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Promising Practices in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

Author
Arquillos, Joel

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Promising Practices in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

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by

Joel Arquillos

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Promising Practices in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

by

Joel Arquillos

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

Professor Kimberley Gomez, Co-Chair

This study aimed to explore how experienced teachers of Ethnic Studies (ES) utilize culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) to enhance student engagement in a large urban school district. The participants in the study were nine teachers from eight distinct public schools. The research design employed a sequential qualitative approach, involving interviews and an analysis of curriculum artifacts. After gathering the data, I identified instances of CRP implementation by the teachers in their instructional delivery and assignment design, which, according to them, fostered engagement in terms of student participation in class discussions, completion of assignments, and inspired writing.

The interviews yielded interesting findings regarding the contrasting approaches of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and white teachers concerning how they conveyed their personal encounters

with racism, their willingness to be vulnerable and open with their students, and their development of a curriculum that reflected the diversity of students in their classes. Furthermore, the findings revealed various activities, such as writing exercises and project presentations, that provided students with opportunities to express aspects of their personal identities in safe learning environments where teachers encouraged open and critical exploration of ideas.

Moreover, the findings highlighted the distinctive nature of ES compared to other history courses, as ES teachers actively construct knowledge with their students instead of merely presenting them with facts and dates. Additionally, the study uncovered challenges, such as insufficient time to cover ES content within a single semester and the need for more collaborative planning time among ES teachers to enhance curriculum effectiveness.

The dissertation of Joel Arquillos is approved.

Robert Cooper

Lucrecia Santibañez

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

Kimberley Gomez, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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VITA

1995	B.A. English and History Hunter College New York, New York
1997	Single Subject Clear Teaching Credential San Francisco State University San Francisco, California
2001	Galileo Academy of Science and Technology Teacher of the Year San Francisco Unified School District San Francisco, California
2003	National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Fellow New York University, New York
2006	*Social Enterprises for Learning: A Toolkit for Educators, Administrators, and Community Partners*. Co-Author Published by the San Francisco Unified School District and the Center for Cities Schools University of California, Berkeley San Francisco, California
2006	Inaugural Teacher Prize from 826 Valencia San Francisco, California
2015	Community Hero Prize from the Los Angeles Dodgers Los Angeles, California
2019	*True Connections: Teen-to-Teen Advice About Social Media and the Digital World*. Editor. Common Sense Media and 826 National Publishing San Francisco, California

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study explored how experienced teachers using culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in their Ethnic Studies (ES) courses support Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students by creating more engagement in their classrooms. Student engagement is defined as "the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning" (Marks, 2000). More specifically, this study shows how experienced teachers use CRP in ES to build a safe environment which allows students to be open about their personal experiences. As Dee & Penner (2017) conclude, instructors utilizing CRP consider their students as highly capable of academic growth, culturally relevant, and contributors to the creation of knowledge. Scholars demonstrate that ES is unevenly taught and that effective teaching of the subject must include a culturally responsive approach to be effective for BIPOC youth (Tintiangco-Cubales, Kohli, Sacramento, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath & Sleeter, 2014). Such an approach creates a stronger connection for students to their classroom and teachers. With ES a requirement for graduation from high school by 2030 in California, new ES teachers can learn from effective CRP practices used by current teachers of ES.

Although ES has long been taught in California, the model curriculum passed by the State board in 2020 is more comprehensive. For instance, it asks teachers to offer "pedagogies that allow for student and community responsiveness, validate students' lived experience, and address social-emotional development" (California Department of Education, p. 6). Many teachers new to the subject will require successful teaching models to adapt CRP methods. Teachers new to ES may not even be aware of the need to use CRP to effectively connect with their students. They may instead teach the course as a multicultural study, e.g., histories of

different ethnicities, an approach that does not maximize BIPOC student engagement and connection to the curriculum.

This project investigated how teachers in LAUSD, using CRP in their ES curriculum, are helping their students feel seen and as a result, more engaged in their classrooms. With controversies surrounding studies on ES' effects on BIPOC students, this study will add the direct voices of teachers and their approach to curriculum and class management. These perspectives are limited in the existing research, and at times have been kept out of studies on ES or have not been given the attention they require. Specifically, this study aimed to uncover effective CRP strategies for BIPOC students, as research calls for (Tintiangco-Cubales et. al., 2014). It provides new teachers of ES with examples of strong teaching methods as they undertake the new California ES model curriculum standards.

The Problem

As of 2020, the dropout rate for Native American students in California was 13.7%, for Black students 13%, for Latinx youth close to 10%, and less than 4.3% for Asian and 7% for White students (California Department of Education, 2020). One contributor to this dilemma according to scholars is the failure of schools and the education system to provide culturally responsive curriculum which addresses the disconnect to school for some BIPOC students in public schools (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020). A remedy for this disconnect in California is the adoption of a new ES, anti-racist and anti-colonial curriculum passed by the state legislature in October of 2021 (Assembly Bill 101) making ES a required course for high school graduation by the year 2030. Research shows that the teaching of ES develops student identity, confidence, and cultural knowledge, which leads to a stronger connection to school for BIPOC students in particular

(Bonilla, Dee, & Penner, 2021). However, because this new curriculum is extensive, for instance necessitating a deep understanding of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality among other identity markers for youth, it requires teachers to be well trained in culturally responsive methods (Dreilinger, 2021). Otherwise, ES teaching will not be as effective (LAist, 2021). Moreover, research shows that Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students can develop a deeper engagement in public schools when teachers use CRP teaching methods in their classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018) instead of presenting a course that only asks students to learn about a variety of cultures.

Despite such benefits the adoption of the State's ES curriculum has encountered resistance. On one side of the current debate are teachers who argue that the ES curriculum has been motivated by political activism focused on dismantling the school system and promoting division among different ethnic groups (Alliance for Constructive Ethnic Studies, 2021). In some school districts throughout California, parents have raised concerns that ES is a critical race theory challenge to traditional history (Smith, 2021). In fact, the course is being challenged even at UCLA where recently the Board of Admissions and Relations (BOARS) stalled their recommendation to add an "H" to the A-G requirement they oversee to make space for an ES course. A letter signed by 172 UC professors claimed the BOARS guidelines would require students to learn "ideas and doctrines" as opposed to key historical learning skills (Sander and Wyner, 2022).

Such rigid views challenge the notion of multiple perspectives. ES curriculum centralizes race and the stories of people of color from multiple ethnicities and gender identities (Liberated Ethnic Studies, 2021; Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2014). It seeks to dismantle a predominantly white and Western perspective. While a model curriculum passed by the State Board of

Education in 2020 exists (California Department of Education, 2021), educators lack effective practices and teacher preparation to deliver this content (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2014). Only six studies have addressed effective ES practices and fewer have included conclusive empirical data showing the effectiveness of this approach. And recent controversy around the most cited and empirical article by Dee and Penner (2017; 2021) has arisen (Sander and Wyner, 2022).

Many studies claim data that shows the benefits of a culturally responsive curriculum to students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lee, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017; Gay 2018). These benefits include a curriculum and approach that 1) builds upon student views and life experiences, 2) develops their critical thinking and consciousness, and 3) creates learning environments that are safe and caring (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). However, scant research investigates how the curriculum is taught by ES teachers in California public schools today (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014; Sacramento, 2019; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) and what we can learn from successful ES practices. While the model curriculum passed by the State Board of Education in 2020 is a starting point, an examination of current teaching practices using CRP and assessed in terms of students' engagement, requires more attention.

Existing Evidence of Benefits of ES implementation

Even though ES is not a new subject in many areas of California and Arizona, only a few studies exist with empirical evidence of the positive impact of ES on students. Some of these, however, have been questioned. Dee and Penner's 2017 study is the most cited, with empirical evidence for the positive impact on achievement of ES on BIPOC youth. This study of an ES program in San Francisco found that ninth-grade attendance increased by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23. The effects were so prodigious that other

researchers have questioned their validity. Just recently, Sander and Wyner (2022) released a rebuttal to Dee and Penner's findings stating, "the effects are not merely greatly overblown—they plausibly do not exist at all" (p. 3).

The Dee and Penner study focused on the San Francisco Unified District, which in 2007 urged the creation of an ES curriculum. This new curriculum (SFUSD, 2020) led to the formation of an SFUSD Curriculum Collective made up of faculty who designed a curriculum and lesson plans. Central to the curriculum was the use of CRP as a tool to engage youth who had traditionally been left out of the curriculum.

In 2010, the San Francisco school board approved an ES pilot program at the high school level which has since expanded to all high schools in the district. Dee & Penner showed that the original design of this curriculum focused on a social justice approach centering the lived experiences of BIPOC youth. Some of the SFUSD pilot schools who offered the ES course targeted students who were entering high school with a GPA lower than 2.0 and an attendance rate below 87.5%. Yet, as critics have argued, the selection of students who were given the choice to opt in or out of the study made the data from the final population of 67 students hard to understand and identify the causal effects (Sander and Wyner, 2022). But the criticism does not disavow how a culturally responsive approach to ES has proven effective in helping students who are predominantly BIPOC see themselves reflected in the curriculum, a reflection that many scholars argue leads to a greater student engagement in ES classrooms.

Despite such strengths and noted methodical weaknesses, this study also lacked a deep examination of the practices and pedagogy used by teachers who implemented the curriculum. Although implementation was not the focus of the study, an examination of teaching practices that led to the claims of success would be helpful for future teachers of the subject. In fact, the

authors of the study have gone on to question attempts at replication of the successes seen in their study of schools in San Francisco. They note that these teachers were highly trained in the same education program at San Francisco State University—a point that must be considered as the new curriculum is rolled out and this course becomes a CA graduation requirement. The attacks on their methods also raises the question of the political pressures behind the push to make this course a graduation requirement. However, many teachers and academics still see strong evidence from this study for making ES central to the public high school curriculum since no other effort exists which centers the lived experiences of BIPOC students in schools.

The Gap

With ES a graduation requirement, more research is needed on culturally responsive practices that make the implementation of this curriculum effective. Since this curriculum is new for many teachers, a deeper look at *effective* teaching of ES, defined as producing student engagement, supports the successful delivery of this new curriculum. Specifically, this research shed light on effective current teaching practices, measured by students' willingness and sense of safety through participation in class discussions. This study highlights the use of CRP delivering ES in school settings. Researchers have some evidence that ES increases learning (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020) and that CRP increases engagement (Osterman, 2000); however, they have not identified many CRP practices that ES teachers use to promote student academic engagement. This study identified and described such practices, through the following Research Questions.

Research Questions

- **RQ1**: In what ways, if at all, are teachers building student engagement in their ES classes (as measured through CRP approaches including incorporating student identity into the curriculum, knowledge creation, participation in class discussions, etc)? (interviews and artifact review)
- **RQ2**: How, if at all, does a teacher's identity impact their pedagogical approach to teaching ES? (interviews)

Research Design & Methods

My study investigated which CRP classroom strategies, according to experienced teachers, support BIPOC student engagement in ES. I undertook a sequential qualitative study which included interviews and an analysis of curriculum artifacts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was appropriate because it focused on the practices of teachers and gave them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences delivering the ES curriculum as well as pulling examples of CRP methods from student work and lesson plans. In addition, as Creswell & Creswell (p. 258) remind qualitative researchers, the point of the interview is to find the meaning the *interviewees* give for their practices, not those the interviewer wants to see. With that in mind, it was important to highlight what curricular choices teachers are making and how they believe it is creating engagement for their students. An understanding of what works and doesn't through interviews provided rich details that support future teachers of this content. In fact, since a qualitative approach necessitated an emergent design (p. 258), the study changed according to the responses teachers provided to questions. This flexibility secured the study as coming directly from them and not from my own desire to prove the importance of CRP in ES.

I began the study with interviews of experienced ES teachers from a group of schools in a large urban school district in California. My focus was on the teaching practices of a select group of ES teachers (7-10) to learn how and if they utilized key CRP methods, such as curriculum reflecting the specific ethnicities of students in their class among other markers. From these interviews, I then teased out fuller descriptions of CRP practices in ES that, in their experience, promoted high engagement from students in terms of class participation, openness, and a willingness to contribute to classroom discussions or debates. This study required this deep probing because there are specific approaches, language, and practices that ES teachers may possess, which will serve as helpful models for future teachers of ES. Capturing these teaching methods will serve as examples of best approaches to building engagement in ES classrooms.

In addition to the interviews, I reviewed artifacts such as lesson plans, student work, and curriculum to analyze how ES content is being delivered and how students are making sense of the material. I looked for use of CRP language in the design of the curriculum and lessons. In the student work, I highlighted instances of language and critical understanding of ES issues which are being taught in the classroom. I also highlighted examples of student connection to ES through personal reflections they may share in their writing or other student work.

This study required the perspectives of teachers in urban schools at a large school district where large numbers of BIPOC students exist. It is for those student populations that the new curriculum has been designed. An examination of how the teachers of these children deliver ES content will not only support teachers entering the profession, but support those in less diverse communities looking for ways to engage their BIPOC students effectively and to center their lived experiences more accurately and consistently in their curriculum.

Significance of Study

This study provides approaches to teaching ES for teachers new to it and how to successfully implement the new model curriculum at their schools. Since ES will be required at all California high schools in the next few years, teachers will need materials, lesson plans, and professional development to deliver the ES content in a way that can maximize impact on BIPOC students. By highlighting some of the differences teachers from urban schools experience in delivering ES content to their students, I provide data that supports how teachers with multiple identities use CRP to successfully engage BIPOC students. Additionally, since all California districts will need to develop their own ES curriculum based on the one approved by the State, the findings from this study provides insight into the challenges and successes teachers of the subject in the district have encountered. Ultimately, this study supports the critical next steps of ES adoption in California and beyond.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that the teaching of Ethnic Studies (ES) is key to developing student identity, confidence, and cultural knowledge, which leads to a stronger connection to school for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students in particular (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Lopez, 2017; Kolluri, 2020). However, for many teachers in California public schools, this curriculum is new, and many are still figuring out how to teach it in a way that engages their specific student population. This project investigated how teachers using CRP in their ES curriculum are helping engage their students in their classrooms in a variety of ways. The study aimed to uncover effective CRP strategies for BIPOC student's engagement when implementing the new ES model curriculum.

In this literature review, I first examine the problems around the lack of engagement for BIPOC students, leading to high dropout rates. I then address the disconnect for BIPOC youth in schools by examining white and Western-dominant instruction and the evidence of how this has led to student disengagement and failure, and thus the need for increasing student connection to the curriculum. Next, I provide a brief overview of the various attempts to address this problem, through interventions such as culturally responsive instruction. I then turn to ES as a key solution, beginning with the history of ES in California and how it became a required course for high school graduation. I also demonstrate how CRP is embedded in this new curriculum and I show examples of how CRP in ES has been effectively delivered in the past. I conclude with the conceptual framework of my study, namely CRP and student engagement. I display how using a CRP approach to teaching BIPOC students in ES may lead to a stronger sense of student belonging in urban classrooms.

Student Engagement

For the purposes of this study, student engagement was observed and operationalized in how ES teachers create classroom environments where students feel safe to join classroom discussions about challenging topics which the ES curriculum centralizes. Themes such as racism, identity, gender, and other topics not typically addressed in other high school classes are front and center in the ES course. Therefore, this study explored how teachers have incorporated these themes and how they have helped their students see themselves and feel empathy for others while engaging in classroom conversations around these topics.

Although ES has been taught for a few decades in many schools throughout California, current politicized conversations are pushing back on critical race theory, as well as BIPOC focused pedagogies, which advocate for a less white and Western curriculum. Therefore, this study explored the unique ways BIPOC students face challenges other groups do not when entering school. Their experiences of personal and system-imposed inequities influence their willingness to participate in school (Howard, 2016). A look at some of the obstacles unique to BIPOC students helps readers understand why ES is important and how CRP methods help level the playing field in classrooms for students of color, specifically.

Problems with BIPOC Student Engagement

BIPOC students often feel disconnected to high school history courses because they do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum (Chapman, Jones, Stephens, Lopez. Rogers, & Crawford, 2020). Western civilization and white supremacy dominate the narrative of the past in the curriculum, and because of this narrative, ES was created to level the field for students of color and to help BIPOC students develop a sense of agency and worth. Yet many challenges

still exist for BIPOC students in schools and in their communities. Challenges include a higher incidence of poverty, policing targeting youth of color, not being prepared or selected for AP or Honors classes, and a tendency to be assigned to schools with the least prepared teachers (Howard, 2016). These systemic challenges—compounded with curriculum where BIPOC students do not see themselves reflected—motivate a focus on successful methods of CRP in ES. Such a focus offers a chance to build agency in these students, which can lead to higher aspirations and improve their chances of attending college (Marrun, 2018; Kolluri, 2020).

Dropout and Challenges for BIPOC Students

As presented in Chapter 1, the dropout rate for Native American students in California was 13.7%, for Black students 13%, for Latinx youth close to 10%, and less than 4.3% for Asian and 7% for White students (California Department of Education, 2020). Reasons that scholars identify for dropout vary between BIPOC groups. Scholars have pointed to Latinx students dropping out due to economic issues leading to higher mobility between schools, pregnancy, a higher incidence of youth living in single family homes, and higher numbers of parents without high school or college degrees (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Okilwa, Cordova, Kaulbert, 2021). Data also show that students whose parents do not speak English were also less likely to engage with teachers and schools (Okilwa, Cordova, Kaulbert, 2021).

