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**Publication Date**

2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Listen to the Teacher:

The Realities of Leading Ethnic Studies Classrooms

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Kimberly Young

2021



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Listen to the Teacher:

The Realities of Leading Ethnic Studies Classrooms

by

Kimberly Young

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Pedro Antonio Noguera, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

This study investigated the pedagogy and goals of Ethnic Studies as elucidated by Ethnic Studies teachers across three public school districts in California. Drawing upon the positive impacts of Ethnic Studies for students while analyzing teacher pedagogy through Sleeter and Zavala's (2020) Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies, my research analyzed the dynamic multifaceted efforts that are on display daily in Ethnic Studies classrooms throughout California. Rooted in the knowledge and expertise of current Ethnic Studies teachers, my study focuses on the teacher, a lesser studied but very important element of Ethnic Studies instruction. My research design consisted of a recruitment survey with various open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews,

and document analysis of course syllabi. Once the data was collected and analyzed, I identified Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies implemented in practice as well as growth areas for further consideration and support. I found that many of the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies as described by Sleeter and Zavala (2020) were evident in participating Ethnic Studies teacher practice. Only one of the hallmarks was not indicated as a priority of the course by teachers in my sample. Additionally, Ethnic Studies teachers worked to mitigate curricular marginalization and discussed many of the benefits and drawbacks of teaching Ethnic Studies as a marginalized curriculum. The teachers succeeded in implementing Ethnic Studies in spite of challenges because of critical consciousness that they had established prior to teaching Ethnic Studies. Implementations for further research are also discussed, along with recommendations for systemic and structural support for Ethnic Studies. By centering the voices of Ethnic Studies teachers and learning from the productive struggle of those doing the work of bringing Ethnic Studies curriculum to life, this study honors those actively working to bring marginalized histories into K-12 classrooms and making Ethnic Studies a reality for our students.

The dissertation of Kimberly Young is approved.

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2021

## DEDICATION PAGE

My work is dedicated to my family. Cruz and Nico, thank you, amores. Thank you for your patience and understanding as mama works. I am trying to disrupt and build so that you will see yourselves and your stories honored in classroom spaces. I appreciate all your support and cuddles. To my bestie, Suneal. Thank you! There is no way that I could have ever even imagined taking on this project without your unwavering support. I love our endless conversations about all things education. You are my thought-partner extraordinaire. You are the best. To my parents, Prescilla and Henry – the endless support, love, and meals mean so much. Thank you. I know the importance of community from both of you. To my brothers and sisters, thank you. Your educational experiences are largely the reason I became a teacher. I carry each of you into my classroom each day. Matt and Kathy, thank you both for being a part of my community, for all of the help with the boys, and all of the cups of coffee.

My work is dedicated to all of the Ethnic Studies teachers out there putting in the work to get this right so that our classrooms are places of inclusion and empowerment. As we productively struggle - we thrive!

My work is dedicated to soccer. Thank you, soccer, for grounding and distracting me.

My work is dedicated to the ancestors, past, present, and future. May your histories be told and continue to be a source of empowerment as we work for a better tomorrow.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and express my deepest gratitude to my incredible co-chairs, Dr. Pedro Noguera and Dr. Kristen Rohanna, thank you both for believing in me, laughing with me, pushing me, and supporting me. I am so grateful for each of you and for your guidance throughout this process.

Cheers to ELP faculty, staff, and my cohort – thank you. To have persevered in the midst of a pandemic is really crazy. I will forever hold you all in my heart.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The collective trauma of the murder of George Floyd set off a movement for social reckoning that was, for Black Americans, a long time coming. Protests of his senseless killing by police continued for months across the United States. Similar to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950 and 60s, young people took to the streets in protest against systematic and institutionalized racism. In Culver City, where I live and work, and across other cities in California, the youth continue to interrogate different systems that leave them undereducated and uninformed. Thus, K-12 schooling and curricula are being questioned. At a Culver City Unified School District School Board Meeting in 2020 an alumnus captured this sentiment by stating,

Racism and prejudice within schools is a multifaceted issue and must be looked at through different lenses. First, what is being taught in the classroom. In history classes, we only learn about Black history when it's within US and European history. We learn about slavery, segregation, MLK, Rosa Parks, and that is basically it. The history of Black people should be its own lesson, we should learn about culture, language, arts, there are so many stories and lessons we are never told. Two years ago, an Ethnic Studies class was started as an elective. It is a semester long course and the other semester is Gender Studies. I had the opportunity to take this class and I loved it, not only because it was beautifully taught by Ms. Young, but because I was exposed to so many lessons and information I had never heard before. I think this class should be taken by every student, to expand their own knowledge and it teaches empathy (Stein, 2020).

Not only did the “Summer of Racial Reckoning,” reinvigorate conversations about race in the United States (Chang et al., 2020), but discussions for the inclusion of Ethnic Studies as a high

school graduation requirement reemerged as the push for teaching and learning more inclusive histories and racial literacy were reenergized in California.

There are many reasons and ways that Ethnic Studies is growing in California. The population of students of color in California continues to grow as does the opportunity gap for these students. Ethnic Studies is a popular educational reform (Castillo, 2018) that is being increasingly implemented in both K-12 and higher education. The California State University system, the largest public university system in the country, recently amended their graduation requirements to include an Ethnic Studies or social justice class for all students beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. In March 2021, a model Ethnic Studies curriculum was unanimously passed by the State Board of Education (SBE). Shortly after, the governor signed pending legislation establishing Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement for the class of 2029-2030. To meet this new mandate, many high schools in California will need to include and grow Ethnic Studies courses at their school sites. Ethnic Studies has the potential to impact student lives and outcomes in transformative ways.

The opportunities and challenges facing Ethnic Studies teachers are abundant. It is essential that we understand the teaching and learning that is happening in Ethnic Studies classrooms. Pedagogical scholarship is often far removed from the constraints of practice. Given the somewhat limited research centered on Ethnic Studies teachers, my research objectives are to elucidate the goals teachers articulate for their students and courses. In amplifying teacher voice and experience in the conversation about the future of Ethnic Studies, my research aims to understand the alignment and disconnect between Ethnic Studies theory and actual Ethnic Studies teacher practice at the secondary level. As the Ethnic Studies mandate for high schools in California approaches, understanding the gaps between Ethnic Studies theory and praxis will be



vital to meet the ongoing professional development needs of current Ethnic Studies teachers and newly trained Ethnic Studies teachers in order to best serve the needs of our students who will engage in this long overdue course offering.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Background**

There is no single archetype for an Ethnic Studies teacher nor training in the discipline. From a credentialing perspective, there is no singular test that certifies teachers as proficient in Ethnic Studies. In some cases, Ethnic Studies teachers are underprepared or lack the content knowledge necessary to teach Ethnic Studies (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Compounding this issue is the reality of limited teacher preparation and scarce professional development opportunities focused on Ethnic Studies. This is not to say there are no opportunities for Ethnic Studies professional development; however, opportunities to engage in development opportunities that build critical Ethnic Studies teachers' collective consciousness (Sacramento, 2019) remain constrained.

Even with limited spaces for Ethnic Studies teachers to learn in community with each other, research has demonstrated the importance of learning histories that value knowledge and interrogate the creation of further knowledge through an epistemological lens grounded in non-European origin can result in important educational and social outcomes (Reyes-McGovern & Buenavista, 2016). Captured in a groundbreaking study centered on the impact that Ethnic Studies classes had on students, decreased absenteeism and rising grade point averages are just two of the quantifiable positive student benefits that were associated with taking Ethnic Studies classes. San Francisco Unified School District hosted a study conducted by Dr. Thomas Dee and Dr. Emily Penner (2017) linked meaningful and relevant curriculum that utilized student-

centered pedagogical practices as being fundamental to strong Ethnic Studies classes. Practices such as a specific emphasis by teachers on developing students' critical thinking skills, engaging with diverse perspectives, and exploring home culture in relation to other people's experiences clearly revealed the effectiveness of Ethnic Studies teaching (Reyes-McGovern & Buenavista, 2016).

In illuminating what happens in Ethnic Studies classrooms, past research studies have centered their focus on the impact on students or on what teachers are doing from a theoretical vantage point. For example, Ethnic Studies classrooms teachers work to build on the funds of knowledge, cultural assets traditionally relegated outside of the classroom, that students bring into the classroom daily (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). While this may be true, successful Ethnic Studies teachers also work to bridge the gap between academic knowledge prioritized in school and knowledge utilized in students' home lives, therefore improving student behaviors and other indicators of academic success (Dee & Penner, 2017). Even so, there is scarce research that focuses on how Ethnic Studies teachers are thinking and using significant Ethnic Studies frameworks such as the funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) on a daily basis in their classroom. Leveraging community cultural wealth can be important for high school students as they engage in challenging academic opportunities and prepare for postsecondary opportunities (Duncheon, 2018; Kolluri, 2019; Kolluri, 2020).

It is also worth noting that my connection to Ethnic Studies is not simply theoretical. I have taught Ethnic Studies in high schools in northern and southern California for over six years. I feel deeply connected to the subject matter as this was my chosen undergraduate major at University of California, Berkeley. As a BIPOC educator and mother of multi-racial and ethnic kids, I have a deep understanding of what classrooms can feel like when you do not see yourself

represented in the curriculum. I have also seen the power of Ethnic Studies in my own classroom and the positive impact a single class in the midst of a crowded day can be for some of our students who are not reflected in broader curriculum.

### **Historical Context**

Historically, Ethnic Studies emerged from political struggle. The discipline materialized after intense political struggle was waged to gain representation for historically marginalized groups pushed to the periphery of social science curriculum. The political battles continue as the discipline is in conflict with a K-12 educational system founded in White supremacy. Additionally, the legislative struggle over whether or not to include Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement coupled with the ongoing debates over Ethnic Studies curriculum standards creates a complicated and pressure-filled context for Ethnic Studies teachers to persist.

As a course, Ethnic Studies seeks to engage students with inclusive, although, sometimes troubling histories of those often pushed to the margin of American society. This inclusive narrative holistically counters the traditional or dominant narrative that is reproduced in state education standards and corresponding textbooks. At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the pedagogical tenets unique to Ethnic Studies in teacher preparation are described,

Specifically, the teaching of Ethnic Studies within the classroom requires educators to work with students to learn and practice the following pedagogical tenets: 1) question white supremacist notions of ideological objectivity and neutrality in processes of knowledge construction, 2) move towards anti-essentialist representations of racialized communities, 3) develop and practice a community-grounded praxis in the teaching of content, and 4) foster opportunities for individual empowerment and collective self-determination and social transformation (Fong, 2008).

For students of color, Ethnic Studies classes include curricula that address the knowledge and perspectives of their ethnic or racial group and localized histories and reflect the previously silenced points of view that are “rooted in that group’s lived experiences and intellectual scholarship” (Sleeter, 2011). Put simply, “when students of color see their own experiences, realities, histories, and intellectual frameworks represented in the classroom, they wake up and dive in” (Cuauhtin et al., 2018, p. 1). An example of the pedagogical shift in an Ethnic Studies class is the way that topics of power, narratives, and positionality are taught in a clear and explicit way. In a traditional 11<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History class, the teacher and textbooks might discuss the discovery of the new world before moving into a discussion of the resulting Columbian exchange. However, in an Ethnic Studies classroom, intentional instructional time would be dedicated to the Indigenous Communities who were living in established societies at the time of the invasion by the European settlers. Indigenous Peoples are included in the class as decision makers, resisters, and people with a previously established way of living. These pedagogical shifts work to highlight the multidimensional Indigenous Communities and their ways of life, complicating the dominant traditional narrative that Indigenous peoples were easily exploited by explorers. Highlighting position, power, and hegemonic narratives provides an entry for students to question the dominant narratives sometimes taught to them in social science classrooms and ask who these narratives serve.

In addition to teaching more inclusive history, Ethnic Studies courses have been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement outcomes because of the relevant and meaningful curriculum (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). Relevant curriculum is defined in this context by teachers creating learning experiences that are directly pertinent to the personal goals, interests, or cultural experiences of students and are connected to real-world issues or contexts.

To varying degrees, Ethnic Studies teachers employ the pillars of culturally relevant teaching (academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness) in their classroom practice (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The impact on student outcomes is clear and these positive impacts on student achievement is not limited to student's success in Ethnic Studies classrooms. While there are "limits to the amount of quantitative analyses of large-scale data that explore the impact of Ethnic Studies on academic outcomes" (Cabrera et al., 2014, p. 1089), we do know that on a smaller scale Ethnic Studies courses have significant results on increasing student attendance and completion of classes towards graduation (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011).

