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Exploring the Factors Influencing the Development of Teacher Agency for Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Abstract

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogy that promotes social justice by improving the educational experiences of students of color. This study aims to explore factors that influence teachers' agency to implement CRT. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen teachers who had adopted CRT practices in the South-Central Appalachian region of the United States. Employing a qualitative design, a hybrid thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the interview data. This exploratory study is significant in several ways. First, the study advances theoretical discussions on what constitutes the construct of teacher agency for social justice based on its empirical evidence, which captured teachers' lively voices. Second, it introduces the unique perspectives and experiences of South-Central Appalachian teachers into the discussion on the complex and less-known construct of teacher agency for social justice. Third, this study offers practical implications for school administrators, teacher educators, and policy-makers regarding what actions can promote teachers to develop and pursue social justice agendas using CRT in growingly diverse public education settings. The results discuss how the teachers perceived their sense of purpose, competence, autonomy, reflexivity, and commitment to professional development opportunities in enacting CRT in their educational practices.

Introduction

With the shifting demographic landscape of the United States, public schools are confronted with new racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), White students accounted for 46% of the total enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools in fall 2020. The NCES (2022) further projected that the enrollment of White students would decrease to 43%, whereas enrollment of students of color would continue to increase to 57% between 2020 and 2030.

Despite the observed and projected increases in diversity, unchanged discriminatory practices in U.S. public schools have aggravated educational inequality. For example, textbooks used in most schools focus on the ideology of the dominant group, underrepresenting people of color, women, the poor, or people with disabilities and reinforcing White supremacy (Love, 2019; Gay, 2018; Sleeter & Grant, 2017). Similarly, children's literature is largely written by White authors: According to statistics from the Cooperative Children's Books Center (2022),

books written by people of color accounted only for 30% of the total publications received in 2021. Moreover, many teachers and schools interpret and respond to students' behaviors through the lens of the dominant group's socio-cultural norms.

To ameliorate these structural inequalities and promote an equitable educational environment, some scholars have highlighted the critical role of teachers as frontline activists and agents for change (Narey, 2019; Pantić et al., 2019; Wassell et al., 2019): Individual teachers can exercise their agency to adopt an inclusive and equity pedagogy that addresses the distinct needs of students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomically underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. The present study aims to explore the factors that contribute to developing positive teacher agency that leads to social-justice-oriented pedagogy, in particular, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The following two research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the shared motivations of teachers who have enacted CRT in their teaching practices?
- (2) What affordances supported teachers to sustain their positive agency for CRT?

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework: Teacher Agency for Social Justice

Teacher agency is an “emergent phenomenon” that occurs or is achieved within continuously changing contexts over time (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 143). A growing number of studies have also focused on exploring the concept of teacher agency in relation to social change (Bourn, 2016; Butera et al., 2021; Pantić & Florian, 2015). Among them, Pantić (2015) examined the construct of teacher agency to achieve social justice and suggested a model to explain the concept that includes four major elements: (1) sense of purpose, (2) competence, (3) autonomy, and (4) reflexivity.

The first element, sense of purpose, refers to teachers' views of their pursuit of social justice as part of their professional and moral roles. In this element, Pantić (2015) suggested exploring “teachers' perceptions of their moral roles, sense of identity, motivation, and understanding of social justice” (p. 8). The second element, competence, denotes teachers' “efforts to transform the structures and cultures as well as acting within them” (p. 8). Pantić (2015) also posited that inclusive teaching practices can be encouraged or impeded by the structural and cultural aspects of teachers' settings; therefore, she suggested exploring “teachers' engagement practices [that are] effective toward [the] promotion of social justice” and “teachers' understanding of broader social forces that influence schooling and micropolitical competence” (Pantić, 2015, p. 9).

