, Rousseau, and Donnor (2006) and others have extended this work. Despite the history of CRT in education, it has been seldom used to interrogate adult education, and when used, the focus is primarily on higher education (Closson, 2010). Closson’s (2010) exploration of CRT for the field of adult education makes clear the challenge of using CRT because it “mixes strategy, research method, and definitional premises” (p. 262) and reaches across disciplines known to educators to assemble familiar concepts in a new framework.

Solórzano (1997) identified five basic tenets of CRT in education: (a) racism is endemic or the norm in the United States, (b) challenges dominant ideology, (c) commits to social justice, (d) centers experiential knowledge, and (e) presents a transdisciplinary perspective. Yosso (2005) argues that these five tenets define CRT in education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). As Yosso notes, CRT validates the experiences of People of Color while challenging white privilege and the dominant ideology that supports that privilege.

According to critical race theorists, endemic racism occurs because white people resist seeing themselves as racist, and this belief is supported by a legal system that defines racism as intentional behavior and policies (Bell, 1980) and claims color-blindness (Gotanda, 1991). Endemic racism, as defined by Bell (1980), is a condition where white people tend not to see their race or themselves as racist and do not see how racist structures are embedded in educational policies and practices. When racial injustice is addressed, change occurs because of interest convergence: change happens when that change is in the interest of white people (Bell,
If a legal or policy change benefiting Communities of Color does not concomitantly benefit whites, change does not occur or is resisted. The social justice perspective of CRT exposes interest convergence and works toward the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty while empowering People of Color (Yosso, 2005).

Aspects of CRT that are not included in the tenets identified by Solórzano (1997), but useful for our analysis, include intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Intersectionality explains how race and gender (or other aspects of identity) interact to shape an individual’s experience, thus pushing beyond dichotomies. An understanding of intersectionality is important for listening to the lived experience of people within a racialized and gendered society. Community cultural wealth is a way to see the depth of experience individuals bring to a learning opportunity. Yosso defines community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). Community cultural wealth is built through aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, linguistic, and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005).

Methodology and Research Design

Our positionality as white women limits comprehension of the lived experience of working learners who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). The use of the acronym BIPOC in a U.S. context serves to highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Black African Americans, Indigenous individuals, and People of Color have had historically, which shapes experiences and relationships to white supremacy. We recognize that other countries have different racialized histories, but every country in the international community is affected by racism in some way (Bhambra et al., 2020). We approach CRT recognizing that we
cannot and should not speak for Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. Rather, CRT helps to illuminate structural aspects of racism that we, as white people, have been apt to miss. The metaphor Wilkerson (2020) uses is that of an old house. She writes that America is an old house built on a flawed structure, and we cannot repair that structure until we look beneath the plaster to see what problems are hidden. Thus, we engaged in this work to look more deeply at the structures within which working learners are attempting to succeed.

**Participants**

Interviewees were selected from a pool of participants from multiple geographic locations across the United States. The participant pool included working learners and key stakeholders such as instructors, support service providers, and employees who helped shape education programming. Initial analysis of interviewees left us wondering about who has access and who is encouraged to participate in learning opportunities. Our wonderings focused on the potential influence of race, language, and gender and how these characteristics may influence opportunities and access. Prior to the recruitment of participants, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). To protect the confidentiality of human subjects, pseudonyms are used in place of all participants’ names, and all data collection sites have been masked to maintain participant confidentiality. To ensure that findings were not influenced by the funding source, none of the research was conducted at a site that was operated by the funder.

**Key Stakeholders**

Key stakeholder interviews were purposively selected for CRT analysis based on the type of organization, role in the organization, and relationship to the working learner participants. Four key stakeholders self-identified as white, one declined to state, and one was an immigrant
from Eastern Europe. They supported the implementation of educational opportunities by serving as employers, support providers, or educators. See Table 1 for a summary of key stakeholders’ characteristics.

Working Learners

From the pool of participants, six working learners were purposively selected for CRT analysis based on their self-identified race or ethnicity. Each self-identified as Black or as a Person of Color. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of these six participants followed by descriptions of the working learner participants.

