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*Ethnic Studies as a Vehicle of
Empowerment:
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Educational Journey*

Biography

Briana Anguiano grew up in Pico Rivera where she attended El Rancho High School. Coming into San José State University, Briana majored in Marine Biology with goals of becoming an Aquatic Veterinarian. During her second year, Briana decided to take a leap of faith and change her major to Sociology after losing passion for the field. Soon after, Briana developed a passion for societal issues and more specifically, creating change within the educational system. While at San José State University, Briana has been a Student Ambassador for the Guardian Scholars, an Academic Coach at the Educational Opportunity Program, a Social Action Intern working with the recognized student organization, The College Awareness Network, and a Ronald E. McNair Scholar engaging in undergraduate research. Briana graduates from San José State University in the Spring of 2021 and will go on to obtain a Master of Arts in the Teaching of Social Studies with initial certification to teach 7-12 at Teacher's College, Columbia University in New York City.

Ethnic Studies as a Vehicle of Empowerment: Students of Color and Their Educational Journey

Abstract

Students from marginalized communities often enter classrooms where their cultural heritage is not reflected within the classroom. As a result of being in an environment where one's culture and experiences are overlooked, students can become disengaged in the classroom. This project investigates the ways in which Ethnic Studies courses hold social promise to inspire better academic performance for high school students. Therefore, the goal of this study is to document, describe, analyze, and advocate for the implementation of ethnic studies scholarship into the California high school curricula. My literature review will ask and answer the following research question: To what extent can teaching ethnic studies motivate high school students in their educational journey to achieve their full potential as active learners? I contend that incorporating ethnic studies into the high school curricula can create an inclusive, diverse, and empowering learning environment for students from marginalized communities. Through reviewing ethnic studies literature from primary and secondary sources, I illustrate the historical development of ethnic studies scholarship as well as the ongoing use of ethnic studies in struggles for social justice that take place on and off campus. Additionally, I include insight from conversations with high school teachers who create ethnic studies classrooms and/or people who are familiar with a curriculum that centers college and career readiness. My project finds that ethnic studies can encourage academic success in students, especially those from marginalized communities. A statewide Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement can ultimately communicate to Californian students that their culture has value while preparing them to thrive in an increasingly diverse global society.

Introduction

Students from marginalized communities often enter classrooms where their cultural heritage is not reflected within the curriculum. As a result, students may feel as though their history does not matter. More importantly, they may come to feel invisible due to the lack of critical recognition of their ancestry in school curricula as a source of knowledge to learn about and from. As Kumar, Karabenick, Warnke, Hany and Seay (2019) report in their study on students' perceptions on cultural responsiveness and inclusivity within the classroom, Arab-American, African American, and Chaldean (Iraqi) students expressed feelings of exclusion and marginalization when there was an absence of cultural representation in the class curriculum.

As a result of being in an environment where one's culture and experiences are overlooked, students can become disengaged in the classroom. This may even lead them to develop low motivation to engage in their academics in general. In order to prevent the educational withdrawal of students—especially those from historically disenfranchised communities—the curriculum in schools must be culturally relevant and inclusive. My project focuses on high school students from racially marginalized communities who are often disregarded in school curricula. The stakes of this crisis are that these students can become disengaged from learning engagements inside the classroom. Therefore, the goal of this study is to document, describe, analyze, and advocate for the implementation of ethnic studies scholarship into California high school curricula. My work strives to demonstrate the need for the meaningful outcomes ethnic studies produces among marginalized communities. I contend that ethnic studies is a form of indispensable education, an inviting pedagogy, and a tool that teachers can use to unlock the full potential of their students. My project serves to inform educational leaders about the promise of ethnic studies curricula in high school institutions—especially the ways that young people are empowered by their histories and culture to become serious students and people willing to take action for social change.

The following literature review illustrates the historical development of ethnic studies scholarship. Additionally, it engages with the ongoing use of ethnic studies in struggles for social justice that take place on and off the school campus. I begin with a conversation about the

emergence of ethnic studies from campus and community mobilizations for social justice, and subsequently offer insight into how ethnic studies functions within school settings today as well as where ethnic studies stands, in regards to legislation. I also engage in a conversation about how ethnic studies is used in high school curricula, specifically among historically marginalized communities, and focus on the academic outcomes of students in these courses. Ultimately, my study promotes the academic success of high school students from marginalized communities of color and includes insight from conversations I engaged in with high school teachers who create ethnic studies classrooms and/or people who are familiar with a curriculum that centers college and career readiness.

