

# Chapter 1

## Learning in Dangerous Times

IN 1963, writer and social critic James Baldwin delivered “A Talk to Teachers” in which he called on educators of Black youth to prepare their students to navigate and challenge racial injustice in the United States. In this powerful address, Baldwin declared to the assembled teachers that if *he* were a teacher of Black youth:

I would try to teach them—I would try to make them know—that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agonies by which they are surrounded, are criminal. I would try to make each child know that these things are the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him. I would teach him that if he intends to get to be a man, he must at once decide that he is stronger than this conspiracy, and he must never make his peace with it . . . That it is up to him to change these standards for the sake of the life and the health of the country.<sup>1</sup>

In these words, Baldwin argued that teachers have a key role to play—alongside families, churches, community organizations, peers, and numerous other influences—in preparing Black youth to recognize and resist racism. We begin with Baldwin’s words for three reasons.

First, without overlooking the meaningful strides toward racial equity that have taken place in the United States over the past fifty years, one might nonetheless have hoped that Baldwin's description of a "criminal conspiracy" against Black youth in the United States would ring less true today. Yet, Black and Latinx children in the United States today are born into systems that produce a multitude of inequities in health care, housing, education, and criminal justice that systematically threaten their opportunities, well-being, and lives.<sup>2</sup> To take the public education system as just one example: Black and Latinx youth in the contemporary United States are 60 percent more likely than their White peers to attend high poverty, under-resourced schools.<sup>3</sup> Black and Latinx youth also have less access to advanced high school coursework, are more likely to be taught by first-year teachers, and are disproportionately suspended and expelled.<sup>4</sup> Related to this last point, the United States Department of Education recently reported that Black *preschoolers* are three and a half times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than White preschoolers.<sup>5</sup> Cumulatively, these and many other statistics reveal how race and racism continue to shape opportunity for youth in the United States in ways far too reminiscent of the 1960s about which Baldwin was writing.

The second reason we begin with Baldwin's speech is that, although the term *critical consciousness* would not be coined for several more years, in "A Talk to Teachers" Baldwin was essentially calling for educators and schools to foster Black children's critical consciousness of racial injustice. The term *critical consciousness* comes from Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire and refers to a person's ability to recognize and analyze oppressive forces shaping society and to take action against these forces.<sup>6</sup> While working as an adult literacy teacher in northern Brazil, Freire realized that the migrant laborers in his classes were motivated to learn to read in order to understand and challenge the social forces impacting their social status and opportunities.<sup>7</sup> From these workers' experiences, Freire concluded that a primary goal of education should be to engage students from oppressed groups in learning to decode and challenge their social conditions—the same goal Baldwin proposed in his talk to teachers. In his 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire invoked the term *conscientização*, or critical

consciousness, to refer to this combination of reflection and action on the world in order to transform it.

Finally, we begin with Baldwin's words because *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* is, ultimately, a talk to teachers as well. In the pages ahead, we report on a growing body of research that has found critical consciousness to be an important tool through which youth of color can both resist the negative effects of racial injustice and challenge its root causes. We then share a set of powerful practices for fostering youth critical consciousness that emerged from our four years of research in a diverse group of high schools. Our goal in identifying and sharing these practices is to strengthen the capacity of schools and educators to support their own Black and Latinx students in learning to analyze, navigate, and challenge racial injustice. Like Baldwin, we see such critical consciousness as essential for youth of color to survive and thrive in the contemporary United States as well as to engage in the collective social action necessary "for the sake of the life and health of the country."<sup>8</sup>

## WHY CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS MATTERS

Paulo Freire described critical consciousness as a powerful tool for societal transformation by motivating individuals to combat oppression, violence, and dehumanization within their communities.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a growing body of research has found critical consciousness to be an important predictor of positive outcomes for youth marginalized by inequities in race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and language. Namely, scholars have reported that marginalized youth with high levels of critical consciousness are more likely to demonstrate resilience, mental health, self-esteem, academic achievement, high professional aspirations, and civic and political engagement.<sup>10</sup>

In explaining why critical consciousness might be associated with these positive youth outcomes, scholar Shawn Ginwright has suggested that critical consciousness can replace marginalized adolescents' feelings of isolation and self-blame for challenges they are encountering with a sense of agency and engagement in a broader collective struggle for social justice.<sup>11</sup>