Winta. Winta wants to become an accountant but struggles to get her degree earned in her home country recognized, “So I will try to find my document … for the CPA department to validate my education.” Winta is comfortable reading and writing in English and uses spoken English with customers and colleagues in her position as a clerk in a retail shop. She is further developing oral English skills by participating in an English class offered by her employer. She reports that, “[the English class is] too easy for me. So I try more the difficult one.” While higher level English courses were offered at a local community college, Winta’s work shift prevented her from attending. Her large extended family provides support for her learning by providing childcare. Although improving her English helped her in her current job, she said, “I want to be more, I want to make more money. I want to know more. So I just want to be more. I don’t want to do this job for my lifetime. So I will try to change.”

Maggie. Before coming to the United States, Maggie “…went to university for four years. I study science economic for four years, and I studied accounting, for one year. And I studied
like a computer training for three years…” Although she was experienced in banking and earned a degree in Haiti, in the United States she worked in a series of service jobs and completed a Certified Nursing Assistant program. She said, “I was working that time, working and go to school. I don't have enough time for my family. And I do some sacrifice, sacrifice my life to do this, I'm going to say this was my hard time.” Maggie was able to persevere through her “hard time” and “sacrifice” by staying connected with her mother. She said, “I have my mom, she helped me out a lot when I'm working and go to school, she helped me with my daughter.”

Julie. Julie has been in the United States for five years. She enrolled in community college to improve her English and earned a dental assistant credential. She found a job in her field, but felt unprepared and left to work as a volunteer in a food pantry. Julie said, “…it was hard for me. I feel like overwhelming because of my language. So, I had to back up. [I thought], maybe I can volunteer first and get the experience.” She also said, “For me, it's hard to talk to people. I feel like I'm a little bit weak, when you work as a dental assistant, you have to have computers skill to put everything on the system.” Julie felt that reaching out for support was not an option. She said, “All the classes were in English, so I didn't, I didn't have like nobody to translate to me anything. I just had to figure out everything by myself. So it was really hard for me. I even think to give up. Like, I was thinking to not continue because every time I get home I was so tired. It was really hard.”

Destiny. Destiny was born in the United States and speaks only English. After starting employment as a front desk clerk in a hotel, Destiny became the supervisor. When the company eliminated the manager position, she took on additional responsibilities without additional pay. She took online courses through a program offered by her employer as well as hospitality classes at her local community college. When the local workforce agency made leadership training
classes available through LinkedIn, Destiny took those as well. She was especially excited about the LinkedIn courses because she was already on the platform. She said, “...oh this is perfect...I can just like pick LinkedIn’s brain for a whole year and just learn different things.” She focused on learning “what type of person you are and how you deal with people...how to strategize and how to get the team motivated. As well as difficult conversations because they are always coming up.” Destiny’s manager was pleased that she was taking courses, and she was given permission to do some of the coursework on the clock when her team was able to cover for her. Despite her efforts, she has been unable to progress into a better job. To move from her hourly position as front desk supervisor to a salaried position, she will have to switch to a different company.

Victoria. Victoria self-identified as Latina who was born in the United States. She worked for over 14 years as a mechanic and recently moved into a supervisory role. She earned a Bachelor’s degree through her employer while working nights, but did not immediately pursue a supervisory position. She said she considers herself as “rough around the edges.” She said, “I walked around with a chip on my shoulder. So of course I wasn't in any position (to lead) at that time.” Victoria was encouraged by a mentor to begin seeking leadership, so she decided to participate in a training program, “I'd always known about it, but I had a bad attitude. So I didn't care. So you know when I finally grew up, someone says to me, if you sign up for it, I will vouch for you, but I expect you to give it your best.” She is happy in her current position and said, “It's awesome. I love connecting and networking with people....it's been a great experience.” She wants to continue learning and said, “I'm doing leadership training, finishing up with (program).” Victoria credits her focus to the support of her husband and the fact that her children are grown.
Muhazzim. Muhazzim has been in the United States for six years. After emigrating, he worked in a call center then joined the database administration team for the same company where he took on a supervisory role. At the time he changed jobs, he was working on earning a certificate in management/supervision from the local community college. He was able to integrate the learning for his new position into the assignments for the certification program. He also worked closely with his direct supervisor to learn how to be a member of the database management team. He credits his supervisor for mentoring him and said his willingness to ask questions is what helps him learn. “I keep asking and even, you know, in every evaluation my supervisor commends me. He said, like, hey, he's the one who will question most of the time, and I love it. He literally said, I love it, how much questions you ask.” He noted that he is divorced and has no children living with him, which he said made it easier for him to spend time on learning.