Black students have been shown to drop out for other reasons. Scholars point to the higher degree of punishment for BIPOC youth and criminalization inside and outside of school as a factor for dropouts, especially for Black students (Huerta, Howard, & Haro, 2020). This treatment of BIPOC students as criminals has increased the number of times they are suspended from school. In a 2018 study by Joel Mittleman, who researched 15 years of data from a Fragile

Families and Child Wellbeing Study, showed a 52% association between student suspension leading to arrest (Mittleman, 2018). In fact, over 400,000 youth go to juvenile detention facilities for infractions that were once handled in less punitive ways (Howard, 2016). Once students become criminalized and absorbed by the "school-to-prison pipeline" the likelihood of them graduating school is drastically minimized (Howard, 2016; Huerta, Howard, & Haro, 2020).

Other groups feel a sense of "otherness" or "imposter syndrome" which is brought about by being subjected to a curriculum which does not reflect their own lived experiences, leading to high dropout rates (Oyserman, 2008). Feeling seen and connected to what is being taught by teachers who show care and interest in their students helps build more engagement and connection (Osterman, 2000), which can help BIPOC students view school as a place that wants them to stay instead of one that pushes them out. A study by Fall and Roberts from 2012 on student engagement in school, measured by data from an Educational Longitude study showed increased student retention when teachers expressed interest in their students, praised them, and helped enhance community building within the school. One of the central factors for the adoption of ES has been to create experiences for BIPOC students to feel valued and respected by their teachers (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020). These teachers use CRP to highlight the assets and abilities of their students as opposed to holding them to white or Western-dominant standards (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al, 2014).

Stress in Schools and the Lack of Trust

In addition to feeling left out of the curriculum in schools, BIPOC students who live in urban communities (and some suburban) face the added challenges of trauma, violence, and poverty. A recent study of 1,548 students in urban high schools found that 41.7% of students

witnessed shooting/stabbing/beating in their communities, while 18.3% witnessed a murder, and 53.8% experienced the murder of someone close (Gollub, Green, Richardson, Kaplan, Shervington, 2019). The observation of violence in urban communities has contributed to a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in youth, yet many are misdiagnosed and often untreated (Gollub, et al, 2019). In addition, urban students who are immigrants have often witnessed violence back home and their numbers have been steadily increasing in urban schools. As of 2014, the number of students categorized as English Language Learners (ELL) made up close to 10% of the student population in the United States and close to 17% in large urban districts (NCES, 2016). Violence and stress also plague children of lower socio-economic status living in large urban areas, many of whom are at greater risk for experiencing victimization than those from families with greater incomes (Gollub et al, 2019).

Compounding the safety issues that youth in urban communities face, these students attend schools with teachers who are less prepared to support their needs (Darling-Hammond, 2004a, 2007; Larson, 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales, et al, 2014)). The disconnect is exacerbated by the fact that most urban school teachers do not reflect the communities students come from. Demographic statistics from 2020 show that Latinx students make up 55% of the student population in California schools, while Black students make up 5%, Asian 9%, and White 22% (CDE, 2020). Yet, teachers are 21% Hispanic/Latinx, 4% Black, 6% Asian, and 61% White, creating a mismatch between students and teachers (CDE, 2020).

While racial disparities exist, studies suggest that white teachers can be trained to be more culturally sensitive to the diverse needs of students (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020) Recent work investigates how acknowledging their own ethnocentrism, learning about students' cultural backgrounds, studying the larger political

and social context, and setting clear expectations for students, all teachers can address diverse student needs (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020).

History of Ethnic Studies Program to Increase Student Engagement

By centering the experiences of BIPOC students in the ES curriculum, teachers can begin the process of making their spaces reflective of their student population and therefore, more welcoming. Although our nation's demographics will be a majority non-white by 2045 (Brookings Institute, 2018), school curriculum and teacher identities are predominantly white and tell a story of our past that positions a white and Western perspective as the unifying and dominant culture of our nation (Carter Andrews, He, Marciano, & Salazar, 2021). Currently, states across the country are banning the teaching of 'critical race theory' in an attempt to control the narrative of our nation's past (Los Angeles Times, 2021). The ES curriculum has evolved as a response to this dominant pedagogy and creates space for African/Black, Latino/a/x, Asian, and Native people's narratives to encompass the story that is American history. California high school students will soon be required to take ES in order to graduate and California State Colleges have already mandated this course be included in its graduation requirements (Pawel, 2021). Even though ES is becoming a graduation requirement for all high school students, little research examines what best practices will help current and future teachers of this subject in school (Allender, Berta-Avila, 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2014).

The path to defining ES started with college students known as the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State University in 1968 protesting the Eurocentric nature of courses at the school, lack of professors of color, and other anti-minority systems which existed

across all schools in the United States at this time (Green, Nysgreen, Valdiviezo, & Arce 2020). The notion of decolonization in education was seen as a way of fighting back against oppressive systems which kept people of color from advancing in the United States. This foundation is the backdrop to what has been described as the first wave of ES which led to the establishment of the first department of ES at San Francisco State. By 1994, over 700 universities included some form of ES in their schools. The movement found its voice through the work of Paolo Freire, among others, who promoted the concept of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970/2000), a form of inquiry which asks students to critique the power structures and systems that maintain a status quo and keep certain groups in control of societal norms. ES programs became the antithesis to a Western curriculum embedded across multiple disciplines and a way to give voice to the communities and histories which were kept out of most college courses. The movement to bring ES to high schools was led by educators who came out of this critical pedagogical tradition who wanted youth of color to see themselves reflected in their learning.

Supporters of this curriculum seek a more just world focused on forms of thinking that oppose the dominant forms of capitalist culture. In fact, Marxist ideology plays a major role in the evolution of this approach which influenced Freire and other thinkers who viewed the inequities and social structures as a result of a capitalist system. The success of this approach for students of color in secondary schools is attributed to connections being made between the actual lived experiences of minoritized students and the content being learned in schools (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). The argument is that students of color have historically been underserved by schools because the focus has been assimilation to a dominant culture as opposed to empowerment and the valuing of the culture they already bring to the classroom. Since white-

identified people have been the dominant population in the country since its founding and the main benefactors of the capitalist structure, the curriculum and history of education in the U.S. (Green et al., 2020) has evolved to reflect white values, not considering the unique and valuable experiences of other ethnic groups and gender identities.

Advocates of the ES approach argue that most educational curriculum is based on a deficit approach to learning about groups not from Western traditions and has been a discouraging element for students of color who do not see themselves or their ancestral histories as valid in comparison. The empowerment and dismantling of these structures are at the heart of the ES movement and empirical studies have helped prove that this approach is effective (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017).

What CRP Offers

Research indicates that when students experience a curriculum focused on their identities and on creating a safe learning environment, they demonstrate a deeper connection to their classroom experience, measured in participation, homework submissions, grades and engagement with the curriculum (de Los Ríos, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). This classroom practice has led to an increase in student attendance, health, long-term economic success, and post-secondary enrollment (Bonilla, Dee, & Penner, 2021; Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). These studies can serve as one layer of the changes required in helping build a classroom environment which is more engaging and therefore allows students to be themselves.

CRP has been shown to increase engagement and a sense of belonging in classrooms (de Los Ríos, 2014) because it emphasizes the many micro and macro aggressions in conventional school curriculum, which sees non-white cultures through a deficit lens (Yosso, 2005). Further, it

promotes the experiences of communities of color and their contributions to the development of the U.S.

Opposition to this curriculum suggests the fear of embracing the changing demographics of the U.S. (Farr, 2021). In fact, over 20 states across the U.S. have passed bills restricting the teaching of race or what they perceive as *critical race theory* in their schools (Los Angeles Times, 2021). In Orange County, parents have protested the teaching of the new curriculum calling it "militant and anti-Western" (Smith, 2021), and A Los Alamitos school board meeting was attended by angry parents showing their disapproval, claiming ES teaches hate (Smith, 2021).

The Need for Ethnic Studies

Long-standing systemic racism in U.S. schools and society has resulted in the underperformance of BIPOC students (Howard, 2016; Huerta, Howard, & Haro, 2020). Persistent issues such as inequitable distribution of resources, teacher bias, assessment and grading bias, lack of diverse educators, access to early educational support, and limited communication with families of color by educators on educational opportunities are adversely impacting students of color (Patrick, Socol, & Morgan, 2020). This reality increases the detachment from school for BIPOC students who are made to feel unsafe in urban schools. In addition, BIPOC students who are less "self-schematic" in terms of identifying with their ethnicity are more susceptible to disengagement from school (Oyserman, 2008), especially when their teachers do not elevate or value those unique aspects students bring to the classroom. Furthermore, BIPOC students are more likely to be placed in special education courses and be denied access to AP and Honors courses instead of being given equitable attention and support

(Noguera, 2012; Patrick, et al., 2020). This exclusion further leads to a disconnect and sense that school doesn't value the lives of BIPOC youth. Furthermore, school culture and curriculum often favor a euro-centric perspective which omits the experiences of BIPOC youth.

Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching

At the core of the ES approach is what scholars' term Culturally Responsive Teaching, an approach to curriculum that builds upon the strengths and identities of students to create a personal connection to their learning (Gay, 2018). According to Gay, with this pedagogy a teacher must acknowledge that he/she brings their own cultural influences into the classroom, and for the most part, this influence has been of Western and white dominant influence. The ES curriculum focuses on expanding the cultural influence and requires a dismantling of assumptions and past learning. According to Paolo Freire (2018) too often schooling has been approached in a "top-down" way through a "banking" approach, where the teacher is all knowing and works to fill the student with knowledge. In contrast, a culturally responsive approach seeks to elevate the knowledge and cultural strengths of students in the classroom. In addition, this approach decenters whiteness or a purely western perspective as the dominant content in the curriculum (Chapman, et al., 2020).

ES in Building Engagement and Academic Growth

Other earlier empirical studies have shown the effectiveness of ES on building student engagement and academic growth. An often-cited study from 2014 by Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, and Marx who ran a multi-year empirical study of a Mexican American Studies high school course in Tucson showed significant academic achievement for the students. In their study they

used administrative data from the Tucson Unified School District and ran logistic regression models to see if there was a relationship between students taking Mexican American Studies and passing Arizona's standardized tests and high school graduation. Their results showed that students taking the MAS course showed improvement in the tests and graduated at a higher degree than students who did not.

A 2020 report for the *National Education Association* by Sleeter and Zavala highlighted a range of empirical studies in pre-K to 12 proving the positive results of a culturally responsive curriculum on BIPOC students (NEA, 2020). One of the studies cited from 2018 of 368 students and their teachers found that by honoring student heritage and interweaving culturally relevant content, student math and reading scores improved (Sharif Mathews & Lopez, 2018). The authors found that teachers who used an asset-based approach were most effective in helping their students improve academically. In another study highlighted in the report, Okoye-Johnson led a statistical meta-analysis comparing differences between traditional curriculum and a multicultural curriculum on pre-K-12 students. They reported an effect size of 0.645, which was interpreted as bringing "about more positive changes in students' racial attitudes than did exposure to traditional instruction" (2011). Okoye-Johnson defined an effective multicultural curriculum as one that includes ethnicity and race as well as students' cultural identities.

A qualitative study by Lee (2006) looked at African American vernacular as a pathway to having deeper discussions in the classroom to achieve higher cognition. Lee continued his work on "Cultural Modeling" in 2007 by which he meant pulling from the competencies Black students already possess, but he found that students are not performing any better on standard English achievement tests (Lee, 2007). However, Geneva Gay (2010) showed that culturally

responsive teaching, where teachers accepted student vernacular instead of immediately correcting them led to greater gains in writing than those who did not receive that instruction.

Teacher Identity and CRP

Some scholars point out that even if teachers who identify as white are trained to lead the ES curriculum, race does play a factor in how the material is delivered and received. In the study by Tintiango-Cubales, et al. "Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research," (2014). The authors find that being a teacher of color is a "distinct asset" (p. 111) because of their experiences with discrimination. Teachers of color bring more multicultural knowledge, are stronger advocates for ES, are committed to social justice, and are not afraid to give their students challenging curriculum (Dee, 2005). Yet, white identifying teachers can be effectively trained and must confront their privileges and how they've benefited from racism. At the same time, the study points out that even teachers of color need to "unpack" their own prejudices to bear, especially if the students they're teaching are from a different ethnic group.

Nonetheless, the scholars emphasize that only through a teacher's critical reflection about their own cultural experiences and the power of the dominant, Western perspectives they may hold and how it has empowered their sense of self can they build the empathy and understanding required to connect with students of color in their classrooms.

The work of teachers in re-educating themselves to be stronger supporters of their students' needs can be approached in a variety of ways as highlighted above, but another approach is focusing on ways to help students feel engaged in their classrooms. This approach adheres to a CRP method in that students' needs are centered as the starting point for instruction.

Building Engagement for BIPOC Students

This study is situated in the intersection of CRP and student engagement because teaching methods in the classroom where students are seen as assets and their cultures as strengths can help create a sense of connection in ES not always afforded to BIPOC students in other classes. This engagement comes through building community in classes as well as relationships between the teacher and students and between students. Students want to feel safe and connected with others in the class, they ultimately need themselves to feel worthy of love and respect. This engagement has a psychological impact on the mental health and well-being of students (Marks, 2000).

As Marks points out in “Student Engagement in Instructional Activity" (2000) “Engagement is an important facet of students' school experience because of its logical relationship to achievement and to optimal human development” (p. 155). By keeping engagement in mind when constructing an ES curriculum, the ES teacher can deepen the feelings of safety and connection for BIPOC students. The ES course as designed and presented in the model curriculum highlights engagement in terms of inclusivity and building upon the direct identities of students. Additionally, the ES curriculum is designed to engage students in authentic experiences about their cultural backgrounds. This more meaningful approach to learning has shown to effectively engage students through higher level classroom conversations and connections to the world at large (Marks, 2000). My study provides best practices which may support teachers new to the ES curriculum. I also show how this sense of engagement leads to more BIPOC student participation in their ES class.

Previous Studies on ES Teachers

There are very few studies focused on teaching methods in ES which have led to student engagement. Those that exist are not from ES courses, but instead use an ES lens to teach subject matter focused on BIPOC history. From his dissertation, Daus-Magbual (2010) focused on San Francisco teachers from the Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP) who taught Filipino American studies. In order to prepare to take on the subject, these teachers first underwent a process of self-learning through an ES lens on their own personal Filipino histories. The ability for these teachers to become more self-aware prepared them to engage with students from a variety of ethnicities, seeing them as capable of reaching a similar sense of self. This approach to becoming an effective teacher of ES is seen regularly in the literature and suggests that teaching this course requires a different training and approach than other subject matter.

In another dissertation, Baptiste (2010) studied how teachers interpreted a New Jersey Amistad Law which mandated the inclusion of African American history in social studies courses and provided professional development to support this learning. Baptiste found that the three teachers he focused on had to first become aware of their own confidence in the subject matter in order to challenge a dominant white perspective in the course design. These teachers went on to use a CRP approach in that they got to know their students and their cultural needs and then infused this perspective in their lessons. And like the Daus-Magbual study, the teachers needed to undergo an exploration of their own identities in relation to the subject they were teaching. Self-awareness is once again cited as essential to relaying this content.

In a more recent and much cited study by Sleeter and Zavala (2020), nine teachers were interviewed to discover what values inform their teaching practices. Again, as in the previous studies, identity becomes central to how ES teachers connect to the curriculum and is in many

cases also the motivating force behind why teachers take on ES-type courses. As one of the interviewed teachers, Aimee, a Latina high school instructor commented:

> So, [teaching ethnic studies] really forced me to examine my own identity, which again, I think is another key component of ethnic studies is our own critical understanding of ourselves. Myself as an educator, I can't ask my students to uncover things that they think about themselves, how they view the world, if I don't do that work on my own, if I don't bring that into the classroom (p. 98)

The notion of being on the same level as her students is a key component to the approach of ES for many educators who do not seek a top-down sharing of information with their students but instead see them as valuable contributors to the learning process.

Another teacher from the Sleeter and Zavala study named Greg, who identifies as white, contributes that he is very cognizant of his privilege and uses this vantage point to engage his students in dialogue. He gives his students opportunities to ask him questions about growing up in a racist environment and whether or not he himself has been racist at times (p. 98). This openness and self-awareness create, according to the teachers interviewed, a safe space where students can discuss topics they may not cover in any other class. These approaches require more investigation, something that these studies only touch on the surface. A deeper look at how these teachers build upon these learning practices to help their students feel engaged throughout the length of the course requires more investigation.

In most studies about teachers' approaches to ES subject matter, it is clear that there is an underlying commitment to social justice and challenging traditional modes of teaching. Without naming their approach CRP, teachers of ES in the studies are instinctively using the tenets of that pedagogy in the way they honor their students' cultures and view them in an assets-based way.