The third element, autonomy, refers to “the locus of power” (Pantić 2015, p. 9). Teachers with equal competence may act differently depending on how they perceive their individual and collective autonomy. This autonomy can be influenced by various institutional elements, from school culture to the bureaucratic education system. Pantić's (2015) suggestion for exploring this element involves investigating:

Teachers' beliefs about individual and collective efficacy, levels of power and trust in teachers' relationships, perceptions of school cultures and principals' leadership, perceptions of teachers' roles as school and system developers and opportunities for participation in school development, policy making

and networking, and broader education policy and social-cultural contexts. (p. 14)

The last element, reflexivity, involves teachers' evaluations of their own practices and society and their decisions to maintain or modify their actions. To explore this element, Pantić (2015) suggested focusing on the "development of teachers' capacity to articulate practical professional knowledge and justify actions, critical and open reflection on their assumptions, practices, and exploration of alternatives" (p. 15).

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

CRT is a pedagogy that uses the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2018, p. 36). By facilitating students' learning through their own cultural lenses instead of those constructed by the dominant ideologies, CRT reduces institutional and systemic inequality in education settings (Byrd, 2016; Parkhouse et al., 2021). The work of Ladson-Billings (2009; 2014) has also been central to the creation and adoption of a culturally relevant pedagogy that shares the goals of CRT. A large body of literature has highlighted the advantages and applications of CRT for racially and ethnically underrepresented students (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2021).

Specifically, various studies have highlighted the significant effects of CRT on narrowing achievement gaps between middle-class White students and students from racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities (Byrd, 2016; Hollie, 2018; Portes et al., 2018). A suggested explanation for this positive relationship for minority students is that CRT helps teachers select and develop materials that address diversity, employ various teaching strategies with academic rigor, and facilitate equity between students' cultural backgrounds and mainstream ideologies (Gay, 2018; Yuan, 2018). In addition, students can apply knowledge about themselves and their histories and cultures to their learning, while using cultural assets promotes academic "self-empowerment, confidence, and motivation" (Chenowith, 2014, p. 37).

Prior research has also found that CRT facilitates a decrease in surface-level issues related to discipline, attendance, class participation, and even racial attitudes. A recent study by Larson et al. (2018) observed 274 teachers' CRT practices in 18 schools and found positive associations between these practices and constructive behaviors among students. Some studies have also highlighted that CRT helps teachers and students become active agents of social justice; for example, Bassey (2016) and Rahmawati et al. (2019) noted that CRT develops students' critical thinking skills, which can be applied to evaluate current systems and effect social change.

Factors Influencing Teacher Agency in Enacting CRT

A growing number of studies have shed light on how teacher agency is developed, negotiated, and sustained in relation to teaching practices that promote social justice and which factors promote or constrain the achievement of such agency (Halai & Durrani, 2018; Leal & Crookes, 2018; Li & Ruppap, 2021; Lonski, 2020; King & Nomikou, 2018). However, little is known about what influences the positive development of teacher agency that can promote the enactment of CRT.

Whipp (2013), Bonner et al., (2018), Reed (2010), and Authors (2021) are some of the few studies that have explored what affects the achievement of teacher agency that aims toward this pedagogy. Whipp (2013) reported that previous experiences of understanding other cultures, training from teacher-education institutions, and support from administrators and colleagues encouraged teachers to integrate CRT into their practices. Meanwhile, Bonner et al. (2018) noted that teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of CRT for improving minority students' academic performance and helping students grow as citizens who "accept, respect, and understand each other regardless of background and culture" motivated them to adopt the pedagogy (p. 720). According to Reed (2010), working in schools with students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds encourages teachers to learn and implement CRT.

Lastly, Authors (2021) highlighted the constraints that prevented teachers from sustaining their positive agency for CRT, as well as its motivators. The study found that backlash from administrators, colleagues, and parents; a lack of prep time for CRT; a lack of confidence in correctly understanding and representing other cultures; and a lack of knowledge and skills to effectively practice CRT were the key constraints to achieving this positive agency.