Campus and Community Mobilizations for Social Justice: Ethnic Studies as an Educational Right

During the 1968 Walkouts, thousands of Chicax high school students from different campuses across East Los Angeles walked out of their schools in protest of the educational inequalities they were experiencing (Acuña 2011). The walkouts were organized over several months by student groups such as the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), with the support of community members, college students, and some educators such as the famed Lincoln High School educator, Sal Castro. College students included alumni from Camp Hess Kramer—a camp for Jewish youth—signaling attention to the broad support that the Chicax youths garnered for their cause (Acuña 2011). Chicax students demanded smaller classes and culturally relevant textbooks and curricula; they also desired to experience education as a pathway to higher learning, and not as a route to dead end jobs that lacked dignity and favorable conditions. Additionally, they voiced their displeasure over social conditions that criminalized them at school, such as fences that enclosed them, which they likened to gates that surround jails (Acuña 2011). The students and community members emphasized their demands for an inclusive curriculum as part of the larger struggle for equality. Although the East Los Angeles Walkouts did not achieve the outcomes that students labored for, the movement built a sense of power and dignity among the Chicax community that was directly related to taking back control of their

educational institution and curriculum; which is still drawn on as inspiration for educational equity to this day.

Less than a year after the walkouts, student activists at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) organized a strike demanding a School of Ethnic Studies with separate independent departments consisting of Black, Asian, Latino and Native American studies (Rooks 2006). This strike resulted in violence between students and law enforcement; however, the institution ultimately agreed to establish a School of Ethnic Studies (Rooks 2006). Despite the fact that a School of Ethnic Studies was founded, at the time, the college only housed a department of Black Studies (Rooks 2006). Today, San Francisco State University (SFSU) has a department for American Indian, Asian American and Latina/Latino Studies, in addition to Africana Studies. An important lesson from this historical struggle is how students, faculty, and community members united in solidarity for the right to their history and the opportunity to engage in intellectual material that affirmed their own experiences and needs. After what transpired at SFSU, many colleges and universities across the nation followed suit by establishing their own Ethnic Studies departments as well as adding more courses to the curriculum. It was during this time that the Mexican American Studies, now The Chicana and Chicano Studies Department at San José State University, was created, as well as the Graduate Program in Chicana/o Studies.

If not for the imagination and actions of students, Ethnic Studies as a discipline would not have come into being. The campus and community mobilizations are part of the significant history behind the founding of Ethnic Studies. We see that, consistently, students have fought for their right to have their culture and history represented in school curricula. In every instance when high school and university administrators did not listen to students, they took their cause to the streets and created demonstrations that called the community into action. In other instances, students used education as a vehicle to serve their surrounding community in order to emphasize the importance of a culturally relevant curriculum to the development of their identity and ultimately, their ability to succeed as informed change makers in the world. Although students have stressed the need for Ethnic Studies to promote inclusivity within the classroom and social justice in society, critics and opponents continue to claim these

courses and programs are unpatriotic and encourage resistance against “American” values.

Backlash Politics: Framing Ethnic Studies as Anti-American

Following the mobilizations for ethnic studies in the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic studies programs would become the target of political backlash from right-wing conservatives. Part of their argument claims that ethnic studies materials promote Anti-Americanism (Cacho 2010). Critics of ethnic studies also feel that the curriculum promoted feelings of resentment, grievance, and hatred (Cacho 2010). However, ethnic studies teaches students how racialized communities experience oppression, not because it is their destiny. Rather, it teaches them that they have become vulnerable to systems of domination, which include oppression based on how dominant social groups use dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and citizenship to exploit particular groups of people. Educators attempt to illustrate this through a problem-based framework, which is contrary to the beliefs of opponents of ethnic studies (Cacho 2010). Critics saw this as merely divisive education, using tropes related to the term “trouble maker” to label ethnic studies advocates and activists as people looking to create problems for those who work hard.