Yet what still remains unclear is how these approaches help students become more engaged in their classwork and overall connection to the curriculum. My study sought to uncover approaches teachers use to not only help students feel seen but also be academically engaged. And as ES becomes a requirement for graduation in California, new teachers to the subject will need more examples of practices that can make their courses impactful.

New California Model Curriculum and CRP

After years of debate and political challenges to drafts of an ES curriculum for California, on October 8, 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 101 into law, making ES a graduation requirement for high school students beginning in 2029-30. The law states that in order to graduate, a student must take a course based on the adopted ES Model Curriculum; or a pre-existing ES course being offered at their school; or a course that satisfies the A-G requirements which includes an emphasis on ES; or that a school may develop their own ES course with the approval of a local governing agency (AB 101, 2021). The new ES Model Curriculum was adopted in 2020 and includes a framework for how best to approach ES utilizing elements of CRP.

In addition to ES becoming a required course for graduation, the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC), authors of the curriculum, included provisions that the course highlight ES terminology such as equity, justice, racism, bigotry, and ethnicity. It also asks local districts to modify the curriculum to reflect the demographics of their local school populations, a key element of CRP instruction. Furthermore, the course must be developed using current research, meet A-G requirements, be teacher-led, and include the perspectives of the racial and ethnic groups represented. The course is also intended to include traditional ES studies reflecting the

diverse histories of African American, Chicana/o/x, Latina/o/x, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander history. And finally, the course must include the four foundational principles of ES "(1) Identity, (2) History and Movement, (3) Systems of Power, and (4) Social Movements and Equity to make connections to the experiences of all students" (CADE, 2021). It is through this approach that the IQC believes students can develop a "social consciousness" which they claim leads to "public good" and a stronger democracy in the 21st century.

The road to adopting the Model Curriculum was a long one which created a division between the original group of educators who adopted an early draft that was seen by the current State Board of Education and other public entities as being biased, anti-Semitic, and divisive (EdSource, 2021). For some educators the newly adopted curriculum is a compromise and is less critical of the systems of power which the original included. Nonetheless, the State Board of Education included guidelines to address some of these concerns in the new model by outlining an approved approach to the teaching of the content. Some of the provisions highlight the importance of including confirmed academic research, aligned with the State Literacy and History/Social Studies framework, promote "self and collective empowerment," be presented in an inclusive manner which is comprehensible to all, build upon cultural understanding among different ethnic groups, include information about the origins of ES and the Third World Liberation Front, and promote critical thinking skills such as analysis of systems of oppression and the imagining of new possibilities. At its heart, the curriculum tries to find a compromised medium which allows for a multi-ethnic, locally controlled interpretation of ES. But at the core of the curriculum, the authors insist:

> It should advance the cause of equity and inclusivity, challenge systemic racism, foster self-understanding, build intergroup and intragroup bridges, enhance civic engagement,

> and further a sense of human commonality. In this way, ethnic studies can help build stronger communities, a more equitably inclusive state, and a more just nation.

This shows a commitment from the designers of the curriculum to embed CRP approaches to the teaching of the curriculum which is designed to support inclusivity and equity in ES classrooms. Furthermore, the Model Curriculum also states that the teaching of ES must "Engage pedagogies that allow for student and community responsiveness, validate students' lived experience, and address social-emotional development" a key component of CRP that has been at the core of the development of the ES discipline from the start. An outcome of my study shows that using CRP is not how all teachers of ES are presenting the curriculum. Therefore, more training on this approach will be required in order to align with the intent of the ICQ and the educators promoting the importance and effectiveness of ES on BIPOC youth.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the concepts of CRP and student engagement to highlight effective practices by teachers of ES. Data show the benefits of a culturally responsive curriculum approach like ES on students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lee, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017; Gay 2018). These benefits include a curriculum and teaching approach that 1) builds upon student views and life experiences, 2) develops their critical thinking and consciousness, and 3) creates learning environments that are safe and caring (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). However, little research investigates how the curriculum is taught in California public schools today (Sacramento, 2019; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) and what we can learn from successful ES practices.

The theoretical lens of CRP in ES combines with the lens of student engagement. Marks' study (2000) on engagement in schools focuses on deeper classroom conversations, student participation, and more completed assignments. As Marks notes "Tapping standards of intellectual quality—higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, substantive conversation, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom—the salience of authentic work stands in contrast to alienating work" (p.173) These markers of engagement will frame the study's investigation of teacher practices.

ES provides teachers and students an opportunity for deeper connection on matters not typically addressed in other subjects. This intellectual journey helps students discover new modes of expressing themselves and of seeing themselves as authentic contributors to knowledge.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This project investigated the teaching strategies that ES teachers say they use to implement CRP and how this approach, according to teachers, results in signs of student engagement in the curriculum. The study aimed to uncover effective teaching strategies for BIPOC student learning when implementing an ES curriculum.

Research Questions

- **RQ1**: In what ways, if at all, are teachers building student engagement in their ES classes (as measured through CRP approaches including incorporating student identity into the curriculum, knowledge creation, participation in class discussions, etc.)? (interviews and artifact review)
- **RQ2**: How, if at all, does a teacher's identity impact their pedagogical approach to teaching ES? (interviews)

Design and Rationale

I undertook a sequential qualitative study to identify effective on-the-ground practices of ES teachers using CRP practices in their classrooms. A sequential qualitative design is appropriate because it centers the voices of ES teachers who have developed the ES curriculum on their own and have made adjustments to improve this subject matter. As Maxwell posits in *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (2013), the researcher is seeking how the subjects "understanding influences their behavior" (p. 41). By centering their experiences, new

teachers to the subject will have an understanding of potential challenges and pitfalls the new model curriculum may not yet have uncovered. Furthermore, this study revealed effective teaching practices, measured by lesson plans, curriculum, and students' completed work and class participation. This study uncovered *how teachers are using CRP in their classrooms*. As previously shown, evidence exists that ES increases learning (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020) and that CRP increases engagement (Osterman, 2000); yet, studies have not identified specific CRP practices that ES teachers use to promote student engagement.

I began with qualitative interviews of ES teachers using CRP in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Questions asked of interviewees were designed to help me develop a clearer comprehension of the phenomenon of CRP use in well-established ES courses within a large urban district serving predominantly BIPOC students. To this end, I aimed to develop a holistic account (Creswell & Creswell, 2016) of how experienced teachers approach the teaching of ES, by examining teachers' multiple perspectives, to design a picture of how this work happens in the real world. It is only through teacher experience in delivering this content that we can get a true picture of what the design of ES entails and how student engagement in terms of classroom participation and assignment completion is impacted. Teachers are best suited to report on what has been most effective for their students in terms of participation, completed work, and engagement in classroom discussions.

Site Selection

I interviewed high school teachers in the Large Urban School District (LUSD) serving predominantly BIPOC students. By focusing on LUSD schools, I was able to understand how

one large urban district has approached the dissemination of ES curriculum and practices. As one of the largest districts in the state of California, LUSD includes the largest BIPOC student population, with those identifying as Latino with the highest representation at 73% of the total population and a total of 90% of students identifying as BIPOC.

In addition, I focused only on high schools because ES will be a graduation requirement for students there by 2030. In fact, LUSD's Board of Education has directed the superintendent to provide them with a strategic plan on how the new mandate will be enacted in the district by the 2023-2024 school year. Moreover, LUSD teachers are predominantly white, yet many ES teachers identify as teachers of color. I highlighted these important details when summarizing the interviews and my findings.

Participants: Criteria and Recruitment

Through a combination of supporting outlets such as UCLA's Center X, principals, and LUSD personnel, I interviewed 9 teachers and reviewed artifacts such as student writing and curriculum designs that they provided me. Criteria for the sample included teachers of varying identities who have taught this course for at least a year to a majority of BIPOC students. I used my personal contacts with principals to ask permission to interview their ES teachers throughout LUSD.

As part of recruitment, and in order to not disrupt my interviewees' school day or work schedule, I offered them a variety of ways to be interviewed at a time and location most convenient for them. I also offered to go to them and connect during one of their prep periods, at lunch, or after school. I also made myself available over Zoom after school hours if they

preferred (or on a weekend). I provided them a $25 dollar gift card as well to thank them for their time and participation.

Final Selection of Interview Participants

The teachers selected for this study were from LUSD but from schools where the demographic percentages differed. For example, one school had a mixed group of students from many regions of the world while the majority had a predominantly Latino classroom population. In addition, the teachers I sought out reflected diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and ES teaching experience. Final selections were heavily favored towards teachers who have taught ES the longest, since their perspectives could provide a deeper and richer experience with the subject matter. But I also found that teachers with only a year of experience offered interesting responses which could help those who will be new to this subject navigate the challenges of the course material. Ultimately, I worked with administration and other research partners to select teachers who were willing to participate in the study.

In order to respect teachers' tight school schedules, I made it clear I would only interview them at a time most convenient for them. In fact, all the teachers felt that being interviewed via Zoom gave them the most flexibility and as a result, all of them were interviewed using this video conferencing tool.

Through a network of LUSD administrators and other adjacent ES support groups in Los Angeles, I obtained a sample of teachers who were using CRP regularly and others who were not. My rationale for selecting a small number of teachers who demonstrated a strong embrace of the CRP approach was to be able to get into deeper conversations via Zoom to understand how they believe their approach has helped their students feel more engaged in the ES curriculum.

Data Collection

Method 1: Interviews

My interview questions were designed to understand what aspects of CRP are used most frequently, why they are used, and how they are perceived to make the biggest impact on BIPOC student engagement. With permission from the teacher, I also examined some of the completed projects that showed student engagement through thoughtfulness and critical thinking they developed in the classroom.

I selected nine ES teachers who are currently teaching the subject at LAUSD schools. I then interviewed these teachers and assessed their use of CRP in a 1:1 setting via Zoom to obtain a more detailed description of the practices that they say create engagement, as defined by…, for their students. I wanted to know how these teachers were using the new model curriculum, if at all, and how they were adapting it to meet the needs of their students. I also examined what these urban teachers were saying they do to build a classroom environment that helps students feel safe and able to share their true selves. I asked teachers about high usage of engagement measures such as students who speak up, complete assignments, and attend class regularly, and to give me evidence of this. Appendix A of this study includes the interview questions I asked the identified teachers.

Method 2: Documents and Student Work

In order to triangulate and deepen my interview findings, I asked teachers for permission to review student work that they were willing to share with me that was submitted by students in the current academic year. I focused on the quality of the writing in terms of the length and details connected to ES used, such as self-discovery, attention to issues of racism, and systemic

problems; the level of critical analysis in terms of argumentation used by students, for example referencing prior readings; and if there were observable instances of student self-awareness and personal connections to the content they were examining in their writing. More specifically, I looked for examples where they indicated how ethnicity, identity, or other elements of ES such as racism, colonialism, and oppression are or have been present in their lives through their writing. Examples of student work included essays and projects where students were asked to connect their own personal life experiences with the themes or topics being covered in the curriculum. By finding instances of student self-reflection, I was able to understand how the CRP approach used by the teacher facilitated student's willingness to express themselves openly and personally as opposed to writing what the teacher wanted to hear.

I also examined teacher lesson plans and looked for ways in which they incorporated CRP into the language and goals for student learning. These CRP methods were highlighted in terms of how often teachers use ES terms and approaches like collaborative work, critical thinking, debate, and instances where they purposefully design their lessons to address students' specific ethnicities. The way a teacher considered their students' ethnicities and identities by clearly articulating these elements in their course design was important evidence to show how intentional they were in helping reach students using a CRP lens. This is appropriate but somewhat spare.

Data Analysis

Through a combination of interviews and document analysis, I looked for common themes of CRP that have been shown to increase engagement for BIPOC students. Some of the areas I paid particular attention to included:

- Build set of norms together with class
- Connect with students 1:1 regularly
- Acknowledge students regularly
- Ask for input from students about how the class culture feels
- Follow up with students outside of class
- Check in regularly to see how students and their families are doing
- Go beyond the textbook and include a diverse array of primary sources
- Find commonalities between different cultures in class through lessons
- Get student input on lessons
- Offer project-based learning opportunities
- Incorporate openness to contemporary culture into curriculum
- Provide curriculum that reveals hard truths of history
- Bring in guest speakers who represent diverse cultural groups to engage students in conversation
- Encourage varying perspectives on historical issues
- Develop questioning skills
- Offer different forms of assessment which allow for multiple ways of showing understanding
- Give students freedom to insert their perspectives
- Challenge student perspectives in a way that helps them grow
- Provide students an evaluation of the class
- Give students ample opportunities to interpret what you've taught through various modes: writing, performing, etc.

I also explored how a teacher's identity impacts the delivery of the ES content to students. These criteria will help inform future teachers of ES if CRP methods can help deepen connections between students and teachers in terms of their identities, a quality that according to the data creates more engagement and safety for students in these classes. All of these factors helped me paint a clearer picture of the realities experienced in ES classrooms using CRP methods to help BIPOC youth become more engaged in their learning experience. I was able to show how teachers integrate CRP methods such as care, responsiveness to student identities, and awareness of how a teacher's own identity impacts the students in their classroom in the results of my study. The teachers I interviewed were also asked how they engage their students regularly by having classroom conversations and debates, and by designing assignments that students regularly complete and enjoy completing. By analyzing some of the documents provided, I found evidence of engagement reflected in the work. I also reviewed examples of teacher thoughtfulness around engagement and CRP criteria such as care, identity, and classroom safety in the curriculum and assignments they shared with me.

Interviews

The interviews allowed me to deepen the study by finding examples of how teachers implement CRP. Not all teachers approached this work the same way and this study highlights the nuances that make each teacher's approach to the work unique. The questions were designed to capture ways in which teachers build safety for students in their classes and create an environment where students can bring their identities into the learning process. I analyzed the responses teachers gave me by categorizing them under common themes from CRP such as student inclusion, approaches to designing a curriculum reflective of student ethnicities and

identities, and examples of ways critical thinking is encouraged by the choices of topics taught and literature used to inspire student engagement. I collected these methods and approaches and positioned them as examples for new teachers of the subject to explore.

Documents and Student Work

From the curriculum and examples of student work I was given permission to analyze, I continued to search out examples that fell under the categories of CRP. In the curriculum I looked for language which specifically indicated how teachers thought about their student populations and how they've incorporated that into the planning. I also highlighted ways teachers designed their projects, considered potential challenges with subject matter, and built collaboration, engagement, and safety into their projects. I wanted to highlight innovative writing projects and class discussion approaches to understand how CRP methods and tools create engagement for BIPOC students.

In student essays or team projects, I analyzed the frequency and use of language particular to ES and CRP such as issues of race, belonging, identity, and criticism of power dynamics and societal and systemic structures. These high-level concepts are required to be covered in ES and how students understand these concepts and show their learning of them in their work was highlighted in the data I present below.

Positionality

As a former social studies teacher and leader of a nonprofit working in schools, I was seen as a trusted partner and unbiased interviewer. I asked permission from teachers to interview them as an independent UCLA student, and was very transparent about my background and current work as a nonprofit executive. This gave me some distance from LUSD and as a result

helped my interviewees feel more at ease. I also let them know about my interest in this study and made clear that my work was designed to highlight their best practices in terms of using CRP in their ES classes. In addition, I kept all of my interviewees' identities private and protected all the data collected on secure cloud servers.

Ethical Issues

Serious consideration of how this study could adversely affect teachers was taken into account. The areas I focused on were approved by the State Board of Education via the model curriculum. I did not encounter any controversy or uncovered instances of teacher malpractice from the interviews I conducted. To protect teachers' identities, I offered anonymity for all teachers who may fear negative repercussions from their administrators, other teachers, or the wider ES community. I also used pseudonyms for the teachers and schools I observed in order to further protect all who were mentioned in the study. All transcripts, recordings, and other identifying data are stored on secure cloud storage.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom. The recordings were transcribed by a paid professional service called Temi.

Digital copies of student work shared with me by teachers were also stored on a secure cloud service. The names of students were replaced by a number which allowed me to know who the work belongs to. This code set, along with the digital copies of student work, were kept along with all transcripts and recordings on the secure cloud service.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As the researcher and former social studies teacher, I acknowledge that I bring biases to the process of reviewing CRP practices. In order to be aware of this, I paid extra attention to

personal judgements I made when hearing about certain practices or approaches teachers took. I was also cognizant of other learning expectations I wanted to see which were not present in my observations of CRP in ES. Beyond elements of CRP, my mind did wander to historical thinking skills I learned as a teacher that may no longer be in vogue in ES classrooms. Elements such as causation, correlation, evaluating historical perspectives from multiple vantage points, and the use of counter texts to argue against one perspective on a historical issue. Since most of the ES content is designed to elevate the student's cultural identity, I was careful not to question opportunities to challenge some of those presumptions. Since my focus was on CRP methods, I put aside some of my personal biases in favor of what ES using CRP claims to affect in BIPOC students.

I was also aware of how my identity as a white presenting, cis-gendered male from a first-generation Hispanic family played in my view and biases of this subject matter. My knowledge of the various identities and cultures reflected in the classrooms the teachers I interviewed came from was limited and as an observer, I needed to focus on the lens of CRP and how it was used in the ES course. I put aside my own perspective and judgements in favor of an objective understanding of the learning process for the BIPOC students.