Methods

This exploratory study employed qualitative research methods using semi-structured interviews. While we did not intend to identify causal relationships among the factors motivating teachers' development of agency to apply CRT, we aimed to explore how teachers develop agency to apply an instructional approach that promotes diversity and social justice by including their own lively voices. Institutional review board approval was obtained before the study commenced.

Participants and Study Context

Participants were recruited from three school districts located in the South-Central region of Appalachia, North Carolina, U.S.A. These three school districts were selected based on both their accessibility to the researchers and the environment they present to explore teachers' experiences with CRT. Sixteen in-service teachers from eight secondary schools in three school districts in the South-Central Appalachian region participated in this study after providing informed consent. The inclusion criterion required participants to have working knowledge of CRT in the classroom. Among the teachers, 27% (n = 4) were men and 73% (n = 11) were women.

The majority identified as White. Participants ranged from a first-year teacher to a veteran with 28 years of teaching: 20% (n = 3) participants had 5 years of experience or less, 33.3% (n = 5) had 6–10 years, 13.3% (n = 2) had 11–19 years, and 33.3% (n = 5) had 20 years or more. The participants taught many subjects, ranging from advanced biology to Spanish, which allowed them to provide unique examples of their experiences with CRT in their subject areas. The grade levels they taught ranged from 6 to 12.

Table 1 lists the participating teachers' demographic information.

Table 1. Participants Information

Teacher	Gender	Teaching Experience	Grade Level	Subject
Isabella	Female	1 year	6-8th	Exceptional Children
Ava	Female	5 years	10-12th	English & Writing
Zoe	Female	5 years	7th	English Language Arts
Liam	Male	6 years	7th	Special Education Support
Noah	Male	6 years	7th	English Language Arts
Sophia	Female	8 years	11th	Honors Biology
Camilla	Female	8 years	9-12th	English
Layla	Female	10 years	6-8th	Spanish
Olivia	Female	11 years	7th	English Second Language
Aria	Female	14 years	9-12th	Fine Arts
Amelia	Female	20 years	9-12th	Social studies
Emma	Female	22 years	10-12th	Math
Jackson	Male	26 years	10-12th	Civics & American History
Aiden	Male	26 years	9-12th	American History
Riley	Female	28 years	9-12th	Math & Psychology

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through an email that outlined the study's purpose, research questions, and interview procedures. The researchers contacted teachers who expressed an interest in participating and scheduled interviews with them in the spring and fall of 2020. Sixteen teachers volunteered to participate in the study's semi-structured interviews.

Interviews are "a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experiences" (Rabionet, 2011); as one of the most frequently used data collection methods for qualitative research in the social sciences field, semi-structured interviews support researchers to elicit rich illustrations of participants' experiences and subjective perceptions (Bearman, 2019; Bradford & Cullen, 2012). The interviews were conducted in the video conferencing platform Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>), which allowed for the recording of audio and video files to create transcripts. Sixteen separate interviews were conducted and each lasted 20–40 minutes.

Examples of the interview questions employed include:

- (1) What initially motivated you to implement CRT methods in your teaching?
- (2) What helps (helped) you continue to implement CRT methods in your teaching?
- (3) What challenges do you face while implementing CRT methods in your teaching?

The data was transcribed verbatim for analysis and kept in a secure location.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. In this process, the researcher identifies emerging themes or patterns to explain a phenomenon by reading, interpreting, and making sense of the data (Maguire & Delahun, 2017; Swain, 2018). Specifically, we used the hybrid approach proposed by Fereday and Muir-Cocharnae (2006), which integrates top-down deductive and bottom-up inductive processes. This approach not only helps researchers build a preliminary understanding of a phenomenon to be explored through theory but also allows them to gain more a comprehensive understanding by identifying, clarifying, and elaborating on its latent meanings (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

First, two coders (the first and second authors of this paper) repeatedly read the transcribed interviews to familiarize themselves with the raw data. Next, they developed a codebook that included “the relevant units of analysis,” as suggested by Pantić (2015) in her theoretical framework for exploring teacher agency for social justice. Four broad code categories formed this codebook: (1) sense of purpose, (2) competence, (3) autonomy, and (4) reflexivity. The codebook also included code names, definitions, and examples.

