



CRT(ish) 'indoctrination' in schools: youth exposure and association with negative outcomes

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Abstract

Recent years have seen debate over the intrusion of progressive sociopolitical narratives, henceforth referred to as CRT(ish) into K12 education. Though passionate, these debates have often progressed with little data regarding how common these narratives are in education or evidence whether they are harmful. The current preregistered study sought to add data to this debate with a sample of 221 youth aged 13–18. Exposure to CRT(ish) sociopolitical beliefs via teachers was, overall, common in this sample. Left-wing authoritarian beliefs were likewise common among youth, though CRT(ish) exposure did not predict the latter. CRT(ish) exposure was generally not associated with negative outcomes, but mental health problems were. Mental health problems were associated with left-wing authoritarian beliefs, and such beliefs were also more common among girls than boys. Left-wing authoritarian beliefs were also associated with classist attitudes. Non-ideological teaching of the history or race and racism in the US was widely common, suggesting progressive worries on this score are misplaced. In exploratory analyses, trait victimhood was associated with higher ethnocentrism, classism, and left-wing authoritarianism. Cluster analysis suggested that left-wing authoritarianism is particularly common among girls with higher mental health symptoms and trait victimhood. Overall, left-wing authoritarian beliefs are worryingly common among youth, but appear less tied to CRT(ish) infused teaching than clustered particularly among girls with mental health problems, perceptions of victimhood and classist beliefs.

Keywords Critical race theory · Mental health · Classism · Victimhood · Teaching

Recent years have seen intense debates regarding K12 teaching in the United States, Canada and elsewhere. Put briefly, these debates focus on the moral tone of messages communicated to students by teachers. I use the term CRT(ish) to refer to a constellation of critical social justice and progressive sociopolitical views that have been associated

with Critical Race Theory (CRT) but actually include a wider variety of progressive beliefs. CRT(ish) views tend to highlight group identity dynamics, binary oppressor/victim narratives, and deemphasize free speech and due process. CRT(ish) beliefs tend to highlight, for instance, views that the US and Europe remain mired in systemic racism, that whites are uniquely racist and harmful as an ethnicity, that modern cultures remain heavily sexist, homophobic or transphobic, or that gender identity is unquestionable and more important than biological sex. On one hand, conservatives are concerned that K12 teaching has become progressively biased, with messages that are unpatriotic, obsessed with race, identity, and oppression, potentially racist or sexist, and unduly shaming of students. By contrast progressives defend these practices, suggest conservatives are fomenting a moral panic and worry students don't learn enough about historical injustices. Typically argued in public by policy makers and social advocates, these debates often take place with relatively little data regarding how common the teaching practices in question are, nor their impact on students.

Statement of Relevance: Policy makers, teachers, and parents are debating the impact of progressive ideology in K12 teaching. The current study finds that it is fairly common for youth to be exposed to such practices. Left-wing authoritarian beliefs are also fairly common among youth, though exposure to CRT(ish) teaching did not appear to be the primary mechanism for the development of such beliefs. Rather, such beliefs appeared to be clustered among youth with mental health problems, classist beliefs and trait victimhood, particularly among girls.

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The current study seeks to bring some data to these interesting and important issues in a sample of youth.

The CRT(ish) debate

Debates that K12 education has become too ideologically progressive or, conversely, not progressive enough are nothing new. Yet, they appeared to reach a particular intensity following the Covid19 epidemic when parents were more able to view instruction taking place online. Several incidents received news media coverage such as a biracial student being told that one parent is probably abusing the other because of their respective races, or young children being asked to make public apologies for their race (Lukianoff et al., 2021). Anecdotes such as these are alarming, but merely anecdotes. They don't necessarily reflect widespread practices. Nonetheless, they have inflamed tensions over how identity issues are addressed in schools.

The current trend toward CRT(ish) education can be situated in larger history education trends, stretching back decades (see, Vinovskis, 2015) in which history educators became more interested in policy and also engaged in revisionist history, often stressing negatives of the United States and other industrialized cultures. Some scholars (e.g., Negy, 2020) have suggested that, beyond a necessary corrective to biased US-centric education, this often took the form of unrealistically positive narratives of black and indigenous cultures, and outright prejudice toward white or other industrialized cultures. In this sense, CRT(ish) replaced jingoistic misinformation, not with more accurate historical information, but rather with a different set of prejudiced information (of course, a conservative backlash to CRT(ish) could do the same yet again).

