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From Classroom to Community: The Impact of Ethnic Studies Curricula on Students' Civic Engagement in California's Central Valley

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¹ Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Golden State Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows who secure a summer placement interning in an organization related to civic and political advocacy and who have demonstrated a commitment to diversity.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research explores the potential impacts of ethnic studies curricula on young students' civic and community engagement, particularly focusing on students attending schools in California's Central Valley. Since the passage of AB 101, which establishes ethnic studies as a requisite for graduating high school², understanding the significance of ethnic studies is more relevant than ever for California's K-12 education. I interviewed three Central Valley educators to understand their perceptions of student civic and community engagement outcomes based on ethnic studies coursework. Overall, three key findings gathered from the interviews demonstrate educators' and students' interest in utilizing ethnic studies within their communities.

BACKGROUND

The signing of California's AB 101 requires an ethnic studies curriculum in high schools³ and strives to address the longstanding absence of a thorough multicultural education. In 2016, a groundbreaking study analyzed the quantitative positive impacts of ethnic studies on 9th-grade student academic outcomes in San Francisco public schools.⁴ However, challenges persist despite the legislative aim to enrich students' understanding of marginalized communities' contributions and struggles. As controversies rise, including how it will affect students, the need for a nuanced approach to curriculum development is clear.⁵

Research on ethnic studies finds that it has positive academic outcomes for students in the classroom. A 2016 study on San Francisco schools correlates increases in attendance rates and GPAs to ethnic studies because it aligns with the cultural experiences of minority students.⁶ This

² https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101

³ https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101

⁴ https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21865/w21865.pdf

⁵ <https://calmatters.org/education/2021/10/ethnic-studies-requirement/>

⁶ https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21865/w21865.pdf

finding on ethnic studies outcomes is used by several sources that urge California to do more to diversify its teacher workforce,⁷ arguing that the diverse population of students in California deserves a teacher workforce that is more representative of their population because it is relevant to addressing issues like the student achievement gap between minority students and white students.⁸

Given the positive academic outcomes, this research aims to explore how ethnic studies may also foster civic and community engagement outcomes among young students. Understanding how ethnic studies influence students' community involvement and sense of civic responsibility can provide a more comprehensive view of its benefits. To do this, I interviewed educators from two school districts in Fresno, California. The first district is Fresno Unified, which has an implemented ethnic studies curriculum. The second is Kings Canyon Unified, and it does not have an ethnic studies curriculum. This region holds personal importance to me as I was raised in Fresno County and attended Kings Canyon Unified, and I acknowledge how my positionality and experiences affect my perspective. However, the interviews and analysis aim to understand the effects of ethnic studies outcomes on students' civic engagement through educator perceptions.

Fresno Unified School District

Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) has an ethnic studies curriculum that models its commitment to being a place where “Diversity is valued, educational excellence and equity are expected, individual responsibility and participation by all is required, collaborative adult relationships are essential, and, parents, students and the community as a whole are vital partners.”⁹ A FUSD administrator involved in developing the district’s ethnic studies curriculum was interviewed for this research. According to demographic data reported by the California Department of Education (CDE), the three minority groups that make up most of FUSD’s enrolled students are African American (7.6%), Asian (10.6%), and Hispanic or Latino (69.5%).¹⁰

Kings Canyon Unified School District

Kings Canyon Unified School District (KCUSD) does not have an ethnic studies curriculum,¹¹ however, their insights are also significant in understanding how ethnic studies influence students' civic and community involvement. I interviewed a current and former educator at

⁷ <https://edsources.org/updates/states-need-to-do-more-to-diversify-the-teacher-workforce-study-says>

⁸ <https://calmatters.org/explainers/achievement-gap-california-explainer-schools-education-disparities-explained/>

⁹ <https://curr.fresnounified.org/ethnic-studies-2/>

¹⁰ <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthLevels.aspx?cds=1062166&aggllevel=District&year=2023-24>

¹¹ <https://www.kcusd.com/>

KCUSD. The current educator teaches the elective course on Chicano Studies at Orange Cove High. The former district educator now teaches in Southern California and has experience with the development of the California Department of Education's (CDE) Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.¹² Data reported by the CDE reports that KCUSD's enrolled student population is predominantly Hispanic or Latino (88.1%).¹³

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC STUDIES' IMPACT ON STUDENTS

All three educators shared perceptions of student impacts from ethnic studies coursework. Three main themes highlighted during the interviews were: special cases in which there were perceived changes in a student's attitude towards the ethnic studies class, students' notable excitement and curiosity, and student engagement in cultural clubs and activities outside the classroom.