While ethnic studies was receiving criticism during the 70s and 80s, the U.S. was in the middle of an economic crisis that led to the rationale that cutbacks in Ethnic Studies programs should be made in colleges and universities across the nation (Hu-DeHart 1993). The push to defund ethnic studies programs and courses was influenced by a new brand of conservative activism labeled, “movement conservatism” (Nicol 2013). According to Nicol (2013), movement conservatism sought to preserve the privilege and power of the wealthy elite by sending millions to the nation’s colleges and universities as a response to any criticism of capitalism. In this regard, capitalism is a main concern in ethnic studies courses, as its historical development is identified and critiqued as a main source of hierarchy and exploitation of racialized and gendered communities. Lewis F. Powell Jr, corporate lawyer and Nixon’s nominee to the Supreme Court, was one major individual who led this movement of conservative activists to criticize radical social sciences in academia. Additionally, this criticism shaped the minds of wealthy business tycoons

to begin heavily funding conservative research policy organizations and think tanks that sought to delegitimize the importance of ethnic studies programs and curriculum (Nicol 2013). Soon after, the rise of “neo-conservatism” emerged as mainstream American academics and journalists began moving towards the more conservative and reactionary stances in politics, economics, and culture in relationship to and in fear of Black power politics. This resulted in the creation of conservative coalitions made up of scholars, journalists, big business executives, and political operatives to challenge what they identified in ethnic studies and social science disciplines as the “radicalization” of American politics. For them, ethnic studies seemed to be “an assault on patriotism, educational standards and family values” (Nicols 2013). Furthermore, these critics claimed that these academic programs undermined the quality of academic scholarship and teaching due to their opinion that it relied too heavily on cultural relativism and did not allow students and faculty to use “moral reasoning” (Nicols 2013).

The charges and criticisms towards programs and courses like ethnic studies were loosely known as the “The Culture Wars.” The culture wars consisted of racist attacks on the cultures and knowledge systems of communities of color that were vaguely shielded by a colorblind language. They were taken a step further in the mid-1980s when William Bennett, former chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, defended critics and attacked an undergraduate course at Stanford University. To illustrate his point, Bennett offered a suggested list of “classic” Western texts that did not include a single work by a woman or person of color in general, claiming “curriculum reformers in higher education were denying students a timeless legacy by replacing classic texts of Western civilization with the works of lesser quality and significance” (Nichol 2013). In regard to this incident at Stanford, Bennett publicly attacked the replacement of the freshman undergraduate course, “Western Culture,” with “Culture, Ideas and Values” (Nichol 2013). The original course had students read fifteen works in Western philosophy and literature; conversely the replacement included works by women and persons of color (Nichol 2013). This decision by the Stanford University faculty implies an attempt to add additional voices in order to create a more complete analysis of American cultural values and social institutions.

Ethnic Studies scholarship strives for the inclusion of more voices of women and persons of color to depict a more accurate and comprehensive account of history by considering the stories and experiences of all people in the U.S. Students have pleaded with faculty and administration for the right to be included and represented; there is nothing more American than the desire to feel American through the inclusion of heritage and narratives of those who have been marginalized. In a conversation with an English/AVID teacher from a Southern California high school on the importance of an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum, they emphasized how our textbooks and content taught in class must, “reflect the people that live here, it needs to reflect the cultures that exist here....if we want history to be accurate then the importance of inclusivity is huge.” Another English/AVID teacher comments, “It’s about bringing equality and raising awareness among all cultures....it’s all voices [that are] to be heard.” AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination and is a program that “prepares students for college eligibility and success.” (cde.ca.gov 2020) Although students and educators advocate for inclusivity and relevancy in the classroom, it seems that opponents of Ethnic Studies only saw the dangers of the development of self-determination and solidarity in the students that may potentially affect their political agendas. The Anti-American discourse continued into the 90s and 2000s once there was news of a culturally relevant curriculum that was empowering students and promoting ethnic solidarity in an Arizona school district.