Much of the debate has focused on Critical Race Theory (CRT), a legal theory which posits that systemic racial oppression is widespread and a defining feature of the legal system and other aspects of American (and Canadian, European, etc.), society. CRT also tends to express skepticism toward traditional liberal values such as free speech, meritocratic advancement, due process and even the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is a controversial theory; among black scholars it has both supporters (e.g., Crenshaw, 2011) and detractors (e.g., McWhorter, 2021). Yet, CRT has arguably become a shorthand, not just for concerns over the specific theory, but rather a wider range of practices involving the teaching not only of race, but gender, feminism, and other identity related issues. These may include works that draw from CRT but are less scholarly and intended for general audiences such as the "White Fragility" concept (DiAngelo, 2018) or the "anti-racism" of Kendi (2019), or even the

equating of things like reason, objectivity, being on time and hard work with "whiteness" as was done by the Smithsonian Institute (Koop, 2020). However, the concerns also relate to "gender ideology" (the progressive theory that gender is fluid, multifaceted, and socially constructed, often linked with affirmation approaches to youth gender and advocacy for medical interventions for trans youth) and anticolonial theories that tend to portray the West, Canada, or the US harshly, but may engage in Noble Savage myths regarding indigenous cultures (Pinker, 2003). As such, these concerns, whether coming from conservatives or traditional liberals, focus on a wider range of progressive thought than only the legal theory of CRT specifically. Thus, henceforth the term CRT(ish) is used to refer to this broader array of progressive ideology under debate.

At least anecdotally, many of the practices under question may be reasonably criticized as unscientific, ideological, even perhaps racist, or harmful. But it is less clear how common they actually are. Furthermore, reactions to them, particularly from conservative legislatures have often involved harsh censorship measures and book bannings, including of materials that don't reasonably fall under the CRT(ish) umbrella, such as the work of Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King, or books that merely involve gay or trans characters without promoting specific sociopolitical narratives around gender (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Of course, censorship and book bannings are not limited to the political right, but under Republican legislatures and governors, they have taken place under state authority in more conservative states.

Progressives often defend the CRT(ish) issue in one of several ways. First, it is commonly asserted that CRT is not being taught in schools (e.g., Jones, 2021). Conversely, progressives may argue that teaching CRT in schools is simply teaching the history of race and racism in the US, Canada or elsewhere (e.g., Hughes, 2022). These two rationales can seem mutually exclusive. Further, the first rationale can appear somewhat misleading as it relies on specifically noting that K12 students are seldom asked to specifically read Delgado, Crenshaw, etc. However, it elides that many ideas expressed by CRT as well as pop versions influenced by CRT (e.g., DiAngelo, Kendi), may influence teaching practices. It also fails to note that leaders in teachers' unions have, themselves, specifically called upon including CRT in teaching as well as other CRT(ish) ideas with a resolution from 2021 promoting teaching of "...empire, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, racism, patriarchy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, [and] anthropocentrism, and other forms of power and oppression at the intersections of our society, and that we oppose attempts to ban critical race theory and/or The 1619 Project" and, multiple times, calls upon the union and its leaders to publicly

support the teaching of CRT in K12 (National Education Association, 2021). As to the second point, the main theorists of CRT have never claimed CRT is merely teaching the history of race and racism. Progressives also worry that K12 education fails to fully teach topics related to race or racism though, like CRT critics' complaints about CRT(ish), it's unknown how frequently such topics are actually covered.

As with many culture war debates, partisans on each side often talk past each other, or engage in confirmation bias selecting information that fits their worldview and ignoring that which does not. More worrisome, efforts on both sides may lead toward various forms of censorship, whether de facto shaming, firing "cancel culture" efforts on the left, or de jure censorship of banned books and teaching on the right.

How prevalent are CRT(ish) ideologies in K12 teaching

Despite several years of debate and numerous unpleasant anecdotes of both dubious teaching efforts and censorship and book bannings, little is known about how common CRT(ish) practices actually are. In the last year a few data points have begun to come to light.

In one recent British study, surveys of over 1500 youth in the UK found that exposure to CRT(ish) theories on race, gender, privilege, etc., were widespread in British schools. Specifically, concepts such as "privilege", "unconscious bias", and "systemic racism" as well as the notion of gender as a social construct were presented by teachers as factual and beyond debate to approximately 73% of British students (Kaufman, 2022). Despite the fact that many of these concepts are contentious and debated among scholars, they were typically presented as factual by teachers to students¹. Nonetheless, this study also found that social media, more than teachers, was a primary route via which students were first introduced to CRT(ish) concepts.

A second study (see Goldberg & Kaufman, 2022) has replicated these findings with an American student population. A majority of students reported being exposed to CRT(ish) beliefs such as that "America is a systemically racist country" or "white people have unconscious biases that negatively affect non-white people" or "gender is an identity choice, regardless of the biological sex you were born into." As with UK students, these beliefs were typically presented as factual, not as points of debate. Further, students who were more exposed to these concepts were

more likely to believe them than those who were not, suggesting education as a point of transmission of left political beliefs.

Nonetheless these studies are few in number and replication with different samples is desirable. Furthermore, though these studies connect teaching to youth adoption of left political beliefs (particularly in Goldberg & Kaufman, 2022), they typically do not consider a wider context of youth experiences. It is to these issues we briefly turn in the next section of this manuscript.