Ethnic Studies Coursework

The current educator at KCUSD shared her experiences teaching the Chicano class to students. After teaching the class for the first time in 2017, she loved teaching the class because she **"loved seeing students being excited" about "materials they never have been exposed to."** In her classroom, she facilitates socratic seminars to encourage students to come up with higher-order questions and make connections between the material and their lives. She particularly notes students' body language and how they respond and engage to measure their excitement in the classroom. She shared a special case in which she witnessed the changed academic attitude of one student known for his "bad academic reputation" who submitted his first essay in her class after "connecting very well with the material" in the Chicano studies course. Although she enjoys witnessing students' interest in the material, she admits, "In my mind, I think it should be more." She refers to the number of students engaged in ethnic studies learning. This year, her class was comprised of 12 students. For this reason, she does her best to encourage students to consider what other students and community members in Orange Cove who are not in the classroom should know. During her interview, the former KCUSD educator shared that the most beautiful times from teaching ethnic studies have been when students begin to realize **"We are learning here. This is me. Education and what we are doing is relevant to me."**

During the interview, the FUSD administrator mentioned that her efforts in developing the district's ethnic studies curriculum included curating a qualitative survey in collaboration with UC Berkeley researchers for students who have taken an ethnic studies course. The purpose of the

¹² <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/esmc.asp>

¹³ <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthLevels.aspx?cds=1062265&agglevel=District&year=2023-24>

survey is to evaluate how likely students would recommend the class they took to another student. The survey showed that 80% of students reported that they would recommend the class to another student. The administrator shared that these findings are used for teacher training and continuous improvement of ethnic studies courses at FUSD. Feedback from students began with phrases such as **“This class has helped me greatly with understanding...”** and **“I think every student should take...”**

Cultural Student Organizations

The insights shared by the three interviewees underscore the significant role that ethnic studies and cultural empowerment clubs play in fostering student civic engagement and leadership. All three interviewees shared perceptions about expanded involvement in ethnic studies via cultural empowerment clubs. The current educator at KCUSD helps lead the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) club at Orange Cove High, which is student-led and where students take on leadership roles to plan and manage community events on campus such as Dia De Los Muertos. She notes that students often participate in the club due to their experience in the class she teaches. The FUSD administrator has prior experience at a middle school where she saw similar observations. The former KCUSD educator has observed student involvement in organizations such as MEChA, the Black Student Union, and Social Justice for Palestine, where she expressed seeing students' concern with Palestine and being active in school boards to pass resolutions calling ceasefires. Both KCUSD educators discussed during the interview how students who came in ready and interested in the ethnic studies material had lots of growth, and those students who came in with no experience experienced some growth compared to the other group. This distinction emphasizes the transformative potential of ethnic studies in nurturing informed, proactive, and culturally empowered individuals.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Supporting Teacher Training for Ethnic Studies-specific Coursework

In her interview, the former KCUSD educator emphasized the importance of teacher training, pedagogy, and knowledge in advancing a culturally responsive ethnic studies curriculum in school districts. State-supported initiatives to provide school districts with teacher support training programs and grants are essential. These resources would equip educators with the necessary tools to effectively implement AB 101, ensuring that the curriculum meets their students' diverse and specific needs. This approach not only enhances the quality of education but also fosters an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

2. Continue State Efforts to Recruit and Retain More Teachers of Color

California should prioritize efforts to recruit and retain more teachers of color. Research and reports have shown that a diverse teaching workforce benefits all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.¹⁴ For perspective, 2021-22 administrative data reports that 79% of California’s student population were students of color, but only 39% of its teacher workforce were teachers of color.¹⁵ By continuing to implement and support recommendations to increase the number of teachers of color, the state can ensure that students receive an education that is both culturally relevant and representative of their own experiences. This dual approach—enhancing teacher training and diversifying the teaching workforce—will significantly strengthen the implementation of ethnic studies curricula and promote a more inclusive and equitable education system.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- Educators from Central Valley school districts engage in efforts to teach ethnic studies through **workshop training, direct classroom action, and advocating for inclusive curriculum.**
- Students enrolled in ethnic studies courses are often **also a part of an organization at their school related to cultural empowerment.**
- Educators perceive that taking an ethnic studies course encourages students to think critically about their communities and families from a societal issue perspective, and **those who have already come prepared with those interests have taken action to address them.**

CONTACT PERSONS

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¹⁴ Dee, Thomas S. “A Teacher like Me: Does Race, Ethnicity, or Gender Matter?” *The American Economic Review* 95, no. 2 (2005): 158–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132809>.

¹⁵ <https://www.nctq.org/publications/State-of-the-States-2023:-Policies-to-Increase-Teacher-Diversity>