At this point, however, there is somewhat limited research on effective pedagogy of Ethnic Studies teachers. In the article, "Towards and Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research," six studies on Ethnic Studies teachers conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s are analyzed. There are significant findings that are discussed about effective Ethnic Studies pedagogy, teachers, and their practices. However, this research is a survey of existing research on these teachers and does not directly engage with Ethnic Studies teachers about their practice (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Additionally, there is research conducted by Sleeter and Zavala (2020) of six teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District. Findings from this research and their expansive knowledge and research in Ethnic Studies resulted in the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies. There are other studies that also address Ethnic Studies teaching such as teacher preparation (Hipolito et al., 2016; Reyes-McGovern & Buenavista, 2016) and professional development (Sacramento, 2019), yet to my knowledge no study addressed multiple Ethnic Studies teachers in different regions in California. A study that spans multiple regions across California gives us an opportunity to examine how regional difference may shape the

implementation of Ethnic Studies, which can serve as a vitally important piece of research as the California Ethnic Studies mandate rolls out over the next few years.

Currently, there is limited and geographically confined research on Ethnic Studies teachers who plan and instruct in high school classrooms on a daily basis. As Ethnic Studies is growing in demand and popularity across the state and Ethnic Studies courses garner more attention with the recent mandate, it is essential that we understand what Ethnic Studies teachers who are established in their practice are grappling with as they prepare daily instruction for Ethnic Studies students. Learning from the variety of Ethnic Studies teachers will support teacher-growth and help to build strong high school Ethnic Studies programs across the state. My research sought to add to the growing body of research focused on Ethnic Studies by capturing where teacher focus and goals are in this moment of racial reckoning and analyzing the overlap or gap that potentially exists with Ethnic Studies pedagogical theory and practice.

### **Statement of the Project**

This study examined Ethnic Studies teacher practices from three different regions across California by utilizing interviews, a short descriptive survey, and document analysis. The findings that emerged from the survey, interview, and document analysis were used to understand and analyze the convergence and divergence between Ethnic Studies theoretical frameworks and Ethnic Studies teaching practice. Additionally, I gathered data regarding opportunities and challenges unique to Ethnic Studies teachers that they are facing in their regional contexts.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways, if at all, do Ethnic Studies teachers' goals and pedagogical practices align with Ethnic Studies' theoretical goals?

2. What conditions enhance or limit the ability of Ethnic Studies teachers to reach the theoretical goals articulated in frameworks for Ethnic Studies teaching?

### **Research Design**

My research was primarily a qualitative study comprised of a short descriptive survey, document analysis, and one-on-one interviews with Ethnic Studies teachers. I chose to centralize practitioner voice in my study in order to triangulate the literature and pedagogy that has been provided by scholars constructing Ethnic Studies theoretical frameworks. Specifically, utilizing the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) I aimed to understand how the goals, instructional choices, and perspectives of Ethnic Studies teachers across California coexist with this theoretical framework.

I obtained 50 survey respondents, received 21 Ethnic Studies syllabi, and conducted 21 interviews with Ethnic Studies teacher participants. The 30-minute interviews allowed me to connect with many teachers. Teachers were recruited from three diverse school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural districts. Recruited teachers taught either semester-long or yearlong Ethnic Studies classes during the 2020-2021 school year. Each of the teachers interviewed had also taught Ethnic Studies in years prior to the 2020-2021 school year. I limited my study participants to teachers who have taught the course for at least a full academic year to ensure that they had a level of fluency and time to think deeply about Ethnic Studies pedagogy and curriculum.

Researching across multiple regions in California provided an opportunity to examine how local context and structures could impact Ethnic Studies teaching. I anticipated that regional difference would play a significant role on the teaching and learning that happened in Ethnic Studies classes due in part to the pressures from the surrounding communities. However, no

notable regional difference was shown in the data. Even so, working across multiple districts allowed my research to catalog the similarities and differences that face Ethnic Studies in various regions, underscoring the important of context when grappling with the implications of my findings.

### **Project Significance**

Recently, California incorporated Ethnic Studies into the high school graduation requirements. This policy was not in place at the time of data collection. It is essential that trained and knowledgeable Ethnic Studies teachers are doing this important work as California expands its Ethnic Studies offerings. Even with the best training possible, there will be differences between the theoretical and ideological Ethnic Studies taught and written about at the university level and the Ethnic Studies teaching that happens in K-12 classrooms. Past scholars have provided recommendations for practice and research-based in theory. My research expands upon this existing scholarship by intentionally focusing on practitioner experience and student goals in order to capture the daily realities that happen in high school Ethnic Studies classrooms.

To my knowledge, the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (Sleeter and Zavala, 2020) have not been utilized in extensive research. I used this theoretical framework as a lens through which I analyzed documents and constructed survey and interview questions. With the findings that I assert from my research, I discuss the elements of Ethnic Studies theory that are salient in high school Ethnic Studies classes and the elements of Ethnic Studies theory that are not present, and I make suggestions on adjustments needed for classroom practice.

The research can be utilized by policy makers to ensure that essential elements are in place for K-12 educational spaces that are developing, expanding, or reshaping their Ethnic Studies programs. For example, in my research, many of the teachers who taught semester-long



courses felt as if they did not have enough time to teach significant content foundational to Ethnic Studies. Determining the length of the class semester or year-long is an important detail in Ethnic Studies programming that has implications for other parts of K-12 structures.

Transformational Ethnic Studies classes are needed as the inclusion of Ethnic Studies continues to grow throughout the state of California. The histories of communities of color must be included to support an inclusive curriculum that are reflective the demographics of California's students. It is imperative that we understand what experienced Ethnic Studies teachers are grappling with in their daily practice. Learning from the variety of established Ethnic Studies teachers across the Golden State will support teacher growth and help to build a strong high school Ethnic Studies program that ensures powerful and inclusive learning opportunities for students.

## **Chapter 2**

### **A Comprehensive Review of Literature on Ethnic Studies**

Ethnic Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary field of study that reprioritizes the contributions and intellectual work of marginalized ethnic or racial groups in the United States in response to curricular eurocentrism (Banks, 1999). Empirical studies have provided strong data on the benefits of Ethnic Studies classes on students with regards to their classroom engagement, increased attendance, and credit completion (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Duncan, 2012; Kisker, 2012). Included in the literature are vast and varied approaches to defining Ethnic Studies and myriad ways of incorporating the content of marginalized histories into the classroom curriculum. In 2017, the State of California put forth a framework that loosely provides guidance for teachers currently teaching Ethnic Studies classes (California Department of Education, 2017). However, absent from the existing theoretical literature and empirical studies is input from the teachers tasked with creating and delivering Ethnic Studies curriculum. To date, there is limited research centered on Ethnic Studies teacher experience, perspectives and goals for student learning. My research analyzed the dynamic multifaceted efforts that are on display daily in Ethnic Studies classrooms throughout California.

This chapter begins with an overview of key terms and definitions that are pertinent in understanding the research on the pedagogy and content found in high school Ethnic Studies classes. First, I define Ethnic Studies in a historic context and discuss the contemporary iteration in a political context. Second, I discuss the theoretical understanding of Ethnic Studies pedagogy. Finally, I argue that research about/on practitioners across the state of California who are ultimately responsible for creating a strong Ethnic Studies education for students is woefully lacking.

## **Ethnic Studies from History to Present**

Ethnic Studies materialized on university campuses in response to the struggle of students of color to gain representation in the curriculum during the Civil Rights Movement era. San Francisco State University (SFSU) opened the first Ethnic Studies department in the United States in 1968 after students, faculty, and community organized for the inclusion of multicultural and anti-racist curricular reform guided by the principles of self-determination and decolonization (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). The Third World Liberation Front coalition connected the work at SFSU and the University of California, Berkeley to progress towards decolonizing education by requiring autonomy, access, and inclusion for faculty and students of color (Umemoto, 1989). Community members insisted on the inclusion of histories that discussed issues of identity, race, power, privilege, and culture (Acuña, 1996; Umemoto, 1989; Woo, 1989). However, the fight for inclusion did not end with the development of cultural history departments on university campuses.

Contemporarily, the political controversy over Ethnic Studies has impacted states' adoption of Ethnic Studies programs (Wang, 2016). Ethnic Studies classes gained national attention in 2010 when the Arizona state legislature passed House Bill 2281, which sought to end the teaching of specific cultural studies classes at the high school level in Arizona. Specifically, House Bill 2281 ended the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District (de los Ríos et al., 2015). House Bill 2281 stated that a school is not allowed to teach courses that advocate for students of a particular ethnic group to coalesce around ethnic solidarity rather than the treatment of students as individuals (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). However, the law was struck down after a seven-year lawsuit brought against the state by a founding teacher in the school district's Mexican American studies program. In 2017, federal Judge A.

Wallace Tashima declared the ban unconstitutional because of the obvious racial animosity that was centered on the enforcement and enactment of the legislation (Depenbrock, 2017). As a consequence of the legislation and judgment, national attention focused on both the pedagogy and curriculum of Ethnic Studies courses taught in high schools.

Some states are proactively including Ethnic Studies classes as part of the state-approved course offerings as a means to engage a more diverse student population. Indiana and Oregon governors have signed into law requirements around the inclusion of Ethnic Studies (Alejo & Lara, 2018). Former California Governor Jerry Brown had the opportunity to include Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement with Assembly Bill 2772, constructed by Assembly member Jose Medina, that received bi-partisan approval. This bill sought to make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement for all California public high schools by the 2023-24 school year (Wang, 2016). Even though Assembly Bill 2772 was vetoed by the California governor, Ethnic Studies gained traction and success at the local levels. With the protests that took place in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, the renewed calls for Ethnic Studies as a state mandated course across California amplified. Ethnic Studies courses are already established graduation requirements in Oakland Unified, San Francisco Unified, Los Angeles Unified, Pico Rivera, and other smaller school districts throughout the state. On October 8, 2021, Governor Gavin Newsome signed AB 101 requiring all public high schools in California to offer an Ethnic Studies class as a requirement for graduation beginning with the class of 2029-2030. Now more than ever, Ethnic Studies courses are being offered in many more school districts and at school sites throughout California (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

### **Theoretical Conception and Definition of Contemporary Ethnic Studies**

Ethnic Studies is a malleable term that has different meanings in different contexts. There are many definitions of what is meant by “Ethnic Studies” leaving the curriculum to localized interpretation of the course throughout the state. The nomenclature, while distinct, has evolved and adapted as Ethnic Studies has moved towards the mainstream. At its core and for the purpose of this dissertation, I use the same definition as articulated in California’s History-Social Sciences Framework (2017), “Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses many subject areas including history, literature, economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science. It emerged to both address content considered missing from traditional curriculum and to encourage critical engagement” (p. 310).

Along with the State of California’s adopted definition of Ethnic Studies, it is also important to note that for this dissertation my research and analysis are limited to public high schools that are subject to California’s education code. For the purpose of this dissertation, the Ethnic Studies that are discussed is a high school Social Science or English courses. Furthermore, the struggle for the legitimization of Ethnic Studies at the high school level is in part due to the work of cultural scholars at the university level and their fight for inclusion which is ongoing (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

In California, the course of study for History-Social Sciences includes Ethnic Studies as a ninth-grade high school social science elective. The Ethnic Studies course is recognized by California’s Board of Education and a curricular framework, although limited in its scope, was completed and unanimously approved by the SBE on March 14, 2021. However, even with the framework and forthcoming model curriculum, there will likely continue to be a wide variation of what teachers teach in Ethnic Studies classes due to persistent local factors and variance in preparation to each the course.

Pedagogically, scholars highlight different, unique elements essential to Ethnic Studies courses (Banks, 1999; Hu-DeHart, 1993; Pérez Huber et al., 2006; Rangel, 2007; Sleeter, 2017). Social action, transformative knowledge, and community action (Sleeter, 2017) have emerged through the research as being vital to effective Ethnic Studies courses. These driving values are all necessary elements in an effective Ethnic Studies class along with a curriculum that centers on the experiences of historically marginalized Americans due to racial and ethnic hierarchies in the United States (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Ethnic Studies intentionally reprioritizes U.S. history to center the histories of communities of color and social activism in opposition to systems of oppression (de los Ríos, 2017). Therefore, as an interdisciplinary, comparative, and multidisciplinary field of inquiry, Ethnic Studies incorporates political, social, economic, cultural experiences, and histories of marginalized ethnic groups thereby asserting validity to the vast histories contained within these communities (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Ethnic Studies pedagogy and curriculum work to build upon students' critical intellectualism, incorporate access points to literacy, promote democratic principles, and demonstrate an understanding of complex histories.

Because Ethnic Studies is often positioned as an elective that is currently without specific standards and curriculum, it is often taught as a survey class that interrogates the complex histories of different communities of color in the United States. Ethnic Studies teachers have a lot of power to shape curriculum in their classes. This professional choice leaves opportunities to be responsive to the local context and communities in the classroom as well as the limited guidance provided by the state. Ethnic Studies is not limited to an in-depth study of one marginalized group's experience in the United States but is often comparative and inclusive in nature. Additionally, as an elective survey course positioned in public high schools, resources are

often scarce (Pérez Huber et al., 2006) which may impact the course in various ways. Some believe that Ethnic Studies is not a serious course because of the focus on student identity, but this viewpoint is limited and fails to understand the importance of making the history relevant to the students enrolled in the course. Ethnic Studies classrooms are intended to be spaces for reflexive, critical, empowered conversations where students help in the construction of classroom content and where teachers acknowledge and build upon student identities and cultural resources (Dee & Penner, 2017). This academically-based curriculum is designed and proven to engage students and improve students' academic performance both within and outside of Ethnic Studies classrooms (de los Ríos, 2017).

