




Article

Advancing Middle Grade Research on Critical Pedagogy: Research Synthesis

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Abstract: In this critical literature review, we examine how middle-level pedagogies, specifically critical pedagogies, impact students' academic, physical, and socioemotional development. This literature review examines critical pedagogies research in middle-level education, focusing on methods that address systemic inequities and center diverse and historically marginalized student populations. Examining the literature from 2013 to 2023, key findings indicate that critical pedagogies, including culturally responsive teaching practices, diverse instructional approaches, and decolonial and antiracist strategies can impact student engagement and development. When used purposefully to foster equity, these approaches disrupt institutional power dynamics, promote social justice, and support diverse student needs. However, there is a lack of research on these pedagogies when in practice for a sustained amount of time, as well as a lack of inclusion of literature with student voices. Because of this, we call for future research to include the perspectives and voices of middle-level students to better understand and refine critical pedagogical practices.

Keywords: critical pedagogies; culturally responsive teaching; middle grades



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1. Introduction

Middle-level educational research increasingly emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that address systemic inequalities and that empower and center diverse student populations. We conceptualize pedagogy as a method that “depends on various factors such as the social system, the content of information, and the receiver” [1] (p. 80) and includes theory, assessment, teaching style, instructional approaches, and feedback. Building on this conceptualization of pedagogy as a complex interplay of social systems, instructional content, and learner interactions, this literature review focuses on critical pedagogies. We chose the term “critical pedagogies” as our area of consideration because we wanted to narrow in on teaching practices that examined and challenged power structures and systems across learning spaces in ways that empowered middle school students and fostered equity. Critical pedagogies have the potential to promote equity, meet students' diverse needs, and appeal to a broad range of students' interests and identities [2].

For this review, we represent both public and private institutions of higher education that hold strong backgrounds in multiple areas and show understanding of the pedagogical nuances of middle grades. The role of each investigator was to leverage their own content expertise with a common understanding of the unique pedagogical considerations needed to develop critical pedagogies specific to middle grades and to the learners they impact. Through this process, we conceptualize critical literacies as instructional approaches that focus on language and power in both texts and the world. We use intersectionality as a framework, which maintains that interconnections of categories like race, gender, geography, age, and social class converge, and suggest how power is wielded, “offering a window into thinking about the significance of ideas and social action in fostering social

transformation” [3] (p. 41). This supports current middle-level standards. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), which was previously known as the National Middle School Association, is the premier international organization for middle school researchers and educators in terms of research and instructional practices. AMLE acknowledges that various student categories such as race, social class, gender, and intersections of abilities are inextricably interwoven [4]. For middle school education, a developmental stage that is characterized by significant cognitive, emotional, and social growth, the application of critical pedagogies holds promise. We draw from intersectionality to consider the complex ways in which middle-level pedagogies impact students’ academic, physical, and socioemotional development. Focusing on critical pedagogies, this literature review seeks to illuminate effective strategies and to highlight areas in need of further exploration, ultimately aiming to inform practices that center the diverse experiences, strengths, and needs of young adolescents.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Scope of the Literature Review

Although specific to middle-level education, the topic of critical pedagogies is a broad and interdisciplinary field that spans a wide spectrum of theories, approaches, and practices within the field of education. For these reasons, we employed a critical literature review approach to identify the key themes, theories, and trends in the existing literature on critical pedagogies while highlighting areas that could use attention in future research. We chose a critical literature review approach because of its emphasis on not just summarizing but on evaluating “what is of value from the previous body of work” [5] (p. 93), critically engaging with scholarship to deepen understanding and highlight insights into the field. Conducting a critical literature review helped us synthesize effective strategies and interventions from recent scholarship in an effort to inform effective practices, increase accessibility, and foster equity among middle grades classrooms.

To drive our research, we discussed the trends and issues commonly faced across the field of education research, particularly concerning pedagogy. Because we were focused on critical pedagogies, we wanted to narrow in on strategies and topics that challenged dominant norms and expectations, as well as those that fostered equity across learning spaces. We wanted to include research that utilized culturally responsive, antiracist, and anticolonial teaching practices, as these methods disrupt dominant racial, cultural, and linguistic practices and assumptions by centering culturally and linguistically diverse students. We carefully chose our wording, as we did not want to limit our scope, but we also wanted to keep our focus concentrated on practices that questioned power dynamics and attended to issues of equity and justice. Negotiations on the chosen terms resulted in language that we determined would generate timely and relevant literature in a manageable way without excluding important topics, and we maintain this positioning of language as representative of the review we sought to conduct. The research questions that drove our literature review were as follows:

1. How do teachers across content areas use and promote critical and culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What strategies and classroom practices do teachers implement that examine and challenge power relations and center culturally and linguistically diverse students?
3. What is the impact of classroom implementation of critical pedagogies on young adolescent learning?
4. How do educators and researchers expand the concept of critical pedagogies to include antiracist and anticolonial teaching practices for action?