Table 2. Theory Driven Codebook

Code Name	Definition	Example
Sense of purpose	Purposes that empower teachers to practice CRT (moral roles, sense of identity, motivation, and understanding of social justice)	“Um I don't know...it was morally right. Kind of the thing to do. I think part of it started out when, when I remember being a student in school and I didn't see very many women in my science books...”
Competence	Abilities or capabilities of understanding influential factors on schooling and engaging in practices for promoting social justice individually or collectively	“And I just know that parent is already thinking politically, is already thinking in a divisive way and I should be on the lookout for that parent and that student situation....part of me is thinking like a scaled down version like simpler articles.”
Autonomy	Perceived power and individual or collective efficacy	“I have the privilege at my school of having a lot of flexibility with what I read...”
Reflexivity	Abilities or capabilities of monitoring, articulating, and evaluating their teaching practices and making (re-)commitments for achieving their purposes of promoting social justice	“I reflect on what books or stories am I reading um because the world is always changing and our students are always changing...”

The two coders tested the reliability of the predetermined codes in the codebook by using them to independently code and analyze three transcripts from the data. After comparing the results, the codebook was considered suitable for analyzing the entire raw dataset with no modifications. The two coders then independently summarized the transcripts by outlining key points, which were “meaningful units of text,” and sorted these units into the four categories in the codebook (Fereday & Muir-Cocharnae, 2006, p. 87). Following this, they began the inductive process of analyzing the data by creating additional codes that captured “the qualitative richness of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). The two sets of codes were compared and discussed in multiple meetings until the coders reached complete agreement. We also expanded the four predetermined, theory-based codes, by identifying sub-themes emerged. Next, the two coders connected the codes to identify themes. During this process, they ensured that unique comments were treated as being as important as those that were repeated by multiple teachers (Fereday & Muir-Cocharnae, 2006). Finally, the emerging themes were clustered and given titles that succinctly described their latent meanings; we then corroborated and legitimated the coded themes. To ensure the validity of the analyzed data, the third author, who did not participate in the data coding processes, reviewed the data and shared his opinions on how it should be coded whenever discrepancies between the two coders arose. Based on his input, the two coders discussed the discrepancies until full agreement was reached.

Results

A total of five themes (five main-level and six sub-level themes) emerged from the data analysis.

Sense of Purpose

The data analysis showed that the participants recognized two purposes in their application of CRT: (1) to meet their moral responsibility and (2) to contribute to creating a more just society.

Meeting Moral Responsibilities

The teachers’ accounts revealed that their sense of purpose for using CRT was driven by the belief that it was the morally right thing to do. The following comment from Amelia demonstrates her belief that teachers have a moral responsibility to empower students belonging to underrepresented groups to realize their equal rights and be represented in schools and society:

Amelia: I had a young man in one of my classes today...he understands the frustration that people feel with the police because his family has experienced that he feels like trash and he's starting to see that his voice you know has a right to be heard and he has a right to justice.

The data analysis also demonstrated that this sense of purpose was associated with teachers’ personal and social identities. For example, Jackson said that the major driving force for applying CRT in his classes was his religious faith: “The idea of racism or discrimination or segregation is so offensive to my faith; it is so sinful that I really feel a motivation to fight that.” Influenced by her family and professional development experiences, Amelia was conscious of White privilege and acknowledged the prevalence of systematic inequality in society:

Ameila: I grew up in poverty and my parents were different than their families who were racist... You know everything bad that has surrounded them and how do you reach them on that level? Just give them a chance because obviously they are limiting their options, their economic mobility, their social mobility, you have to put in the effort - it's exhausting. I know I'm exhausted but I think there is a moral imperative and we have a moral obligation to our students.