Within the literature when seeking a definition of Ethnic Studies, there is a multitude of pedagogy, frameworks, references, and examples of curriculum that include Ethnic Studies content (Sleeter, 2017). Ethnic Studies classes are multifaceted learning environments where the complexities of teaching and learning are engaged. An effective Ethnic Studies teacher draws upon culturally sustaining pedagogy and culturally responsive curriculum in their classrooms to teach Ethnic Studies. Specific pedagogy, theory, and content all are unique and significant elements that constitute Ethnic Studies courses.

### **The Benefits of Ethnic Studies for Students**

As Ethnic Studies grows in popularity – and becomes legislatively endorsed - at the high school level, empirical studies give strong data on the positive effects of Ethnic Studies classes on student academic performance (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Duncan, 2012; Kisker, 2012). Ethnic Studies courses in high schools have been offered as a means of meeting the educational needs of the shifting demographics in the United States. Currently, in California, there are over 6 million students enrolled in public schools (CalEdFacts, 2021). Of these more

than 6 million children, only 23% self-report as white students. Children of color are expected to be the majority of people under 18-years-old in the U.S. by 2023 (de los Ríos et al., 2015).

Scholars have argued that a demographic shift to a majority of students of color should force schools to diversify course offerings and curriculum for students. Classrooms must be seen as spaces where student critical consciousness is cultivated and developed (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011) as a means to fight the opportunity gap and underperformance of students of color in the United States.

Unfortunately, current dropout rates alone are an indicator of the issues facing many students of color in American public schools. While about 14% of white students in public high schools fail to graduate on time, Black and Latinx students have dropout rates of nearly twice that of white students (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). As the population of students of color continues to grow in the U.S., education leaders are trying to interrupt the persistent racialized educational disparities of past generations that await these vulnerable students (Howard, 2010). Incorporating the marginalized communities that are representative of students of color is needed in classroom curriculum and course standards to address the changing demographics in public schools (Noguera, 2012). The expansion of Ethnic Studies curricula is one way to understand how some educational leaders are trying to address the present racialized disparities.

The reality across many schools is that they are “hyper-segregated non-white educational spaces where students are still provided a curriculum and a set of pedagogical practices representative of an ethnically homogenous America that never existed” (de los Ríos et al., 2015, p. 85). Additionally, the social science standards that are taught and learned by all students in required social studies classes are written through a Eurocentric perspective. People of color are referred to in ways considered both “essentialist and additive” (Pérez Huber et al., 2006, p.108).



Students take notice of who is prioritized in their history classrooms (Sleeter, 2017), and Ethnic Studies programs developed as a response to the eurocentrism that marginalizes groups of people and their histories (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). In the struggle for Ethnic Studies, student and community grassroots movements have challenged the existing academic power structure with the belief that centering communities in the curriculum taught to students will benefit of students of color across the nation (Hu-DeHart, 1993).

Many studies have found that as students mature in age, they become more disconnected and bored as school becomes more disconnected from their lived experiences (Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Ochoa, 2007; Wiggan, 2008). Research goes on to state that Ethnic Studies has demonstrated that a culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum, when taught with consistent and appropriate student expectations utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy, has a positive impact on students (Gay, 2013; Sleeter, 2011). Culturally sustaining curriculum, for example, creates an intentional bridge between student knowledge from their home and communities and the classroom. At the same time, rigor and high student expectation is present allowing for student academic engagement (Copenhaver, 2001). Moreover, students learn to distrust school when what is presented in classrooms directly contradicts their lived experiences or what they are taught in their home communities (Epstein, 2009; Kolluri & Young, 2021).

While still limited, research studies on effects of Ethnic Studies classes for students are overwhelmingly positive. In 2017, an influential research study by Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner explored the causal and positive effects of Ethnic Studies courses on student outcomes. Their quantitative study was conducted by using data from three of five high schools that piloted Ethnic Studies curriculum collaboratively constructed by a team of teachers and with district oversight in San Francisco Unified School District (Dee & Penner, 2017).

The results of their study conducted in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) suggests that the sample of ninth-grade students enrolled in Ethnic Studies courses showed statistically significant improvements in their behavior outside of the Ethnic Studies classroom. Additional results included improvements in student grade point average overall, stronger rates of attendance and decreased absenteeism, as well as increased credits earned by the students enrolled in Ethnic Studies courses (Dee & Penner, 2017). However, the work done in Ethnic Studies in SFUSD cannot simply be copied and implemented across the nation to interrupt racialized disparities. Significant influences and variables such as teachers' subject matter knowledge, forethought, planning, and other professional development factors may have contributed to the success of the Ethnic Studies program in SFUSD. While the identified influences contribute to these positive outcomes, the study itself was not focused on the teaching or teachers in the Ethnic Studies classes.

The State of California responded to the possibilities of Ethnic Studies curricula by putting forth a framework and model curriculum that is meant to provide guidance for teachers currently teaching Ethnic Studies classes. With a theoretical basis for Ethnic Studies having been borne out of the struggle for inclusion and a growing body of research on the positive impact of Ethnic Studies for students, still absent from existing empirical research continues to be the perspective of teachers across California who are teaching Ethnic Studies courses. This limitation extends to Ethnic Studies teacher experience and reflection on the circular choices, perspectives and goals that ethnic studies teachers have for their students. My research contributes towards the body of literature by centering teachers across California as the focal point of my research to understand their perspectives and actions.

### **Ethnic Studies Teaching According to the State of California**

One of the few places where Ethnic Studies teachers are directly mentioned is in the History-Social Sciences guiding framework put forth by California's SBE. The state has crafted a smattering of ideas and suggestions of how teachers might organize Ethnic Studies classes and strategies for delivering instruction.

However, central to any Ethnic Studies course is the historic struggle of communities of color, taking into account the intersectionality of identity (gender, class, sexuality, among others), to challenge racism, discrimination, and oppression and interrogate the systems that continue to perpetuate inequality. From a history–social science perspective, students may study the history and culture of a single, historically racialized group in the United States (California Department of Education [CDE], 2017, p. 310).

Notice, the language choice used in the framework is that of suggestion because as an elective class that is not a state-level graduation requirement, the state can provide offerings and ideas, but it cannot mandate any type of course standards. In addition, the working group that created a model Ethnic Studies curriculum did not include implementation guidelines. These structures are in place due in part to passed legislation. Moreover, it is imperative to know and understand what teachers are doing in their classrooms and their goals for the students they interact with daily in order to build the supports necessary to support and implement effective Ethnic Studies teaching.

In the History Social-Sciences framework, teachers are encouraged to organize instruction around a variety of themes connected to race and ethnicity in the United States. These themes include the historical struggle and development of Ethnic Studies at the university level, the social construction of race, the lessons learned from past social movements, the investigation of the history of various ethnic groups in the United States, the influence of the media on identity formation, and more. Also noted in the framework is the importance of personalization, the

guiding principle that individual student history should be included in the classroom curriculum as complementary and dynamically connected to other histories. The framework clearly articulates this idea, “students can also personalize their study by considering how their personal and/or family stories connect to the larger historical narratives and how and why some narratives have been privileged over others” (CDE, 2017, p. 312). It is also suggested that these themes might be taught through a student-centered lens of inquiry. The framework provides some guidance for teachers, but more research is needed to examine the process of how teachers make daily pedagogical and curricular choices in Ethnic Studies courses. If the goal of Ethnic Studies as clearly discussed in the framework is to “empower all students to engage socially and politically and to think critically about the world around them” (p. 310), then it is imperative that we hear from the teachers who guide the process from pedagogical theory into student learning.

Situating Ethnic Studies instruction in the social science course sequence asks for key reflective practices in teachers. As explained in the History-Social Science Framework (2016), “as identity and the use of power are central to Ethnic Studies courses, instructors should demonstrate a willingness to reflect critically on their own perspective and personal histories as well as engage students as co-investigators in the inquiry process” (p. 311). These reflective practices are a key difference in the pedagogy between Ethnic Studies teachers and other history social-science teachers. Teachers interrogating and arriving at an understanding their own positionality in connection to course curriculum is a novel idea that sets Ethnic Studies teachers apart from history social-science teachers. This notion of self-interrogation is another clear pedagogical shift from other History or Social Science courses that is not found in any standards for other state-mandated courses. Given this unique difference in teachers and reflective practices, researching what this means for teachers tasked with teaching Ethnic Studies –

especially those who may not be trained in Ethnic Studies yet needed to meet the demand of the state mandate - seems relevant to the theoretical previously conducted research.

### **Barriers to Effective Ethnic Studies Implementation**

#### **Current Teacher Preparation**

Currently, in California, at least 61% of K-12 public school teachers in California reported that they are white. While only 22.4% of students in California identify as white (CDE, 2021). Increasingly, public-school student demographics show that students will become increasingly more racially different than alike to their teachers (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). This is not to say that white teachers are unable to effectively teach students of color; however, for teachers and students to have unacknowledged different racial and potentially class backgrounds leave students at a disadvantage because of the power structures at play in classroom settings. Unless teachers are actively trying to create classroom spaces centered on equity, inclusion, and asset-based cultural understandings, classrooms and schools easily fall prey to the legacy of inequality in education in the United States (Howard, 2010).

A commonly held adage is that teachers teach similarly to the ways in which they were taught (Oleson & Hora, 2014). This notion is slow to evolve. Many teachers enter the teaching profession because they themselves did well in school and because of their success in systems rooted in white, middle-class norms that are unjust and perpetuate inequalities (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Teacher dispositions enmeshed in dominant cultural norms will do little to offset the antiquated and Eurocentric standards taught in California. For example, History–Social Science content standards have not been revised since 1998 (Klingensmith & Geeting, 1998) and are not representative of the home communities for public school students. Static

standards that prioritize the European immigrant experience as the root of national identity in a rapidly changing America will not produce equitable outcomes for students of color.

Teachers need training to meet all of the ways in which students are diverse. It is not enough to adopt an Ethnic Studies curriculum without focusing on pedagogy. James Banks (1991) offers goals and strategies for teachers developing Ethnic Studies courses. He states:

To function effectively within multicultural classrooms, teachers need at least three major kinds of knowledge: 1) social science knowledge about their societies and about the diverse cultural and ethnic groups which comprise them; 2) pedagogical knowledge, which can help them to make effective instructional decisions and to become skillful in the classroom; and 3) subject-matter content knowledge (p. 136).

The focus on these unique types of knowledge broadens teachers' preconceived notions of knowledge. When these types of knowledge can be combined with the ARC (access, relevance, and community) of a pedagogically sound Ethnic Studies course, we can expect to see student academic achievement, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Furthermore, teachers play an important role in equity pedagogy (Ruiz & Cantú, 2013). For example, explicitly discussing the construction of knowledge is a paradigm shift for some teachers that allows entry into a larger conversation about the different types of knowledge that students are bringing with them into the classroom. Well-prepared teachers build on students' diverse knowledge and value the various types of knowledge students have upon entrance to the classroom.

Unfortunately, some teachers who are in the position of teaching Ethnic Studies courses have not had the opportunity to obtain the needed content knowledge nor the pedagogical supports necessary in their pre-service preparation (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Few have

had the opportunity like the teachers in SFUSD to work in collaboration with peers and professors to craft curriculum. Without proper preparation to teach Ethnic Studies, pre-service and credentialed teachers may have a limited understanding of anti-bias and anti-racist approaches to teaching and lack the skills to educate diverse students (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Teacher preparation programs, in themselves, may prioritize the traditional hegemonic elements of education and the role of teachers within that system rather than viewing education as a means of transformation (Guillén et al., 2016). Teachers who have limited Ethnic Studies pedagogical knowledge may unknowingly work against essential elements of effective Ethnic Studies classes therefore limiting the potential transformational impact of the class. It is important to note that because teacher experience has not been well documented in research, it is impossible to know how many teachers are currently in this situation. My research seeks to access Ethnic Studies teacher experience in part to address the absence of findings specifically on Ethnic Studies teachers and to potentially utilize their wisdom to improve practice.

Intentional preparation is needed for teachers who will teach Ethnic Studies classes. Currently, in the state of California, social studies teachers must pass five performance assessments to earn a secondary social science credential. The subject matter of the test reinforces the dominant narrative that is pervasively taught in schools (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Ethnic Studies is not a domain that teachers are responsible for knowing nor is there any requirement for teachers to have any type of critical understanding of racism, classism, or historical marginalization of communities of color to teach the course. Currently, teachers are not required at any level (state, district, etc.) to have any actual content knowledge of Ethnic Studies to teach the subject (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). A key aspect of teaching Ethnic Studies is elevating hidden histories and silences voices of marginalized communities. Understanding

current Ethnic Studies teachers' preparation and the rationale underlying their curricular choices is an essential element of necessary research on Ethnic Studies in order to predict the success of an Ethnic Studies class. It is important to understand how teachers are able to bridge this disconnect between teacher preparation and the necessary content knowledge for teaching Ethnic Studies.