These questions served as parameters for defining our search terms and the scope of our literature review. As a group, we decided to gather quantitative and qualitative empirical research published between 2013 and 2023. We did not want to replicate work that was already completed; rather, one of our primary goals was to add to this work in meaningful ways, centering culturally and linguistically diverse students and spaces.

Additionally, much more focus and attention have been given to critical pedagogies within the last decade.

As researchers from multiple universities in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the United States, we knew our research processes for gathering articles would not be able to be completely streamlined. We developed criteria for the search engines, agreeing to use our university electronic library system to access journal articles. We also used search engines such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, and ERIC. We included research within and outside the United States. Our searches were filtered to works published in English.

2.2. Study Selection

We curated a list of key search terms and criteria, reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research from 2013 to 2023. Our search terms initially included:

- Critical pedagogies AND middle school or junior high or 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, AND teaching strategies or teaching methods or teaching approaches or classroom techniques;
- Antiracist teaching AND middle school or junior high or 6th, 7th, and 8th grades;
- Antiracism or anti-racism or antiracist or antiracist AND middle school or junior high or 6th, 7th, and 8th grades AND education or school or learning or teaching or classroom or education system (later added AND education to further narrow results);
- Culturally responsive teaching or culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive instruction or culturally inclusive AND middle school or junior high or 6th, 7th, and 8th grades or young adolescents;
- Anticolonial or anti-colonial or decolonial AND middle school or junior high or 6th, 7th, and 8th grades or young adolescents AND education or school or learning or teaching or classroom or education system;
- Critical literacy or social justice AND teaching strategies or teaching methods or teaching approaches or classroom techniques AND middle school or junior high or 6th or 7th or 8th.

Deciding on our search terms was an iterative process rather than a prescriptive process. Initially, we did not have keyword searches; rather, we used the advanced study search option within our library systems to curate the criteria for our search. We started with middle school pedagogies, which left us with over 20,000 results. We wanted to ensure that our review on critical pedagogies in middle-level education focused on teaching strategies and social justice across learning spaces, so we added and revised the criteria until we reached the above search terms, which generated 240 results.

We identified three sub-themes within the critical pedagogies relevant to today's middle-level classroom context: diverse instructional approaches, culturally responsive pedagogies, and decolonial and antiracist strategies. We acknowledge that many of the articles we gathered overlap or fit within two or more themes. As the purpose of this critical literature review was not to find the best fit or to summarize findings but to synthesize and highlight themes emerging from recent scholarship, we maintain that these categories were informative and subjective, and we used them to organize the information.

We acknowledge that a potential limitation of this review is that, based on the limitations and scopes of our search engines and criteria, we may not have included all articles that met the final criteria for inclusion. However, we also determined that due to the vast number of articles selected for final review, it is unlikely that an outlying pedagogy was missed when determining the sub-themes for critical pedagogies. In Table 1, we present our results and references.

Table 1. Critical Pedagogies Literature Review.