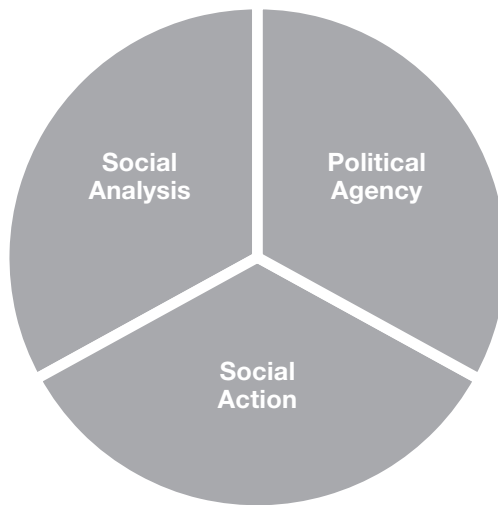
Or as scholar Beverly Daniel Tatum has observed: “We are better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, various scholars have characterized critical consciousness as an “antidote to oppression” and a form of “psychological armor” against oppressive social forces such as racial injustice.<sup>13</sup>

### DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Scholars often conceptualize critical consciousness as consisting of the development of three distinct yet overlapping qualities: (1) social analysis, (2) political agency, and (3) social action (see figure 1).<sup>14</sup> *Social analysis* refers to the ability to name and analyze the social, political, and economic forces that contribute to inequity and inequality. Paulo Freire theorized that when people from oppressed groups can engage in social analysis, the dominant narratives that hide or perpetuate oppression “lose credibility.”<sup>15</sup> *Political agency* is the belief that one has the capacity to effect social or

FIGURE 1.1 Components of critical consciousness

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political change.<sup>16</sup> Political agency is a crucial component of critical consciousness because it can transform an individual's recognition of oppression and injustice (social analysis) into a commitment to oppose these forces (social action). Finally, *social action* refers to engaging in events or activities that confront oppressive forces and structures, and the unequal conditions they perpetuate.<sup>17</sup> Social action can be individual or collective, and includes a wide range of forms through which individuals seek to navigate and challenge oppressive forces. Paulo Freire characterized engagement in such social action as the ultimate goal of critical consciousness.

While each component of critical consciousness has a distinct meaning and purpose, they are also interconnected in that development in one component can influence development in others. For example, a young person who engages in social action to protest police violence against African Americans might through that action come to learn additional information about the effects of racism throughout the criminal justice system and thus further develop the ability to engage in social analysis. That same young person could also experience a growing sense of political agency if she comes to see her participation in the protest as having effected social change.

## SCHOOLING FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In his foundational text on critical consciousness, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire described traditional approaches to education as a “banking model” in which the teacher serves as an authority figure who deposits knowledge into students. Freire argued that this banking model is antithetical to critical consciousness development in that students from oppressed groups are taught to adapt to their conditions rather than to challenge the social forces that oppress them. Instead, Freire theorized that critical consciousness is best engendered through a “problem-posing education” in which the educator poses reality as a problem to be investigated by teachers and students in which “both are simultaneously students and teachers.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Freire called for educational settings in which teachers and students work reciprocally to investigate and address real-world issues.

Freire believed that, in such settings, students come to see their community and world as capable of transformation and to see themselves as possessing the agency to bring about such transformation.

This connection that Freire posited between critical consciousness and problem-posing education has served as the foundation for many of the contemporary efforts to foster critical consciousness both inside and outside of traditional school spaces. For example, a number of educators have sought to foster youth critical consciousness through participatory action research projects in which youth identify a problem within their community and then collaborate as equal partners with scholars in constructing research questions, designing the research study, collecting data, and sharing results.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have reported on the role of ethnic studies courses—programming that focuses on the lived experiences and cultures of particular ethnic or racial groups—in fostering young people’s capacity and commitment to challenge oppression and hegemony facing their community.<sup>20</sup> Both of these approaches align with Freire’s conception of problem-posing education in that they center the cultural knowledge and identities of the students in their learning, and situate both teachers and students as learners and knowledge-holders.