### **Curricular Choices of Teachers**

Daily Ethnic Studies teachers make curricular choices of what and how to teach in Ethnic Studies classrooms. Curriculum operates as a “layered narrative” (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020, p. 24) where explicit messages and perspectives are brought into classrooms through instructional materials. Often teachers, especially those new to the profession, rely on textbooks to support their instruction. For a variety of reasons including the novelty of Ethnic Studies, subject-specific textbooks are not readily available or may not support the type of counternarratives that are to be prioritized in Ethnic Studies classrooms (Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Kauffmann et al., 2002; Sleeter, 2017). As teachers mature in the profession, they are less reliant on textbooks and are able to utilize a large variety of instructional materials to convey unit enduring understandings (Sleeter, 2017). An essential element of my research was to understand and analyze how teachers manage to teach an Ethnic Studies course without clear guidance and a dearth of curricular materials on a continuous basis.

Curriculum is only an element of an effective Ethnic Studies class. For Ethnic Studies classrooms to be places of inclusion for students of color, culturally responsive teaching, a central element of Ethnic Studies instruction (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), must be present. As an effective pedagogical tool, culturally relevant pedagogy has not been taught in some teacher education programs and promoted by scholars and practitioners as an effective means of reaching and teaching students of diverse backgrounds. However, there are numerous studies that



discuss the challenges of implementation of multicultural education or culturally responsive teaching in preservice and in-service teachers' classroom pedagogy (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Sleeter et al., 2004). Theoretically, these teachers have significant support of culturally relevant teaching implementation at this time in their teaching career (Gay, 2002). Of these studies focusing on culturally relevant teaching, no one has examined teachers' implementation of culturally relevant teaching or curricular decision making specifically in Ethnic Studies. Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical hallmark in Ethnic Studies courses (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). My research contributed to the field by analyzing the intersection where theory meets practice and decisions made by Ethnic Studies teachers.

### **Limited Teacher Voice in Research**

Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline originated in institutions of higher education. In the past 10 years, we have seen an increase in teaching Ethnic Studies at other levels of K-12 schooling. Experts and historians continue to publish research about Ethnic Studies pedagogy (Pérez Huber et al., 2006; Sleeter, 2017), programs (de los Ríos, 2017) and theoretical frameworks (Cuauhtin et al., 2018). Increasingly, researchers are studying the impact of Ethnic Studies on students (Dee & Penner, 2017) and legislators and policymakers in some states are opting for the inclusion of Ethnic Studies in courses of study (Cuauhtin et al., 2018). To date, there continue to be limited studies published centered on high school Ethnic Studies teachers within a contemporary iteration of comparative Ethnic Studies (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Certain studies interrogate the connection between civic action and Ethnic Studies (Kwon & de los Ríos, 2019), programs in general (Cabrera et al., 2014), and professional development (Sacramento, 2019). However, to my knowledge, there are no studies published that utilize the wisdom of Ethnic Studies teachers and seek to understand their pedagogical approach of teaching Ethnic

Studies classes across California. Understanding Ethnic Studies practices in K-12 classrooms is important as Ethnic Studies programs increase across the state. Course authenticity and honoring the key components of Ethnic Studies are important to know and understand. Researchers have defined elements of effective Ethnic Studies high school classes (Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter 2011), but many have not engaged teachers to understand their conception and self-identified challenges to teaching Ethnic Studies. Ethnic Studies teacher training, experiences, perceptions, and choices play a key role in defining and shaping Ethnic Studies on high school campuses. My research centered a very specific sample of Ethnic Studies teachers in different regions of California, who have completed at least a full year of teaching Ethnic Studies so that they were able to reflect on their experiences as Ethnic Studies teachers. As policymakers and school districts make investments into Ethnic Studies programs, it is essential we understand what choices teachers are currently making in order to learn and make effective choices and policies moving forward.

### **Theoretical Framework for Research**

My research study is guided by a theoretical framework drawn from multiple sources of theoretical understandings that inform Ethnic Studies teacher practice: the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020); critical pedagogy; culturally sustaining pedagogy; and decolonialism.

The Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies encompasses significant elements of critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy and decolonialism frameworks. Critical pedagogy, a theoretical framework conceptualized by Paulo Freire (1970), is in opposition to the traditional banking method of education where teachers deliver knowledge and students are passive recipients. Critical pedagogy views teaching as a political act and central to it is the notion that people can

transform society and the work for a better place. Furthermore, the educational system along with critical pedagogy is not a-political, but rather all individuals and the system of schooling itself have biases that must be acknowledged (Freire, 1970).

Critical pedagogy theory is deeply connected to Ethnic Studies in its intention to acknowledge the political elements of teaching and the importance of teaching be connected to be social change. In the essay “A Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin stated that education is “to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions... [to] ask questions” (1963, p. 42). Training students to ask questions of the curriculum taught and the school system itself is a political act. Furthermore, Freire stated, “Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence” (1970, p.73). The connotation that is easily derived from these statements is centered on the unyielding importance of education and the embedded political act of school teaching students to think for themselves. The theory of critical pedagogy is the foundation of an essential element of an effective Ethnic Studies classroom, seeing students as intellectuals focused on the assets they bring into the classroom.

Building off of critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy is responsive to the understanding that effective teaching in diverse classroom settings means that teachers must intentionally draw from the cultural backgrounds of their students in connection to teaching content (Paris, 2012). For example, when teaching in diverse settings like Los Angeles, effective Ethnic Studies teachers would approach teaching by reflecting the complexity of society and by instructing content through an intersectional lens or transdisciplinary approach. These complex approaches to curriculum honor the cultural and community knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom. Rather than teaching about racism as a unique form of oppression, a

transdisciplinary approach would be to teach about racism as connected to all other forms of oppression (Dee & Penner, 2017). This curricular approach would be taken with the warning of not seeking to understand the “multiple identities and knowledges of people of color without essentializing their various experiences” (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004, p. 246). This intentional curricular connection between subject matter and students is an embedded element in the Ethnic Studies class description authored by the State of California’s Board of Education.

Finally, decolonialism, a purposeful building knowledge outside of the established “matrix of colonialism” (Mignolo, 2011), provided a critical lens to orient the study. From the western perspective, knowledge is often thought of as impartial or comprehensive. The result is that knowledge is therefore not interrogated. As a discipline, Ethnic Studies demands that this knowledge be questioned (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) and the answer be made transparent for youth. The described theoretical framework was used to further analyze the pedagogy of Ethnic Studies teachers as my research sought to elevate their perspectives and experiences as I interpreted their pedagogical and curricular choices.

Woven together, these frameworks provided a strong foundation for my research about Ethnic Studies teaching. Critical pedagogy sets the foundation of teaching as a political act but leaves out the actual strategies and actions that teachers need to employ in their classrooms, interacting with students. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is not as attuned to the powers of colonialism discussed in the theory of decolonialism, yet it offers guidance daily classroom strategies and teacher moves. These frameworks focus on key elements in the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies. Hence these theories together envision and encapsulate a holistic idea of an Ethnic Studies teacher.

## **Conclusion**

A powerful Ethnic Studies curriculum is rooted in liberatory practices, which are shown to have a positive academic impact on students of color. This literature review grounded my proposed research in the history of Ethnic Studies in the K-12 classroom in California and was centered on Ethnic Studies teaching in order to support student achievement. Research has continued to demonstrate the complexities of theory and the significant impact that Ethnic Studies classes have on student outcomes. For example, effective Ethnic Studies classrooms are spaces where reflective, critical empowering conversations happen for students. In these classroom spaces, essential learning happens as students grow in their sense of self. However, understanding the work of teachers in the classrooms across California is an element overlooked in existing work. My research analyzed the elements of Ethnic Studies theory that are salient in high school Ethnic Studies classes while deciphering what elements of Ethnic Studies theory are absent. By centering my multiregional research on teacher experiences and perspectives, I contributed worthy and timely research that captured the successes and challenges of Ethnic Studies teachers in the contemporary Ethnic Studies classroom.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Introduction**

Ethnic Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary field of study that reprioritizes the contributions and intellectual work of marginalized ethnic or racial groups in the United States in response to curricular eurocentrism (Banks, 1999). Many scholars have theorized that “social action, transformative knowledge, and community action” are essential in effective Ethnic Studies teaching (Sleeter, 2017, p. 8). Empirical studies have provided strong data on the positive effects of Ethnic Studies classes on students (Cabrera et al., 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Stovall, 2007; Sleeter, 2011; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Included in the literature are vast and varied approaches to defining Ethnic Studies as well as incorporating the content of marginalized histories into the classroom curriculum. In 2021, the State of California put forth a model curriculum that is meant to provide guidance for teachers currently teaching Ethnic Studies and those who will in the future. However, currently, there is limited research centered on the Ethnic Studies teacher perspective, experiences, and reflection on their goals for these Ethnic Studies classes. My research sought to amplify the realities of Ethnic Studies teachers by sharing their perspectives on goals, opportunities, and challenges that they contend with daily in their classrooms. Thus, my research explored the relationship between Ethnic Studies theory and Ethnic Studies practice and was guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do Ethnic Studies teachers’ goals and pedagogical practices align with Ethnic Studies’ theoretical goals?
2. What conditions enhance or limit the ability of Ethnic Studies teachers to reach the theoretical goals articulated in frameworks for Ethnic Studies teaching?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Although the study utilized multiple methods, including a survey, it primarily approached the research questions from a qualitative methodology paradigm. Because this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between Ethnic Studies theory and practice, a qualitative approach allowed me to attain a holistic understanding of teacher perspective. As a collective knowledge continues to grow around Ethnic Studies, qualitative research is preferable because of its exploratory and inductive nature (Maxwell, 2013). My research process included three steps: survey, document analysis, and interview. The bulk of my data derived from one-on-one interviews using the technological platform Zoom because of the unique limitations of COVID-19. At the conclusion of the survey, teachers could optionally submit their class syllabus devoid of any identifying markers, as well as select an option to participate in a short interview. The purpose of the interview was to pose questions that built upon the questions asked in the survey. Interview questions were poised to gain an understanding of goals that Ethnic Studies teachers have for their students and for their lesson planning and teaching processes. Together, combining survey, interviews, and document analysis allowed me to triangulate the data and grasp a holistic understanding of the manifold teaching and learning decisions that Ethnic Studies teachers make every day (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

While surveys alone might also capture a portion of the information that I hoped to attain in my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), surveys were somewhat limited in their deductive nature and therefore restricted in their ability to be responsive at the moment and probe deeper into the information shared by teachers (Maxwell, 2013). An isolated survey would not be sufficient because of the novelty of the field and the limited number of Ethnic Studies teachers, and thus the realistic need for a non-probability sampling strategy; therefore, survey results may not be generalizable. Interviews also garner meaning and interpretation of phenomena in ways

specifically tailored to the particular context of the teacher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Surveys do not always allow for that richness, yet when coupled with other qualitative methods, surveys can widen the breadth of information gathered, increasing the geographic span and number of teachers that my research reached. Because there is limited scholarship about Ethnic Studies teacher perspective and experience, I determined surveys, document analysis, and interviews together were the best methods of data collection to provide a general data, strong triangulation, and findings in order to build future quantitative efforts.

## **Methods**

### **Site and Population**

I researched three specific sites that were purposefully selected in various geographic regions in California to provide an array of Ethnic Studies teacher experience. One important element of Ethnic Studies is the potential to engage in histories that are locally oriented. Working with districts in differing geographic locations allowed me to understand how Ethnic Studies teachers addressed their local community context in their classrooms. These teachers are uniquely positioned to share information and knowledge with my study because they are the experts in their Ethnic Studies focus, and this position affords them the opportunity to provide needed answers to my research questions (Maxwell, 2013). The context of the selected - Urban School District, Suburban School District, and Rural School District - were representative of the opportunities and issues commonly found in these K-12 settings.

The three school districts consisted of multiple high schools that offer Ethnic Studies classes taught by numerous teachers at each site. By selecting districts that can be described as suburban, rural, and urban, I had access to a sizeable population of teachers and obtained a wide variation of perspectives on teaching Ethnic Studies. Because the sample sought maximum



variation, the study has the potential to be more applicable for readers and their contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As one of the largest school districts in California, Urban School District has officially offered a semester long Ethnic Studies class across the district for roughly five years. Because of its influence, size and geographic reach, Urban School District is a very significant district to study. Regarding racial or ethnic identification, the most recent census of Urban District's students indicated that 74.2% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 10.2% as white, 7.6% as African American, 3.6% as Asian, 1.9% as Filipino, 1.6% as two or more races, 0.2% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and the remaining 0.5% of the student population did not specify their racial or ethnic makeup (Data Quest, 2021).