| Sub-Theme | References Included in This Literature Review |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Diverse Instructional Approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aksakalli, A. The Effects of Science Teaching Based on Critical Pedagogy Principles on the Classroom Climate. <i>Science Education International</i> 2018, 29, pp. 250–260. Arphattananon, T. Breaking the Mold of Liberal Multicultural Education in Thailand through Social Studies Lessons. <i>The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas</i> 2021, 94, pp. 53–62. Ruppert, N.; Coleman, B.; Pinter, H.; Johnson, D.; Rector, M.; Diaz, C. Culturally Sustaining Practices for Middle Level Mathematics Teachers. <i>Education Sciences</i> 2022, 12, 910. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120910. Author 2023. Turner, K.C.N.; Hayes, N.V.; Way, K. Critical Multimodal Hip Hop Production: A Social Justice Approach to African American Language and Literacy Practices. <i>Equity & Excellence in Education</i> 46, 342–354. Coppola, R.; Woodard, R.; Vaughan, A. And the Students Shall Lead Us: Putting Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Conversation with Universal Design for Learning in a Middle-School Spoken Word Poetry Unit. <i>Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice</i> 2019, 68, 226–240. Arada, K.; Sanchez, A.; Bell, P. Youth as Pattern Makers for Racial Justice: How Speculative Design Pedagogy in Science Can Promote Restorative Futures through Radical Care Practices. <i>Journal of the Learning Sciences</i> 2023, 32, 76–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2022.2154158. Lensmire, A. Children Teaching Future Teachers: A Civic Literacy Project on the Border Wall during the Trump Regime. <i>Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy</i> 2023, 20, 250–272. Andrews, P.G.; Moulton, M.J.; Hughes, H.E. Integrating Social Justice into Middle Grades Education. <i>Middle School Journal</i> 2018, 49, 4–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2018.1509562. |
| Culturally Responsive Pedagogies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arphattananon, T. Breaking the Mold of Liberal Multicultural Education in Thailand through Social Studies Lessons. <i>The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas</i> 2021, 94, pp. 53–62. Ruppert, N.; Coleman, B.; Pinter, H.; Johnson, D.; Rector, M.; Diaz, C. Culturally Sustaining Practices for Middle Level Mathematics Teachers. <i>Education Sciences</i> 2022, 12, 910. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120910. Author 2023. Coppola, R.; Woodard, R.; Vaughan, A. And the Students Shall Lead Us: Putting Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Conversation with Universal Design for Learning in a Middle-School Spoken Word Poetry Unit. <i>Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice</i> 2019, 68, 226–240. Aguirre, J.M.; Zavala, M. del R. Making Culturally Responsive Mathematics Teaching Explicit: A Lesson Analysis Tool. <i>Pedagogies: An International Journal</i> 2013, 8, 163–190. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2013.768518. Gunn, A.A. Focus on Middle School: Honoring My Students’ Names! Using Web 2.0 Tools to Create Culturally Responsive Literacy Classrooms. <i>Childhood Education</i> 2014, 90, 150–153. Casler-Failing, S.L.; Stevenson, A.D.; King Miller, B.A. Integrating Mathematics, Science, and Literacy into a Culturally Responsive STEM After-School Program. <i>Current Issues in Middle Level Education</i> 2021, 26. Balint-Langel, K.; Woods-Groves, S.; Rodgers, D.B.; Rila, A.; Riden, B.S. Using a Computer-Based Strategy to Teach Self-Advocacy Skills to Middle School Students with Disabilities. <i>Journal of Special Education Technology</i> 2019, 35, 249–261. O’Keefe, S.B.; Medina, C.M. Nine Strategies for Helping Middle School Students Weather the Perfect Storm of Diversity, Disability and Adolescence. <i>American Secondary Education</i> 2016, 44, 72–87. Wexler, J. Improving Instruction in Co-Taught Classrooms to Support Reading Comprehension. <i>Intervention in School and Clinic</i> 2021, 56, 195–199. Krawec, J.; Huang, J. Modifying a Research-Based Problem-Solving Intervention to Improve the Problem-Solving Performance of Fifth and Sixth Graders with and without Learning Disabilities. <i>Journal of Learning Disabilities</i> 2017, 50, 468–480. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219416645565. Cuenca-Carlino, Y.; Freen-Green, S.; Stephenson, G.W.; Hauth, C. Self-Regulated Strategy Development Instruction for Teaching Multi-Step Equations to Middle School Students Struggling in Math. <i>The Journal of Special Education</i> 2016, 50, 75–85. King-Sears, M.E.; Jenkins, M.C.; Brawand, A. Co-Teaching Perspectives from Middle School Algebra Co-Teachers and Their Students with and without Disabilities. <i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i> 2020, 24, 427–442. Swanson, E.; Stevens, E.A.; Wexler, J. Engaging Students with Disabilities in Text-Based Discussions: Guidance for General Education Social Studies Classrooms. <i>TEACHING Exceptional Children</i> 2019, 51, 305–312. |

Table 1. Cont.