Data Sources and Collection

Interviews were conducted in multiple geographic locations within the United States. Each site had work-based educational programming with instructors, support service providers, and company employees who helped shape the programming. Contact information for working learners and key stakeholders were shared by workplace development programs, adult education, or immigrant and refugee support services. Volunteers were invited to participate via email or in person. Those who responded completed a screening questionnaire and an interview. Inclusion criteria required participants’ past or current participation in workplace-sponsored learning. Key stakeholders were identified based on the relationships they had to support the working learners we interviewed. Working learners were given a cash gift to recognize the time they gave for the interview. Key stakeholders were not remunerated.
The review of the literature into employer-supported learning opportunities informed our emerging understanding of the landscape, which we used to shape an initial interview protocol. Interviews were conducted by two researchers and lasted an hour. Interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken and transcribed. Following each interview, the two researchers combined their field notes and discussed their observations which were folded into the analysis. Data analysis followed each round of interviews and led to refinements in the questions asked and the interpretation of the responses. This continual questioning of data resulted in several iterations of the interview protocol.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis was conducted using an a priori coding system derived from the CRT literature. The CRT tenets and premises were added to a comprehensive code book. As the researchers’ understanding of the concepts grew through engagement in the data and the CRT literature, the a priori codes that became most salient were *experiential knowledge, endemic racism, interest convergence, community cultural wealth, color-blindness* and *social justice orientation*. Because the data are limited, investigator triangulation was used as a way to increase rigor. Denzin (2012) describes investigator triangulation as an opportunity to apply different or alternative theories to the data. Examining data collaboratively encourages multiple perspectives, which offers a more complete understanding of the data, and supports the trustworthiness of findings. Specifically each investigator brought experience with different theoretical lenses to the study, and each was discussed before identifying CRT as the most useful lens for answering the research question.

**Working Learner Analysis**

The code “community cultural wealth” was used to explain the different types of capital the working learners drew on. Aspirational, social, linguistic, familial, and social capital were
especially evident. Examination of the coded excerpts revealed persistent tensions between what
the learners noted they brought to their learning and employment experiences (e.g., goals, skills,
experiential knowledge, language flexibility) and what was made available to them (e.g.,
employment opportunities or educational options). Analyses revealed employers, support
providers, and educators appeared to undervalue the experiential knowledge of learners. At that
point, we had analyzed only participants who were female English language learners. To check
the trustworthiness of the finding, the team returned to the data to examine the experiences of
three additional participants whose profiles matched those of other participants except for
language and gender. These multiple data points served as data triangulation and helped refine
our understanding of the role language and gender may have played in the participants’ learning
experiences.

Key Stakeholder Analysis

Analyses made visible critical incidents of endemic racism. Critical incidents are
unplanned or unanticipated events that researchers noted as memorable, illustrative, or unsettling
(Finch, 2010). The critical incident excerpts coded “endemic racism” included descriptions of
learners and educational opportunity. The code was applied to excerpts whether or not the
interviewees expressed knowledge of the racialized nature of the incident. The code “interest
convergence” was evident in the selected excerpts of data describing incidents where anti-racist
action was taken when it also benefited whites or the dominant power structure. This code was
applied to excerpts where stakeholders discussed how changes to policy and practice impacted
individuals and business. A social justice orientation was applied as a code when an interviewee
shared that an action had taken place in response to perceived inequities.
Findings

RQ1: What Do the Perspectives of Adult Learners Reveal?