In Urban School District, the Ethnic Studies curriculum that is widely taught was created collaboratively and is focused on four historically marginalized groups that have a sizeable population in California. Sometimes discussed in Ethnic Studies circles as the Core Four, the curriculum is broken into units discuss the history of African Americans, American Indians, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. Versions of this curriculum are taught in nearly 100 schools across the district, and there is a district level-program coordinator who supports Ethnic Studies teaching and professional development. Because Urban School District has not faced a lot of outside critique around the teaching of Ethnic Studies, they have not needed to use up valuable resources on defending Ethnic Studies, but rather have been able to use these resources to better the teaching of the subject (Cohen, 2019).

Suburban School District is a midsized school district in Northern California. The median home price in the surrounding neighborhood is just under \$1.5 million, and the neighborhood has many of the private and public attributes that one would associate with a suburban neighborhood.

The district is unique in a few distinct ways that made it desirable for my study. Suburban School District allows a small number of students who live in a neighboring less affluent city, East Palo Alto, to enroll and attend school in the district. East Palo Alto has historically been under resourced and continues to be a city that has the other widely known indicators that we associate with urban neighborhoods. Since East Palo Alto does not have a public high school in the district, the surrounding districts school the kids. The students who bus in from East Palo Alto help to increase racial diversity in Suburban School District. Suburban School District's student body is made up of just over 9,700 students. Demographically speaking, the Hispanic and Latino students make up the largest part of student enrollment across the district at 31.8%. Additionally, 27.5% self-reported as white, 22% Asian, 10.1% two or more races, 5.2% Filipino, 1.9% Pacific Islander, 0.8% African American, and 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native (Data Quest, 2021). This very diverse student body potentially offers a lot of histories and perspectives to include in the Ethnic Studies curriculum. A few years ago, the staff at Suburban School District focused on race and equity as a topic of their professional development and introduced a 9<sup>th</sup> grade elective Ethnic Studies class on their high school campuses.

Because Ethnic Studies was born out of a political struggle people often think of it being taught by those who are close to that struggle for inclusion and curricular justice. But as Ethnic Studies grows, more and more teachers who are not intimately connected with historically marginalized communities will be called on to teach Ethnic Studies. This was the case with some of the teachers teaching Ethnic Studies in Suburban School District. As this will most likely be the case in several other school districts across California as the Ethnic Studies mandate rolls out, the perspectives of teachers who have been trained in Ethnic Studies content and curriculum is also needed.

Rural School District is located in the Inland Empire (IE) of Southern California. The school district serves more than 17,000 students. Riverside is the largest city in the county, but the Rural School District is far removed from this city center. The IE has a unique political relationship with Ethnic Studies as the California. Assembly member Jose Medina, a teacher of Ethnic Studies in Riverside County for many years, sponsored the legislation (Assembly Bill 331) calling for Ethnic Studies to be a graduation requirement for all high school students across the state of California. The Rural School District also has a well-established Ethnic Studies program, requiring students to take Ethnic Studies classes for over five years, and it goes beyond stand-alone Ethnic Studies elective classes. Emerged from a collective struggle by teachers and members in the local community to establish and maintain Ethnic Studies, there are now many established classes in different subject areas that are taught through the lens of Ethnic Studies in Rural School District.

Additionally, my interest in this district is the student demographic data. Rural School District is the least diverse of the three study sites. The student population is largely homogeneous with Latinx students making up about 97.9% of the enrolled student population (ed-data, 2021). White students make up 1% of the students, American Indian or Alaska Native students 0.5%, and African American students, students who indicated Two or More Races, and Non-Reporting students each make up 0.2% of the 17,539 enrolled students in the district (Data quest, 2021). The muted ethnic and racial diversity of this district offered an interesting perspective of how teachers teach about the histories of marginalized groups that have limited or no representation in their student body.

Ethnic Studies interrogates race while being responsive to a localized context, therefore it was important to reflect upon the school's diversity in sample selection. Suburban School

District has a district ethnic diversity score of 55 out of a potential 100; however, no school district obtains a score of over 76. Suburban School District is the most diverse of all of the districts studied. The Ethnic Diversity Score is a way to measure how evenly distributed the students are in the racial and ethnic make-up of a student body as reported to the California Department of Education. To put this one data point in context, Rural School District has a district score of 2 (not very diverse student body), while Urban School District has a score of 24 (ed-data, 2021). I was interested to know how teachers in these very unique settings define and respond to the work of teaching Ethnic Studies given these different demographic contexts and the impact that location and student population might have on the articulated goals of the course. A high school Ethnic Studies course is essentially my dependent variable, while the settings are vastly different, thus lending to their selection as ideal independent variables. a challenge to ensuring the variation of my sample was to get a representative/balanced/proportional number of interviewees from each district.

I received IRB approval to research and send my recruitment survey to all of the Ethnic Studies teachers in the three school districts in 2020. I followed each districts' regulations and UCLA's IRB process, and the survey was sent out in early Fall. The survey was an essential recruitment tool because I did not have established personal relationships with any of the districts prior to selecting the district as a research site. The survey was a crucial part of the recruitment process as the unique impact of COVID-19 made all communication formal, intentional, and electronic. Had this been a non-COVID year, perhaps I could have been out at school sites and met Ethnic Studies teachers informally. But with the impact of COVID, the recruitment survey was a key way to connect with Ethnic Studies teachers in different districts across California.

The target population across the three districts for this study was secondary Ethnic Studies teachers. I contacted school administrators, district administrators, and Social Sciences and English department chairs at each high school, as well as following IRB processes to survey Ethnic Studies teachers and recruit them to be interviewed in my study. Some teachers decided to participate in an interview, while others decided not to continue after completing the survey. For teachers who did not want to be interviewed but wanted to contribute more to the study, I had an option for them to remove identifying markers from their class syllabus and submit it for me to be able to analyze.

### **Recruitment and Data Collection Methods**

To best address my research questions, data collection for this study took place in three parts: survey, interviews, document analysis. The brief anonymous recruitment survey took around 10 minutes to complete and was the first step of the research process. The recruitment survey that was a mix of demographic questions, open-response questions, and ranking questions. At the conclusion of the recruitment survey, I offered participants a place to include their Ethnic Studies course syllabus and contact information if they wanted to participate in an interview. I hoped that they would take the offer to be contacted for the ensuing interview where I was able to delve more deeply into their Ethnic Studies goals, pedagogy, and experiences in a semi-structured interview protocol.

In seeking to understand teachers' goals for their students across California, my research process began with a recruitment survey that gathered descriptive data and provided teachers with the option to submit their Ethnic Studies course syllabus as well as their contact information if they would like to participate in an interview. The recruitment survey was sent to district level leads of secondary English, Social Studies, or Ethnic Studies curricular divisions. Urban School

District had a district level administrator send out the recruitment email and survey to all of the teachers who were listed in their master schedule database as currently teaching Ethnic Studies in 2020. Suburban School District and Rural School District allowed me to send out the recruitment email and survey to teachers who were currently teaching Ethnic Studies classes or classes that were deemed to meet the Ethnic Studies graduation requirement. After the initial recruitment email and survey link was sent to all identified teachers, I worked with the district administrator or resent the survey myself in a reminder email after a period of two weeks.

### **Recruitment Survey**

I collected 50 survey responses, obtained 21 Ethnic Studies syllabi, and conducted 21 interviews with Ethnic Studies teacher participants. Across the three school districts, the overall survey response rate was roughly 28%. In Suburban School District, the rate was 60% ( $n = 9$ ), in Urban District the rate was 23% ( $n = 31$ ), and in the Rural District the response rate was 33% ( $n = 10$ ). The total years of teaching experience of survey respondents are indicated in Table 1. Study participants were limited to teachers who had completed at least one full school year of teaching Ethnic Studies to ensure that they had some amount of time to think deeply about Ethnic Studies pedagogy and curriculum. The identified teachers also needed to be currently teaching a semester or year-long Ethnic Studies course during the 2020-2021 school year.

**Table 1**

#### ***Survey Sample***

	% teaching less than 3 years	% teaching 3-5 years	% teaching 6-10 years	% teaching 11 or more years
Urban (N=31)	16%	13%	16%	55%
Suburban (N=9)	0%	11%	11%	78%
Rural (N=10)	0%	30%	30%	40%

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Note. The percentages of years teaching is total years in the classroom, these percentages are not limited to years teaching Ethnic Studies.

The recruitment survey was my first point of contact with the study participants. The interviews and syllabi that were obtained for the study were done so through the survey. Of those 50 survey respondents, 26 Ethnic Studies teachers provided their contact information for an interview. Unfortunately, five teachers who provided their contact information for an interview did not respond to numerous email attempts to schedule the interview, therefore I was able to complete the interviews with 21 Ethnic Studies teachers. Interestingly, 17 of the 21 teachers who offered their contact information for the interview also provided their syllabi for analysis. 4 teachers who completed the survey opted to offer their Ethnic Studies course syllabus but did not submit contact information for an interview.

The scholarly pedagogy that I utilized is authored by Sleeter and Zavala (2020). They compiled their years of research and publications into seven Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies drawing from theory and practice. The questions that I asked in the interviews and survey served as a lens to analyze the syllabi that I collected from Ethnic Studies teachers. The three data collection strategies illuminated areas for further discussion of the converging themes and areas of differentiation between theory and practice.

I compiled the recruitment survey results into a spreadsheet that enabled me to analyze patterns, trends, and outliers. The final part of the survey asked teachers to optionally include their course syllabus without identifying markers and provided a space to voluntarily participate in a follow-up interview.

## **Interviews**

All of the interviews conducted were semi-structured with intentional space allotted for in the moment follow-up questions. The interview questions focused on expanding on the questions asked in the survey and served as a means of addressing the research questions pertaining to curricular choice, challenges, and practices that teachers employ in the Ethnic Studies classes. My intention was to make my interactions with participants feel less like a formal question and answer interview and more like an open-ended conversation. The purpose of these questions was to identify the possible gaps or insecurities in knowledge or practice with which they were grappling. From their personal assessment of their own strengths and growth areas and the structures of their schools, my research amplified the experiences and curricular choices of these selected Ethnic Studies teachers. The sessions were recorded on Zoom so that they could be transcribed and the data could be coded and analyzed.

I sent a follow-up email to each interviewee to thank them for their time and participation. I asked if they have had any additional thoughts about the questions asked since the conclusion of the interview and included a small gift card to a local bookstore as a thank you. I provided this additional opportunity for reflection by teachers (if they wanted to engage in it) as a means of elaboration on something that they might have said during the interview after its conclusion. I intended for my interview sequence to be a systematic data collection technique (Merriam, 2016).



**Table 2*****Interview Sample***

Teacher Pseudonym	District Geographic Profile	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Number of Years Teaching	Number of Years Teaching Ethnic Studies	Ethnic Studies Course Length	Grade Level Taught in Course
Sarah	Urban	Female	White	6-10 years	3-5 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Mireya	Urban	Female	Indigenous/ Mexican	3-5 years	3-5 years	Year	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade and 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Mixed
Anthony	Urban	Male	Black	11 or more years	1-2 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> /10 <sup>th</sup> /11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Levels
Henry	Urban	Male	Black	11 or more years	11 or more years	Semester	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Zulema	Urban	Female	No Response	11 or more years	3-5 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Mixed
Pablo	Urban	Male	Indigenous/ Chicano	11 or more years	11 or more years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
April	Urban	Female	Black	11 or more years	3-5 years	Semester	11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Mixed
Molly	Urban	Female	White	11 or more years	6-10 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Esteban	Urban	Male	No Response	1-2 years	1-2 years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Mixed
Nadia	Urban	Female	Mexican- American	11 or more years	3-5 years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Mariana	Urban	Female	Latinx	3-5 years	3-5 years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Lexi	Suburban	Female	White	6-10 years	1-2 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade

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Steven	Suburban	Male	White	11 or more years	1-2 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Jennifer	Suburban	Female	Filipina-American	11 or more years	3-5 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Megan	Suburban	Female	White	11 or more years	1-2 years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Francisco	Rural	Male	No Response	11 or more years	11 or more years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade/11 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Vanessa	Rural	Female	Chicana	3-5 years	6-10 years		
Rebecca	Rural	Female	Latina	6-10 years	1-2 years	Year	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Andrew	Rural	Male	White	11 or more years	3-5 years	Year	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Anthony	Rural	Male	Chicano	11 or more years	3-5 Years	Semester	9 <sup>th</sup> /10 <sup>th</sup> /11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Levels
Pedro	Rural	Male	Indigenous/ Chicano	11 or more years	3-5 Years	Year	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade

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## **Document Analysis**

A thorough document analysis of submitted class syllabi was another method of data collection. Document analysis can be an effective way to corroborate what the teacher says in their interview (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). In trying to grasp a holistic view of Ethnic Studies courses and Ethnic Studies teachers, it was important that my research methodology extended beyond the subjective view of the individual being interviewed. Document analysis allowed me to set an interviewees' thoughts and words into context, thereby alleviating the methodological individualism sometimes associated with interviews (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). The research process of survey, interview, and document analysis were all intended to obtain a more complete understanding of an Ethnic Studies teachers context, motivations, and actions.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

### **Surveys**

Analysis occurred simultaneously as the data was being gathered. Close-ended survey questions were analyzed descriptively to show proportions and seek out commonalities as well as key differences. Data from the open-ended survey questions, syllabus analysis, and interviews were all analyzed through categorizing strategies and inductive and deductive coding methods where data was organized into broad themes. I documented the themes through the use of memos and built a categorical coding matrix capturing each survey participant's responses.