Bias was not the only challenge to credibility. In order to avoid reactivity from the teachers I interviewed, I built trust with administration and teachers who I selected by sharing about my personal background and reasons for wanting to learn more about ES. I was honest about my desire to learn from them and that I wanted them to be as open as they were willing to be with me. By selecting nine very willing teachers I gathered a deeper understanding of their practices in ES using CRP to build engagement for their BIPOC students. The interviewees were examined through the lens of CRP which informed the language and teaching approaches I was

assessing. I compared what I learned from the initial interviews to what I observed in the lesson plans and student work I reviewed so I could uncover whether or not what I was told in the interviews was in fact creating engagement for students. I was looking for elements of student agency, culture of care, and critical thinking in the lessons and approaches used by teachers.

Intersection of CRP approaches in the methods of data collection

	Student Agency, Culture of Care, Critical Thinking
Interviews and Artifacts	● Student input on lessons ● Collective classroom norms ● Survey of student interests ● Student pronouns used ● Students feel safe during classroom debates ● Out-of-class time with students 1:1 ● Connecting with student families and communities ● Open discussions about race, identity, ethnicity, religion ● Debate and disagreement encouraged ● Safe space created for all identities

Significance and Use of the Data

Rich, contextualized information was the ultimate result of my findings. By highlighting effective CRP methods being used most frequently by ES teachers in a particular district, my study can provide newer teachers a set of criteria and examples they may wish to replicate. My

assumption is that CRP approaches are replicable and, based on whether or not teachers adhere to the principles and ideology of CRP, they can have equal success in implementation of best practices from teachers highlighted in this study. A potential challenge to this assumption is that all ES classrooms will have students from similar cultural backgrounds, but the reality is that teachers will need to adapt their approaches to the identities of the students in their classrooms. This will pose challenges in classrooms where there are a large percentage of students from one ethnicity as opposed to more mixed groups. Balancing the needs of the students in the classroom will require judgment calls from the teacher to build an inclusive learning environment. Ultimately, my study supports the strengths of data showing a CRP approach to ES helps increase BIPOC student's engagement.

Limitations

The interviews and observations highlighted practices which appeared to be helping students feel more engaged in their ES classrooms. Yet due to time constraints and the fact that I did not gather grades to track student progress over a year, my data only captured the perspective of teachers. A deeper study would involve tracking teachers and students over a longer period of time to see if the CRP methods are indeed having lasting effect and helping students as they navigate the remainder of their school years and potentially college. But these areas have been studied by other scholars and data exists to show how CRP in ES has helped students become stronger critical thinkers and therefore more equipped to take on higher level work. Nonetheless, this study highlighted practices which teachers said work and which I observed through the content they designed for their classrooms and the work the students produced. My study will be

a useful tool for new ES teachers as that course becomes a requirement for graduation and acceptance into college.

Conclusion

Although the theory of CRP is well known in some university departments (most often in schools of education) and is being adopted more frequently in teacher preparation programs, it is a relatively new approach to teaching which would benefit from more scrutiny. Since ES will now be more widely taught in California and as it continues to be seen as a controversial approach to schooling, it is important to elevate effective teachers and their use of CRP to help a new generation of teachers explore innovative methods and approaches that will help them engage their students. With ES, topics around race and identity will be central to class discourse and how this is done effectively requires more understanding. My study highlights how these critical elements to ES are effectively taught and in turn help BIPOC students feel more willing to engage in conversations, debate, challenge perceptions, and see their classroom engagement as meaningful and where they can elevate their authentic selves.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As a result of the new California graduation requirement for Ethnic Studies, as well as a new model curriculum adopted in 2021, this study sought to explore, in depth, what experienced Ethnic Studies teachers did in the classroom. First, I wanted to understand what, if any, of culturally responsive pedagogy these teachers used in the classroom. Secondly, I wanted to explore how and if teacher identity changed the way they approached the subject matter. Additionally, I wanted to hear what teachers said about how they produced student engagement (as defined by Marks 2000). Finally, I was curious to uncover the student work that revealed the elements of engagement the teachers hope to provide in their curriculum. We already know a significant amount about CRP practices. What we don't know is how these practices play out in classrooms in a specific urban area, with a new curriculum and the new graduation requirement for ES opening the door to a new generation of teachers who will undertake this subject matter. Specifically, I sought to explore the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: In what ways, if at all, are teachers building student engagement in their ES classes (as measured through CRP approaches including incorporating student identity into the curriculum, knowledge creation, participation in class discussions, etc)? (interviews and artifact review)
- **RQ2**: What approaches and tools are teachers using to build more engagement in their ES classes?

Key findings support existing literature on how culturally responsive practices are central to the delivery of ES. To wit, the findings show experienced teachers utilize a culturally

responsive approach, one which considers students' views and identities as assets; they focus on developing students' critical consciousness; and they build safe learning environments where students are acknowledged as knowledge creators and as valuable contributors to discussions in the classroom (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). The findings add to what we know in that they give special weight to teachers' expressed vulnerability. Further, unlike earlier studies, findings indicate that objectivity may or may not be important. While findings confirm the literature on creating engagement (Marks, 2000), they detail projects co-creating knowledge of challenging subject matter. This level of detail has not been present in existing literature.

I begin with some of the well-known practices of CRP through the lens of engagement. These practices include building a classroom community, teacher vulnerability and openness, and empowering students through respect and value for their ancestry. What the literature has not shown empirically, and my study reveals, is how teacher vulnerability and openness is critical in an ES course. My research also suggests that this vulnerability differed in delivery, based on teacher identity and classroom demographics.

Other findings uncovered how teachers understand and approach neutrality when discussing historical topics: Some teachers believed students should not be influenced by the teachers' views; others insisted that revealing positionality is unavoidable and necessary in order to show students where the teacher stands and why.

According to teachers, being 'real' and open with students increases engagement in students leading to more empowerment and connection to their own identities. Lacking in the literature is this connection between theory and practice that these teachers unveiled. That is, the literature has not heretofore offered evidence of a connection between teacher vulnerability and openness as a form of engagement with students. And increased student engagement in ES

classes leads to deeper understanding of the subject matter for students because they see their teachers as having experienced similar feelings and challenges as them.

ES Promotes Student Connectedness: Life Experiences Beyond the Classroom

The following findings use the engagement lens as defined by Marks (2000). This lens as employed here frames "higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, substantive conversation, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom" as the way ES builds knowledge with students. For many teachers, this engagement was achieved by building a classroom environment that was safe for students to express their thoughts and learn from each other through group work and classroom conversations. Additionally, the classroom environment the teachers created emphasized personal identity.

Of the nine teachers I interviewed, six underscored how they encouraged student connectedness by creating safe learning environments that were student-centered. These teachers valued students' personal experience, reinforcing identity. They did this in unique ways, such as starting their course with activities like Autoethnography and PhotoVoice where students use images and answer questions about their own histories and world views to others in their class. As Marks' (2000) study identified: "social studies' inherent link to life outside the classroom has the potential to generate considerable interest among students because of its relevance to their experience" (p. 175). As Lupe, an ES teacher with six years of experience who identified as a Mexican American woman, explained:

> That opportunity to share about themselves matters and like elevating their voice matters right and being listened to, I think that matters. And so, I feel like the sense of identity

> starts with like I feel like I belong. I feel like I matter, and I feel like people care about what I think, what I believe, and so I feel a sense of identity.

This view of a student's voice and being heard, from the opening of class, was repeated by most of the teachers I interviewed. Gabriela noted:

> It really requires in the very initial that you build a lot of trust and that you build a safe space, because if the students aren't safe in the classroom, they're just not going to create that knowledge in that space with you.

Gabriela introduced the Mayan concept of In Lak'ech ("you are the other me") as a way to share native wisdom around how we are all connected and that students should treat each other with respect. Respect for the students' identity was an essential element of building trust and connection between Gabriela and her students. This approach became a way for Gabriela to set an example for how she wanted to be treated. Gabriela further laid out for me the level of her consciousness in her approach "…the way that I'm treating you [her students] is not just because I'm a nice person or a good person. I'm also modeling for you what I want to see in the world." Here, the teacher sees connectedness and engagement as critical to laying the groundwork in the ES classroom; they help build a generation of thoughtful humans who could take their learning beyond the classroom, to their homes, and into the future to hopefully build a better world.

Self-Love Through Exploration of Identity

For many of the teachers I spoke to, the core of what they wanted for their students was to help them love themselves, to believe they are good, and to prepare them for challenges they will face, particularly as BIPOC.

In fact, most of the teachers interviewed start their class with a unit on identity like Autoethnography or PhotoVoice. Further, they solidify identity affirmation by running an Autoethnography project or PhotoVoice that allows students (and the teacher) to present about themselves. This activity was one which established respect for each other and taught them to understand the many layers that make up a person's identity. This also, as one teacher Luis, a descendant of Mexican parents recounted, allowed him to show his students "we're all in that struggle" a signal to his students that he understands and acknowledges an equality between him and his students. Ultimately, he sees this stance as creating a safer environment where his mostly Latino students can be vulnerable and share openly about themselves.

The teachers approached these projects differently, but essentially, the Autoethnography asked students to tell a story about who they are, what they look like, where their families come from, in the form of a presentation or poster to share with their classmates. Elements of identity like ethnicity, race, community, culture, and other vocabulary studied in the class were incorporated to help students make sense of these terms through their life stories. The PhotoVoice project, like the Autoethnography, similarly incorporated identity terminology, important because it gave students the language they would be using throughout the course. They used it with photos or imagery to share their identities with their peers. Tomas, a 15-year veteran of ES and History courses, went beyond asking students about their ethnicities and other identity markers to what students cared about and wanted to change:

> Autoethnography is a key assignment that I would have students do. We're literally the first day of class: Who am I? Where am I from, where am I going? You know, what is the social justice cause or issue that I care about and what I wanna do about it?

For Tomas, Autoethnography was not just a language but a bridge to social justice content; he wants his students to learn to advocate for issues they are concerned about. This focus on helping students see themselves as change makers and activists was shared by a few other teachers, who emphasized the need to empower students by exposing them to injustices.

Autoethnography not only institutionalizes identity reinforcement, but it uses student identity to guide the course by making all students aware of each other's intersectionality. ES teachers make clear from the outset that the course is not top down (teacher as all-knowing), but assets-based, where student identity *guides the development of the course.* Unlike other academic subjects where empirical learning is the goal, ES focuses more on the decolonization of BIPOC youth who have spent most of their school years learning a white/Western epistemology. Tomas quotes an essay by one of his ES, students, Ines, who struggled with her mixed heritage and had not learned about her indigenous roots in other classes:

> I also believed I only came from European descent, and my ancestors were all European because the textbooks never spoke about the Indigenous, the ones who were here before the Europeans, my people. And the fact that I couldn't name from the top of my head, my ancestral tribe and my ancestral roots is evidence that colonization has really made its way through the minds of the people. You don't know how frustrating it is to walk around or to be asked where your family is from.

What is clear from Ines' essay is how impactful her ES course was on her ability to connect to an indigenous identity, something not encouraged in other classes. In fact, until she took ES she was not aware of the power she could pull from identifying as indigenous since most of her life she'd been taught to see herself as European.

The course can thus be a place for self-discovery. For teachers like Tomas, infusing a deep look at Indigeneity and the process of colonization in his mostly Latino classroom guided his ES pedagogical approach. As to Ines, her knowledge of her ancestors had been "erased" in the white/Western school curriculum. For many Latino/Hispanic students, most of the focus of History courses in schools has looked at their Spanish roots and not the Indigenous cultures. Ines has a Spanish surname and is questioned by others about where she is from, as if her Indigenous ancestry is less important than a generalized Latino or dominant Western one. By starting their course using these identity focused activities, teachers could then reconstruct their curriculum to better meet the needs of their students.

Working with Undocumented Students in ES

Legal status created even more subterranean identities. Gabriela told me about her students and families, many of whom had experienced incarceration at the border. She too recounted how diverse the experiences of students in ES classes can be and how their experiences can be connected to unjust policies, which many are afraid to critique:

> Some of them [immigrant children] were separated from their parents, some of them have little brothers and sisters that were in cages, so they totally get like this has happened to them. They haven't yet associated that with the American legal system. To them it was like we have created a criminal act like they're in this belief, right? So, this happened to us. They're in shame. They hide that they don't want us to know about that. You know, obviously I know because with trust you get the stories right, and so when they're here in LA they're so happy they're here in LA and not in a cage at the border or in extreme poverty…

For those students who recently arrived, there is a gratitude about being free and a reluctance to criticize a legal system which complicated their arrival. There is also a fear of sticking out or being perceived as ungrateful. For many immigrant students' parents as well, they feel a sense of relief for being in a safer place than they were before–even if there are unjust systems in place making it harder for them to acclimate. They pass this caution on to their children who are trying to figure out who they can trust in their communities and at school. Teachers like Gabriela are safe havens for these youth and their families, especially because she can engage with them in their own language and understand their cultural needs.

Many of these students know where they come from but are not yet equipped to understand how they are perceived by others already living in the U.S. Yet for Gabriela, it is important for students to understand how they ended up where they are and how their circumstances have been shaped by a legal system and nativist American culture which may view them as not deserving of the same rights. This new consciousness (Darling-Hammond, 2004a, 2007; Larson, 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales, et al, 2014) becomes critical learning for these students.

Many may not want to stand out at the beginning because of their undocumented status, as in the case with Gabriela. She first built trust with her students by showing them they bring strengths to the classroom, although an unspoken understanding of discretion exists. For students in the large urban school district I studied—whose identities spanned the gamut of cultural, ethnic, mixed, as well as sexual—creating an environment where all of these youth felt safe and at home was a key component of the teacher's approach. The BIPOC teachers I interviewed decided to become teachers of ES in order to help students become more rooted in their own heritage.

ES Activities that Produce Engagement

As noted above, strong engagement with students begins with vulnerability from the teacher and by creating a safe learning environment, elements central to CRP. But in terms of academic engagement, that is, the projects and ways teachers build knowledge with students, I found activities which are unique to ES as powerful examples of learning. Covered above, activities like Autoethnography and PhotoVoice are introductions to the subject of ES which places students at the center of the curriculum. By establishing this foundation, teachers can build upon the safety established through openness, vulnerability, and class rules that maintain a safe learning environment. Other projects that developed intellectualism and students as critical thinkers and knowledge builders included cultural rituals, monologues, writing and publishing, and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

Gabriella highlighted the use of land acknowledgements at the beginning of each class to remind her students of the vantage point of indigeneity she wants centered in classroom conversations:

> What we do first is called cultural rituals and that's your land acknowledgement, your ancestor acknowledgement, and then we go into our cultural energizer, which is some type of an activity that gets them communicating and out of their seats and doing something. And I try to relate it to whatever we're learning that day. And then after that I go into critical vocabulary. And your critical content, and so that's where we do, like lecture or whatever it is that needs to be done for that day. After that we go into community collaboration or cultural products. So we do some type of activity where we get them working in groups together or creating something–some type of a quote like a

> piece that goes with it, you know? And then at the end is a critical, like a conclusive dialogue.

From lecturing to group work to analysis of documents, students are engaged in the learning process in a community that is not founded on white or Western learning principals but instead one which acknowledges native principles and incorporates them. The use of critical vocabulary to help students use the academic terminology is developed along with group work where students make sense of primary documents or quotes which build upon larger themes their teacher wants them to grapple with.

Almost all the teachers emphasized group work and dialogue as important to their approach. Gabriella expanded on her classroom design:

> …the way I have my classroom set up I have like a boardroom style. I call them communities of eight students and they each have their own whiteboard, like a whiteboard on wheels on a tripod, and what I do is sometimes instead of doing a whole group close read I'll break up a piece where there's four smaller chunks and have them do a close read. So like really just breaking down like the critical concepts, like just chewing on it, you know, and then being able to then as a group, decide like, what do you think this means? You know, analyzing it? Why is this important? And coming up with some sort of like way to present it back to the whole class.

Designing her classrooms in four groups of 8 and changing them throughout the year helped students learn to work in different communities and build knowledge together as they read and discuss primary sources and other materials. Many of the students in Gabriella's classes are English Language Learners so this approach helps remove the pressure of learning alone and instead combining strengths with peers who might have stronger reading and writing skills. She

follows this with presentations, another critical academic skill where students need to verbalize their learning with or without the assistance of notes. For many students, especially those who may not feel very comfortable in their English language skills, fear can create. Bill, a White and Jewish first year teacher observed:

> So every either Thursday or Friday depending on a block schedule, we have each group go up and present what they found. I really try to also emphasize presentational skills. Although a lot of our students really need work on that, projecting and a lot of them are really shy. In a perfect world what would I want me to do? What I would want to happen is just me sit there and have them tell the class what they found right?