Making Contributions to Creating a More Just Society

The results also foregrounded that the teachers decided to enact CRT in their practices in order to contribute to creating a more just society. By acknowledging gaps between racially, culturally, and economically underrepresented groups and their counterparts in terms of academic achievements, the teachers perceived CRT as a pedagogy that could support the academic success of disadvantaged students through the construction of inclusive learning communities and improving their academic engagement:

Aiden: I think it's hard for kids, minority kids especially to sit in the classroom that's mostly all White. And not having heroes from their lineages and backgrounds to share the same time and I think that's really hard... there is a real need to say- hey well let's talk about the Harlem Hellfighters or let's talk about Delores Hureta in the Latino American movement for the grape pickers in the sixties... You've got to find ways to tap in and keep the kids engaged...

In addition, the teachers perceived CRT as conducive to developing White students' multicultural perspectives, describing such perspectives as essential to survival in our increasingly diverse society. The following comment from Camilla represents the teachers' viewpoints on CRT as a practice that facilitates and improves White students' understanding of the importance of developing their multicultural empathy and acceptance of others from different backgrounds:

Camilla: I think culturally responsive, not just to speak to that population for kids to see themselves mirrored, but for White students to see and hear more voices in the classroom because we want them to be able to have empathy and function in the world and all this great stuff.

Lastly, the teachers perceived that CRT could help students become more aware of social issues, as well as of the need for an equitable society, and empower them to view themselves as change agents that could create a more just society:

Zoe: We're on the front lines of creating people who are gonna make decisions for us later and be changing the world and that feels... phenomenally powerful and important to me, so I want to take that responsibility, or not take that responsibility lightly and I want to make sure I'm doing everything I can ... Open their minds to different things and then to see them go out into the world and take action.

Competence

The results indicated that the teachers with positive agency for CRT demonstrated two competencies for actively promoting social justice through their educational practices: (1) competence in acknowledging White privilege

and (2) competence in understanding external influences on schooling.

Competence in Acknowledging White Privilege

First, the teachers made efforts to step outside their comfort zones, acknowledged White privilege and structural inequality, and critically reflected on school curricula:

Amelia: I grew up in upstate New York outside of Buffalo and I had really good teachers but it was still that kinda White-washed depiction of “we’ve done nothing wrong in the past” and you know obviously in the set up that we’re in, who writes the textbooks?

Camilla: I think some of it is the recognition that lots of voices have, historically, there have been a lot more voices than we have been hearing... it is important not to lose some of those voices and to acknowledge that sort of the version of history that we have been taught is sort of inaccurate...

Going beyond self-reflection and acknowledgment, the teachers also demonstrated competence in helping their students understand and recognize White privilege and structural inequality and in managing resistance from these students and their parents in response to their CRT practices:

Noah: We read the ‘I have a dream’ speech. There was a lot of kickback both from the community and some members from my class...well I never owned a slave so why should I care about this? Why should I care about equity as opposed to equality?...Well no, but you still benefit from it. You know, you are still in a position of power and privilege because of something that happened that far back. So, let’s take a look at how that influences um, how those positions influence an author’s work.

Competence in Understanding External Influences on Schooling

The teachers further displayed competence in understanding the influence of political and social forces on schooling and enabling change through individual and collective efforts. For example, Ava’s comments below show that she understood the effect of the current political climate on her class’s discussion of social issues:

Ava:...when I said “Hey we are reading a book about discrimination and um, racial discrimination and things like that” and then that New Zealand shooting happened, and I brought it in, a kid thought I was trying to debate [them] on gun rights. And I’m like “I’m not trying to debate you on gun rights, I’m trying to say - Look! This is still a problem...what we realize is these things are still relevant and part of humanity...So it’s kind of tiptoeing around dangerous territory. And especially in the political climate right now. People have a lot of heightened emotions.