Other issues

Much of the debate regarding CRT(ish) focuses on concerns that these approaches to education are, in some way, either good or bad. However, good or bad *for what* isn't always made entirely clear. As noted by Goldberg and Kaufman (2022) one possibility is that CRT(ish) exposure may inculcate politically leftist beliefs in students. Whether this is "bad" or "good" is likely subjective given the observer's own political beliefs, albeit this could involve two reasonable issues. First, CRT(ish) teaching could instill empirical or historical beliefs that are false. For instance, as Goldberg and Kaufman note, this could include the belief that countries such as the United States or Europe are among the most racist on the planet, despite some evidence suggesting they are, in fact, among the *least* racist (Berggren & Nillson, 2013, see also Fisher, 2013). Naturally, assessing racism across cultures is difficult and it may be best to teach these topics as nuances and complexities, but the concern is this is precisely what CRT(ish) education does not do, preferring sweeping statements declaring the US and other western nations to be intolerably racist. If the facts are more nuanced, or do not exactly line up with such claims, the result is *miseducation*. The other concern is that CRT(ish) education may push skepticism toward core values such as free speech and due process as such skepticism is often explicitly part of CRT and other progressive narratives (of course, many conservative "solutions" to the CRT(ish) may be criticized on exactly the same grounds). Nonetheless, we might expect to see CRT(ish) education associated with left-wing authoritarianism.

Presumably the anti-racist (Kendi, 2019) values which are core to CRT(ish) education are designed to reduce racism in youth. As such it is reasonable to hypothesize that CRT(ish) exposure might reduce facets of racism such as ethnocentrism. By contrast, if CRT(ish) education is dangerous, it may be associated with increasing mental health concerns in youth or, to the extent it appears most popular among highly educated progressives (Pew Research Center, 2021) with classist attitudes. Lastly, trait victimhood (Gabay

¹ The concept of unconscious bias is perhaps a key example. Often presented as factual and beyond debate to young students in primary or secondary schools, the concept appears to be in very serious trouble in the academic literature (Forscher et al., 2019; Oswald et al., 2013).

et al., 2020) refers to a tendency to see oneself as a victim of the oppression of others, often responding vindictively to that perception. Trait victimhood is viewed as a personality trait, not a situational one, marked by moral sanctimoniousness, aggression, and aversion to fairness and due process. It is possible either that CRT(ish) education may particularly appeal to individuals high in trait victimhood, or conversely may help instill such traits given the CRT(ish) focus on sanctifying victims and focused narratives on oppression. Taken together, these variables (mental health, left-wing authoritarianism, trait victimhood, ethnocentrism, classism), appear worthy of studying in the context of potential outcomes associated with CRT(ish) education.

Other factors that could influence relevant outcomes

Concerns among some parents and policymakers involve the potential impact of CRT(ish) teaching on mental health, left-wing authoritarianism, ethnocentrism (due to emphasizing race and other identities), and classism. Thus, it is important to understand how school policies are influencing not only student well-being but their civic involvement as it relates to civil rights and egalitarianism. However, other factors may also influence these outcomes and are worthy of consideration.

Mental health concerns in schools have also been at the forefront of parent and policymaker attention. Data suggests that recent years have seen an increase in mental health disorders, particularly internalizing disorders, among youth (Mojtabai & Olfson, 2020). In terms of population trends, this appears to correlated with increased emphasis on CRT(ish) trends in education though, of course, many other cultural phenomena were occurring at the same time.

As indicated above, one concern that has recently emerged has been *trait victimhood* a personality trait marked by focusing on perceived victimhood as a core element of identity, often accompanied by aggressive and retaliatory behavior (Gabay et al., 2020). Such individuals may tend toward more authoritarian and aggressive beliefs, as well as increased classism and ethnocentrism to the degree they blame other groups for their own perceived problems. Thus, it is possible that issues related to mental health and trait victimhood specifically may predict outcomes such as left-wing authoritarianism, ethnocentrism or classism.

The current study

The current study sought to examine the degree of exposure that youth 13–18 have with CRT(ish) education and it's relation with the outcome variables noted above. As such the following hypotheses are examined. The first two hypotheses are merely descriptive:

H1: To what extent are students 13–18 exposed to CRT(ish) ideological beliefs by teachers in schools?

H2: To what extent are students 13–18 exposed to factually true (and historically non-controversial) information on this history of race and racism in the United States?

The remaining hypotheses test specific associations:

H3: Exposure to CRT(ish) education as well as trait victimhood is associated with higher mental health problems.

H4: Exposure to CRT(ish) education is associated with higher left-wing authoritarianism.

H5: Exposure to CRT(ish) education is associated with either greater or reduced ethnocentrism.

H6: Exposure to factual teaching of history will be associated with reduced ethnocentrism.

H7: Exposure to CRT(ish) education is associated with increased classism.

H8: Exposure to CRT(ish) will be associated with greater trait victimhood.

Outcomes related to mental health and ethnocentrism (a component or racism) given that these outcomes have been widely discussed in the general public as current concerns for youth. The early 2020s saw proponents expose the belief that racism had become widespread and a major problem in the US and Europe (e.g., DiAngelonnn, 2018), whereas others claimed that a mental health crisis had gripped youth (see Ferguson et al., 2025 or Yang & Feng, 2024, for discussion of this phenomenon). By contrast, concern has also been expressed that modern progressivism is defined by classism and hostility toward the working class, often seen as uneducated, racist “deplorables” (Flanagan, 2023). These societal concerns guided selection of these outcome variables.