This section contains a discussion of the emergent themes of mal-employment and the role of intersectionality. The section ends with an examination of insights gained about community cultural wealth and the role of social capital in accessing opportunities.

Mal-employment and Intersectionality

Mal-employment describes the experience of four of the six focal participants who were immigrants. The experiences of the four immigrant women raised the question of how race/ethnicity, language, and gender may have contributed to differing experiences and what opportunities were offered.

Language discrimination. Winta and Maggie had four-year degrees from universities in their countries of origin, but they started work in low-paid service jobs. Although Julie had a certificate in dental assisting, she felt unable to work in that position because of her limited English proficiency. She moved into a volunteer position at a food pantry. We wondered whether language discrimination may have contributed to their experience, but Muhazzim, who was also an English Language Learner, had a different experience. This difference led us to consider the role of gender in the opportunities made available.

Gender discrimination. As a man unencumbered with family responsibilities and reporting to a male supervisor, Muhazzim may have been able to make connections in ways that the women were not. He commented on his close relationship with his manager, who provided guidance and support educationally, professionally, and personally. His identity as a man and the networking this relationship with his manager afforded may have shaped his ability to progress.
in his career goals. Muhazzim’s close relationship to his direct manager raised a new question about the role of social capital, which is part of community cultural wealth.

**Community Cultural Wealth**

The elements of community cultural wealth most frequently coded were aspirational, familial, linguistic, and social capital. Familial capital was evident when Victoria mentioned that her husband of 19 years works for the same employer and is “…100 percent supportive.” Winta described how her large extended family gave her support, and Maggie talked about her mother. Maggie and Winta were part of their immigrant and refugee communities and through them learned of organizations that provided avenues for learning. Julie was also connected to the immigrant and refugee community, which helped her find learning opportunities. By virtue of being multilingual, Winta, Maggie, Julia, and Muhazzim had linguistic capital. Destiny, a Black woman born in the United States appeared to draw on aspirational capital as she worked and took classes despite knowing her employer offered little chance for promotion.

Muhazzim and Victoria appeared to draw heavily on social capital. They referred extensively to connections to individuals within their employment setting. Victoria described herself as being “good at networking.” Victoria was able to move ahead because of her connections with others in her company. As Victoria noted, she was hesitant to pursue a leadership position until she was mentored by a male colleague.

Winta, Maggie, and Julie described connections and support drawn on from their personal stories of community cultural wealth and life experience but did not mention connections within their places of employment or target careers. Destiny did not discuss her community or family connections and she did not network within the company. She was praised
by her managers for taking courses and lost the opportunity for growth when a position within her company was eliminated.

Although the sample is too small to make generalizable statements, the data from Victoria and Muhazzim suggest the networking they engaged in as part of their jobs is important.

It may have been Muhazzim’s and Victoria’s ability to connect to others within their organizations that helped them advance professionally. It is important to note that it was not a failure on the part of other participants to leverage social capital. Instead, the opportunities presented to them did not help build the social capital needed. Neither Destiny, Winta, nor Maggie were mentored despite their educational histories.

Summary RQ1

The use of CRT problematized the types of learning and jobs BIPOC and immigrant working learners are directed into regardless of their background and strengths. Although all of the participants had strengths as evidenced by their experiences, often these strengths were not drawn on by their employers. All participants had qualifications, some with degrees from their own country, but these assets and resources were not consistently acknowledged or recognized by their employers. Mal-employment is well documented (Fogg and Harrington, 2012; Habibi & Kamis, 2021), and a CRT analysis illustrates that mal-employment needs to be considered through the lens of intersectionality and the types of social capital available to working learners. Moreover, mal-employment raises the question of how endemic racism contributes to the limited opportunities made available.

RQ2: What Do the Perspectives and Practices of Adult Education Stakeholders Reveal?

The use of CRT afforded insights into the perspectives of key stakeholders. For the purpose of this article, we selected eight critical incidents and provide excerpts from interviews
that illustrate the codes of social justice orientation, endemic racism, interest convergence, and color blindness.