The following comment from Amelia also illustrates her efforts to change the dominant dialogue in her school and community and promote social justice through collective efforts:

Amelia: We had an incident where a black student was targeted and somebody put a t-shirt in his locker and it had a Confederate flag on it and said “this shirt is 100% cotton picked by your ancestor”...[our school] banned the Confederate flag. Next thing you know, [a local t-shirt company] got involved in it, they were giving out shirts that had a Confederate flag to any student...the social studies teachers who

were there at that point, we made sure that people understood that well here's pictures of the civil rights movement, stop acting like it means nothing to other people.

Autonomy

The analysis results indicated that the teachers with positive agency for CRT had both (1) individual and collective efficacy and (2) perceived a school culture and principal support that was conducive to implementing CRT.

Individual and Collective Efficacy

The teachers believed that they possessed the individual or collective ability to make CRT effective and reap its benefits. For example, Liam viewed himself as a change agent who could support his students to become responsible citizens through his CRT practices, as demonstrated in the following comment:

Liam: I think that in this day and age, our job is very important more so than at other times...I do think education is key - uh so again I view my job as not necessarily as trying to sway them in a certain direction as much as to prepare them to be receptive adults and informed citizens and voters one day hopefully.

The following comments from Riley demonstrate her efficacy to implement CRT effectively in their schools; they articulated their goals for building and nurturing an inclusive school culture by organizing and undertaking collective action:

Riley: Um our school improvement team and our MTSS team are working on...making students feel welcomed, and to be included in the whole school, in the classroom, and every environment we have here.

Perceptions of School Culture and Principal Support

Most of the teachers perceived their school environments as being conducive to the enactment of CRT. First, their students were made to feel comfortable during sensitive conversations on difficult topics:

Noah:...the kids feel free to be able to ask each other challenging or difficult questions. Um, you know so that somebody that comes from a majority standpoint can say "what do you mean I'm privileged" and can ask that question of someone who is coming from an underserved population...you can see the light bulbs going off when they're going and talking to each other. Because no one can teach a kid better than another kid...

The leadership of school principals was also mentioned as the most influential factor in creating a CRT-friendly school culture. The teachers believed that strong support from principals for enacting CRT contributed to building and cultivating a respectful and inclusive teaching and learning environment by promoting them to sustain positive agency to practice this pedagogy, despite pushback from some students and parents:

Sophia: Support from my administrator I'd say would be the first thing. She encourages us to push the boundaries. To really get students out of their comfort zones and, and I know that's not something that is

common across a lot of administrators, but ours has just been phenomenal in terms of providing that support and helping us think through some controversial issues and some things that we might get pushed back, get pushback from and how to handle that push back.

Reflexivity

The analysis demonstrated that teachers with positive agency for CRT continually reflected critically on their assumptions and teaching practices and explored ways to make their teaching more culturally responsive:

Noah: If I were just giving someone advice who was looking to broaden their own culturally responsiveness, I would definitely say review, personal review. You know, um, watch your own teaching practices. Understand where you're coming from and why, why you say the things you do, why you respond the way that you do, that was the main trigger for me was understanding how much I didn't understand even when I thought I understood all kinds of stuff.

The teachers also critically analyzed systemic and structural obstacles to diversity and inclusion and shared their solutions. For example, Olivia identified a lack of early education on diversity and the need for CRT in elementary schools: "I feel like [education on diversity and CRT] need to be in elementary schools a lot ... if things started younger, it is all easier for when they are older." Liam further drew attention to the lack of Black male teachers in his school and called for the recruitment of teachers from diverse backgrounds:

Liam: I think number one we need to do a better job of recruiting diverse teachers. Um, I think at my school...we have about 20% African American population uh, we have one black teacher, she is a female. We have no black male teachers...it would be important to have some type of example in the school that looks like them.