| Sub-Theme | References Included in This Literature Review |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Decolonial and Antiracist Strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ DeMink-Carthew, J.; Smith, K.; Burgess, K.; Leonard, S.; Yoon, B.; Andrews, G.; Nagle, J.; Bishop, P. Navigating Common Challenges: Guidance for Educators in Racial Justice Work. <i>Middle School Journal</i> 2023, 54, 25–36.■ Kavanagh, S.S.; Danielson, K.A. Practicing Justice, Justifying Practice: Toward Critical Practice Teacher Education. <i>American Education Research Journal</i> 2020, 57, 69–105.■ Hagerman, D.; Porath, S. The Possibilities of Teaching for, with, and about Social Justice in a Public Middle School. <i>Middle School Journal</i> 2018, 49, 26–34. https://doi-org.proxy.binghamton.edu/10.1080/00940771.2018.1509561.■ Hughes, H.E.; Ranschaert, R.; Benson, K.L. Engaged Pedagogies in the Middle Grades: A Case Study of Justice-Oriented Teachers in COVID Times. <i>Middle School Journal</i> 2023, 9.■ DeMink-Carthew, J.; Gonell, E. Lessons Learned From Teaching Social Justice Education in Sixth Grade. <i>Middle School Journal</i> 2022, 53, pp. 5–14.■ Vachon, K.J. The Racialization of Self and Others: An Exploration of Criticality in Pre-Service Teacher Self-Reflection. <i>Issues in Teacher Education</i> 2022, 31, 35–56.■ Brewer, A. Critical Global Literacies: Expanding Our Critical Global View from the Classroom. <i>The English Journal</i> 2019, 108, 6, pp. 100–102. |

3. Results

3.1. Diverse Instructional Practices

Across these studies, researchers pointed to a variety of instructional approaches to meet the needs of all students and to center student experiences in the classroom. Throughout the research, there was an emphasis on inquiry-based learning, collaboration, and cooperative learning as strategies that would upend power dynamics and increase academic achievement [6–9].

Several research studies centered instructional practices on reflecting through writing as tools for students to map their own thinking and reflect and self-monitor their own learning. Journaling was used in mathematics, along with mathematical autobiographies [8]. In conjunction with discussions, students in an Indigenous middle school created memes in a language arts class to reflect their beliefs and opinions about sociopolitical topics like the Dakota Access Pipeline and to challenge dominant power dynamics [10]. Centering students’ interests, a 9-week spoken poetry unit challenged canonical poetry methods and helped students explore cultural affiliations and identities [11]. In a physics unit, students reflected on their own racial and cultural histories and composed vision boards to decenter Western science education and facilitate dreaming and designing for Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth [12].

In addition to reflection, classrooms across the content areas implemented a variety of instructional practices, with the goal of confronting power dynamics and encouraging student participation in community engagement and sociopolitical issues. Role-playing was a strategy implemented in a social studies classroom to engage students in culture-building and democratizing the classroom [7]. In an extended program in California, Turner et al. employed critical multimodal hip hop production as an instructional approach to propel awareness of social justice and to empower students to use their voices and take action for social justice [10]. Built on reflection and collaboration, a middle school science classroom implemented critical pedagogical strategies including letting students design the classroom environment, as well as giving them an open invitation to ask questions or speak whenever they felt it was pertinent to do so, rather than students being prescribed a designated window for questions; based on both student and teacher reflections, these practices increased classroom community-building and transformed the teacher’s initial authoritative instructional leanings into encouraging a student-centered classroom environment [6].

Diverse instructional approaches were not limited to students. Research reflected the diverse instructional approaches in teacher preparation programs that served as models for preservice teachers and their future students. With colleagues, Lensmire created The Civic Literacy Project, a teacher education model for challenging dominant field experience approaches and hierarchies, instead centering collaboration and co-inquiry among teachers

and students alike by foregrounding students' interests and issues of concern as the foundation for instructional planning [13]. The author challenged the idea of field experience as school-based and reframed service learning by designing and embedding a cultural exploration and learning project into her course in a middle-level education program [9]. Preservice teachers used culturally responsive teaching practices and co-created an interdisciplinary learning program on food literacies for inner-city middle school refugee and immigrant youth, which they presented at a local library during students' spring break. Students conducted walking tours of the neighborhood and responded to a local refugee resettling nonprofit organization's identified needs for their students' learning. Andrews et al. reform their middle grades educator program to focus on preservice teachers as change agents who will disrupt oppressive power dynamics and institutional practices in order to foster social justice and equity by participating in protest events, conducting neighborhood walks, and emphasizing critical reflection and democratic decision-making [14].