Bill knows his students struggle with presenting, but he wants them to develop these skills. He recounted how many of the students were not able to get to the deeper meaning of some of the current events he had them present but still felt it was important they go through the motions. He lamented that in an ideal situation, the students could teach themselves, but he may have missed the realization that although his students may not be getting the deeper themes, he wants them to capture, they are learning from each other in groups, by presenting, and doing their best to make sense of knowledge through their own words. Jaime focused on developing his students' critical literacies as key to building their confidence and knowledge:

> I think for me the hook is developing their critical literacies and so I do a lot of short responses. I pose a lot of questions, right? Using essential questions. And so posing a lot of, a lot of questions and having students think about those questions, also together discuss those particular questions in teams and their tables, right? Or discuss the questions in the class and then bring a source, uh, whether it be a short reading or video, an image. Um, cuz I think that the hook is developing critical literacy.

Jaime wants to “hook” his students into learning by giving them challenging and social justice focused content where students can feel something. He shared his own upbringing and injustices he suffered and feeling othered by his teachers. He wants his students to know terrible things have taken place, but they can use their minds to criticize and question. Jaime continued:

> We're learning about oppression and injustices that my parents are going through and people in our community are experiencing. Students tend to have an interest in wanting to read the material and do the material that I give them in the class. Like today, for example we started with a quote from Frederick Douglass about how black Americans were prohibited from learning to read and write and engaging in that conversation. Like why was it that our society, our government didn't want black Americans to become literate? And how could that connect to today? Or what's the power behind learning how to read and write? And so making those kinds of deeper meaningful connections like, yo, learning how to read and write is a powerful tool for knowledge and for, for freedom and liberation.

For teachers like Jaime and Gabriele, empowerment, voice, liberation, were central to what they wanted students to take away. ES became the vehicle for self-empowerment and through academic practices like reading, writing, group work, presentations, vocabulary building, students can put their new learned skills and identity to work to further their learning. Teachers could only get this far if they’ve built trust and safety from the outset. This requires getting to know your students as human and as people who bring knowledge to the learning process through their life experiences and ways of understanding the world. Ultimate liberation requires self-love, a sense of equality, and respect, a crucial part of ES culture building and learning.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

One of the powerful ways these ES teachers helped their students build upon their acquired and own wisdom was through YPAR where individually or in groups student tackle a challenge in their communities they'd like to study and change. This project requires students to interview people in their communities, families, school, and to offer solutions to how policies or people themselves can fix these issues. Jaime uses YPAR as the final project in his ES class "the youth participatory action research cuz they…have an opportunity to choose their own topic or subject that they're passionate about, connected to something that we read in class, connected to particular themes that we learned about in class and then engage in this research as well." Students get to choose what they want to learn but they need to incorporate issues and topics they learned in their class. And for Jaime in particular, the hope is that students will focus on projects that will provide change to the communities they live in. Jaime mentioned how he focuses on the community surrounding the school, where the students live, as central to his ES teaching. He wants students to understand not only their own personal histories, but why they're living in the areas (mostly poorer, urban areas) and how that ties back to the challenges they may be facing. Tomas took the YPAR experience a bit further saying:

> And of course, Ethnic Studies classes are based around student responsiveness, and students actually thinking and deciding for themselves at the core, in multitudes of ways. When it comes to how they best connect with assignments, specific assignments that only they know the answers to, in relation to the course concepts and content, and in relation to causes and issues they care about and want to do something about, that is where the class opens up completely far beyond the average course -- students completely decide and are respected as young critical thinkers, which is also important for their authentic

> interest and engagement with it. They help us, including me as a teacher, better understand what injustices are occurring in relation to the issues/causes of their choice, and what's being done about it. And then their issues to action projects take it further, where students let us know how they think we can help advocate, organize and build further around this cause and/or issue to help bring about actual change for the better. Sometimes, when you give students that autonomy and voice in their curricular decisions, more than ever, it's clear that your primary role as teacher, isn't thee all-knowing teacher and expert in front of the class, it's much more teacher as facilitator of the student journey in a sense, magnificently magnified at those moments, which is beautiful and necessary, and part of what we really need to help create a more just, equitable, and democratic world -- today and into tomorrow. This is part of what's at the core of Ethnic Studies, and why it's so effective when done well.

Tomas not only wants his students to present, but to take action as well. He wants them to learn that they have power and even though they're students in the class, they possess knowledge and will eventually be leaders who can make change. Giving students voice and autonomy are critical to building social action and YPAR gives students an independence in their learning where they are making sense of the world and problems around them and the teacher is merely the "facilitator" or coach. This ultimately builds a level of engagement for students where they feel respected and valued as well as authorities in something they're studying. There's no better way to help young people find a place for themselves in education than when they become teachers and conveyors of knowledge.

Publishing Student Voices in ES

Another powerful project shared with me by two ES teachers was a publishing project they undertake each year in collaboration with a nonprofit organization called 826LA. The ES teachers at the particular school have their students write essays and stories that relate to themes they're studying in the class. The folks from 826LA provide volunteers from the community to sit side by side with students to write multiple drafts of their pieces which will eventually be published in a book. What's remarkable about this is that the published book then becomes the text for the incoming 9th grade ES class and the students who wrote the book come back as authors to present to the incoming class about their process and experience becoming published authors. Not only is this empowering students to see themselves as authors, but their life stories become the curriculum. Students teach each other. This project has been running at this school for over 8 years and so there have been over 7 years of ES freshman who've been exposed to ideas of upperclassmen and who will in turn contribute their own knowledge to this library of texts. Lupe, one of the teachers who ran this project, explained:

> …and so also just like opportunities to write, write narratives about their experiences. I think again with the book project, those are opportunities to really dive deeper into that. And also like. Yeah, I think those are ways that I've gotten to know students at least through, like the work that they produce aside from the, you know, conversations I have with them.

The 826LA books become the text and the way Lupe gets to learn more about her students. Not only that, but they also become documents of a particular place and time as seen through student eyes. In effect, they are histories written by the students themselves. The books are not only

published, but the school library, the city library, parents, and others get copies of the books so that these stories live beyond the school and community. Lupe continues:

> … the 826 books [are] really impactful readings to initiate conversations, right? Or just launch our exploration of the theme before we get into the more, I would say quote unquote, complex text, which sometimes it's like a frustrating term because it's like, even though these texts [826LA books] may not be written at a very sophisticated level, right? The concepts that they do explore are rigorous for students to graph.

Lupe is aware the students may not be writing at a "complex" level, but she does know the stories are valid and powerful as launching off points to what may be more traditional classroom texts or readings. But the fact that these students are building upon knowledge from their peers goes a long way in their ability to connect and feel seen and heard.

Documents Used in ES Classroom

Many of the teachers interviewed cited materials they used for their ES classes coming from the organization Facing History and Ourselves, Learning for Justice, the Rethinking Schools book titled *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, and content from the Zinn Education Project. From these sites and publications, teachers pulled primary sources, lesson plans, videos, and other documents that helped them present many of the ES themes to their students.

One document in particular from Facing History was an essay turned into a short film called "Little Things are Big" by Jesus Colon from 1961. The story the author shares is about how his Black and Puerto Rican identity made it difficult for him to exist in a white dominant New York of the time. He recounts an experience he had where he witnessed a white lady with a baby and suitcases in tow was having trouble boarding a subway train he was riding on. He

explains that courtesy is an extremely important value in his culture, yet he feels he cannot show this quality to this white woman for fear that she may see him as threatening and not as a helpful person. Andrea, the teacher who shared this document, added the text on the left-hand side of a page with questions on the right side to help guide the student's understanding. By asking students to summarize main points, highlight words the author uses to build his narrative, making connections between the author's experience and one a student might have similarly encountered, the document is used to develop critical thinking, writing, and personal experience as a learning tool for engagement. The use of primary documents like Colon's examines a common experience many BIPOC students have when out in the world even when the author's experience was over 50 years prior.

Another document which could be useful to future ES teachers was shared by Irene from Al Jazeera called "How U.S. Involvement In Central America Led To a Border Crisis." The video, positioned as a news story, uses actual footage of Central Americans fleeing to the border, interviews with professors and other experts and narrated by a correspondent. The pace of the video is fast and touches upon the history of U.S. occupation and military activities in Latin America highlighting revolutions in El Salvador, Honduras, Cuba, and Guatemala. Historical periods like the Cold War and the fight against communism serves as the backdrop for why the U.S become involved eventually destabilizing the region and causing people to flee for safety to the U.S. The video was used by Irene as an introduction to an ES lesson on immigration and the perceived challenges the news and anti-immigrant groups use to tell the story of Central American refugees seeking safety. By showing students a counter-story to the popular culture's identification of these people as illegal she helps her students engage their ability to understand the dynamics of how history is told and how popular culture creates stereotypes. For Irene,

vocabulary is an important learning tool and the words in the video such as trauma, refugee, asylum, undocumented, stereotypes, and racism.

Jaime, one of the teachers who participated in the publication project by the organization 826LA, uses the books that are published year after year by his ES students as the documents for the incoming Freshman classes. He shares:

> …one of the things that we've used have been the 826LA books. And so, we use those throughout the entire year. So, the voices of the students are there…that's part of the curriculum. Those are our classroom texts. The students have the freedom to read different poems, read different letters and narratives, or there's times when we're talking about a particular subject, right? Or we're learning about indigenous people or education. Then we find those particular stories together with the teachers also, we think about stories that might connect that would be good fits or different themes that we're discussing in class. I always tell the students that whatever they write about also becomes part of the curriculum.

Jaime not only uses these texts with his students, but the texts become the curriculum and he works with other ES teachers throughout the summer to highlight readings from those books to use in class based on themes they want to cover. In fact, Jaime highlighted the importance of working with other ES teachers at his school site to develop a curriculum that is student-centered as well as informed by the teachers themselves. And the 826LA books serve as learning materials in all the ES classes.

BIPOC ES Teachers Use Personal Vulnerability in Approach to ES

The CRP approach is core for most of the BIPOC teachers I interviewed. As researchers have shown~~,~~ it is the central organizing principle in ES because, in effect, it has a basic tenet of seeking to establish a more equal relationship between teacher and student–a non-patriarchal, anti-hegemonic approach (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lee, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017; Gay 2018). And the best way to ensure this experience, at least for the BIPOC teachers I interviewed, is to be vulnerable. Luis, a 14-year BIPOC teacher explained:

> I think it just starts with being vulnerable yourself. If you're not honest about who you are, where you come from, which I don't know how other teachers do it <laugh> who maybe don't have my cultural background or, or experiences in my family. Um, they gotta find a way, I guess. But for me, man, what I teach is relevant as hell to my life. And I know it's relevant to a lot of my students.

For Luis, who described his students as coming from similar backgrounds as he personally experienced, talking openly about subjects which other teachers might not feel as comfortable with added to his commitment to being vulnerable:

> I think it's a huge influence. I don't think I'd be as invested if it wasn't that I came from immigrant parents. Most of my family in Mexico or here has been incarcerated involved in drugs, drug trade. So, um, there's a direct connection for me with, with the war on drugs and mass incarceration. Both my stepdad and blood dad were locked up.

Again, for many teachers, sharing this level of personal experience might be uncomfortable, but for BIPOC teachers like Luis it is a way to show their students that they too have experienced challenges with systemic injustice. Because of his personal experience growing up around family members who were imprisoned and dealt with gang-related crimes, he could see how his

situation growing up in areas without support or resources is similar to what his students have to deal with regularly. As a Latino who was not afforded the same privileges as other dominant groups, he has an innate understanding of how the system is positioned against him.

Research has shown BIPOC ES teachers may be better equipped to take on the subject matter of ES because the work of decolonization and battling racism has been central to their own lives (Dee, 2005; Tintiangco-Cubales et. al., 2014). Jaime, a self-identified Chicano with over 21 years teaching ES-related courses, explained how his personal experience with racism as a youth ~~m~~otivated him to want to try and change the system as an ES teacher:

> Teachers used to practice corporal punishment back in the day, even I, I know that I actually looked it up later and I know that it was banned in the state of California in like 1980 something. As a kindergartener, I was hit with a ruler by my teacher who would call me up to her desk. She washed my mouth with a bar of soap while she brought in my older sister who was in the third grade to witness it as she cried. And the teacher's aid was like holding my hands back. And then the teacher was like washing my mouth in the kindergarten sink in the bathroom. And so, yeah. So yeah, my schooling experience was like horrible. I went to a school that was just kind of mixed, right? You had like, um, Latino kids. Most of the Latino kids were farm workers from families of farm workers. And then you had, um, some middle-class kids who their families were from, like, the local Navy base. But probably like all of my teachers were, were white.

The harm Jaime experienced as a young Mexican boy in a Central Valley farming town led him to explore more about movements for social justice. He told me he became a teacher to correct these past harms and to help students build love for themselves. As he recounted "I want to be a teacher that, you know, centers love and, and care, right? I was, uh, you know, dehumanized and

I want to be a teacher that is bringing humanization into, into the classroom." Through the personal stories he shares with his students, they know that he too has been through unfortunate experiences.

Teachers like Jaime are not just sharing their personal stories with students for the sake of sharing, but also for student empowerment. These teachers want their students to know that they became who they are by becoming more educated and by challenging systemic issues. They want students to learn to explore themselves in ES so that they can develop criticality; they believe this skill will serve them to become agents of change in the long run.

Empowerment and Criticality in ES

A theme that continued to come up in the majority of my interviews (from both white and BIPOC teachers) was the notion of empowering students to know their culture and history and eventually advocate for themselves. Teachers helped their students become empowered by guiding them to be critical of their own education and history by choosing readings and videos reflecting the cultures present in their classrooms and how these groups have been unjustly treated in this country. Again, this stance was more prominent in BIPOC teachers than White teachers, but both groups aligned in wanting to help students become stronger critical thinkers who challenge power structures and in loving themselves. As Lupe described:

> I would want them [the students] to feel empowered in who they are. I think there's going to be a lot of moments, at least in their adolescence, that they're going to struggle with a lot of their identity and who they are…just like understanding that their voice matters, that their voice has power, that they have the capacity to advocate for themselves and

> others…and I also want them to have the capacity to like really think critically about the world around them.

This sense of empowerment was further expressed by Lupe when she explained: "Really having them have a sense of empowerment and who they are and also feeling empowered about like ways that they can create change." For Lupe, empowerment leads to creating change, something which regular history classes may touch upon but seems to take on a more important role in ES courses which reveal injustices which students can push back against through classroom conversations, assignments, and possibly in their personal lives. For many of the teachers I spoke to, helping students realize what social justice actually involves allows them to see how they could use their new found power to affect change. For a white teacher, like Irene, she acknowledges how ES allows her to bring her social justice past to the class:

> I think a lot of it connects to my social justice activities that passed. I view this as my anti- racist work. I mean I have gone out and done protests and things like that, but I feel like those are of limited, oftentimes are of kind of limited scope, and it's also just not something that I like to do. But I feel like Teaching always, not just ethnic studies, but teaching in general, has been kind of shaped by my idealistic drive to make the world a better place. And I feel like I'm definitely aware of myself as a white person.

Irene sees teaching as an act of social justice in that she can help shape her students in a way that reflects her values and beliefs. Through teaching ES and other subjects, she can be an anti-racist as well—someone who doesn't make excuses for why racism exists but who works to dismantle it. By helping her students see the systemic injustices that exist through her curriculum, she can help equip them to challenge those powers. And also, she understands the power she herself holds as a white educator. She uses that knowledge not as something to hold over her students

but as a way to teach them that she is not perfect but holds a lot of power because of how she is identified. Ultimately, she hopes her students realize the structures that exist give her an upper hand but they can work to change that dynamic through resisting and fighting for a more just and equitable world.

This notion of students as change makers came up over and over. Part of the goal of ES is to develop a critical consciousness in students—that is, thinkers who can challenge the status quo—so that they can become change makers who battle injustices. This could only happen if students know who they are and how their own power and history can illuminate why they must critique the system they are living under. And sometimes it requires ES teachers to share personal stories about their own childhoods to help their students be okay with these feelings because their teachers have them, too.

BIPOC Teachers Felt More Comfortable Sharing About Themselves

A line seems to have been drawn between how much personal information was shared by the white teachers I interviewed versus those of BIPOC identities. BIPOC teachers celebrated their identities and especially appreciated how it helped them connect culturally with their students who came from similar backgrounds.

Other white teachers like Edward are careful how they approach ES because they know it's a controversial topic. In fact, in Edward's case, who has a PhD in U.S. History and MA in African American Studies, he approaches ES like a regular social studies course in that neutrality and historical balance is favored over building knowledge with students based on their identities. His approach is more "academic" like Bob and Irene who incorporate more traditional historical approaches in their teaching as opposed to a CRP or Freirian one.

But for the most part, the White teachers I interviewed did understand their positionality, and like the BIPOC teachers, understood it was necessary to be vulnerable and share their experiences to help build trust and care with their mostly BIPOC students. Again, Irene explains how her positionality is at the forefront for her but it doesn't get in the way of her connecting with her mostly BIPOC students:

> I also think you have to come in with–especially if you're white, right– a willingness to be wrong, and if your students question you on something instead of kind of being defensive like, well, hey, I'm the teacher, you know.I think you need to have a have the willingness to defer to their perspectives and to tell them you know, that's a great point I have never quite thought about it that way before. Because I think that the way it works is when your students feel like you care, you know and it matters to you. Which is why I make an effort to, you know, make sure they know my history.