Commitment to Professional Development

The teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to ongoing professional learning and development for the effective implementation of CRT. They sought professional and social networks and researched the pedagogy of their own accord:

Camilla: I was meeting educators who were really passionate about this kind of work and I was learning more about this culturally responsive teaching...I dug more into it and I have gone to more trainings...I have understood oh! that is culturally responsive teaching.

Isabella: I think I heard about it in one of my special ed classes, but then I am very research motivated, I love research just in general, so I researched it with one of my friends, I guess, and we presented at [a] conference in 2018. The teachers were also desperate to gain more professional development opportunities to learn about how to practice CRT effectively in their classrooms.

Emma also expressed her desire to learn practical examples of CRT:

Emma: I want to do it. I would love to see more examples of it happening in a math classroom and love to be part of the conversations and not only building those things but how I can start promoting those in

our school and building some buy-in there, because I think it's very important, especially in low income ... well in any school. In low-income schools we're always looking for ways to reach all of our learners and that would be great.

Discussion

This study provides valuable theoretical and practical insights to advance the dialogue on empowering teachers to become change agents for social justice. First, the findings provide empirical evidence that Pantić's (2015) model of teacher agency for social justice can function as a reliable conceptual framework for explaining how teachers develop agency to implement a social-justice-oriented pedagogy. The four elements in Pantić's model—sense of purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity—were reflected in the accounts of the teachers who had positive agency to apply CRT. Specifically, the teachers described their motivations for practicing CRT in relation to their professional and moral purposes, competence in promoting social justice, levels of autonomy in the school and classroom, and capacity to reflect critically on their practices. The present study also expands on Pantić's (2015) model by elaborating on different aspects within the four components.

First, teachers described that their sense of purpose for implementing CRT was that they considered it a moral obligation. As Sophia and Amelia's comments revealed, they recognized the disproportionate representation of certain races and genders in their curriculum materials and school environments and believed that they had a moral responsibility to help their students of color feel represented and valued through their teaching practices. As indicated in Jackson and Amelia's comments, the locus of these moral imperatives seemed to be their religious and social identities. Another sense of purpose behind the teachers' use of CRT that was identified in our analysis was contributing to the creation of a more just society. The participating teachers believed that their CRT practices could better support the academic success of students of color as these practices facilitated the development of respectful learning communities and improved academic engagement. These findings align with those of Bonner et al. (2018), Byrd (2016), and Howard and Terry (2011).

However, our findings further extend the results of these existing studies by highlighting that teachers' enactment of CRT also benefits White students, as well as students of color: The teachers that participated in the present study claimed that CRT is an essential pedagogy in their White-dominant classrooms as it can help White students develop multicultural empathy and the ability to accept others who are different from them. It also helps students to understand why creating an equitable society for all matters and to critically examine and evaluate what inequality problems currently exist, as well as empowering them to act as change agents to transform society.

Competence, the second element of Pantić's (2015) model, was also evident in the teachers' accounts: They demonstrated competence by engaging in practices aimed at transforming structures that reinforce inequality among marginalized students in their educational settings. As the quotes by Amelia, Camilla, and Noah showed, teachers with positive agency for CRT acknowledged White supremacy and the marginalization of other groups in both educational settings and society at large. Moreover, they demonstrated willingness to help their White students acknowledge the privilege they have benefited from, despite experiencing resistance. The teachers in this

study also demonstrated individual and collective competence in understanding how social and political influences impact schooling, as well as in managing backlash from students and communities in their promotion of social justice, as illustrated in Ava and Amelia's comments.