The surveys provided an abundance of information. All of the information gathered in the survey was analyzed, and some of the questions and responses are including in the findings. The information included in the findings was specifically pertinent to answering the research questions. Other information for example, teacher demographic data, is important but does not pertain to posed research questions and therefore was not included.

## **Interviews**

I listened to and obtain a transcription of interviews from Rev.com. I arrived at findings from deductive codes from the interview questions, memos, and in-vivo coding. This process allowed me to highlight patterns in goals that Ethnic Studies teachers stated goals and other shared perspectives. After I completed an interview, I created memos where I wrote questions, observations, and wonderings throughout the process. From these memos, I began to develop tentative ideas about relationships and categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The emergent ideas along with my research questions guided subsequent interviews. Initially, I used in-vivo open coding to create categories based on my data to classify, summarize, and organize (Maxwell, 2013). Using the program Quirkos, I moved through an inductive and deductive round of coding. I began the coding process with inductive coding to construct a codebook. Then, I reread all of the interviews using a deductive coding structure based on the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies. In essence, my codebook ensured that no important information was missed and my data analysis would be fruitful. As I amassed more and more data, some categories remained while others were revised or eliminated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Document Analysis**

To analyze the Ethnic Studies course syllabus, I used the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) as a conceptual framework. The data derived from this analysis identified the areas of reinforcement or discrepancy between Ethnic Studies expressed teacher goals evident in the course syllabi and the tenets of effective Ethnic Studies courses. The syllabi obtained through the survey served as auxiliary documents that were supplemental to the data gathered from the survey and in interviews. Data analysis of the obtained syllabi were coded and cataloged using both inductive and deductive analysis methods. Sleeter and Zavala's hallmarks

also served as the conceptual framework for the deductive coding framework, while inductive codes emerged from the data.

The text of the document was scrutinized and interpreted in order to elicit meaning and to gain a depth of understanding resulting in empirical knowledge development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Moreover, Bowen (2009) notes that the process of document analysis is iterative and combines notions of both content and thematic analysis. Iteration and theme analysis are possible because documents are stable and provide “broad coverage” of a phenomenon. Ethnic Studies course syllabi represent significant discussions about teaching and learning that guide choices in the classroom. In trying to understand what students learn in Ethnic Studies classes, centering the analysis on the syllabus is important as a central document that is available to different stakeholders and serves as a means of communication about the priorities of the class. I considered Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) overview of document analysis as a guide for how I conducted the analysis that was based on Sleeter and Zavala’s Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (2020). Again, inductive and deductive coding helped to categorize the themes and patterns as well as memos that I wrote as I analyzed the documents.

The survey, interview, and document analysis all resulted in an abundance of material to analyze. This data highlighted patterns across all three sources of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of the data to ensure validity and create rich and layered analysis. (Patton, 1999).

### **Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness**

In terms of credibility, one of the largest issues presented by my research study was reactivity, or how I may be seen by participants. As an Ethnic Studies teacher, I was at an advantage because I have firsthand knowledge of the success and challenges of teaching Ethnic

Studies. Teachers may have felt like they could relate to me because we do similar work. However, it can sometimes take a while to build trust with teachers as I was an outsider with no strong connections to any of the sites where I researched. I was also aware that I needed to do significant follow up by making connections to department chairs and other teachers at school sites to find respondents to my survey. I was also acutely aware that I needed to ensure that participation in my study was voluntary and none of the information obtained during the research would breach confidentiality. As an outside researcher, my objectivity was bolstered by my employment in another district. Since Zoom being such an exhausting tool for teachers during the pandemic, keeping the interviews to agreed upon time was essential. As I sought to protect the anonymity of my research participants, these structures allowed educators to engage in interviews without fear of site-based repercussions.

A second potential issue was my own personal bias towards the transformative powers of Ethnic Studies. As an undergraduate, I majored in Ethnic Studies, and I currently teach Ethnic Studies. I was very familiar with a lot of the success and challenges that my participants shared in interviews. I focused on being natural and refrained from sharing my own personal feelings in response to their responses in the interviews. I tried to be diligent and not allow my opinions to impact the interview or the analysis of my data. One way I did this was by ensuring that my data and analysis was rich with quotes that allowed teachers to share their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in response to my questions. My coding process was firmly in place to ensure systematic data collection. Multiple data types that I used allowed for triangulation. Source information was derived from multiple interviews spread over time with opportunities to circle back to information shared in interviews. The multiple methods of survey, document analysis, and

interviews together provided the variety of sources and methods helped to mitigate the challenges and ensured that I had trustworthy data and findings.

I wanted teachers to be able to be forthcoming with information about their successes and challenges as Ethnic Studies teachers, yet my positionality as an experienced Ethnic Studies teacher could be seen as intimidating, especially for less experienced teachers. I did not judge their contributions to my study, but it might have been overwhelming to talk to an expert teacher who is in the same field as you. Thus, I used my positionality as a fellow teacher when appropriate and explained that the intention of this study was to bring teachers' thoughts, definitions, experiences, and behaviors into the existing conversation surrounding Ethnic Studies. The clear discussion of my project's intention helped to build my credibility when assuring teachers that I was engaging with them for informative purposes and not at all in any type of evaluative fashion and everything shared would be kept confidential. I also assured interviewees that there is very limited research on Ethnic Studies teachers, so expansive data is needed. Because I studied Ethnic Studies as an undergraduate and my years of experience teaching the subject, I believe that my status as a high school teacher helped to alleviate potential researcher/researched awkwardness. I also maintained a close connection to the nuances of Ethnic Studies pedagogy and contemporary language choice. For example, when discussing provocative topics in the classroom there are entry points and positionality that empower historically marginalized groups and analyze their agency even through the teaching of traumatic history. I am comfortable with these types of steps towards decolonization because of the personal work that I have done and the active teacher practice that I maintain.

Language is powerful, so being mindful of current trends and terminology in spaces that are trying to disentangle from colonialization further ensured trust with my research subjects. As

a researcher and interviewer, my task was to listen, observe, and probe. Essential to these actions was a relationship-centered on trust so that teachers would be forthcoming with information as well as honest and reflective about the full range of their Ethnic Studies teaching experiences. I also wanted my research to feel supportive of the needs that they articulated as Ethnic Studies teachers. Thus, I asked them to identify needs connected to their Ethnic Studies courses so that I could include this as a section of my dissertation that addresses potential areas for further research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research posed some ethical issues because of the general issues of privacy and potential harm that could ensue because of breach of confidentiality. I asked teachers to discuss success at their school sites as well as challenges. Identifying challenges can sometimes be seen as negative or complaining, rather than as potential for growth. To mitigate this issue, I ensured confidentiality by having interview participants sign an informed consent form and creating measures to protect identifying information. The anonymous nature of the surveys also ensured confidentiality. School sites, as well as participants, were given necessary pseudonyms when necessary. All data was stored on personal and password protected technological devices. At the conclusion of my research, I provided participating district offices, school sites, and teachers with an executive summary of my research and findings that maintained the use of pseudonyms.

### **Study Limitations**

Extracting universal truths from specific classroom contexts will always be incomplete (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Teachers are constantly making choices and decisions for their students and in their classrooms based on a number of elements including relationships, setting, curriculum, etc. By sampling participants from different geographic locations and utilizing



maximum variation, my study intended to highlight processes and realities. From this study we learned how the numerous Ethnic Studies teachers in three distinct districts are navigating the many tensions of being a K-12 teacher with a course that is relatively new for the K-12 setting. We noted their particular contexts in the shaping of their understandings of the course and how to teach it. The intersection of context and teacher reflections revealed processes that exist. However, with all research, there were limitations to interpreting and applying findings. My study faced particular limitations connected to time. The timeframe to identify, secure, and engage research participants was short and hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic. For the sake of expediency, I needed to rely on any teacher who was willing to volunteer to participate in the study, rather than utilizing established criteria of them having taught the course for at least one full school year. Even with these limitations, my study gathered a significant amount of data that contributes to the understanding of the praxis of Ethnic Studies pedagogy, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

### **Conclusion**

The specified research methods of survey, interview, and document analysis provided a comprehensive answer to my research questions. The findings from the research will inform Ethnic Study teacher practice and the systems that these teachers are working within. The research process allowed for a detailed investigation of multiple data sources to elicit a thorough understanding of the goals, choices and perspectives that Ethnic Studies teachers make daily.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Introduction**

Existing research has shown that Ethnic Studies has many positive academic and personal benefits for students (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Similarly, academics have contributed scholarship centered on a theoretical understanding of Ethnic Studies pedagogy and concepts (Banks, 2012; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Recently, Ethnic Studies has gained traction for being taught at the K-12 level as a means to provide students with relevant curriculum that centers marginalized communities in the classroom. Understanding what Ethnic Studies teachers are doing in the K-12 classroom resulting in these strong academic and personal outcomes for students remains the subject of limited research.

In this chapter, I present the findings from my study in response to the research questions that guided my study:

1. In what ways, if at all, do Ethnic Studies teachers' goals and pedagogical practices align with Ethnic Studies' theoretical goals?
2. What conditions enhance or limit the ability of Ethnic Studies teachers to reach the theoretical goals articulated in frameworks for Ethnic Studies teaching?

My research study was guided by theoretical and conceptual frameworks drawn from multiple sources that inform Ethnic Studies teacher practice: Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies; Critical Pedagogy; Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy; and Decolonialism. These frameworks are used to as lenses through which to analyze and understand the data. Struggle was a persistent thread found throughout the data and ties the themes together. One teacher echoed a sentiment

shared by many others: “The struggle for equity, the struggle for equality, the struggle for a just education in our community has been here for a while.”

This chapter begins with findings related to coverage of Hallmarks and then ends with a discussion of the tensions in K-12, including the challenges and benefits of Ethnic Studies, and then concerns about effectiveness. The Ethnic Studies teachers that participated in my study created spaces where all but one of the theoretical Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies were evident in their pedagogy and practices. All of the teacher participants harnessed the benefits and overcame the challenges of teaching Ethnic Studies in part because they had spent time building their criticality through experiences prior to teaching the subject. What follows are the experiences, perspectives, and reflections from Ethnic Studies teachers working to make the powerful learning of Ethnic Studies flourish in classrooms throughout California.

## **Findings**

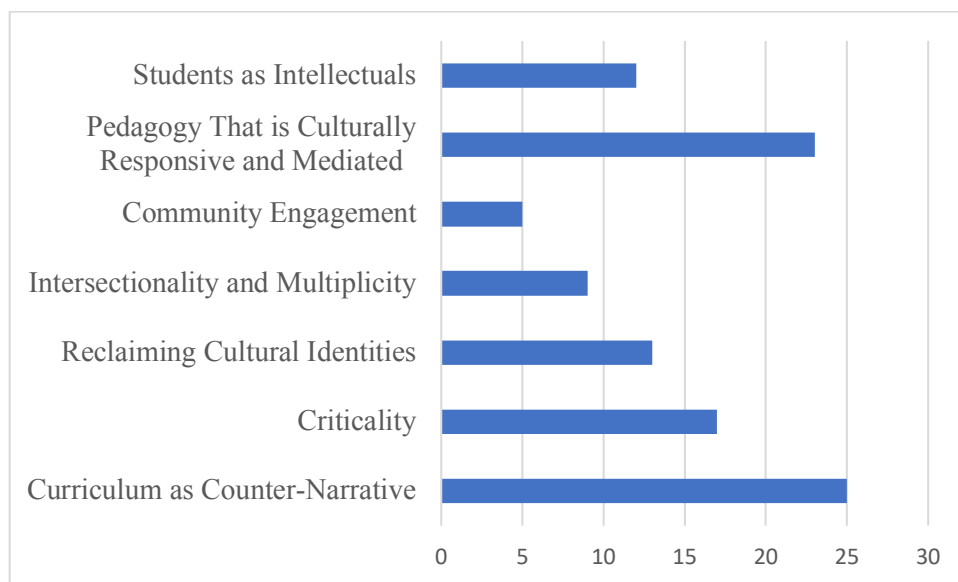
### **Similarities of Ethnic Studies Goals and Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies**

A consistent theme that is present across the survey, syllabi, and interviews was the remarkably similar goals that Ethnic Studies teachers stated. The teachers themselves have a variety of different training backgrounds and reasons for teaching Ethnic Studies; however, the described goals for their courses have clear similarities that also align with other theoretical goals posited by Ethnic Studies scholars. On the survey, the question of goals for Ethnic Studies course was posed to the respondents. The question specifically asked, *What are some of the goals that are represented in your Ethnic Studies curricula? Please prioritize the top 5.* Teachers were then offered a list of possible goals to select from, as well as a space to write in a response in case the provided options did not include a goal of their course (see Table 3). Evidence centered on course goals were also derived from the course syllabi that were submitted by teachers as well as

posed to interviewees. These goals map onto Sleeter and Zavala’s Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (2020) with a clear deviation at the goal of engaging with the local community. Both from the survey data and in interviews, this goal while offered by some teachers, was by far the most infrequently mentioned for Ethnic Studies courses.