### No Single Approach

Paulo Freire’s work on problem-posing education has powerfully informed many of the contemporary efforts by schools and educators to foster youth critical consciousness. Yet, an increasing number of educators today embrace both Baldwin’s and Freire’s charge to support youth of color in learning to analyze, navigate, and challenge racial injustice but approach this work from a diverse set of pedagogical traditions.<sup>21</sup> These educators are committed to fostering their students’ social analysis skills, feelings of political agency, and commitment to social action—the three dimensions of critical consciousness—but via curriculum and programming that are consonant with the respective schooling models from which they come.<sup>22</sup>

The diverse approaches of such educators and schools offer an important opportunity to explore whether different pedagogical approaches might prove adept at fostering different dimensions of youth critical

consciousness. For example, have educators coming out of experiential schooling traditions such as expeditionary learning and action civics developed programming particularly suited to fostering youths' commitment to social action? Conversely, might educators relying on problem-posing or habits of mind pedagogies—with their emphases on inquiry and critical thinking—possess distinctive practices for strengthening youths' social analysis skills? Finally, might a “no-excuses” schooling model—which hews far closer to a banking model of education than a problem-posing one—offer an entirely different set of practices that contribute to youth critical consciousness development? Or, to knit all of these queries together, might historian of education Daniel Perlstein be correct in his assertion that “no single pedagogical approach inherently serves the cause of social justice”?<sup>23</sup>

This book seeks to answer each of these questions. To be clear, our goal in embarking on this project was neither to challenge the importance of Paulo Freire's work on problem-posing education nor to identify a particular schooling model as superior to all others in fostering youth critical consciousness. Rather, we hypothesized that a number of different schooling models might prove adept at fostering different dimensions of youths' critical consciousness. And if that hypothesis proved true, we believed reporting on the curriculum and programming underlying those diverse schooling models would broaden educators' understanding of the full range of practices that can contribute to youth critical consciousness development. Certainly, other scholars have studied the ability of specific schooling practices to foster youth critical consciousness of racial inequity; however, we are not aware of previous work that has sought to compare the contributions of different schooling models to youths' developing critical consciousness of racial injustice.<sup>24</sup>

### Five Schools, Five Models

Over four years, we compared the critical consciousness development of more than three-hundred Black and Latinx youth in the class of 2017 attending five urban high schools featuring five different schooling models. All five schools are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this book, as are the youth and educators from these schools with whom we spoke and observed.

These five high schools were all located in northeastern cities, served predominantly Black and Latinx student bodies, and cited youth civic development as a core part of their missions. All five schools were also not-for-profit public charter schools that admitted youth in their respective cities via randomized registration lotteries, and approximately three-fourths of the youth attending each of these schools qualified for free or reduced-price lunch—a proxy for low socioeconomic status. In short, these five high schools were highly similar in their size, geography, governance, student demographics, admissions policies, and explicit goals for fostering students' academic and civic development (see table A1 in “A Note on Research Methods”).

Yet, these highly similar schools took five different pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. Specifically, Make the Road Academy featured Paulo Freire's problem-posing pedagogy; Espiritu High School was guided by the Coalition of Essential Schools' habits of mind approach; Harriet Tubman High School featured a no-excuses model; Community Academy followed an expeditionary learning model; and Leadership High School was guided by an action civics approach. Rich portraits of each of these schools, their respective schooling models, and their effects on students' critical consciousness of racial injustice are the focus of the five case-study chapters that follow. By comparing each school's distinctive contributions to students' critical consciousness development, this book offers valuable insights to educators and other stakeholders about teaching tools and school spaces that can be employed to support their own youths' critical consciousness development.

Our decision to focus the five case studies on charter schools—publicly funded schools overseen by their state departments of education rather than by local school boards—was not due to any belief on our part that charter schools are more committed or more effective at fostering youth critical consciousness than district, independent, or parochial schools. Rather, we chose to focus on charter schools for two reasons. First, in order to consider the effects of different schooling models on youth critical consciousness, we needed to find schools that explicitly and unequivocally aligned themselves with a particular schooling model. Because charter schools are



typically granted more autonomy than traditional public schools over matters of curriculum and programming, they can more easily affiliate themselves with a singular schooling model or pedagogy. This feature of charter schools made them a good site for investigating the questions motivating this project.