Preregistration: Note that all hypotheses, methods and analyses are preregistered and available here: <https://osf.io/m7f8s>.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study were 221 youth ages 13–18 ($M=16.7$, $SD=1.5$) recruited via snowball sampling both online and through recruitment via association with college students at a liberal arts university in the American South. 75 (33.0%) of the participants were male. Regarding, ethnicity, 127 participants (57.5%) were white, 16 (7.2%) were black, 8 (3.6%) were Asian, 63 (28.5%) were Latino and 7 (3.2%) didn't belong to any of these categories. There were originally 300 hits to the survey. As per the preregistration guidelines, blank responses (common with online surveys) were eliminated as were those which failed several validity checks. These included 1 basic item for careless responding ("Please mark this item as mostly true"), as well as 1 item for mischievous responding ("I once owned a three-headed dog"). The History of Racism item likewise included three validity items for improbable responses (e.g., "Black people came down to Earth in spaceships from Venus.") As per the preregistration, any respondent who failed any of these checks were eliminated from the database, resulting in the final sample of 221.

All methods described within passed local IRB. All participants viewed an informed consent form which was consented to by their guardians and assented to by the youth themselves.

Measures

All measures described below reflect composite scores taken from the mean of the included individual scores unless indicated otherwise.

CRT(ish) exposure To measure CRT(ish) exposure in schools, a survey of 18 Likert items was developed wherein students were asked how often they had heard specific concepts directly from teachers or school staff. These included ideological beliefs taken direct from CRT "I have been told the United States is systematically oppressing certain groups based on race, religion, or gender", those associated with movements such as the Black Lives Matter organization "Unarmed black people are being shot by police very often"² or the beliefs of pop anti-racism (e.g., DiAngelo,

2018) "All white people are racist", but also other progressive sociopolitical beliefs such as on gender "Gender is a social construct" or "I have been asked about my personal pronouns". Items addressing discouragement of open debate were also included such as "If I disagree with what my teacher says, I am racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic" as well as exaggerated criticism of the United States such as "The United States is more racist than other cultures/nations" and "Racism in the United States is as bad as it has ever been"³. Internal reliability for this measure was high ($\alpha=.92$). This measure with all questions can be found at: <https://osf.io/uqv86>.

History of racism scale Similar to the CRT(ish) scale, a History of Racism scale comprising of 10 Likert items (α reliability=0.86) was developed. As with the CRT(ish) scale, students were asked how often they'd been exposed to historical teaching on race or racism by teachers and school staff. All items were historically uncontroversial items such as "Martin Luther King Jr. was an important Civil Rights leader" and "Many Founders of the United States owned slaves" and "Intermarriage between black and white Americans was illegal in many states until the 1960s." This full scale (including 3 validity items that weren't included in the scale score) is available at: <https://osf.io/uqv86>.

Mental health symptoms The Brief Symptoms Inventory-18 (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2000) assesses three dimensions of psychological distress: somatization, depression, and anxiety. For this study, a total score (the global severity index [GSI]) calculated based on a summation of all three subscales. Based on this sample of participants, the BSI-18 provided scores with acceptable reliability (Cronbach $\alpha=0.94$).

Left wing authoritarianism (LWA) As we could not find a similar scale as the RWA for left-wing authoritarianism, we developed one consisting of rigid left-wing beliefs and willingness to eschew free speech or due process to enforce those beliefs. Sample items include: "People who, as teens, made jokes that were racist, sexist, or transphobic should not be admitted to universities, even years later"; "It is sometimes necessary to censor people or books who/which promote views that I feel are racist, transphobic, sexist, or otherwise hateful"; and "Sometimes it is necessary to use physical violence against those who marginalize vulnerable communities, even if those people have not engaged in physical violence themselves". The full scale is openly

² This is an excellent example of a popular, but false belief see McCaffree and Saide (2021).

³ Like other such statements in this measure, this viewpoint is common on the political left, but empirically false (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019).

available at: <https://osf.io/a35dx/>. Coefficient alpha for the present sample was 0.94.

Trait victimhood For this construction I used the trait victimhood scale developed by Gabay et al. (2020). This scale consists of 22 items, with sample items including “People claim that I have hurt them because they cannot see that they are the ones hurting me” and “I feel that other people don’t hesitate to take advantage of my weaknesses.” Coefficient alpha with the present sample was 0.89.

Ethnocentrism Ethnocentrism is a concept marked by preference for being around individuals similar to one’s own ethnicity and dislike or disdain for those who are of a different ethnic background. For this study it was measured using the Multiethnic Climate Inventory (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Sample items include “I don’t like some other races or cultures” and “I want to do social things only with people of my own race and culture.” This was a 10-item Likert scale with coefficient alpha of 0.87.