**Social Justice Orientation**

Three critical incidents show how a social justice perspective was evident among some of the key stakeholders. Ivana spoke of how she assisted working learners around the challenges of digital technology access. She said, “*Technology is a big, big challenge for our clients. It’s a huge challenge....I plan to buy laptops for two of these clients. I found very cheap laptops, $220 and the [program] will buy these laptops for them, and I will enroll them in this basic computer skills program.*” Similarly, Matthew supported his students when he allowed students to bring their children to class because he understood the challenges of childcare. Leslie advocated for her students when working with human resources about the materials given to the English learners. She explained, “[HR] said they tried to make it [training video] simpler. I was like, are you kidding me? Eighty percent of your employees are immigrants, and you have this video that is so idiomatic English.” Her comment to HR pointed out the need to make program changes to address cultural differences and better align with linguistic proficiency.

**Endemic Racism**

Although key stakeholders sometimes took action to support or advocate for their students, critical incidents showed how key stakeholders could be unaware of systemic racism in the programs they described. For example, Matthew discussed how his students who work in the fast food industry were different from his students who were sponsored by a large employer. He said, “*Many of our other students are working, but because of our socio-economic area, they're [in] fast food. They're at the low end of the scale on wages and that is a different type of student than what we get with [program name for the sponsored students].... You get into fast food and*
the students (are) fortunate if they've got the same manager at the end of the semester they had at the beginning of semester. Lots of turnover, working very strange shifts. They just struggle much more than the sponsored students.” Although he never named race, the fast-food industry, low-wages, and insecure working conditions, has a complex history with the BIPOC community (Chatelain, 2020). Though Matthew recognized the unfairness of the situation, he did not demonstrate an awareness of implicit bias, as evidenced in his description of the students’ experiences.

**Interest Convergence**

Interview data coded as interest convergence identified two critical incidents. Key stakeholders identified policy and program decisions that benefited the learners, but only when those also benefited the employers. For example, Lynn said, “We have a jobs committee that we created a couple of years ago that was a response to our tenants struggling to be able to hire enough people to fulfill the open jobs at the [location]... So if they're struggling to recruit, then we're going to focus our initiatives on the recruitment side.... [Shows] the opportunity to work at the [location]; that we were invested in careers and that we had ample opportunities here to develop and grow a career.” In another critical incident, Carmen recognized that soft skills for job searching supports the learners and benefits employers by turning workers into “someone that the companies would want to hire.”

**Color-blindness**

Two critical incidents illustrate how color-blindness contributed to the construction of endemic racism. Matthew stated that as a first generation scholar he understood the challenges faced by his students, and if he could do it, anyone could. This suggests that while he understood
the challenges of being a first generation student, he had not examined his privilege as a white male.

Color-blindness was also evident in Ralph’s perception of what learning behaviors are desirable and what a culture of learning should look like. Ralph described a competitive culture and did not accept time limitations as an excuse for not participating in learning opportunities. He said, “If you can’t find six to 10 hours a week, when you’re working you know 45 or 50 hours...what are you doing that you can’t afford a couple hours a day, or you know, half of your Saturday or four hours one evening to help further your career?” Ralph suggests that everyone has some amount of free time for learning. Perspectives such as Ralph’s do not acknowledge or value the different lives and cultural values of people from cultures that are not white and male.

Summary RQ2

Analysis of eight critical incidents shows key stakeholders strove to support working learners, but did not name racism as a factor that shaped learners’ experiences specifically. This lack of awareness supported interest convergence, which, if the sole motivator for providing opportunity for economic advancement, can foster systemic racism (Bell, 1980). While white key stakeholders reflected on their experience and sought to connect to the lives of the adults with whom they work, they tended to be color-blind and missed how their experience may differ from working learners who are immigrants or Black, Indigienous, or People of Color.