Overall, studies in both middle school classrooms and middle-level education preparation programs shared a focus on interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning and included a diverse variety of instructional strategies to maximize student achievement and to foster equity.

3.2. Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

Culturally responsive pedagogies relate to the use of culture and the students' surroundings as a framework for planning to create engaging lessons that highlight the culture and community [8,15]. Teachers enacting culturally responsive pedagogies confronted implicit biases and disrupted assumptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Culturally responsive pedagogies have been shown to foster collaboration, increase student engagement, and motivate students toward social justice [8]. Common themes across articles included multicultural learning, place-based learning, problem-based learning, and social equity [7–9,16,17].

As illustrated by Ruppert et al., culturally responsive pedagogies include “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” [8] (p. 1). The link between the place in which learning takes place and the role of one's own culture in the learning environment illustrates the use of place-based and problem-based learning as effective middle grades strategies in the content-focused environments of math, science, social studies, and English language arts [8].

The use of multiculturalism and understanding social equity and racial inequality through student voices is another important pedagogy highlighted in this review. As multicultural education has deep roots in the U.S., the struggles against the inequality of historically and systematically marginalized populations and the fight for social justice of multicultural education scholars provided a purpose and guidance in designing and implementing research studies focused on the incorporation of student voices into the lessons in the classroom [7]. Studies also focused on linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of education preparation programs to support preservice and in-service teachers in their understanding of the role of student experiences in culturally responsive teaching practices [8,9,16]. This work also allows students to use their voices in form exploration and place-based learning.

During an initial review of the literature as it related to middle grades pedagogies, the use of inclusive pedagogies was also identified as a strategy used in diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice pedagogies, due to the diversity of all students across multiple measures; as a result of this analysis, it was determined that these pedagogies exhibited a large degree of overlap with those of culturally responsive pedagogies, in that the latter considers the broad range of learning differences that occur due to the nature of teaching diverse populations.

Inclusive pedagogies acknowledge the intersectionality of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the middle grades [11]. As illustrated in the work of Coppola et al., the special focus of universal design for learning, which historically has its foundation

in the field of special education, allows for the incorporation of pedagogical strategies that will also benefit culturally and linguistically diverse student populations [11]. This is not to imply that these groups are the same; however, the rationale for addressing this intersectionality is that it has naturally presented itself in the data and, additionally, findings support the understanding that strategies for supporting linguistic differences often mirror those for supporting students with disabilities [11,18]. Several studies focused on instructional applications and methods of self-advocacy [19] for classroom use with young adolescents [20]. The majority of the empirical research focused on literacy and/or reading, or it used skills related to literacy [21], followed by math [22–24], as well as strategies used in other content areas such as science and social studies [25].

In conclusion, the use of culturally responsive pedagogies demonstrated a far-reaching strategy that supports the academic progress of a diverse student population in the middle grades; often, the use of multiple strategies in combination allows for increased motivation and academic skill growth for students across multiple representations of diversity.

3.3. Decolonial and Antiracist Strategies

Another important finding is that researchers in the field of middle grades education implement critical pedagogy through decolonial and antiracist strategies. This pedagogy is often conducted by justice-oriented educators. Researchers claim that both possibilities and challenges exist when implementing it [26,27].

In terms of possibilities, studies [28–30] show that critical pedagogy through decolonial and antiracist strategies plays a role in open dialogue about critical topics including racism, bias, and prejudice. For instance, in an earlier study [30] that explored three sixth-grade teachers' critical pedagogy, the researchers claim that the colonial ideology of white supremacy and Eurocentric ideas was often disrupted in the classroom. An open-dialogue situation where teachers shared their biases and prejudices offered "opportunities to deepen trust" [30] (p. 9) between justice-oriented teachers and students. The findings by Hughes and colleagues [29] also support the argument that critical pedagogy through decolonial and antiracist strategies opened dialogue and built relationships between teachers and students. The participating middle school content-area teachers show that they engaged in critical pedagogy through unlearning "harmful, dominant narratives about race/ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, and gender" [29] (p. 2). The possibilities of critical pedagogy are also shown in a study by Hagerman and Porath [28]. The researchers found that 8th-grade students engaged more fully in decolonial and antiracist strategies when current events were utilized, which allowed students to make connections.