A Reemergence of the Struggle for Ethnic Studies in Public Schools

The Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) in Arizona launched a Mexican American Studies program offered to elementary, middle, and high school students in 1998 (Romero 2010). This program included courses intended to improve the academic achievement of Chicanx students in the district (Romero 2010). Additionally, the program was meant to serve those students at-risk of either failing or dropping out, who happened to be predominantly Latinx/Chicanx. Improvements were found in attendance and graduation rates with 100% of the students enrolled in the Mexican American studies program graduating and 85% attending college (Deppenbrock 2017). The creation of the Mexican American Studies

program in Tucson was a local victory in a long-standing battle for educational justice that spans the country (Romero 2010).

The curriculum offered college-level material as well as a connection to the social reality of the students (Romero 2010). Once again, Arizona highlighted the promise of an Ethnic Studies education. Students and educators alike benefitted from the course's ability to develop students as critically engaged citizens committed to act against oppression within their communities (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx 2014). Christine Sleeter reveals how Ethnic Studies courses/programs like the one found in Tucson not only lead to overall achievements, they give students, "a sense of agency," to engage with the content and apply it to a broader societal context (Sleeter 2011). Similarly, a history teacher from a Southern California high school with experience in teaching Ethnic Studies courses explains, "students take away a new sense of ownership over themselves and their education and can now apply that into their communities and how they interact with their communities on a larger scale." A different history teacher speaks to the effect of culturally-relevant content, claiming that, "knowing that your culture and experiences matter" teaches students "a lot about self-worth." Ultimately, through ethnic studies curriculum, students began to learn important lessons about themselves and their community. Tara Yosso contends that the lessons mentioned here contribute to their community cultural wealth, in which talents, strengths, and the experiences of students of color and their communities are brought in to help navigate new terrains (Yosso 2005).

While students and educators were becoming empowered and engaged through the Mexican American Studies program, Arizona politicians began their plan of action against Ethnic Studies. In 2008, the Senate Bill 1108 was introduced into the Arizona State Legislature, prohibiting a curriculum that gave voice to the experiences of people of color in elementary, middle, and high school, as well as community college and university courses (Romero 2010). The malicious intentions of SB 1108 became clear when it was revealed that the bill originated from Homeland Security (Romero 2010). Fortunately, the massive opposition to SB 1108 killed any further action (Romero, 2010). However, the resistance did not stop conservative activists from harassing ethnic studies educators

or introducing more legislation challenging Ethnic Studies from being developed.

The following year, Senate Bill 1069 was introduced in the Arizona State Senate. This laid the foundation for a future bill that included a ban on courses that were designed for a particular ethnic group and the advocacy of ethnic solidarity (Romero 2010). A main contention was the treatment of students as belonging to groups instead of treating them as individuals. SB 1069 eventually led to the creation of the controversial HB 2281 in 2010, which mirrored some of the same language as SB 1069, with the addition of classes or courses that were not allowed to promote the overthrow of the U.S. government and promote resentment toward a race or class of people (Romero 2010). The bill was passed from the House to the Senate to then be heard in the Senate Education Committee, where it was moved (Romero 2010). HB 2281 was signed into law by then Governor Jan Brewer, who in fact had never even attended any of the courses in the Mexican American studies program nor attempted to understand the beneficial nature of the curriculum to the large Chicano population (Romero 2010). Politicians were invested in tearing down the hopes of the Chicano people and sought out to control and destroy the Mexican American studies program due to the political problems it posed for them. Consequently, students took over the Tucson school board meeting to protest the potential elimination of the program (Cabrera et al. 2014). About 500 community members came out to support the self-chaining of nine students to the school board members' chairs while over 100 police officers were there to control the scene (Cabrera et al. 2014). The controversy around HB2281 made several headlines and also invited educational professionals to chime in on the debate surrounding Ethnic Studies (Cabrera et al. 2014). Both sides agreed that student achievement should be the focal point of the debate; however, the race politics surrounding it interfered, pushing academic success to the backburner (Cabrera et al. 2014). Ultimately, opponents of Ethnic Studies were able to convince the Tucson school board of the potential dangers of this liberating program. In order to also protect funding, the Tucson school board made the decision to end the program in 2012 (Cabrera et al., 2014).