Classism To assess classist attitudes in the current sample a 7-item Likert scale was devised. Sample items include “I must admit, rural poor people sometimes seem angry or irrational to me” and “People should be required to get a certain level of education before being allowed to vote.” Coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.65 and it is fully available at: <https://osf.io/sjgmq>.

Distractor surveys Demand characteristics, or the ability of participants to guess research hypotheses can result in spurious outcomes. Thus, it can be valuable to consider measures to reduce hypothesis guessing. In this study, two surveys were included, namely of music preferences and mating preferences, to make the study hypotheses less obvious. As there were no actual hypotheses regarding these measures, they aren’t discussed further.

Procedure

As indicated above, all study procedures and analyses were preregistered. All analyses were conducted using OLS regression using pairwise deletion for missing data. Biological sex and age were included as covariates in all analyses, with exposure to CRT(ish) as the main predictor. BSI also served as a covariate for all analyses other than the one for which it is the main outcome. Other outcomes include classism, ethnocentrism, trait victimhood, and far-left authoritarianism. Regressions will also consider a BSI x CRT(ish) interaction term. Exposure to history of racism will also be included in OLS with age, gender and mental health as predictors of ethnocentrism and trait victimhood. OLS

regression was chosen as a simple, direct and robust method of analysis. Regarding sensitivity analyses, outcomes were generally robust if regression method or means of addressing missing data were altered. Data from the study are available at: <https://osf.io/4qnpk>.

Regarding sex, 3 respondents indicated “prefer not to say” on this. In order not to exclude them, these individuals were included with female respondents. Thus, the sex variable should be considered one of biological maleness specifically.

Results

Main analyses (descriptive)

Descriptive results for the responses to the CRT(ish) questionnaire are presented in Table 1. Although there was considerable variance between items, overall, exposure to CRT(ish) ideas were very common. Those that were most common tended to related to Black Lives Matter narratives (that shooting of unarmed black Americans is common, that the US is systemically racist) as well as the Noble Savage myth of peaceful Native Americans. Less common was targeting of students themselves (asking them to apologize for sins of their ethnic group or sex; calling them racist or homophobic for disagreeing with the teacher). For 10 of the 18 items, more students had been exposed to the CRT(ish) ideological teaching than had not.

Descriptive results for the responses to the History of Racism questionnaire are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, the history of racism and race in the US was thoroughly taught in this sample. Only for two items (on Frederick Douglas and the illegality of interracial marriage in the pre-Civil Rights US) did non-exposure reach double digits and even then, only in the teens.

Although not included in the preregistration I also present descriptive results for the responses to the Left-Wing Authoritarianism questionnaire in Table 3. Once again, though endorsements varied by item, agreement with left-wing authoritarian principles were generally high. Highest support was found for items endorsing the view of the United States as a racist, oppressive society. Lowest support was found for permanent cancellations, the belief that it is transphobic not to date trans individuals, abolition of police and abolition of campus free speech statements. By contrast, roughly half of participants were willing to support censorship of views they find to be offensive, or an authoritarian Department of Antiracism which would censure politically incorrect views or policies (e.g., Kendi, 2019).

Table 1 Descriptive responses to the CRT(ish) questionnaire

Question	None	Moderate	Considerable
All white people have privilege over other people.	38.9	37.5	22.6
All white people are racist.	63.3	25.7	10.0
Unarmed black people are being shot by police very often.	23.5	42.0	33.5
The United States is more racist than other cultures/nations.	37.6	36.7	24.9
I have been asked to talk about my own privilege based on my race/ethnicity.	58.8	29.9	10.4
I have been asked about my personal pronouns.	35.7	42.5	20.8
I have been told people are not really born as boys or girls but identify with a gender later.	56.6	31.7	10.9
...the United States is systematically oppressing certain groups based on race, religion, or gender.	24.0	44.3	30.8
I have been told not to be proud of the United States.	59.3	25.3	14.0
I have been told that there are many genders beyond male and female.	32.6	42.5	24.0
Racism in the United States is as bad as it has ever been.	40.7	42.5	14.9
If I disagree with what my teacher says, I am racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic.	72.9	19.0	7.3
I have been asked to apologize...for things I didn't do but other people of my race or gender...	75.1	19.4	4.1
Native Americans lived entirely in peace and harmony with nature before Europeans arrived.	29.4	37.1	32.6
Slavery only existed in European colonies, then the United States, not really other places.	62.4	27.6	9.1
Gender is a social construct.	40.7	39.8	18.1
There are no biological differences between different racial/ethnic groups at all.	44.8	32.5	21.7
There are benefits to having black-only spaces where white people aren't allowed.	72.9	17.7	8.6

Note: Some items have been truncated to fit in the table, but the full measure is available at: <https://osf.io/uqv86>. For ease of presentation item responses “a little” and “a moderate amount” were collapsed to “moderate” and “a lot” and “a great deal” were collapsed to “considerable.” Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data