Even when key stakeholders took an explicit social justice stance, endemic racism shaped colorblind policies, program design, and individual ways of thinking. Discussions of policy and program design revealed how interest convergence informed decision making. Data showed that in some circumstances, participants took action against an inequitable system but were not consciously aware of the systemic racism that informed the educational context in which they
were working. When key stakeholders took action, it tended to be at the individual level to mitigate an immediate issue rather than to identify and address systemic problems. This revelation is not meant to blame the key stakeholders for inaction; rather it suggests that individuals, even when they seek to make a difference, are limited by their roles.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The experiential knowledge of working learners provided insights into the role of intersectionality and community cultural wealth. Although working learners were doing everything in their power to progress, and key stakeholders were striving to support learners as much as possible, systemic barriers that are part of endemic racism prevented the full realization of anyone’s efforts.

The data identified and problematized the mal-employment faced by working learners. The opportunities made available failed to build on the strengths brought by bilingual and multilingual individuals. It also revealed that even when working learners are aspirational, committed, focused, and take advantage of every opportunity presented, they may not be able to move beyond their current position. Without racially conscious mentoring (Vargas, Saetermoe, and Chavira, 2020) that helps build social capital within an organization, there may be little that can be done to move up. In short, the economic and workforce development systems appear to be stacked against them, and this may be because of endemic racism.

Key stakeholders were committed to their students and strove to mitigate the challenges facing working learners whenever they identified an issue. However, color blindness may be preventing key stakeholders from taking action, or they may be limited by the role they play—they have only so much power to make changes. When changes beneficial to working learners were enacted, it was only when those changes benefited the organization as well.
This qualitative study is not without its limitations. The analysis delves into the experiences of working learners and key stakeholders, but the data set is small and the analysis relies on researcher interpretation. Findings are not generalizable in the traditional sense, yet the use of CRT principles and approaches to data analysis may be transferable to other contexts. We recognize that the racialized history of the United States deeply informs our use of CRT and the findings that emerged. Nonetheless, this small scale study is indicative of wider trends that can inform international efforts by demonstrating the power of a CRT analysis and the acute impact of barriers to equitable learning opportunities.

Data analysis, informed by CRT, prompted us to ask important questions about the role of race, language groups, gender, and illustrated how problematic it is when the experiences and qualifications of immigrants and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are not consistently acknowledged or recognized. Findings indicate there is an insufficient awareness of implicit bias in policy, program design and implementation, and even at the level of well-meaning individuals. We seek opportunities to widen the conversation and move analysis beyond interpretive description and into the realm of social action to provoke change at policy and program level as well as among practitioners. The research process provided the context to pose important questions that will continue to be interrogated far beyond the parameters of this study.

References


RUNNING HEAD: Examining Perspectives Using Critical Race Theory


Table 1.

*Participants: Key Stakeholders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Notes about Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Workforce development</td>
<td>Refers learners to educational opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CBO*</td>
<td>Career Navigator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Workforce development</td>
<td>Refers learners to educational opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Career Navigator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Adult education program</td>
<td>Teaches courses financially supported by workforce development agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Airport</td>
<td>Taught in the airport, but is an employee of an adult education program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Airport</td>
<td>Administered the course taught by Leslie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR employee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Retail organization</td>
<td>Enrolled in courses to recruit learners he supervised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Community Based Organization. In the United States, a CBO is a public or private nonprofit organization that represents a community and provides educational or related services to individuals in the community.*
Table 2.

Participants: Working Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home language</th>
<th>Prior Education*</th>
<th>Current Learning Course</th>
<th>Prior Job</th>
<th>Current Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winta</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>4yr degree</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Retail Cashier</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>4yr degree</td>
<td>CNA</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>Security</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>Dental Assistant,</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ESL class</td>
<td>English, Computer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Some college and</td>
<td>LinkedIn Learning</td>
<td>Front desk clerk</td>
<td>Hotel front desk supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Employer sponsored</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hospitality</td>
<td>courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muhazzim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, English</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Supervisory course</td>
<td>Dept. supervisor</td>
<td>Database management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>BA, Management Certificate</td>
<td>Leadership training</td>
<td>Mechanic (bus)</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Educational attainment was self-reported. We did not ask for documentation or other forms of proof.