This study also demonstrated that the third element in Pantić's (2015) model, autonomy, helps teachers to be agents of social justice by using CRT. In particular, the teachers described their own resilience and collective efficacy as motivation boosters and perceived that a school culture that ensures teacher autonomy played a significant role in encouraging them to sustain positive agency for CRT. They also noted that support from their principals was critical for nurturing this agency, which is aligned with the findings of Whipp (2013) and Authors (2021). The fourth element in Pantić's (2015) model, reflexivity, also emerged in the accounts of the teachers participating in this study, who reflected critically on their personal assumptions and teaching practices and sought ways to implement CRT more effectively. They evaluated structural problems, such as the lack of representation of teachers of color in their schools, as well as the need for teacher education to address diversity and inclusion.

Although the four elements in Pantić's (2015) model were confirmed by the teachers in this study, the model was not sufficiently comprehensive to capture all the attributes of teacher agency for social justice: It must address more areas to work as a convincing framework for explaining this concept. One of these areas could be teachers' commitment to continuous professional development that aims toward a social-justice-oriented pedagogy; for example, the teachers in the present study continuously and desperately sought professional development opportunities that could help both themselves and other school members better understand how to effectively integrate CRT into their teaching practices. More empirical studies that capture teachers' diverse voices in various settings are needed to advance the theoretical discussion on the construct of teacher agency for social justice.

In terms of practical implications, first, ample professional development opportunities and resources should be provided to increase teachers' awareness of how current systems in society and education benefit one group over others, how CRT can benefit both their White and non-White students, and how they can be change agents for an equitable society. Creating and nurturing district- or school-level support groups consisting of in-service teachers who have successful experiences of undertaking CRT in various subject areas and making them accessible to teachers can be an effective strategy to empower educators to develop and sustain their positive agency for CRT. In a similar vein, it would be valuable to promote district- or school-wide collaborative groups in which teachers can reflect critically on the results of their CRT enactment and learn how to better implement it better through peer support and learning.

Given that other school and community members' pushback functioned as one of the barriers that prevented teachers from sustaining their CRT efforts in Authors' (2021) study, the present study suggests that improving teachers' individual and collective competence in managing backlash from those who disagree with the pedagogy should be also addressed in teacher education programs and professional development opportunities. Lastly, school administrators should recognize the significant role of their support and trust in empowering teachers to act as change agents and make efforts to build and facilitate respectful school cultures in which teachers can exercise their curricular and instructional autonomy to enact CRT.

Conclusion

This exploratory study, which aimed to identify the factors that empower teachers to develop positive agency for social justice through the implementation of CRT, is significant in several ways. First, the study advances theoretical discussions on what constitutes the construct of teacher agency for social justice based on its empirical evidence, which captured teachers' lively voices. Second, it introduces the unique perspectives and experiences of South-Central Appalachian teachers into the discussion on the complex and less-known construct of teacher agency for social justice. Third, this study offers practical implications for school administrators, teacher educators, and policy-makers regarding what actions can promote teachers to develop and pursue social justice agendas using CRT in growingly diverse public education settings.

Despite this significance, this study has several limitations. The interviewed teachers were recruited from only a few areas located within South-Central Appalachia in one state in the U.S. While we did not intend to produce generalizable findings, voices from other regions could provide a more comprehensive and accurate view of teachers' development of agency in the pursuit of social justice. In addition, the participants were mostly high school teachers; however, motivators of the development of teacher agency could vary according to school level. Moreover, the data collected was derived from the participating teachers' self-reported responses, which leaves the possibility of discrepancies between their perceptions and actual teaching practices. Lastly, the study did not consider the specific contexts of the schools in which the teachers were working, other than the information provided by the participants in their comments.

Future studies should consider the voices of teachers from other counties in the South-Central Appalachian region and other regions and states in the U.S. Perspectives and experiences from different school levels and how they are similar or different would also be a worthwhile focus for future research. Undertaking observations in addition to interviews would help provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of how teachers enact CRT in their school and classroom contexts. Finally, exploring perceptions of the complexity of Whiteness among pre- and in-service teachers, as well as CRT's effectiveness in addressing diversity, is also recommended in order to advance the dialogue on conceptualizing teacher agency for social justice.

Notes

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