Second, in order to compare the critical consciousness development of youth attending different schooling models, we needed the participating schools to differ in their pedagogical approaches but also to be as similar as possible in every other way—size, geography, student demographics, admissions policies, and school type. For both of these reasons, the five case studies in the ensuing chapters focus on public charter high schools, but that focus by no means signals a belief on our part that the critical consciousness work taking place in these schools is limited to a singular school type. Here, we briefly describe the data we collected over four years at each of the participating schools to compare their respective contributions to students' critical consciousness of racial injustice.

## OUR STUDY OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Our study began in August of 2013 just as the three-hundred youth in our study were beginning their first year of high school. All of these teens completed a critical consciousness survey during the first week of their freshman year of high school that included a number of scales associated with the three key components of critical consciousness: social analysis, political agency, and social action. For example, one of the scales included in this survey, Awareness of Systemic Racism, offered insight into youths' social analysis skills by assessing their ability to analyze the systemic factors underlying racism and racial inequality.<sup>25</sup> Another scale, the Youth Socio-political Control Scale, assessed youths' confidence that they could effect social or political change in their community.<sup>26</sup> A third scale, the Commitment to Activism Scale, assessed youths' motivation to engage in social action challenging injustice.<sup>27</sup> We administered this survey to youth in their first week of ninth grade to establish their baseline scores on these various scales associated with critical consciousness. Then the youth participating

in our study completed these same surveys four more times over the next four years—at the end of ninth grade (May 2014), tenth grade (May 2015), eleventh grade (May 2016), and twelfth grade (May 2017).

Collecting these five waves of survey data across youths' four years of high school meant that, for any individual student or group of students, we could chart their growth in critical consciousness on each of the scales related to social analysis, political agency, and social action. Then a statistical technique called hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with effects coding allowed us to identify whether youth attending one of the schools in our study were (a) concluding high school with higher scores on a particular dimension of critical consciousness than their peers across the broader sample, or (b) demonstrating stronger growth over four years of high school on a particular dimension of critical consciousness than their peers in the broader sample.

Those analyses of student surveys could tell us whether students from a particular schooling model were demonstrating outsized scores or growth on a particular dimension of critical consciousness, but they couldn't tell us why or how those results were happening. To answer those types of "why" and "how" questions, we also conducted scores of interviews with students and teachers across the five schools. We also spent hundreds of days observing classes, community meetings, extracurricular activities, and other events at the five schools.

Specifically, beginning in the spring of 2014, we randomly selected twelve ninth graders from each of the participating schools (sixty total students) to sit down with us for one-on-one interviews about their beliefs about racial injustice in the United States, as well as how their respective high schools had influenced those beliefs. Examples of questions that we asked students included: "Do you think society gives people of all races an equal chance to succeed?" and "Are there issues in the news about race or racism that you've been talking about in school?" We then re-interviewed each of these young people again at the end of tenth grade (April 2015), eleventh grade (April 2016), and twelfth grade (April 2017) to consider how their beliefs about racial injustice had changed over the course of high school as well as their beliefs about the most impactful programming and practices at their respective schools.

When youth described particular teachers or administrators as important to their critical consciousness development, we then sought to speak directly with those educators, leading us to conduct interviews with thirty-two teachers and administrators across the five schools as well. All 254 of these interviews with students and faculty were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then coded to seek out patterns and themes that helped us to answer how each of the five participating schools had contributed to their respective students' critical consciousness of racial injustice.

Between the class of 2017's ninth-grade orientation in September of 2013 and their high school graduations four years later, we also spent 334 days observing and collecting field notes at the five participating schools (approximately 17 observation days per school per year). These observations allowed us to supplement students' and teachers' descriptions of the programming and practices at their respective schools with our own first-hand accounts of the schools' academic classes, extracurricular activities, community meetings, field trips, guest speakers, senior talks, and special assemblies. Our field notes from all of these different types of activities focused on how teachers and students communicated formally and informally with each other about racism and other oppressive social forces shaping students' lives as well as strategies for navigating and challenging these forces. These field notes also captured our observations about the distinctive pedagogical features of each school. Similar to the student and faculty interviews, all 334 sets of field notes were then coded to identify specific programming and practices through which these five schools sought to foster their students' critical consciousness development.