**Figure 1**

***Ethnic Studies Teacher Stated Goals***



*Note.* Frequency of prioritized top 5 goals for Ethnic Studies classes taken from interview data and survey responses of those interviewed. Though there were 21 interviewees who responded to the survey, each hallmark had multiple subcategories from which respondents could select, hence some responses have a frequency of greater than 21. See Appendix G.

The Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies as identified by Sleeter and Zavala (2020) are discussed in depth in the literature review of this dissertation. These hallmarks are a comprehensive list of the elements of strong Ethnic Studies instruction and pedagogical choice. They were gained through years of research and scholarship by the those who have worked for decades with teachers in the early days of multicultural education and currently in Ethnic Studies. These hallmarks are the “how” of teaching Ethnic Studies. The themes present in the data mapped on to the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies. Each one will be discussed more in the following sections, with

interview analysis demonstrating the ways in which these hallmarks are enacted in teachers' practices. The similarities of Ethnic Studies goals and explanation of teaching across the three districts were abundant. Since there were so many overlapping commonalities in the data, there was no need for specific geographic delineation between the rural, urban and suburban districts.

Beginning with the ways in which Ethnic Studies teachers are incorporating the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies into their courses, it is evident that the teachers in the sample strived to and enacted the majority of the instructional moves and pedagogical stances discussed in the hallmarks. As evident in the survey data responses, interviews, and document analysis of the course syllabi, six of the seven hallmarks explained by Sleeter and Zavala (2020) were widely addressed by Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed in the sample or discussed in the survey. Thus, the goals presented by scholars and the work of Ethnic Studies teachers strongly align. The most prevalent hallmarks were curriculum as counter-narrative, criticality, pedagogy that is culturally responsive and mediated, and students as intellectuals. Only one of the hallmarks, community engagement, was not frequently addressed by Ethnic Studies teachers.

### ***Hallmarks 1 and 2: Curriculum as Counter-Narrative and Criticality***

Curriculum as counter-narrative and criticality are two Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). All of the interviewed teachers provided evidence that they addressed these hallmarks in their classrooms. Also, evident in the survey data, all participating teachers showed in evidence of both curriculum as counter-narrative and criticality in their syllabi. In practice, these hallmarks looked like the pedagogical awareness discussed by one teacher to reframe a deficit narrative that some of his students may hold against their own community. Pablo, a teacher with many years of experience at a school that once participated in the Walkouts in the 1960s, stated that a goal of his Ethnic Studies class is to provide a learning experience

where his students have a “better understanding of their histories and the histories of people, of color in the US.” He wants students to leave his class

having an understanding of the histories of oppression and marginalization that we have faced as communities of color in the US and on this continent. So, we focus a lot on kind of doing the local history. So, really thinking about their communities and thinking about the present and issues that impact who they are and their communities and their identities.

This Ethnic Studies teacher was not unique in his attention to building students criticality as he centered voices and experiences of people of color in his course. Mireya, another teacher in the same district, who has been teaching Ethnic Studies the entirety of her five year teaching career, discussed her curricular focus on challenging students to build their criticality was reflected when she offered,

I felt like teaching students about the legacies of racism and depression and homophobia [...], that's how we're gonna understand why our world is the way that it is. And then we're also gonna learn how to change it and how historically we've been the ones who changed things.

Mireya develops the understanding and criticality of her students by focusing on social problems that are directly connected to their lives. She offers students a space to give voice to the problems that impact their world. At the same time, she discussed the importance of understanding the root of an issue and supporting student agency in addressing the issues. The centrality of teaching counternarratives and centering voices, histories, and stories of people of color in Ethnic Studies courses were echoed by each of the 21 teachers interviewed in the sample.

***Hallmarks 3 and 4: Reclaiming Cultural Identities and Intersectionality and Multiplicity***

The majority of the teachers interviewed and 11 of the 21 syllabi submitted offered students a unit specifically centered on identity. In some cases, this meant that teachers would intentionally ask students to reflect on their cultural backgrounds and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), making space for students to learn and process these concepts in class. As colonialization works to separate students from their racial and ethnic identities, Ethnic Studies teachers ask students to connect with these backgrounds as part of them and the humanization that are foundations of Ethnic Studies teaching and offered in courses.

Mariana, a newer Ethnic Studies teacher working in Urban School District, elaborated on how she tries to reclaim and honor students' cultural identities daily in her class while paying attention to her students' social emotional wellness. She honors them as complex human beings by checking in with kids from the moment her class begins, even before she begins her warm up. Once her class starts, she likes to include their families and their family's knowledge in the curriculum. She offered,

I frame whatever they say about their families in a way that is validating to them. So, I know some of them have very like Eurocentric ideas of like knowledge and epistemologies. So, when they talk about like, 'Oh, my abuela, you know, she planted this, whatever,' I say something like, 'y'all really, she is a bad-ass scientist. Cause you know, that's how they keep plants alive. You know, scientists are over here trying to figure out how to make sure California doesn't burn down, but our ancestors, our familias, they have been knowing.

Ethnic Studies teachers work to support students' understanding and interrogation of intersectionality and multiplicity. In discussing gender identities and decolonialization of gender binaries, Nadia, an Ethnic Studies teacher from a school that has interdisciplinary structures,

discussed how she used her class to support and expand upon student understanding of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs that was taught in the English class. She shared, "I've taught about how he took his work from the Blackfoot nation and what was known and not known about that." Within this unit she also taught students about the social construction of gender, different gender identities and other indigenous ways of understanding gender by introducing them to two-spirit people.

Offering students, the opportunity to grapple with historical narratives from non-Eurocentric perspectives and helping them make connections to today's social realities are representative of the daily work that goes into teaching Ethnic Studies. Additionally, Ethnic Studies teachers acknowledge that to teach Ethnic Studies is to honor a historical legacy of struggle and to safeguard against erasure. When reflecting on this responsibility of honoring the historical context, Anthony a teacher working in Rural School District who has been teaching for over 10 years framed his entry point to his Ethnic Studies course by saying,

it's important for us to acknowledge that we're always rooted in like this historical context. And we can't forget the history in which we're formed by, and we can't forget where we come from and we can't forget the history that's been suppressed because that's what traditional curriculum does.

Anthony felt connected to the historical legacy of all those who struggled for Ethnic Studies to be included in K-12 schooling and, like other Ethnic Studies teachers, wanted students to all be connected to honor their cultural identities.

***Hallmarks #5 and 6: Pedagogy That is Culturally Responsive and Mediated and Students as Intellectuals***



Ethnic Studies teachers leverage their students' lived experiences to create instructional opportunities that build on students' cultural capital, funds of knowledge and other asset-centered frameworks in the classroom. In interviews, all 21 teachers talked about their curriculum being culturally responsive. Additionally, every teacher referenced their attunement to student intellectualism on the Ethnic Studies syllabi. In addition to shifting pedagogy to be more liberatory, student-centered, and culturally sustaining, Ethnic Studies teachers also center nuance and highlight complexities as they work to center voices of color.

Respecting and planning for student intellectualism is an essential aspect of Ethnic Studies teaching. Ethnic Studies teachers work to make complex topics approachable without oversimplifying or watering down instruction. They take on hard historical truths while incorporating identity, agency, and joy into Ethnic Studies courses. In discussing what this looks like in practice, April, a teacher in Urban School District, offered "problem posing" as a pedagogical conduit for her course. She shared an example from when she discussed Black Wall Street and described how she supports her students grappling with examples of systemic racism and the connections between Jim Crow, redlining, and segregation. She also discussed how she layers in the concepts of Black resilience, resistance, and the fight for recognition and education in the face of the coverup of the history of Black Wall Street. But, she is also aware of the potential heaviness of learning the truths of history. She attends to student intellectualism by not watering down this history, but also intentionally plans for this emotional response. She continued,

I don't want to leave my kids feeling heavy and like sad and like this is horrible because oftentimes I feel like that's kind of what ends up happening in other classes. And so, what I want is I want them to be able to recognize the pain that has been inflicted. I want them

to be able to humanize people themselves. And then I also want them to be able to see and have critical hope.

She honors her students' intellectualism by explicitly teaching them the system of oppression that exist in society and also highlighting their agency to resist against these systems and change them.

Honoring student intellectualism means in part fostering student curiosity and making space to address their curiosity in the classroom. There are many ways that teachers also work to honor student intellectualism. Co-constructing curriculum can be a culturally responsive way that some Ethnic Studies teachers center student curiosity in classroom curriculum. Many interviewees shared how they try to support students to make historical connections to contemporary times, especially with issues that impact their community. Andrew, a teacher in Rural School District who has been teaching for over a decade, shared that he wants his students to understand that, "change requires fight and sacrifice, not just wishing things to change, but people demanding and fighting for change." He offers choice in asking students to research times in history where people came together to make change as a means of fostering students' intellectual curiosity. Co-constructing class structures is an additional way that teachers are responsive to their students growing intellect. A submitted syllabus explicitly stated, "the class will work together to decide how to weigh grading and the weights can be adjusted." Building curriculum to foster student intellectualism and partnering with students to build class structures both speak to Ethnic Studies teachers utilizing liberatory pedagogies in their instructional practices employed in the classroom.

***Hallmark #7: Engaging With the Local Community***

In response to the survey question that discussed goals for the course, “Engaging with the local community” as a top-5 goal of the course got the lowest ranking. From the data, engaging with the local community in the context of their classrooms proved to be somewhat of a struggle for Ethnic Studies teachers overall. From the document analysis conducted on the submitted syllabi, there was only one inclusion of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that addressed a local community issue. This is not to say that community engagement was not described from a theoretical perspective, but practical application and/or community based projects were almost completely absent from the syllabi in the sample.

Teachers did talk about engaging with the community more so in interviews. However, of the 21 Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed, only six teachers discussed specific community engagement in their instruction. The discussed examples varied significantly. A 9<sup>th</sup> grade Ethnic Studies teacher described an ongoing in-depth school community based project where students self-publish a class anthology connected to the themes explored in his class: resistance, resilience, and reimagination. Pablo explained, “throughout the year, the students are reading stories from other students that came before them. We're having this intergenerational, almost conversation with other students. So, this becomes kind of like the center of the curriculum.” Centering the local school community and students as the subjects of the anthology positions older students as mentors to younger ones who are newer to theories and concepts of Ethnic Studies. The mentoring aspect of this project highlights how an Ethnic Studies teacher values the assets that all students bring to a project.

Pedro, a teacher in Rural School District who has taught Ethnic Studies for about 5 years, described how he encourages his students to engage in local history that is rich in the community by bringing in local activists as guest speakers. He also discussed encouraging his students to

talk to the elders of their families about the role they played in the local history. But he commented that he would like to do even more: “We live in a rural area and we, and I, feel we have a somewhat rich history when it comes to the farmworker movement.” He shared that he discussed the importance of the local community in his class, but he realized that discussions are different than actually engaging with the local community. He acknowledged wanting to bring more of the local community into this classroom, but there was no structured way in which his class formally engaged with the local community through YPAR or other activities at the time of our interview. It is clear that for this teacher, community capital and importance of individual people in shaping the local community was also personal as both of his parents were farm workers who were involved with farmworker movements in the local community. This Ethnic Studies teacher was not alone in his desire to engage more with the local community. A few other teachers discussed bringing in guest speakers from the surrounding local community or holding community events at the school site, but these examples were not as pervasive in interviews or in the survey responses as the other hallmarks.

### **The Tension of Ethnic Studies in K-12 Education**

Present in the interviews and syllabi analyzed, there were many commonalities in Ethnic Studies topics and practices across the three school districts. The clear course similarities were persistence across geographic divide and individual teacher choice. Many teachers echoed Andrew, a white teacher in Rural School district’s sentiment: “Ethnic Studies is a class to inspire hope and a feeling of empowerment.” Addressing my second research question about conditions that enhanced or limited the ability of Ethnic Studies teachers to reach the theoretical goals, Ethnic Studies teachers in the sample identified ways in which the legitimacy of Ethnic Studies was explicitly or implicitly questioned by many in the education system. There were both

challenges and benefits to teaching Ethnic Studies borne out in the data with an overarching theme of struggle and success being a part of the Ethnic Studies teacher experience.

