



Ethnic Studies: A Research Summary

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In the 1960's Ethnic Studies initially took the form of Black independent schools, Afrocentric public schools, tribal schools, and language immersion schools (Sleeter, 2011). However, Ethnic Studies can be traced as far back as the 1900's when educator and historian W.E.B. Dubois argued for the teaching of Black history in U.S. schools (Anderson, 2016). In higher education, Ethnic Studies began in 1968 after grassroots organizing and student demand sparked programs at San Francisco State University, UC Berkley, and UC Santa Barbara (Hu-Dehart, 1993). A well-known contemporary example of Ethnic Studies is the Mexican-American Studies program that began in 1998 at Tucson Unified School District. Although this popular high school elective was shut down by a statewide legislative ban in 2010, a federal appeals court judge overturned the Ethnic Studies ban in 2017 after deeming it unconstitutional and discriminatory (Depenbrock, 2017).

Ironically, the Tucson ban increased awareness and prompted research into the success of Ethnic Studies, leading to new legislation for its expansion (Depenbrock, 2017). For instance, Governor Jerry Brown signed AB-2016 encouraging all districts and charter schools in California to offer high school Ethnic Studies courses by 2021. Following the lead of El Rancho USD, Los Angeles Unified, the second largest district in the nation, now requires all high school students to complete a one-semester Ethnic Studies course to graduate. In other states, a recent bill passed in Oregon to enact K-12 Ethnic Studies Standards by 2020 and similar laws have been proposed in Washington and Texas. With students of color now the majority in U.S. public schools (Strauss, 2014), and with one in five speaking a language other than English at home (Camarota & Zeigler, 2014), many communities are expressing a need for curricula that is inclusive and representative. Not only is Ethnic Studies good and culturally relevant teaching, research indicates Ethnic Studies leads to significant, positive changes in student performance (Cabrera, 2012; Dee & Penner, 2016; Sleeter, 2011).

Ethnic Studies Research

Ethnic Studies explore the intellectual and cultural traditions and resources of racial and ethnic groups that are underrepresented and marginalized in the textbooks and curricula of U.S. schools (Hu-Dehart, 1993). These multidisciplinary courses draw upon the fields of history and literature and often integrate concepts from anthropology, political science, psychology, law or criminal justice. Ethnic Studies focus

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on the experiences of African Americans, Chicana/os, Latina/os, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other groups, as determined by region and student population (Arce, 2016). Because group identity is complex and multilayered, Ethnic Studies also explore how race and ethnicity intersect with other social and cultural elements such as gender, class, and sexuality (Hu-Dehart, 1993). In sum, Ethnic Studies require students to think critically about relationships between past and present in terms of power and equity by exploring the histories, experiences, and perspectives absent from the traditional curricula taught in most K-12 schools and universities (Arce, 2016; Hu-Dehart, 1993). This holistic, student-centered instruction allows students to critique and potentially disrupt systematic oppression and the legacy of colonialism through community projects, outreach, and inquiry while focusing on social justice, social responsibility, and social change.

In response to the Ethnic Studies ban in Arizona, the National Education Association (NEA) commissioned a review of research to determine how Ethnic Studies programs relate to student achievement. The resultant report, "Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies" details the positive effects Ethnic Studies curricula have on student engagement, achievement, and identity development (Sleeter, 2011). Specifically, evidence indicates that students of color in Ethnic Studies courses are less likely to miss class, more likely to graduate, have greater self-esteem, and increased test scores compared to students who are not in such courses. However, this does not mean assigning texts about diverse groups will automatically improve student performance. As the NEA report details, Ethnic Studies should integrate the following components to have positive social and academic student outcomes:

1. Teachers must have rapport with students and believe they can learn; they must know their content well, including the perspectives of groups they are studying; being of the same ethnic background as most of their students is also helpful.
2. Ethnic Studies must include critical thinking and active strategies that are engaging and relevant to students' lives; students must be able to connect their everyday lived culture and language to the readings and history they are studying.
3. Ethnic Studies should be academically challenging and aligned with state standards and assessments; instead of standalone lessons or classes, Ethnic Studies works best when it is seamlessly integrated into academic subject matter.

In addition to the positive impact of Ethnic Studies on students of color who are members of the group under study, the NEA report found that Ethnic Studies positively affects White students, as well. When taught how to talk about race and specific actions they can take to address racism—including perspective-taking and intercultural communication—White students produce higher levels of thinking and cognitive complexity, and show increases in achievement, engagement, and empathy (Sleeter, 2011).

Ethnic Studies Content

Below are outcomes selected from an Ethnic Studies survey course syllabus provided by the Los Angeles Unified School District. These learning outcomes are aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Reading and Writing in History/Social Science and exemplify the kinds of multidisciplinary, culturally

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relevant, and challenging content secondary students explore in Ethnic Studies courses. Although these are taken from a much larger list, note that these outcomes address a number of components discussed above, including the study of relationships between past events and present experience. Additionally, these outcomes use high level cognitive verbs such as "examine," "evaluate," and "analyze," indicating that students are required to think complexly about social, political, historical, and cultural content.

In this course students will know and be able to:

- Explore histories, struggles, and triumphs of the LGBTQ community in the United States.
- Examine and evaluate gender stereotypes.
- Examine and analyze the effects of dehumanization through the capture, trade, and enslavement of Africans, within a regional and global context.
- Examine the role that Mendez v. Westminster School District played in the desegregation of American schools.
- Evaluate the impact of immigration policies on Latino Americans.
- Evaluate the impact of the reservation system on American Indians.
- Examine push-pull factors that led to Asian immigration to the United States.

In another example, San Francisco Unified School District's high school Ethnic Studies course includes six units, each focusing on two key concepts, such as identity & narrative, systems & power, transformation & change, and causality & agency. Each unit integrates cross-cutting values such as love, respect, hope, community, self-determination and is guided by complex essential questions, such as: How have people historically, and in the present, challenged oppression? What role do individuals play in the transformation of themselves, their community and larger society? How do race, ethnicity, nationality, and culture shape identity?

Similar to the LAUSD syllabus, SFUSD's literacy-based content integrates critical thinking, active strategies, and cultural relevance. The suggested reading list includes contemporary and challenging texts such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Howard Zinn's *A Young People's History of the United States*, Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror for Young People: A History of Multicultural America*, and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The use of cross-cutting values, essential questions, and contemporary readings connect to students' everyday experience while challenging them to apply this content to their communities and lives.

Ethnic Studies and Good Teaching

As research indicates, all students benefit from Ethnic Studies, no matter what age, race, or ethnicity. However, key components must be present for Ethnic Studies to fulfill its promise of increased engagement, academic achievement, and student empowerment. Diverse texts and discussions about race are not enough. In order for Ethnic Studies to produce good teaching it must: 1) be taught by instructors who are knowledgeable, engaged, and want to challenge oppressive conditions, 2) explore

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content that is political, social, and economic in local, personal, and critical ways, and 3) use instructional methods that are active, authentic, and connected to students' everyday lived experience.

About the Author

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