After a seven-year legal battle, a federal judge deemed HB2281 unconstitutional in 2017. The federal judge stated that the enactment and enforcement of the ban was motivated by racial animus due to the sole

removal of the Mexican American studies program (Astor 2017). The court ultimately felt that the ban on the Mexican American studies program was driven by the political agenda of Tom Horne, former Arizona attorney general, and John Huppenthal, the former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, by using race-based fears to delegitimize ethnic studies curriculum (Astor 2017). Today, the TUSD employs a multicultural curriculum that uses an “anti-basis framework” and culturally-responsive teaching at all grade levels (tusd1.org 2020). The curriculum is based on four main themes to create an “optimal learning environment”: identity, diversity, justice and action (tusd1.org 2020). Educators and students in the TUSD are paving the way for future public school programs interested in incorporating multiculturalism in their curricula.

Taking Initiative in the Fight for Ethnic Studies

While Tucson students and educators were fighting politicians for the right to their heritage, districts in California were waiting for Assemblyman Luis Alejo’s AB1750 Ethnic Studies Bill to pass. The bill would require the State Department of Education to commission a report in order to “identify programs, standards, and curricula pertaining to ethnic studies at the high school level” (leginfo.legislature.ca.gov 2014). At the same time, Dr. Aurora Villon and her colleague, Jose Lara, who sat on the El Rancho Unified School District (ERUSD) Board of Education, were drafting their own Ethnic Studies Resolution. This resolution called for an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement starting with the 2015-2016 academic year (Fuentes, Villon and Zavala 2016). The resolution was approved in June of 2014 and ERUSD made history as the first district in California to make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement (Fuentes et al. 2016). ERUSD is located in Pico Rivera, a Southern California city, where a large majority of the population is of Latinx descent. The district has one public high school, El Rancho High School (ERHS), and a magnet high school, Ellen Ochoa Prep Academy. Both are made up of at least 97% Latinx students (caschooldashboard.org 2019; niche.com 2020). With the collaborative effort of teachers, as well as the monetary support for curriculum planning, professional development and instructional material, Ethnic Studies at ERHS was created (Fuentes et al. 2016). The courses offered at El Rancho High School under Ethnic Studies today are: Ethnic

Studies Foundations, Diversity in Film and Literature, Multicultural Literature and Ethnic Studies Statistics (erUSD.k12.ca.us 2020). According to Dr. Villon, since the passing of the Ethnic Studies resolution in 2014, about 20 other school districts have followed suit (Fuentes et al. 2016).

The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) was one district in particular that took initiative to investigate the outcomes of an Ethnic Studies program on its high school students. In partnership with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, they conducted a study that examined a pilot Ethnic Studies program in San Francisco high schools as well as its academic outcomes compared to students who did not enroll in the Ethnic Studies courses (Donald 2016). According to Brooke Donald (2016) of the Graduate School of Education, the ethnic studies course, “focuses on the experiences and identities of racial and ethnic minorities, uses cultural references in teaching and aims to enhance social and political awareness.” The research partnership revealed—similar to the impact of the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson—improvements in attendance, grades, as well as credits needed to graduate (Donald 2016). The evidence from SFUSD is clear: Ethnic Studies can encourage academic success in students.

Conclusion: Ethnic Studies Today

All students in California would benefit the most from an Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement due to the state’s extreme diversity, which is projected to continue growing. Nevertheless, in 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a bill that would make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement in all California high schools due to both dissatisfaction of the model curriculum and pressure from opponents. Although advocates of the Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement may have to try again, the California State Board of Education recently approved an Ethnic Studies model curriculum for grades K-12. According to EdSource.org (2021), the model curriculum will include goals, principles and sample lessons. Additionally, Cynthia Glover Woods, a state board member and liaison to the Instructional Quality Commission, emphasized the Ethnic Studies model curriculum, “shall promote critical thinking and a rigorous analysis of history, the status quo and systems of oppression” (EdSource.org 2021).

With the approval of an Ethnic Studies model curriculum for K-12, an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement for all California high schools may not be too far behind. Many school districts, such as Los Angeles and Fresno, have already considered making Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement within the next few years (EdSource.org 2021). A statewide Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement can ultimately communicate to Californian students that their culture has value while preparing them to thrive in an increasingly diverse global society.

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