Table 2 Descriptive responses to the history of racism questionnaire

Question	None	Moderate	Considerable
The US Civil War was primarily fought over slavery.	7.2	39.3	53.4
After the Civil War a system of Jim Crow Laws oppressed black Americans for generations.	9.5	37.5	52.5
The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s achieved legal racial equality for black Americans.	5.4	54.3	39.8
Martin Luther King Jr. was an important Civil Rights leader.	0.5	10.4	89.1
Frederick Douglass wrote passionately about eradicating slavery in the United States.	19.9	41.1	38.1
The Underground Railroad helped many black slaves escape the US south for the north.	2.7	28.9	68.3
The Ku Klux Klan terrorized and murdered black people after the US Civil War.	7.2	27.1	65.6
Black Americans were legally segregated...until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.	2.7	31.7	65.6
Many Founders of the United States owned slaves.	6.8	41.2	52.1
Intermarriage between black and white Americans was illegal in many states until the 1960s.	14.9	40.3	44.8

Note: Some items have been truncated to fit in the table, but the full measure is available at: <https://osf.io/uqv86>. For ease of presentation item responses “a little” and “a moderate amount” were collapsed to “moderate” and “a lot” and “a great deal” were collapsed to “considerable.” Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data

Main analyses (hypothesis testing H3-7)

For all analyses, VIFs were below 2.0, indicating an absence of multicollinearity. Effect sizes for all predictors in all regressions are presented in Table 4.

For the first regression (H3, with mental health symptoms as the outcome), the overall model was significant $F(4, 180)=7.71$, $p<.001$, $R^2_{adj}=0.13$. Of the predictors, only maleness was inversely related to mental health symptoms ($\beta = -0.30$). CRT(ish) was not a predictor of mental health symptoms.

For the second regression (H4, with left-wing authoritarianism as the outcome), the overall model was significant $F(5, 179)=8.87$, $p<.001$, $R^2_{adj}=0.18$. Of the predictors, maleness was inversely related to left-wing authoritarianism

($\beta = -0.32$) as was mental health symptoms ($\beta=0.22$). CRT(ish) was not a predictor of left-wing authoritarianism, nor was its interaction with mental health symptoms.

For the third regression (H5 and H6 regarding ethnocentrism), the overall model was non-significant $F(6, 178)=1.83$, $p=.01$, $R^2_{adj}=0.03$. As such, individual predictors were not examined.

For the fourth regression (H7 with classism as the outcome), the overall model was non-significant $F(5, 179)=0.81$, $p=.54$, $R^2_{adj}=0.01$. As such, individual predictors were not examined.

Regarding the regression for trait victimhood (H8) the overall model was significant $F(6, 178)=5.14$, $p<.001$, $R^2_{adj}=0.12$. Of the predictors, only maleness was inversely related to left-wing authoritarianism ($\beta = -0.29$).

Table 3 Descriptive responses to the left wing authoritarianism questionnaire

Question	False	True
I believe that people who doubt whether trans women should compete in woman's sports are....	62.4	37.1
Gender is a social construct and has little to no basis in biology.	57.0	42.6
People who, as teens, made jokes that were racist, sexist or transphobic should not be admitted to....	79.1	20.8
The United States is one of the most racist places in the world.	46.6	53.4
Police violence against unarmed Black people is increasing, daily, widespread and explained...	38.9	60.1
White silence is violence when it comes to structural racism.	49.4	50.7
Our social world is defined by systems of oppression.	33.5	66.0
I must admit I feel a lot of anger toward cis heterosexual white men in general more than other groups.	73.3	26.2
I believe that police forces in the United States should be entirely abolished.	88.7	11.3
Universities should abolish their free speech statements as free speech typically is used to oppress...	87.3	12.7
Any disagreement with the concept of systemic/structural racism is itself racist.	67.8	31.7
If a heterosexual man does not want to have sex with a trans woman, or a gay man does not want to....	88.7	10.9
Racism in the United States is as bad as it has ever been, even if it has gone underground...	58.4	41.6
Certain racial groups as well as men have inherent privilege, whatever their personal social standing...	32.6	67.0
Universities should have committees which would condemn or censor faculty and student opinions...	62.0	37.1
I feel more warmly toward individuals from marginalized communities than individuals from the majority	52.5	45.7
It is sometimes necessary to censor people or books who/which promote views that I feel are racist...	48.0	51.6
Sometimes it is necessary to use physical violence against those who marginalize vulnerable communities	85.5	13.6
The United States should create a Department of Antiracism which would censure any politicians or...	47.5	51.6

Note: Some items have been truncated to fit in the table, but the full measure is available at: <https://osf.io/a35dx>. For ease of presentation item responses “definitely false” and “probably false” were collapsed to “false” and “definitely true” and “probably true” were collapsed to “true.” Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data

Table 4 Main hypotheses regression outcomes

Predictor	BSI	LWA	Ethnocentrism	Classism	Trait Victim
Male Sex	-0.30	-0.32	0.08	0.13	0.29
Age	0.04	-0.05	-0.06	0.04	0.05
Trait Victimhood	0.13	.NA	NA	NA	N/A
BSI	NA	.22	0.05	0.11	0.13
CRT(ish)	0.06	0.024	0.12	0.06	0.09
CRTxBSI	NA	-0.00	-0.02	0.08	-0.09
History of Race	NA	NA	-0.22	NA	0.01