### Comparison Schools

Our primary approach to investigating the contributions of five different schooling models to youth critical consciousness development was to compare the growth in critical consciousness of youth attending schools featuring these five different schooling models *to each other*. Such a research design has numerous strengths, but a reasonable critique is that it does not include a comparison group. In other words, our investigation of the contributions of various schooling models to youth critical consciousness

development would benefit from the inclusion of an additional set of comprehensive high schools that did *not* include explicit goals for youth civic development. Without such a comparison group, this book might simply be reporting on adolescents' typical critical consciousness development rather than the effects of school programming designed to foster such development.

To address this possibility, in the fifth and final wave of data collection in the spring of 2017, we also administered our critical consciousness survey to 275 twelfth-grade students at four additional high schools located in the same northeastern cities as the five schools featured in this book. Two of these additional high schools were traditional district high schools, and two were not-for-profit public charter high schools. The demographic characteristics of the youth attending these comparison high schools closely matched those of the original sample of students in terms of their age, hometown, race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. However, neither the mission nor vision statements of these four comparison schools cited explicit goals for youth civic development nor a singular pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. By including these additional youth in our final wave of survey data collection and then comparing their scores to that of youth from the five schools featured in this book, we sought to confirm that our five featured schools had made outsized contributions to their students' critical consciousness development over and above adolescents' typical development.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This opening chapter has sought to introduce the concept of critical consciousness and why it matters, as well as our hypothesis that different schooling approaches might prove adept at fostering different dimensions of youths' critical consciousness of racial injustice. The ensuing chapters offer substantial support for this hypothesis. Namely, youth attending this study's problem-posing high school graduated with the strongest ability to engage in social analysis of racial injustice, but youth attending the habits of mind high school demonstrated both the highest levels and steepest

growth in their feelings of political agency. Youth attending the action civics and expeditionary learning schools demonstrated the highest levels and steepest growth, respectively, in their commitment to collective social action challenging injustice. Finally, youth attending the no-excuses high school reported both the highest levels and steepest growth in their confidence in navigating settings in which racial inequity is prominent.

The next five chapters offer rich portraits of each of these schools. Each chapter opens with a vignette from the school's ninth-grade orientation for students in the class of 2017, and each chapter concludes with a scene from those same students' high school graduation ceremonies four years later. We book-end each chapter with these events because we believe that each school's approach to welcoming and sending off its students illuminates its culture, core values, pedagogy, and approach to fostering youth critical consciousness. In between these two bookends, we describe each school's distinctive approach to teaching and learning, the particular dimension of critical consciousness on which their students demonstrated outsized growth, and finally the programming and practices that contributed to this development.

The final chapter reviews these promising practices unique to each of the featured schools but then also identifies a number of common teaching tools employed by multiple schools for fostering their students' critical consciousness, as well as the optimal spaces within secondary schools for deploying these tools. Ultimately, we believe both these similarities and differences across the five schools hold important implications for educators, school leaders, and other stakeholders committed to fostering the critical consciousness of the youth they serve.

## DANGEROUS TIMES

James Baldwin began "A Talk to Teachers" with the caveat: "Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time."<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this sentiment remains true for the youth featured in *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* as well. These young people began high school just a month after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the extrajudicial killing

of African American teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida—a verdict that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. Over the next four years, these young people witnessed the extrajudicial killings of many more young people of color including Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Rekia Boyd. In few of these cases were the perpetrators convicted of any wrongdoing.

At the conclusion of tenth grade, these young people listened to Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump characterize Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, and then a year and a half later as president of the United States enact a so-called Muslim ban that suspended all immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries. As these young adults celebrated their high school graduations in the summer of 2017, hundreds of White supremacists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue wielding torches and semi-automatic weapons, and chanting, “White Lives Matter!” And many of these young people then matriculated to college the following fall just as colleges and universities across the country reported surges in the frequency of campus hate crimes and the dissemination of White supremacist propaganda.<sup>29</sup>

In short, the young people featured in this book have also come of age in an America in which racial injustice remains overwhelming, pernicious, and perhaps even more visible than in recent decades. Critical consciousness can lend these and other Black and Latinx youth the “psychological armor” to resist the negative effects of racial injustice as well as the activist skills and commitments to challenge such injustice. *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* seeks to equip educators and schools with the tools to support their own students’ development of such skills, commitments, and armor.