This willingness by the teacher, who knows her identity holds a level of power, to be wrong can help her students to know their perspectives matter and are as important as their teachers. Yet, for Irene, who also identified herself as Jewish, she wants students to know she brings a historical experience which matters and can add to the classroom experience.

BIPOC Teacher Mentorship in Creating Empowerment

Unlike most classes in high school where the emphasis is learning facts and formulas, the ES classroom provides students with services more akin to counseling or mentorship. There is a deeper sense of care for the student's well-being, self-worth, and, specifically in ES, a hope to help BIPOC youth find themselves through honing their critical thinking of the systems that have shaped them. In relaying their own personal stories, most of the BIPOC teachers I interviewed

had felt unseen, voiceless as youth - and not in the sense of just being young and not valued but being disconnected from the dominant society entirely. The BIPOC teachers I interviewed wanted to help their students find themselves sooner, a privilege they did not personally experience. In some ways they saw themselves as mentors to their students who they met with after class, during lunch or after school. They also wanted to provide this mentoring through the content they taught to help students see their power while in high school unlike the teachers themselves who didn't receive this kind of learning until college. And yet, they acknowledge that the ideas they're sharing with their students are challenging. As Lupe recounts:

> …when I do introduce something complicated like the concept of oppression or the concept of resistance, I usually tell students like, this is something I did not learn until I was in college, y'all, and this is something that we're still trying to make sense of as a society. Like this is some really hard difficult things that we're grappling with…

Teachers like Lupe believe empowerment comes with knowledge, which, in her recounting, wasn't shared with her until she got into college. In fact, this delay came up in a few of the interviews I did with BIPOC teachers. Many felt they had not been exposed to the kind of content and thought they were providing their students in ES.

For some of the BIPOC teachers, college was a difficult path to attain. They felt exposing their students to content that could transform the way they see themselves while in high school could help them see college as a place where they belong - where they can dive deeper into understanding their past. This kind of guidance required teachers to see themselves almost like older siblings who are providing caring guidance on how to navigate school and beyond. And for other teachers, like Tomas whose mission is similarly to help his students shake off the hegemonic schooling they have received, ES in college is what made him want to become a

teacher—after realizing it was a way of seeing the world that was okay to explore. He wants his students to know that he almost flunked out of high school and that it wasn't until college that he found his voice as he shared:

> …in community college, after barely making it through high school, which attempted to push me out as it does so many of our intelligent Brown and Black youth, then at community college realizing, oh, school can be interesting again, have authentic purpose, and relate to me and my communities. I could do good in school again, lol, I could do this. Connecting my hip hop cultural knowledge that I was first immersed in during my high school years, community knowledge, my experiences with racism as a child, were all connected to in my Chicano Studies classes, that's when I first became a part of the college honor's program to transfer to the 4 year university, and it was the first main branch of the disciplinary academic Ethnic studies realm that really resonated with me, as a student… before becoming both an Ethnic Studies classroom teacher, and before even becoming an Ethnic Studies student in the classroom, living Ethnic Studies in many ways is integral to my background, and which is why, I so appreciated the way the ES academic lenses and language taught me vocabulary, conceptual understandings, legacies, and academic framing to the experiences I already knew from life itself…

Tomas found a voice through Chicano Studies in a community college after almost failing out of high school. Luckily for him, he was still able to focus his passion for social justice in an academic setting where the subject was more openly discussed. Not only that, but his college ES experience also helped him connect all of his cultural experiences—like hip hop, community, and racism—as valid experiences which should be acknowledged and seen as what helped build his world view. These aspects of culture have not been taken seriously by the dominant

educational establishment, yet ES elevates them as valid and important. This background and deeper sense of self led Tomas to provide a different experience to his students, which he feels can help them avoid the pitfalls that almost distracted him from seeking a college education. Much like a mentor, his approach is to coach and guide his students—who he validates and acknowledges as carriers of authentic culture—through the content in ES so they become enlightened before it is too late. Furthermore, Tomas became a teacher who centers this college-level learning in his ES course because he believes his students deserve to learn hard truths before they go to college:

> The desire for this critical, compassionate, and creative consciousness is part of what drives me, as well as the deep belief that students should not have to wait until they get to college for critical knowledge to be made available to them. And perhaps even more importantly, that this is the type of knowledge that can help them re-engage with education, that can help them save their successful high school graduation, and their formal education as a whole, and even their lives in some cases.

For Tomas, ES can help his students "re-engage" with school because it respects them as knowledge builders. It can even save them in some cases because they feel seen and don't feel othered like much of the traditional curriculum makes BIPOC students feel. Moreover, like Lupe, Tomas feels that exposing students to college level content in ES is critical and necessary, but he goes even further when expressing that by getting this kind of education in high school, BIPOC youth lives may be saved. Much like his own upbringing where he felt ostracized and not valued as a multicultural Latino growing up in Los Angeles. For many youths, being unseen can lead to dropping out of high school and for others it could mean something worse. So, for these ES teachers, knowledge equals power, which Tomas says can equal survival "in some cases." He

felt his students, just like himself, feel as if they must assimilate to a white/Western culture. For him, this experience was tantamount to colonialism in that non-white/Western students were othered and not valued for what their identities could add to the fabric of the multicultural American experience. Empowerment for teachers like Tomas came through helping students dismantle systems through critical thinking and counter-narratives.

For Lupe, who identified as Latina and who grew up in South Central, being open about her world is how she connects with her students at a human level:

> When I think of culturally responsive, it's like, how am I responsive to who you are and like what you dig and what you vibe and equally like? How do you get to know me and my full humanity right?

This comment by Lupe clearly shows how not only is her own identity as Mexican American important but that it's important to bring her students' identities into the equation to build connection. True CRP blends the worlds of the teacher with those of the students. She weaves into her classroom practice:

> That responsiveness starts with like: How do we know each other? Who we are as people and? How am I really authentic in those relationships with them and then with me as well?

For the other BIPOC teachers I interviewed it was critical to help students see themselves in their teachers. In fact, because the BIPOC teachers saw themselves in their students (and vice versa), they felt more comfort in what they shared about themselves because their realities were familiar to their students.

ES as Controversial Subject Matter for White Teachers

For White teachers this shared experience was not always the case. There was a bit of distance between their own realities and those of their students. For some of these white teachers this distance led to them to be careful in how they tackled ES subject matter, whereas for BIPOC teachers these ethnic connections could be the focus. As Edward, a first year white ES teacher expressed:

> …in this climate that we're in right now where they're trying to essentially criminalize this [ES] in half the states in the country. You know, there's I think a lot of teachers [who] shy away from it because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing or they're afraid of coming across as anti-American or coming across as anti-white.

As the current cultural wars have shown, many states are banning ES-types of approaches to learning which they see as creating a divide and a lack of patriotism. There's a fear that, as many right-wing pundits have pointed out, that Critical Race Theory is building a generation of anti-American sentiment by emphasizing what they see as only the negative aspects of our history. Even in an urban district where the majority of teachers are white and the student population is majority BIPOC, there's a fear that by not balancing the curriculum, students will have a one-sided view of history.

But it should be noted that this sentiment of empowerment was heard from teachers who identified as white. As Edward further shared:

> I always make sure to focus on the resistance, you know. You teach about what happened and then you teach about the way those people that happened to how they resisted, how they adapted, how they survive, right, how they persevere, and the fact that I make an effort to do that so strongly. I know this is a bit of an assumption, but I would certainly

> assume that when they're done with that class [ES], they come out feeling a little bit of pride at how their group, whichever, whatever of the four groups they may be a part of, how their group has managed to persevere and thrive in spite of everything that happened to them. And I would think that would fill them with a positive sense of identity.

Edward understood his positionality as a white man who could not share the same stories as his BIPOC students, yet he understood ES was a vehicle to help youth uncover their power by taking on the subject matter of ES classes. Although the term empowerment is substituted with resistance, the desire to help students learn their past and how their cultures resisted could lead to pride and a feeling that they too can persevere.

Growing up BIPOC and Part of the System Influenced Approach to Teaching ES

For the BIPOC teachers I interviewed, the act of becoming a teacher was a way to correct the wrongs of the past that they personally experienced. For Jaime, his identity and experience growing up with Mexican parents in the Central Valley and San Diego shaped his desire to be a teacher. Having experienced racism and corporal punishment from his elementary school teachers who frequently pulled him aside to correct his behavior (as quoted previously). These experiences and guidance from community program counselors helped him find a voice through social justice programs and later go deeper into ES as a college student. Jaime believes in sharing his past with students to build trust with them who, as he recounted, have similar experiences growing up.

> I remember feeling, uh, you know, ashamed of my parents because they were poor. They were farm workers. I remember being embarrassed for them coming to school because they didn't speak English. And so, um, I remember wishing that I, that I wasn't as brown,

> or I had lighter skin. These things you hear about in interviews that I show to my students about the Mexican experience.

The BIPOC teacher's connection with ES as portrayed by Jaime above is one of self-discovery and learning to love themselves after growing up in systems where their skin color made them feel less than. For many first- and second-generation Mexicans, speaking Spanish was less desirable than integrating into the dominant culture. This notion of being under a dominant culture has led to self-hate and is considered by many social justice teachers of ES as an indication of how a colonization mindset has made many BIPOC youth forget the value of their heritage. Jaime continued:

> …that's kind of like a universal experience of Chicanos/Latinos in the United States. And I could kind of go on with this, but I think that one of the reasons why I came into ethnic studies was because I wanted to be the teacher that I never had, you know, the teacher that I needed.

In the large urban school district I studied, Latino students comprise over 70% of the students and teachers like Jaime who are Chicano/Latino comprise 42% of all teachers, highest among all ethnicities. The experiences like those of Jaime are critical in connecting with the predominantly BIPOC student community but their representation in the classroom is still not at the same level as students of color. Here another Latino teacher, Tomas, expands:

> My experience as a youth, never really being able to relate to school in between the third grade and community college, from my mostly white teachers getting the message that I wouldn't amount to anything, and was never taught anything about my ancestral culture, was instead taught in the old Eurocentric paradigm, which renders much empowering knowledge invisible, functionally forbidden.

From these responses, one gets the impression that teaching for these educators is more than just relaying knowledge to their students but making up for injustices they suffered growing up. They seek to correct those wrongs by empowering the next generation of BIPOC youth with a sense of self so that they are not "invisible" but instead recapture what was taken from them.

Andrea, when recalling how she experienced public schooling in the U.S. as a Dreamer talked about a White instructor who inspired her to become a teacher:

> He really inspired me because he made me feel proud of being Indigena, you know. He just made me feel proud of knowing Spanish, speaking Spanish; not feel ashamed of that because I feel like during that time there was a lot of racism towards Latinos…

Thankfully not all encounters for BIPOC teachers started with terrible learning experiences. In some cases, like for Andrea, a caring teacher who she identified as White and "radical" by her estimates was able to see her as more than just a new immigrant to the country, but one with a deeper identity (Indigena) and a special knowledge (Spanish). This kind of humility on the part of educators transcends race and requires deep introspection and training. And ultimately, what many of the teachers want their students to take away is a sense of empowerment, that they can shed the colonial mindset and engage in criticality through ES.

White Teacher Identity and a Nuanced Approach to Teaching ES

Unlike the BIPOC teachers who could see themselves in their mostly Latino students, the White-identified teachers were more careful with how they presented themselves. While they characterized themselves as mostly white, they felt it was important to highlight their intersectionality as a way to connect with their ES students. As Bob, a first year ES teacher who identified as white and Jewish told me:

> …so basically as a person who isn't of color, I try to really keep it student centered and let them draw their own conclusion. And then not try to impose any of my views but also to offer that idea of nuance, right? Because I don't think I 100% fall into the white category…and to understand that idea of nuances when making racial designations.

Bob wanted to make it clear that he did not identify as fully White because his Jewish identity had let him experience discrimination and his own heritage was filled with examples of oppression and otherness. He felt the curriculum and his students could benefit from including this perspective as well.

Another example of a White teacher highlighting other elements of identity such as being female was Irene, who self-described as being a white Jewish woman and who taught in a magnet school with a very diverse student population. She too felt it important to relate elements of her own identity and how it influenced her approach to the subject matter:

> Teaching in general has been kind of shaped by my idealistic drive to make the world a better place. And I feel like I'm definitely aware of myself as a white person... As I see my identity, I think my experiences working with people of color and just other experiences I had where I witnessed racism, just point blank, I've always been pretty privileged. Even as, you know, even as a woman, I've never really experienced what I would consider significant impactful discrimination as a woman.

As a white teacher, Irene too desires to communicate her intersectionality and the potential for discrimination. Although she is careful to highlight her own intersectionality, she does have students who can benefit from her being more open about it. Irene went on to tell me the story of one of her students who also identified as female and as Jewish who did not, at first, think the ideas about racism and whiteness were as divisive as her ES course portrayed.

> I had this student who was sort of conservative. Jewish actually conservative Jewish. She somehow sometimes kind of poo poo the class, I think because it's not. It's not like all other classes and for some kids it seems super easy but whatever. Anyway, as she was getting ready to graduate. And walk across the stage. She says Ohh, [Irene, her teacher] I just want to tell you that I did not realize about your class, how important it is.

Teachers like Irene want to elevate the nuance that exists within white communities, many who also do not see themselves reflected in the classroom. Although the focus of ES is to highlight the experiences of African American, Latino, Asian, and Native peoples, for Jewish students like the one quoted above, there's a sense of skepticism at first about the emphasis on some groups over others when their own people suffered dearly because of discrimination. Yet, experienced teachers like Irene can provide a bridge especially since her own identity mirrored that of her student who ultimately understands why ES mostly focused on the discrimination suffered by the other ethnic groups. And luckily for Irene's student, she comes to understand why this focus was so important later on.

Some ES Teachers Prefer Neutrality, While Others Say it is Impossible to Uphold

Neutrality, unlike vulnerability, had significant differences in views. All of the ES teachers I interviewed were credentialed as social studies teachers. Yet, in ES, some of the historical thinking practices where teachers remain neutral so that students can come to their own conclusions was not practiced by all. In fact, Tomas insisted neutrality was a myth and that by ignoring that, the teacher would be doing a disservice to his students by acknowledging the oppressive hegemonic structures inherent in education:

> Neutrality is an illusion in so many ways… I mean, Howard Zinn, right? "You can't be neutral on a moving train," right? Paulo Freire basics, which Richard Shaull directly named in the forward of his book: *There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world"* This is necessary to recognize, the bottom line that so-called neutrality speaks directly to, and speaks through in our society and curriculum, is hegemony, the hegemony of the dominant narrative, the master narrative, often invisible -- the hidden curriculum, marginalizing and silencing the rest. A so-called neutral stance often just goes along with the dominant narrative without even realizing it, solidifying the racist status quo in the process.

For ES teachers like Tomas, who work to help BIPOC students discover their own intelligence and ways of knowing are as important as those imposed on them, he doesn't shy away from being up front about how he sees the world, especially how the world has shaped him. He further illustrated this point to me by showing that a "two-sided" approach to learning about topics like racism wouldn't work in a class designed to be anti-racist, a clear stance all teachers should take but again, many prefer letting students decide for themselves based on historical evidence and facts. But Tomas insists:

> …a neutral stance, for instance, on racism could be like, 'okay, well here's this side about racism, and here's this side about racism [does gestures for each hand], and here's examples of each. Now wonderful students, we won't bother to name the hegemony of

> any of this, now it's time for you to go think for yourself and decide, is it good or bad to be racist? Do you want to be racist or not? And be ready next class to let us know what you think. Now, you've heard both sides, decide what you think, and go ahead and have a great day class, and you're welcome for being a neutral teacher for you.' Of course, neutral there, really means hegemonic, status quo preserving -- white supremacist, racist.

Tomas makes no excuses for eliminating learning in ES that is not fruitful. When the facts are the facts, why should students debate it? And why not have students get this kind of honesty from their teachers? As Tomas shows, the ES teacher should play a major role in decolonizing his students.

But other teachers, both BIPOC and White, saw the neutrality approach a bit differently. Andrea engages her students in classroom debates regularly. Topics range from current events to issues around racism in the past and present. But she insists she doesn't want to influence how her students think. She believes it's important for them to think critically in order to better understand an issue. She also encourages students to have different points of view since it helps others see things from a different perspective. Andrea shared:

> I just feel that as educators and I know, everyone has their own way of teaching. But for me it's like I'm not telling my kids this is what you have to believe in. I don't tell them this is what you have to believe in. I tell them, hey, this is this. Are these the facts? How do you feel about that? How do you feel about this? You know, and oftentimes they're gonna be like, well, no, this isn't right, I'm like. Well, yeah, you know, but I'm not telling them. You know this is not right, you know, but I'm just telling them to look at this. Look at what happened. I'm just telling them, you know, I'm giving you both sides. You choose. You take a side.