Note: LWA= Left-Wing Authoritarianism; BSI = Brief Symptom Inventory. Bolded values are statistically significant with a Bonferroni corrected alpha value of 0.007 adjusted for the seven regressions and also meeting the $r = .10$ threshold for interpretation. All effect sizes reported are standardized regression coefficients

Exploratory analyses

Analyses in this section were not preregistered and thus should be considered more cautiously. The preregistered analyses only considered trait victimhood as a predictor for mental health symptoms. Rerunning the other regressions revealed that trait victimhood was significantly correlated with ethnocentrism ($\beta = 0.30$), classism ($\beta = 0.30$) and left-wing authoritarianism ($\beta = 0.22$).

At this juncture femaleness, mental health symptoms and trait victimhood appeared to be emerging as a potential cluster of problems. This was further examined the K-means cluster analysis which did identify two clusters. Cluster 2 ($n = 71$) was more female ($M = 1.92$ versus 1.54), had higher mental health symptoms ($M = 2.91$ versus 2.60) and higher trait victimhood ($M = 2.81$ versus 1.51) than the more numerous cluster 1 ($n = 149$). Using t -test analysis,

cluster 2 also proved to be higher in left-wing authoritarianism ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.66$ versus $M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.61$; $t = 4.50$, $p < .001$), but not ethnocentrism or classism.

One final exploratory test was run. This was done to examine differences in endorsement of CRT(ish) exposure versus left-wing authoritarian beliefs. In other words, did more students report CRT(ish) exposure than endorsed left-wing authoritarianism? Unfortunately, the scales were on different metrics which did not allow for direct comparison. To correct this scale observed scores were averaged across items. From this average, the scale midpoint (for instance, “2.5” on a scale from 1 to 4) was subtracted and this score divided by the scale standard deviation (again using mean as opposed to summed scores). This allowed for a direct comparison of observed scores using paired-samples t test. The result was significant ($t(218) = 15.35$, $p < .001$), with higher

scores reported for CRT(ish) exposure ($M=0.15$, $SD=0.06$) than for left-wing authoritarianism ($M=-0.17$, $SD=0.30$).

Discussion

Recent years have seen intense cultural debates about the extent to which CRT(ish) is being taught in K12 schools and what impact this might have on youth. The current study provided some data that may inform these debates with results that were nuanced and unlikely to make either “side” entirely happy. CRT(ish) themes in education do indeed appear to be fairly common, supporting critics’ assertions about these practices. By contrast, teaching the history of race also appeared to be common, contradicting some progressives’ claims about these topics being ignored or “whitewashed” in K12 education. On the other hand, CRT(ish) exposure did not appear to predict negative outcomes. Instead, evidence suggested that negative outcomes were clustered among mainly girls with higher mental health issues, adoption of authoritarian left-wing beliefs and values and trait victimhood. On its own, trait victimhood was also linked to ethnocentrism, classism, and left-wing authoritarianism.

One interesting observation is that exposure to CRT(ish) themes in education appears to be higher than is left-wing authoritarianism. This author has heard some educators exclaim “Well, the kids aren’t listening to us anyway,” and to some extent this appears to be true. Nonetheless, this is an odd defense of an educational practice, and to the extent both CRT(ish) themed education and left-wing authoritarian beliefs emphasize factually untrue issues (such as that the United States is highly racist, that gender identity is not at all biological, or police violence toward black Americans is epidemic in nature), CRT(ish) education is at very least failing to provide a more cautious context for those youth who are embracing left-wing authoritarianism if via other means. It is interesting to see a lack of clear connection between teaching approaches and student beliefs. It may be that teacher attitudes toward authoritarianism or students’ pre-existing beliefs may moderate any relationships.

In positive, news, for this sample, the teaching of race and racism from a factual perspective was generally widespread. It may be that progressive concerns that history is being “whitewashed” are misplaced. Undoubtedly, this was true in the past but appears less true today.

At least for this sample, the widespread embrace of left-wing authoritarianism among K12 youth is concerning. Majorities of youth appear to adopt the worldview that modern Western societies are defined by racism and oppression, despite considerable evidence that the opposite is, in fact, true (Pinker, 2018). This includes a substantial minority

(13.6%) willing to accept political violence so long as it comes in a moralistic guise (as it so often does).

To be clear, were substantial numbers of youth accepting authoritarian principles opposing free speech and due process as well as embracing factually and historically untrue beliefs from a right-wing perspective this would be just as concerning. The issue is not right or left wing, but rather a substantial portion of youth are both misinformed and negligent of core values essential to the functioning of democracy. If this is not coming from CRT(ish) education specifically, then where is the source of such beliefs?