In terms of challenges, the findings of the reviewed studies show that teachers' racial positionality influences their decision-making processes. For example, a study by Kavanagh and Danielson discusses the impact of pre-service teachers' racial identities on their practice [27]. The researchers argue that the participating teachers were rarely aware of "instructional decisions during which they attended to social justice issues" [27] (p. 69). Vachon's study on pre-service teachers' findings [31] also aligned with Kavanagh and Danielson's study [27]. Vachon claims that there are only a few teachers who critically reflect on the issues of whiteness and power dynamics in the classroom. Furthermore, the findings of a self-study by Brewer, who examines her own teaching in a 7th-grade English language arts class, indicates that a "sense of reluctance and discomfort with analysis and critique and the promotion of political action" [32] (p. 102) was felt, based on her racial identity as a white teacher. These findings demonstrate that more conscious-based practices on teachers' racial identities and positionalities are needed for successfully implementing decolonial and antiracist strategies.

4. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that critical pedagogy is perceived as an important educational practice, but it is not widely implemented in the classroom beyond those of committed and justice-oriented teachers. This shows that it is still an emerging pedagogy

in middle grades education. In particular, studies that were reviewed tend to focus more on teachers' preparation [27,31,33], rather than on teachers' actual practice in classroom settings. It is important to examine teachers' preparation in the teacher education programs. However, it is not clear how the teachers who completed the programs implement them in real settings and how they work with students in the classrooms.

Another important aspect to consider is that the studies on critical pedagogy tend to examine teachers' practice through their interviews and reflections, without researchers' classroom observations [29]. Although these interviews and reflections on their practices are important methods, how teachers engage in their professional judgment and "repertoires of practice" [34] (p. 161), as seen through researchers' observations, is equally important to understand the process. However, studies on the process are sparse. More studies on classroom dynamics that show how teachers interact with students and how students respond to the teachers' pedagogy are needed to deeply understand the existing issues and to find possible solutions for successful critical pedagogies.

The lack of studies on classroom dynamics beyond pre-service teacher preparation using limited methods leads to suggestions for future research. One suggestion is that scholars and teacher educators in the field of middle grades education consider expanding the research area by focusing on students beyond teachers and their research methods to advance critical pedagogies for our young adolescents' equitable learning opportunities. Along with the teacher preparation issues, middle-grades students' voices are equally important for a fuller picture of critical pedagogy. As scholars in the field of middle grades have claimed [35], it is crucially important to help young adolescents engage in critical pedagogy since their cognitive, cultural, and social developments are heightened in the middle years. Finally, developing young adolescents' development regarding critical literacies takes time. Thus, we call for researchers and scholars to engage in more longitudinal studies to capture young adolescents' dynamic learning process in classroom settings.

The other suggestion is that more concrete frameworks that both pre- and in-service teachers can use in the classroom could be developed. Decolonial and antiracist approaches are not simple. They are complex, requiring sustained preparation with systematic methods. As Domínguez claimed, "the ways that, in education, even our best intentions can, unwittingly, be obedient to a logic of coloniality" [36] (p. 552). Although there are seminal frameworks on justice-based education (e.g., culturally relevant pedagogy [37] and culturally sustaining pedagogy [38]), the dimensions in these frameworks do not focus on how to disrupt decolonial and antiracist pedagogies. Under the current situation that critical race theory (CRT) is prohibited and oppressed [36] in the mainstream contexts, more specific instructional frameworks that are grounded in relevant theories (e.g., decolonial theory) will be helpful for middle grades teachers to use to engage in decolonial and antiracist pedagogies in the classroom.

5. Conclusions

This critical literature review emphasizes the significant potential of critical pedagogies in informing, contributing to, and improving middle-level education practices in areas addressing equity and social justice. Our findings suggest that there is evidence of effective practices that encompass diverse instructional approaches, culturally responsive pedagogies, and decolonial and antiracist strategies. The integration of these pedagogies can notably enhance the educational experiences of middle school students by confronting power imbalances and centering diverse voices and perspectives. While there is an ongoing need for increased reflexive work with both preservice teachers and in-service teachers to confront implicit biases and understand positionalities, there is a strong need for research that incorporates middle school students' voices. We call for education researchers to conduct robust ethnographic research across learning spaces to deepen our understanding of classroom dynamics, the choices and outcomes of implementing effective critical practices, and the experiences of middle school students from their own perspectives.

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