Because many of Andrea's ES students are recent arrivals to the U.S., they have perspectives honed by growing up in South America where issues like race and identity are not as emphasized. Some students come to class with conservative views about what the functions of government should be, and others are trying to make sense of how to assimilate or fit into the new American culture. For teachers like Tomas and Andrea, their classroom demographics inform how to introduce or not include their views in the learning process. Gabriela, who like Andrea, has a lot of recent immigrants in her class believes her students should come up with their own opinions about issues they discuss in class:

> …they're not quite ready to even be critical of the system or even how US intervention in Guatemala is partially why there's such high poverty there. You know things like that. They're just not quite there yet. So anyway, it impacts a lot of how I have to teach because our students are in different places. And we never want to force them. You just provide the material then let them do their own analysis. But you don't force them to think a certain way, you know, but where they're willing to be critical is going to be different depending on their circumstance.

For this teacher, like many who were trained to remain neutral in their approach to social studies content, it's important to help his students come to their own conclusions. He wants the materials he provides them to be questioned and he encourages his students to think critically about them. He doesn't believe in sharing his opinion about what could be racist content—he wants his students to pick up on these ideas and challenge them without too much of his input.

Feeling Safe in the ES Classroom

Overriding the issue neutrality was the central issue of safety. Whereas teachers differed on neutrality, they aligned on the need for students feeling safe. Although a central tenet of ES is anti-racism, some of the teachers I interviewed felt they had to meet their students where they were at before getting deeper into the ES themes of race, colonization, and systems of oppression. For many, creating a classroom environment where all students felt safe and acknowledged in what was being taught was most important along with vulnerability and care in how those topics were approached. For Edward, he makes it clear that his classroom is a safe place and that even when students disagree with another's perspective, that should be done respectfully. Edward recounted how one student spoke out against LGBTQ rights during one of his lectures due to his religious views:

> I tried to call them out very forcefully right in front of the class to demonstrate to him that I respect the fact that he has an opinion and I'm willing. I don't require people to have the same opinion as I do. I have no problem with, you know, debate as long as it's healthy and as long as we're, you know, working with fair, calm, reasoned, kind of terms. And if he has a religious objection to that, that's completely legitimate that he needs to express it in a certain way…I explicitly tell people I don't accept any kind of people speaking in certain ways, like for example, a lot of Latino students at my school will use the N word, which I think is kind of interesting. You know to each other like almost a term of endearment, and you know I had to call that out numerous times and so I think it's I think as we go through the class it becomes fairly obvious to them that it's a safe place.

For many students who identify as being religious or having a certain slang that works in their friend circle, there needs to be an understanding on what constitutes cultural/religious expression versus what could be offensive to others. These teaching moments abound in ES but how a teacher designs her class to engage with these identities is critical. For some teachers, being who they truly are in front of their class helps students feel more at ease and willing to share aspects of their identities/culture that other teachers may not feel comfortable hearing. While other ES teachers focus on more traditional academic norms when discussing subject matter to help students debate a variety of perspectives. The decision is in the hands of the ES teacher and the needs of the student population in their ES class.

Advice to New ES Teachers

What was clear from the nine interviews I had with teachers at a large urban school district was that only one used the new California ES Model Curriculum as a guide. The majority relied on ES frameworks created in collaboration with other teachers or through their own research. As Andrea, a self-identified Mexican Dreamer and six-year teacher shared with me, "You kind of get to do your own thing because there's no curriculum that you have to follow." No two ES classes were the same, but the majority of the teachers created a curriculum reflective of the identities of students in their classes. Some teachers preferred to focus on the four core ethnicities promoted by the Model Curriculum: 1) Indigenous Americans, 2) Latino, 3) African American, and 4) Asian communities. Gabriela, who has been teaching ES content for 23 years and who identified as a Chicana woman:

> …ethnic studies is content, but it's also pedagogy and I would have to say like what I have experienced as a Chicana. It you know impacts how I teach my students, you know,

> it makes me very knowledgeable on what it feels like to be a student in the classroom with those kinds of backgrounds and coming from those communities, so I'm very careful with how I construct my classes to ensure that they feel relevant and welcoming to all of my students, and so I am also very conscious of the fact that I'm not black. I'm not, you know, API. But I make sure to center their experiences...

For Gabriela, being conscious and open about her own identity and how it may differ from those of her students helped her shape a curriculum reflective of their needs. As she notes, her own experience as a Chicana helps her relate to her students. She further acknowledges that although she possesses certain experiences as a Chicana, those may not be relevant to her African American or Asian students. She ultimately wants to help her students feel welcome in a space where their identities and perspectives are valued.

The biggest challenge by far for teachers was not having enough time to cover the course content. Some teachers have taught ES over a year in the past, but most ES classes are only a semester long. Teachers who identified as not being BIPOC struggled with maintaining neutrality over letting student identities lead the development of the content.

Collaborate with other ES teachers

Working collaboratively with other ES teachers at your school site or through professional development to create curriculum was cited as important to a strong ES approach. Since so many teachers will be taking on ES as it becomes a requirement for graduation, it is good to know there are resources available and collaboration is key. Luis got to experience collaboration with other teachers at his school until they underwent a leadership change and these opportunities got scrapped: "... there was a year where we were able to collaborate at

[school omitted] with two instructional coaches and our social studies team that really put together that autoethnography and the components of wealth together. So that was really powerful." Sadly, for teachers like Luis, administrative support for ES changes from year to year and promising practices that are department wide are cut. Luckily for other schools where the administrators are very supportive, teachers can even find funding to plan during the summers. Jaime recounted how he was able to ask his principle to pay him and other ES teachers for a few weeks during the summer to review the previous year's curriculum to adjust and design the next year's program:

> …we'd meet in the summer and together engage in dialogue and think back and forth the different themes and subjects that we think would make sense. We'd take out a bunch of resources, things that we've taught before, books that we have…think about other models or the ethnic studies classes that we've taken in college. And so it's been collective. And then there's teachers who might have areas of strength, right? And so they kind of take on the lead of kind of like creating some of those initial ideas. So it's been collective, but it's always kind of changing depending—changing and responding—to current events and social issues and things that are happening in the community and in Los Angeles.

Collaboration and collectivism help teachers bring their perspectives and strengths to support the creation of curriculum which reflects current events in their local and Los Angeles community. This opportunity to get paid and work on curriculum makes clear how essential it is to get administrative backing for ES. Some admins are hesitant either because they don't see ES as academically rigorous or because of the controversy around ES, or simply because they're not aware of the CRP approach teachers need to invoke.

Be Okay with Making Mistakes

A piece of advice for new teachers of ES—especially those without a strong ES or social justice background—comes from Bill, who is a first year teacher told to teach ES (as opposed to wanting to teach ES, a dilemma that will unfortunately come up a lot in the next few years). He mentioned learning to develop the curriculum: “That's why you're just constantly adjusting and learning and seeing what works and what doesn't work. So like whenever I'm struggling, I say Oh my God, I think this lesson sucks that I put together. I tell myself that it's OK. It's normal. This happens and you're trying to improve and you just do your best.” Although this is not a sentiment a parent of a student would want to hear, the sense of self care and knowing you need to work at getting better is something all teachers new to the subject would benefit from having.

Edward, who, like Bill identified as white and new to ES told me:

> So nobody told me you know what to do. I was the first student to teach this class at [school name omitted] and they just said you got to teach ethnic studies right? And I've seen a couple of rough little outlines here and there that LAUSD offered, but they're pretty simplistic. Like and so my understanding is that ethnic studies can be taught in a variety of ways. You know you can teach it from the perspective of sociology, you could probably teach it from the perspective of music or poetry or literature or whatever. But as a history, you know, guy, that's my comfort zone, right? So I teach it as a history class.

For some teachers, they will go to what they know, like for Bill, he has been trained as a social studies teacher which means he will not engage in the CRP methods detailed here previously. He will lecture more and structure the class in a way that doesn’t come from student experiences but instead tells them about the history they may not be aware of. Bill did emphasize focusing on the four thematic ethnic groups the Model Curriculum highlights, but he did have knowledge or

training the ES approach. This is something administrators must acknowledge and work hard to train and support teachers new to ES.

Have the Hard Conversations

Another white-identified teacher, Irene, looked at the teaching of ES more critically and engaged her students in that conversation:

> I have students think about their education like what is an educated person? The extent to which our education, their education that they're getting matches up with that sort of their educational autobiography. Look at sort of some inequality, like inequities in the education system, and then think…should ethnic studies be a graduation requirement? If so, why? If not, why probably get into a little bit about these efforts to, you know, outlaw the discussion of race and racism…

For those teachers who might be hesitant or feel the topic is controversial, they might want to take Irene's approach and have the students discuss it. This could develop opposing points of view which might challenge notions of knowledge being co-created as opposed to knowledge being something that is mostly sought out. Yet, if the teacher is well trained in ES pedagogy, these would be launching points for getting into the subject matter of race and racism, as Irene eventually does.

Other teachers like Andrea address this struggle new teachers may encounter when she told me:

> … it's also about how politicized it is, and how strongly we believe about stuff. And I think that as much as we might have our own opinions about things, and we might be, quote unquote woke, right? This course is to give language for students to understand and

> deconstruct that on their own. So I think yes, we might have a vision or an understanding, and of course I think we all stand against anti-oppression and we're all seeking to be, you know anti-racist and stuff. So yes, there's certain things we should address and educate students, but I think that should always be co-constructive knowledge, right? … I feel like the beauty in this course is that it encourages, and it guides students to come to that discovery upon themselves, and I feel like that's what gives us greater rewards. Students be able to make sense of that and make meaning.

Regardless of what controversies may exist, it is key for new teachers to seek out training where the CRP methods are how the ES curriculum is delivered. It's important, as Lupe states, "co-construct" knowledge with students. That teachers need to emphasize they are not the holders of knowledge or all knowing. Teachers must be anti-racist in how they approach this class, especially, if not all classes.

Not Enough Time

What came across from every teacher I interviewed was not having enough time to teach ES. In fact, most schools only offer the class as a one semester elective. Teachers need to design a 10-week course (longer at other schools using a semester system) that covers all of the very deep subjects like racism, oppression, colonialism, etc. It's practically impossible to get all the details and truly build knowledge with their students, but regardless, the importance of the subject keeps teachers motivated. Gabriella shared:

> …because there's so much to cover in a 1 semester course and we're talking about for racialized ethnic groups, It's like it's not enough time, like even what I'm trying to do

> already is so ambitious for such a short period of time, especially when you know some of the students also have, like you know, I have to translate sometimes translanguaging.

Many teachers of ES will have not only ethnically diverse students in their classroom, but special needs and ELL students as well. Being able to teach in a way that supports all learning styles in a short period of time will require incredible creativity and patience. For Tomas it's more than that. He says, "ideally you approach it as a whole school year because again, if we're making up for 9, 10, 11 years of education that has not offered this BIPOC black, indigenous person of color perspective at the center." And for Tomas, he has experience teaching the one semester ES elective and then having the same students follow up in another elective of Latino or African American Studies. Yet, most teachers will not have this experience. And many schools will not offer courses beyond an ES elective. As Edward laments:

> I'm tasked with teaching the entire history of four different ethnic groups and 10 weeks actually, and that's only in the later semesters. In the first two semesters of the year. In the fall semester you got like an 8-week unit and a nine week unit, which means I can't even do 2 full weeks on some of these units there I'm constrained to teaching. Native American studies and Asian American studies. Each usually only get one week. So I have like no time to do this.

Its clear ES teachers are expected to do the impossible in a semester-long course. Teaching about four ethnic groups which are left out of the regular curriculum in one 10-week class seems like an inadequate amount of time to focus on this important subject matter. Some schools make teaching ES themes central to all of their subjects while others only cover this content in the ES course. Nonetheless, the challenge remains for many teachers and schools to address the needs of

their primarily BIPOC student populations in a way that honors their importance beyond a one-semester class.

Conclusion

My findings confirmed much of the existing data on the need for the ES curriculum and its positive impact on BIPOC students. From helping students feel more connected and seen in their class to teachers building stronger engagement by being more vulnerable and open with their students, the ES curriculum requires a culturally responsive approach to create the impact its designers intended.

My findings also showed the differences in approach to the subject between teachers who identify as BIPOC versus those who are White. The subject matter reflects the experiences of many BIPOC teachers who themselves have and may continue to experience discrimination. By connecting with their students as mentors, they are able to build trust and connection in ways that White teachers could not. Yet, for those who identified as White, the content of ES helped them understand how their own identities showed up in the classroom. By being more cognizant of how their power impacted the learning of BIPOC students, they could find ways to have difficult conversations that challenged notions of hierarchy and power in the classroom.

Moreover, the findings found that the ES curriculum can be approached in many ways and that there's no one right way to teach the subject. In fact, because the course is so short (one semester) teachers can focus on projects that are student driven (YPAR & publishing) so that the knowledge is not only provided by the teacher but is also built in collaboration with their students.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

During my research journey, I embarked on a quest to comprehend how the Ethnic Studies (ES) curriculum was being implemented in a large urban school district, with the aim of fostering engagement among BIPOC students through a Culturally Responsive Pedagogical (CRP) approach. In this pursuit, I discovered a wide array of perspectives and interpretations regarding the teaching of this course. Previous studies have shed light on these differences, elucidating the contrasting approaches of BIPOC and white teachers in relation to the content (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Lopez, 2017; Kolluri, 2020). Furthermore, some scholars have examined these variations through the lens of CRP (de Los Ríos, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017), emphasizing that ES is most impactful when taught utilizing this pedagogical framework.

However, in the context of my research questions, I unearthed layers of nuance that contribute to our understanding of the opportunities presented by teacher identity and CRP approaches to student engagement. These nuanced findings have the potential to enrich our comprehension of the subject matter and enhance the effectiveness of ES instruction.

Research Question 1 Findings

Through my first Research Question (RQ), I uncovered valuable insights regarding how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) fosters engagement among BIPOC students, specifically through academic activities such as writing, group projects, and classroom conversations and debates. One key finding was the pivotal role that teachers play in creating a classroom environment where students feel understood and connected to their instructor. Previous research (de Los Ríos, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017) has emphasized the value of Ethnic Studies (ES)

courses in valuing students' lived experiences and cultivating learning environments where students and teachers can authentically express themselves. Scholars like Jocyl Sacramento (2019) have advocated for teachers' vulnerability as an essential aspect of ES instruction. In my interviews with teachers, many emphasized that sharing their own personal backgrounds and challenges helped establish trust and rapport with their students. This approach distinguishes ES from other courses, as the teacher is not expected to possess all knowledge. Instead, the teacher's role is to facilitate students' exploration and understanding of the curriculum by collectively tapping into their diverse funds of knowledge as a classroom community.

Another finding from RQ1 was the significant impact that project assignments have on student engagement and connection to the content. For some teachers, projects like Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) provided students with the freedom to choose a local community problem they were passionate about, conduct research, and propose solutions. YPAR projects have been extensively studied within the ES context (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Other teachers highlighted the power of identity-focused essay writing for publication or creating PowerPoint presentations, allowing students to honor their perspectives and voices. Surprisingly, few studies have explored the influence of writing on student engagement in ES. Both project types mentioned provided students with opportunities to bring their authentic selves into the learning process and contribute to knowledge about their communities and potential solutions to local challenges.

Additionally, RQ1 revealed the importance of specific classroom practices in ES that create a safe space for students to share their experiences. Recognizing that many students were undocumented or recent arrivals, teachers found it crucial to create an environment where students could develop confidence to critique the injustices they directly encountered at the

border. The challenging experiences faced by recently arrived students, including a lack of connection with school, feelings of distrust, and a lack of safety, have been well-documented (Gollub, Green, Richardson, Kaplan, Shervington, 2019). However, teachers were able to support these students in telling their stories and gradually finding their voice to critique and better understand the layers of power and systemic inequities in their new homeland through projects and classroom activities. Engaging students in this manner required teachers to develop an ES curriculum that reflected the needs and cultural experiences of the students in their classroom.

A clear indication of successful engagement in ES courses was the observation that no students failed the class unless they did not attend. While previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of ES courses on students' test scores (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014), the teachers I interviewed emphasized that the focus was not on passing or failing, but on fostering student success. By respecting students' knowledge and encouraging their active participation, students felt connected, seen, and motivated to excel. Unlike classes that primarily rely on memorization-based assessments, ES classes prioritize the co-construction of knowledge through conversations, debates, and research, allowing students to collectively build knowledge.

Research Question 2 Findings

Additional interesting data was unveiled with RQ2 where I focused on how a teacher's identity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender impacted the way they taught ES. I interviewed three teachers who identified as white with one being female and two also being of Jewish ancestry. The other five teachers were BIPOC with some identifying as Latino/a, Chicano/a, Indigena, female, and male. Ethnic identities were the most influential factors for these teachers

with some highlighting gender identity as a factor in how they taught ES. This understanding has been well established by researchers who've found teachers of color have a "distinct asset" in the teaching of ES (Dee, 2005; Tintiango-Cubales, et al, 2014; Sacramento, 2019). For the white teachers, there was a strong sense of understanding their position of power heading a classroom made up almost entirely of BIPOC youth. For two of these teachers, their white identity was questioned through their cultural identification with being Jewish which was shared as factoring into their class conversations around discrimination and oppression. All three teachers were well aware of controversies in the public discourse around critical race theory but understood their roles as ES teachers to be student focused and reflective of the experiences they brought to the classroom. For these teachers, the course was being taught through the lens of historical thinking where the teacher provides evidence and materials which show a variety of perspectives and students are encouraged to think critically about topics like race and identity in responding through debate and other classroom activities. This differed in how some of the BIPOC teachers approached the subject matter.