Here, again, it appears important to note that left-wing authoritarianism appears vastly more common among girls and is associated with mental health symptoms and trait victimhood. This contrasts with right-wing authoritarianism, which is seen more often in males (Rippl, & Seipel, 1999), though other research has suggested that authoritarianism more generally may be accepted more commonly among women cross-nationally, particularly when gender inequality is more pronounced (Brandt, & Henry, 2012). Exactly why mental health problems, left-wing authoritarianism and trait victimhood appear to cluster together in teen girls remains poorly understood. I express the concern that, too often, adults reach for technophobic explanations (“It’s the phones!”) or those related to politics or generation, which provide satisfying but simplistic explanations, often poorly rooted in data. Indeed, too-quick adoptions of such simplistic narratives may actually create a “bullshit asymmetry factor” in which an erroneous belief takes hold in popular imagination, making it more difficult for actual empirical data to guide policy. Unfortunately, professional guilds such as the American Psychological Association often contribute to, rather than detract from, this situation (O’Donohue & Dyslin, 1996).

It seems possible that information may pass through both social media and friend networks, with the latter particularly instrumental in setting up contingencies that reinforce value systems and discourage dissent. Those struggling with mental health or personality issues may be prone both to accepting more radical ideologies and using shame and aggression to reinforce them, particularly as relates to the features of trait victimhood (Gabay et al., 2020). Thus, value systems among youth may become a form of “minority rule” wherein highly motivated numerical/attitudinal minorities can press their values upon less motivated majorities using fear, shame, and other coercive tactics. More research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon. By contrast, adults may be too quick to blame social media without evidence. Although social media could be a route of information transfer, as of yet we have little clear evidence that it is, and technophobia over new media is common. For instance, despite widespread concerns, evidence does not suggest that

social media leads to mental health concerns among youth (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2025; Yang & Feng, 2024).

Practical implications

The prevalence of left-wing authoritarianism among youth is worthy of concern. The question is what (if anything) schools can do about it. Several thoughts are offered.

First, although CRT(ish) education does not appear to be primarily associated with increased left-wing authoritarianism, it nonetheless presents a missed opportunity to correct misinformation and instill civic values. It is probably time for the educational community to acknowledge that CRT(ish) education is, in fact, quite common and this may not have been the most productive direction for education to have evolved, either for the well-being of youth nor for the reputation of education and teaching itself. It would be valuable for teaching to recenter itself upon providing neutral information regarding history and science, rather than advocating for specific progressive worldviews and policies.

Second, educators may need to reevaluate the teaching of civics in schools. Exactly what is “civic education” is inevitably a matter of dialogue and compromise, albeit the eschewal of values related to free speech and due process among the young as well as an ignorance among the young as to the US’ role in promoting these values on the international scale is cause enough for concern. Once again, civic education which promotes core principles rather than that which advocates specific, current sociopolitical policies may be valuable.

Third, if there is a crisis of civics in our schools, this also appears to be tied to a similar crisis of mental health and a promotion of victimhood sanctification in the same. Thus, a focus on providing adequate mental health services, but also fostering resiliency may promote a change in the civic culture among youth.

It is worth noting that the issue of CRT(ish) in schools can apply to any ideological system injected into schools. Historically, the US (and Europe) prided itself in avoiding overly indoctrinating history education as compared to Communist or Fascist states, even if history education were not always perfect. By contrast, CRT(ish) appears to be deliberately indoctrinating. However, replacing CRT(ish) with a similarly indoctrinating education system from the political right would not be a positive advancement.

Limitations

As with all studies, this one has limitations that must be noted. First, the study is correlational in nature, as such no causal implications can be made. Second, the sample is non-representative and generalization to youth on a broad scale

must be taken only with advisement. Given the current sample is not random, but rather snowball, results may reflect its adjacency and regional nature to a liberal arts university in Florida. Further, the sample was weighted more toward females than males, limiting generalizability. It would be valuable for replication studies to consider different sampling methodologies. Longitudinal studies would also be welcome. Third, it would have been interesting to consider youth social media use and its association with left-wing authoritarianism and this is recommended for future research. Further, because the current sample was weighted female, cluster analysis results particularly as relates to sex should be interpreted with caution. Further research may also wish to consider qualitative designs, which may further elucidate students’ experiences with CRT(ish) education. Since this article was first conceived, another scale to measure left wing authoritarianism (e.g., Costello et al., 2022). It would be worth examining for concurrence between related scales.

Conclusions

CRT(ish) education appears to be fairly common in K12 schools. Fortunately, it does not have a clear association with left-wing authoritarianism among youth, which is most prevalent in girls with higher mental health symptoms and trait victimhood. However, the prevalence of left-wing authoritarian beliefs and values is surprisingly high among youth and may represent a legitimate concern for the health of a functioning democracy. It is recommended that schools reconsider their current strategies toward teaching, focusing on more neutral teaching of history and science, avoiding sociopolitical narratives, fostering civic education and resiliency among youth, and attending adequately to mental health concerns.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Informed consent All research described within passed local IRB and was designed to comport with federal standards for human participants research included proper informed consent.

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