BIPOC teachers' responses to RQ2 varied from wanting to help decolonize the curriculum to an anti-racist approach, a perspective as research has shown reflective of BIPOC lived experiences (Dee, 2005). Three of these teachers pointed to their personal experiences growing up as recipients of injustices as a factor in why they teach ES. Others found themselves academically through their early educational experiences and now wanted to help students who look like them overcome the systemic inequities they may not be aware of. What all BIPOC teachers had in common was how they could relate to their students through cultural connections like food, similar music and art tastes, and being from the same neighborhoods. For the majority of the BIPOC teachers, being vulnerable was a way to help their students connect with them.

This also included teachers being open about their political views and perspectives on issues focused on race and identity.

Some of the BIPOC teachers grew up in the United States while others were born outside. The differences in those experiences related to challenging the American school system and a Western-dominant curriculum for the native-born teachers versus one foreign born teacher who saw the academic possibilities afforded her and how she could help her students grow by also accessing these tools. For most of the BIPOC teachers interviewed, their ES course was about empowering their students through critical thinking and by elevating their students' sense of self. This had been how the BIPOC teachers became motivated to take pride in their identities and in turn motivated them to become teachers. By passing on these critical approaches to learning, they could help their students find themselves.

It was clear that the white teachers I interviewed understood their privilege and how they might be perceived by their students, but they believed a second identity, Jewish for Bob and being a woman for Irene, gave them a perspective that could help students understand nuances that exist in all identities. In the case of Irene, whose classroom demographics are made up of students from Black, African, Latino, Asian, White–a demographic not present in most other classrooms in the district I observed where students are predominantly Latino–she found it necessary to balance perspectives and help students who had not fully understood the impact of racism on BIPOC students.

According to Irene, some of her white students—a minority in the large urban district I researched—feel left out of the ES curriculum and others may even be opposed to it because of more conservative views. Nonetheless, the ES course can help these students understand the challenges BIPOC students deal with every day which are not as apparent to other communities

who feel they too are oppressed and discriminated against. The key is not to make those students feel bad but instead to widen their understanding of the layers of power and systemic oppression and how they differently impact groups (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Kolluri, 2020).

Overall, what was clear from all the teachers in terms of identity was that their ES course was a reflection of teachers' lived experiences as much as it was about reflecting the student's experiences. What sets ES apart from most history courses is that it requires an examination of a teacher's own life and biases in order for the curriculum to be delivered in a way that would have the most impact on his or her students. It was somewhat surprising to learn that some BIPOC ES teachers believe subjectivity is key to relating to their students. This approach has not been covered extensively in the literature as of yet but has been indirectly touched upon as a way to build trust with students in the delivery of ES (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). And since there isn't a required curriculum in place, teachers of ES have freedom to construct a course based on the values of ES that reflects their own lived experiences and those of their students.

Limitations

As with any study using interviews as its main vehicle for collecting data, there's always a concern around whether enough time was given to the subjects for them to answer fully or give enough details. Whether or not the interviewees were in the best frame of mind to answer the questions as best as they could is also a possible limitation to a study. In my case, all nine interviews were done over Zoom. I wanted teachers to select a time that worked best for their schedules and asked them to do the interviews after school. Of the nine, three did the interviews in between teaching assignments which did make me feel like I had to move the interview faster than those I did for teachers outside of school hours. Also, I noted that even the teachers who

were not waiting to teach another class were a bit tired from a full day of teaching which could or could not have impacted what they relayed to me.

Using Zoom as opposed to meeting in person with teachers may have also created less of a connection or sense of trust with the teachers. Although all of those I interviewed appeared comfortable and open to my questions, it was hard to gauge their overall body language when all I could see was from their torso on up. Nonetheless, Zoom offered teachers the most flexibility and all of them preferred that to an in-person meeting.

I did not sense that teachers held back or shied away from answering any of the questions I asked. I did however notice that the teachers who identified as BIPOC were more open about their personal struggles as youth growing up and confronting racism. These teachers were also very clear about their goals and intentions with the ES curriculum as being about decolonizing their students' minds. The teachers who identified as white were also clear about understanding racism and their privileges as being perceived as such. One white teacher did acknowledge there being controversy around the subject matter in the press and even at school. In fact, two of the teachers had been questioned by some students and other faculty about their ability to teach the course at the beginning but were later given approval by concerned parties. If anything, this level of self-knowledge by these teachers made the interviews richer because it gave them room to share openly and talk through some of these concerns. Perhaps because I present as white, these teachers felt comfortable relaying these feelings in a way that felt safe for them, but this is just an assumption and was not confirmed during the interview.

Finding enough participants was a bit of a challenge and also why some might question the low number of interviewees. Because I am not employed by the school district I studied, it wasn't as easy to find willing teachers and administrators. Luckily through my years of work

with schools in this district as a nonprofit leader of a program working with schools, I did have a small network I could ask. I also felt that it would have been stronger to have interviewed a few teachers who identified as Black, but one I had scheduled could not make a time work and could not update his Zoom due to an issue with the IT at his school. I offered to do a call but did not hear back. I do feel that having this perspective would have enhanced a critical area of my study around identity.

Recommendations for Practice

Schools and districts need to put a lot of focus on training and developing a new generation of ES teachers, especially because this course will be required for graduation by 2030. What my findings have shown is that the course can be taught in different ways depending on who is teaching it, but in order to provide a proper CRP approach for building engagement, teachers need social justice training as well as personal reflection training or guidance. This has been covered in previous studies, especially by Tintiango-Cubales, et al. (2014) and Dee (2015), but because of the current climate and controversy in some California schools and nationally, some new teachers may choose to teach the subject as a typical history course and not with a CRP lens. Most of the teachers I interviewed did not feel any pressure by their administration to teach the course in a less personal way, but news stories abound about schools where this approach is a challenge, and the teaching of the course will most likely change to accommodate the criticism. It is imperative that school leadership create the freedom required for ES teachers to explore topics like racism, colonialism, sexism and beyond without fear of retribution. This issue will continue to evolve in many school districts throughout California as the requirement for ES courses becomes a reality.

To teach ES, an instructor needs not only be well versed in history and the cultures being studied, but more training is needed around CRP and how to be consistent in its delivery. Not all the teachers I interviewed had the same understanding of CRP. All of the teachers understood why the content was important but only 7 of the 9 knew what CRP was. The two teachers who did not have a full grasp of CRP taught the course like a regular history class which included some testing and memorization. This is not to say this is a bad approach, but it does make the class less about engagement and more about academic rigor. Nothing in the current state adopted curriculum warns against testing or more formal or traditional teaching methods, but those have not been found to build the kind of engagement an ES course was designed to create to dismantle oppression and other vestiges of white supremacy. Therefore, it is important that teachers continue to seek out professional development around CRP and continue to reflect on best practices through reading and developing curriculum with other ES and CRP experienced teachers.

For policy makers, there will be many challenges from more conservative leaning school districts and leaders to either eliminate ES or to water it down. It will be essential that state leaders put further policies in place to protect teachers who may challenge administrators who they disagree with. As is happening in some states across the country, teachers are being fired for covering content seen as “un-American” by conservative leaders. Hopefully this will not be the case in California, but some districts and leaders are pushing against the roll out of ES in Orange County and in less diverse regions of our state.

Additionally, it is important that parents be well informed about what ES is and is not. Many school boards and PTAs have become battlegrounds where parents have been calling for the elimination of ES and CRP approaches. Some are even absorbing a negative interpretation of

critical race theory through social media and lump in courses like ES as part of a greater push to "indoctrinate" their children. School principals will need to have orientations with parents to address questions and to show how ES is taught and can benefit students from all backgrounds. These leaders will need access to more data about the success of ES and how it can build more rounded students who can critique and look for ways to address the inequities that exist for people of color, women, and gender non-conforming individuals.

Suggestions for Future Research

The topic of ES still requires a lot more study and learning in order for it to succeed as a way to help students who are under-represented in the school curriculum feel equal and respected. White will no longer be the majority population by the year 2045 and schools where the population is already majority BIPOC must accelerate the pace of how they integrate the stories of all communities into the learning. The ES graduation requirement certainly helps move the dial in this direction, but as my study has shown, not all teachers are trained to present this course effectively. Future research in how ES is helping BIPOC students improve academically in other courses would certainly help build the case for why this course is beneficial. Most of the studies to date have been qualitative outside of the landmark Dee and Penner (2017) and the Cabrera, et al (2014) studies. More long-term studies focusing on quantitative data showing grade improvement, high school graduation, and college and career access would build upon studies showing short-term growth for BIPOC students.

More research targeting communities that are divided in their understanding of ES and CRP could help uplift concerns and ways to address them without the politicization taking place in California and in conservative states. Critical Race Theory is being positioned like

communism was in the 1950s as part of a new "woke" culture changing the hearts and minds of young people. The psychological impact of this political debate has positioned parents against teachers and has made even the teaching of slavery and the holocaust cause for controversy. Unless more academic research is done on how courses like ES contribute to a more balanced and just schooling for all students, the forces afraid of the changing American landscape will continue to support a less tolerant student population without necessary critical thinking and fact-based learning.

Since the majority of teachers will continue to be white for the foreseeable future, more research on how to support the training of these teachers to feel safe and able to be more vulnerable with their students. Studies of teacher credentialing programs and their use or lack of CRP training would shed light on where the divide still exists in our country and state on how teachers are prepared to work in schools that will become more diverse if they are not already. Moreover, research on the effectiveness of CRP as a tool for engagement of BIPOC students academically as well as culturally would increase the adoption of this approach in more schools and teacher training programs.

Conclusion

As our nation grapples with its own identity crisis, it is important that teachers, administrators, and policy makers continue to find ways to make their classrooms relevant and inclusive for all their students. The fight to make ES a required course in schools may have started in the 1960s but has been a need and right for BIPOC identified students for much longer. ES as a high school requirement is a step in the right direction for creating a more just and well-rounded learning experience for students, but there is still a lot of work to be done in helping

teachers and administrators build environments that are welcoming and safe for the learning of this subject matter.

From my research, it is clear that BIPOC students are benefiting greatly from ES because not only is their cultural, ethnic, and gendered experience acknowledged, but so too is their humanity. Using CRP methods gives students authorship in their learning. They are given respect as contributors to the creation of knowledge and not simply seen as empty vessels in need of being filled with information. Yet, the majority of teachers in California and even in large urban districts may not be aware of what CRP is or how to effectively use it in their teaching. ES will become the one course where using CRP can influence not only the students but also other teachers and the school community to see their students as active and not passive learners.

It is important that more training and advocacy for how ES is taught is provided to teachers of all ethnicities and backgrounds. It is not easy for teachers who've come up through academic training programs which have emphasized testing and rote memorization to understand how to be vulnerable and even open with their students in the classroom. It has also not been the custom of many history teachers to use writing as a tool to help their students find a voice. The teaching of ES properly will require new approaches that might not feel as academically rigorous as traditional courses have offered, but instead they offer a way to scaffold a student's confidence and self-worth.

Finally, as the world of education continues to evolve and technologies like Artificial Intelligence threaten to challenge how information is shared and designed. Therefore, it is incredibly important that students are taught to hold on to what makes them unique and to know where they come from as information becomes more fragmented. ES is an antidote to a future AI world that may blur the lines of what makes identity essential to understanding the world around

us. By offering an ES that centers students, their cultures, their ethnicities, their opinions and perspectives as valid, ES can build more resilient, politically engaged, and socially conscious humans.

APPENDIX A

Ethnic Studies Interview Protocol

Teacher

Thank you for agreeing to share your views and experiences in your ethnic studies class(es). I value and appreciate your time and expertise.

The main focus of this interview is to learn more about ethnic studies in your classroom. This interview should take approximately one hour. Your participation in this study is voluntary – you do not have to answer any question you do not want to, and we can stop the interview or take a break at any point. Your identity and participation in this study will be kept confidential. All participants in this study will be assigned pseudonyms, so your name will never be used in any publications or presentations from this study.

I am audio recording this interview, to help me with my notes. If there is any point in the interview when you prefer answering without the audio recording, I can turn the recording off.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Tell me a bit about your background and why you became a teacher.
    a. How long have you been teaching?
    b. How long have you taught Ethnic Studies?
2. Why did you decide to teach Ethnic Studies?
    a. How many sessions do you teach?
    b. Is the class a semester or full year?

c. Describe your classroom demographics.

3. **How, if at all, would you say your identity influences the way you teach ES?**
4. **Let's talk about some ways you get to know your students' and their identities.**
    a. **How do you make the course safe for students to discuss their perspectives/identities?**
    b. **How, if at all, have you seen your students develop a sense of identity after taking your class?**
5. **What culturally responsive methods do you use to help students engage in their classwork?**
    a. **Are there specific strategies that you've found to be especially effective year after year? Please explain.**
    b. **Describe how you design and organize your classroom to maintain a culturally responsive atmosphere.**
6. **How do you design your course and decide what to cover?**
    a. **Do your students have any say in what you cover for your ES course? If yes, please explain.**
    b. **What books, primary sources or documents do you use to teach ES? How/why did you choose these materials?**
    c. **Do current events and news play a role in your ES course? If so, how?**
    d. **In what ways do you, if at all, build knowledge with your students as opposed to directly teaching them?**
7. What types of assignments do your students enjoy the most (based on completion and quality of work returned)?

a. **Describe some of the ways you engage students and develop their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.**

8. **I'd like to turn to your assessment approach.**
    i. **How do you assess if students are learning?**
    ii. **How do you give feedback?**
9. **How do you know if your students are enjoying your class?**
10. **What do you ultimately hope your students will personally gain from your course?**
11. What advice would you give to teachers new to ES?
12. Can you describe assignments or projects you may be able to share with me from your ES students? Why are these good examples to share?

APPENDIX B

Curriculum and Student Work Artifact Protocol

- How are topics such as race and identity centered in the curriculum?
- How is student safety being ensured in the assignments and activities they are asked to engage in? Are class rules clear and regularly returned to?
- In what specific ways does the curriculum reflect the identities of the students in the class? How does the curriculum give equal attention to different identities in the classroom?
- What are some examples of students co-creating knowledge in their classrooms? How does the teacher manage and document this for future use?
- What is the teacher's position during student debates or in response to student writing? Do they stay neutral? If not, how do their identities show up in the classroom?
- What are the elements of historical thinking present in assignments? (From UCLA Public History Initiative)
    1. Chronological Thinking
    2. Historical Comprehension
    3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
    4. Historical Research Capabilities
    5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making
- How are primary and secondary sources used to help inform issues being covered? What other reading do teachers assign to augment learning?
- What types of projects are students assigned? Writing, powerpoint presentations, skits, debates, other? Are some used more than others? Why?

- How are students' lived experiences being included in the curriculum? The experiences of their families? The community?
- What input, if any, do students have on the kinds of assignments they get? Do students co-create assignments with their teachers? If so, what is the process?
- How are students graded on their work? Are rubrics used for writing assignments? What do they measure? Other rubrics and what they measure?
- What are the learning outcomes teachers hope students receive from the work and activities assigned? How do they ensure these outcomes happen? What do they do if students do not gain the outcomes hoped for?
- In what ways, if at all, are students evaluated on their authenticity (as opposed to saying what the teacher or other students may want to hear) in their writing or engagement with others in class projects? Are values such as empathy evaluated or encouraged in assignments?

APPENDIX C

Research Information Sheet

University of California, Los Angeles

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Promising Practices in Ethnic Studies Classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Joel Arquillos, EdD student and researcher and Diane Durkin, PhD study supervisor from the Education Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles are conducting a research study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a teacher of Ethnic Studies. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

The purpose of the research interview is to learn about what culturally responsive teaching methods in Ethnic Studies classrooms are leading to increased engagement from students.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

Participation in an interview will take a total of one hour.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Meet either in person or on Zoom for one hour
- Answer questions related to your experience as an Ethnic Studies teacher ● You will be asked about your perspective on how ethnic studies may influence students' future educational pathways.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

- There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

- You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research.

The results of the research may lead to the publication of a guide for future teachers of Ethnic Studies to learn about best practices. Information you provide will also help in any professional development that results from findings in this study.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

- Use of personal information that can identify you:

I will mitigate potential risks to you by ensuring participant confidentiality throughout the research process. Information you provide will be kept confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

- How information about you will be stored:

Pseudonyms will be assigned to interview transcripts, recordings, and notes so that no participant names are associated with the data. All data will be stored in a password-protected, secure server only accessible by members of the research team.

- People and agencies that will have access to your information:

The research team, authorized UCLA personnel may have access to study data and records to monitor the study. Research records provided to authorized, non-UCLA personnel will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

Employees of the University may have access to identifiable information as part of routine

processing of your information, such as lab work or processing payment. However, University employees are bound by strict rules of confidentiality.

- How long information from the study will be kept:

Interview recordings will be destroyed at the end of the project.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

No data collected during this study, including de-identified data will be shared for future research.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you. We are able to offer a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation for the in-depth interview.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can contact: Diane Durkin, Faculty Sponsor at durkin@humnet.ucla.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

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