### *Challenging Conditions of Teaching Ethnic Studies*

**Becoming an Ethnic Studies Teacher.** Challenges for Ethnic Studies teachers arrive even before these teachers come to be. In the interviews, seven teachers mentioned the struggle in the form of an indirect path to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher is inherent in the very process and steps that it takes to become an Ethnic Studies teacher. As Molly stated, the California Subject Examination for Teachers (CSET) test that you have to pass to become a credentialed teacher in California is in genuine conflict with being an Ethnic Studies teacher.

If you think the way that we have to become social science teachers - essentially you have to kind of push all the Ethnic Studies histories that we know, all that criticality to the side to be able to pass the test, to become a teacher. And then you need to like fall back into it to be able to connect students to information.

She is commenting on the disconnect between the dominant historical narrative that makes up the CSET test and the counternarratives that one needs to be well-versed in to actually teach Ethnic Studies.

One teacher in Suburban School District, Steven, highlighted the challenge of learning Ethnic Studies vocabulary. In his interview he captured this sentiment,

I struggled with the word praxis. That's my first thing about Ethnic Studies, I'll be in these PDs (professional developments) with a professor from SFSU and he will say it, I have to look it up every time and I still don't fully grasp it.

Similar to other disciplines, there is a unique vocabulary specific to Ethnic Studies that for some can feel performative or in some cases like to a struggle to use with fluency and authenticity.

Once teachers pass the CSET test, learn counternarratives and marginalized histories, adapt to other nuances of Ethnic Studies, they immediately face another challenge a seemingly greater challenge- the challenge of teaching Ethnic Studies itself in the current context of schooling.

**Fitting Ethnic Studies into Traditional Schooling.** Ethnic Studies epistemology is counter to traditional pedagogies of schooling. Ethnic Studies asks teachers to employ liberatory and critical pedagogies, to see the assets that students enter the classroom with as they are products of their communities and come into the classroom setting in possession of cultural capitals. Often these pedagogies and ideologies are not the guiding priorities found in K-12 educational settings. Many teachers identified this tension of having a schooling system that is inherently subtractive while trying to maintain an asset orientation in their interviews.

Steven, a teacher in Suburban School District who has been teaching social science for over a decade and Ethnic Studies for two years, shared the tension shared by others of maintaining the current system of schooling by stating,

I am just kind of feeling like we're caught up in this capitalist system where I'm just giving work and then giving a grade and like, you know, where's the real depth, and am I not just kind of feeding and maintaining that the system.

This teacher struggled with honoring the assets that his students came in with and his responsibility to build up their academic skills. He offered,

We can't just, we can't just make some sort of magical world where everyone gets an A and then when they get to the real world or they get to college or whatever, I don't want to say what the real world is, but at some point, they're gonna be held accountable to having certain academic skills and, produce not kind of didactic, I don't know if you call it Western based educational system.

These challenges are all exacerbated even more so if there is no trust built between students and Ethnic Studies teachers because so much of the learning that happens in Ethnic Studies classrooms is dependent on students engaging with the curriculum on a personal level. As Zulema, a teacher in Urban School District, put it, “Ethnic Studies is very personal to them, especially if we're talking about their ethnicity or their experiences. What do you do in your classroom to set up this level of trust so that students will engage?” Or as Molly a teacher across town in the same district but at a magnet school offered, “these kids, they need to trust you. If they don't trust you, they're not going to respond to you.” The struggle for employing culturally sustaining pedagogical practices while maintaining an asset-based thinking and building trust with students in a school system that is largely subtractive in practices can leave Ethnic Studies teachers struggling to bridge teaching a novel course in a traditional schooling context.

**Scant Professional Development Opportunities Across the Districts.** In the surveys and many interviews teachers also shared challenges related to professional development for Ethnic Studies teachers. One teacher from Urban School District responded on the survey that there is

no real professional development in the subject matter. It's funny there's a lot of talk about Ethnic Studies being a mandate but the scant resources limited my ability of having a "good" course my first year teaching. Luckily, I have some solid connections, but other than that curriculum that is effective and engaging is hard to come by. I think everyone assumes it's easy to teach, but I feel that Ethnic Studies is a powerful course that requires powerful educators.

Another survey respondent teaching in Rural School District discussed the need for professional development to help teachers navigate complex topics in the class. They elaborated, “There are a

lot of complex topics in Ethnic Studies that are difficult for many people to understand so it can be hard to break down some of those concepts.” Teachers wanted professional development to support students’ social emotional wellbeing as they engage in challenging histories and learn complex topics in the Ethnic Studies classroom. The words of one teacher in Urban School District resonated in the commentary of other newer Ethnic Studies teachers when he said, “But can I get some guidance and some structure?”

In addition to limited professional development opportunities, Ethnic Studies teachers discussed having limited curriculum to use in their teaching. Nadia, a teacher at Urban School District that plans interdisciplinarily, highlighted this reality by stating,

there is a real lack of curriculum, because I think a lot of Ethnic Studies teachers for the most part really are creating all their stuff from scratch. [...] We just don't have the resources for Ethnic Studies teachers to pull it from the way other more traditional Social Studies contents do.

She goes on to state that as an Ethnic Studies teacher “you're kind of creating that wheel as it's moving.” The need to create your own curriculum as you teach is an inerrant part of teaching, but the disparity in curricular resources for Ethnic Studies and that of other social science courses is noteworthy.

**Personal Research as Professional Development.** Ten of the 21 teachers interviewed discussed how they are forced to mitigate differing amounts of professional development offered across the districts and limited curriculum by dedicating significant planning time to conducting personal research. Put plainly, Francisco, a teacher in Rural School District who has been teaching for over a decade, stated, “Whoever's in charge has to be one, a teacher, and a student at the same time.” Many teachers spoke of this as part of the struggle to be prepared to teach Ethnic



Studies and acknowledged that this personal preparation set teaching Ethnic Studies apart from other ELA or Social Science courses. Jennifer a teacher who piloted the Ethnic Studies class in Suburban School District discussed this reality as “internal work.” She said she always reflected by asking, “So what work am I putting in? What books am I reading? How am I examining my teaching practices?” She continued by stating that the professional development that is provided in her district is really helpful in guiding teachers to stay self-reflective about their personal professional development and learning that she is doing independently.

Outside of doing personal research to build lessons, units, and resources is the additional awareness of Ethnic Studies teachers to build curriculum that engages with people as fully developed beings. Pablo discussed this additional level of cognizance,

we look at things from like a humanizing lens or a humanizing pedagogy. Um, and I just feel that for teachers who are going to be teaching Ethnic Studies, it's really important to look at what they do from a humanizing lens and the work that we do with young people.

When asked about how he learned to humanize students or build humanizing curriculum he stressed,

we're asking young people to transform themselves, to become better human beings, but also really important for us to constantly be doing the work ourselves. In transforming ourselves to being better human beings and also making sure that we're meeting our own social emotional needs as well to be able to better serve our students.

This personal and reflective work of Ethnic Studies teachers are holding themselves accountable to the lessons that they are conveying to young people in their classroom can sometimes come at a cost. Mariana, a newer teacher to Ethnic Studies, commented on the tension of staying “up to date myself with stuff that's happening, with ideas that are changing, just keep making sure that I

continue to do that work could be a challenge, because I'm tired sometimes.” The drive to authentically represent societal issues and students’ lives and contexts into classroom curriculum is a challenging task that sets Ethnic Studies apart from other course subject matter. This Ethnic Studies teacher engages in self-reflective and growth oriented learning that sometimes comes at the cost of her classroom teaching. She, like each of the 21 Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed, hold multiple roles at her school site, placing further demands on time, which is always a scarce resource. Even as Ethnic Studies teachers have the desire to stay current in their practice and keeping up with what is happening in society, they also must prepare curriculum to teach. Many interviewed teachers underscored that the limited curricular resources continues to be a persistent challenge to meeting Ethnic Studies’ theoretical goals.

**Resistant Colleagues.** As teachers navigate the limited Ethnic Studies curricular resources that currently exist for them, they must also contend with the ample amount of misinformation about Ethnic Studies that exists in some popular vernacular. Be it perpetuated from other teachers at the school site, colleagues in their department, or untrusting parents, as Ethnic Studies gains in popularity and sheds light on counternarratives to popular mythology, Ethnic Studies teachers find themselves needing to clarify and respond to the abundance of misinformation from adults as they work to educate students. In the interviews and surveys some teachers expressed pushback they received by teacher colleagues. Francisco, a teacher in Rural School District, shared a specific example of the existing distrust that some teachers at his school site had for Ethnic Studies. He divulged, “A group of teachers wrote to the district saying how we were trying to brainwash our students with communist ideas.” This was not the only example offered in interviews of colleagues being hostile to – and misinformed about - Ethnic Studies.

Additionally, another issue discussed by 7 of the 21 Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed was the way in which the validity of Ethnic Studies is questioned by colleagues. A survey respondent working in Rural School District stated, “some teachers have resented and resisted the adoption of Ethnic Studies courses and the district making it a graduation requirement. Also, some parents are not happy [with] a curriculum that they feel is anti-American and unpatriotic.” Corroborating that feeling, in an interview Mireya shared,

I think that that's really annoying. Like I could talk about this forever. Um, yeah, that they don't feel like it's real history or that it's like a real class. They feel like it's elective. Um, like it isn't there, but I think it's also like one of the most powerful courses that our kids are ever going to take. Um, and I'm sure all teachers think that about their subject, but like, I honestly do think like my Ethnic Studies class is like, I feel like it's transformative not to be conceited, but it is, I think it is.

Some teachers discussed how this misconception of Ethnic Studies goes beyond the course and can sometimes be personal. In an interview, Rebecca, a teacher in Rural School District, brought this to light by sharing, “People have preconceived notions of who Ethnic Studies teachers are, like the very liberal ideas that, I guess are like demonized. I don't know, misconceptions and things like that.” She went on to share a story of a disturbing interaction with a colleague. After the faculty and staff watched films highlighting issues of social justice, a colleague confronted her during the small group discussion and stated,

‘My students came up to me and told me that I'm privileged.’ Right, and we had talked about privilege in our [Ethnic Studies] class. And so, the person, the adult that was retelling the story says, ‘I told them, where did you learn this word?’ As opposed to like, asking, ‘what do you mean by this?’

As Rebecca was retelling the story of this interaction, it was obvious that this interaction left her feeling unsettled and defensive of the concepts she teaches in Ethnic Studies. This interaction also exemplified what every interviewed teacher shared: part of their additional labor as Ethnic Studies teachers is educating adults, students, families about the purpose and benefits of Ethnic Studies in order to promote understanding as they work to build their own content knowledge. From time to time the pushback from colleagues can feel insidious. As Pedro stated,

they [other teachers at the site] never truly came up saying, ‘well, we don't want you to teach these histories,’ but other things like, ‘well, we don't know whether this is the best way to teach it because you're going to be teaching kids how to hate white people.’

Ethnic Studies teachers also commented on receiving pushback from parents in their school community and the additional work of needing to correct their misconceptions. One survey respondent in Urban School District discussed the feelings that they contend with at their school site when they have parents that simply "do not believe in Ethnic Studies and what it represents." Interviewees discussed situations where parents directly questioned the validity of what was being taught in Ethnic Studies classes as it did not align with what the parents were taught in their education. Three teachers specifically shared that parents have questioned the particulars of the course and stated that the course "does not represent the values of America." Additionally, three of the teachers interviewed mentioned that they have engaged with parents that do not see Ethnic Studies as an academic course. Francisco, a teacher who became a high school teacher after his own bumpy path through education, offered,

it's hard because we do have, I have had parents who have come to my class and questioned me, like, why are you telling... I remember one time we were talking about, Columbus not being the first person to discover Americas I brought in the Chinese and I

guess the mom just heard the Chinese discovered America. So, she came into question me.

Some parents are unable to see how the curriculum that students are currently learning in the classroom is Eurocentric and have communicated with teachers questioning, “why do we need to teach these units, focusing on certain groups of people?” Vanessa, an English teacher in Rural School District, explained this feeling in an interview by sharing, “They express their view that they just wanted their child to have like a ‘regular English class’ where they learned.” The teacher explained that she believed this notion of a “regular class” meant a noncritical space that centers the traditional cannon of authors rather than an English class intentionally taught through the lens of marginalized narratives.

Megan, a White teacher in Suburban School District who has been teaching for over a decade but is newer to Ethnic Studies, highlighted the challenges of parent pushback as well as the appreciation of having administrators who are clear about the values and intentions of Ethnic studies. She shared one tense interaction with a parent

and this parent like cut me off. It was like, ‘you're pushing like your own like liberal values, you know? Like, I don't want you to tell my kid how to think.’ I was able to like calm down the situation and I talked with him, but I also was very confident with engaging because I knew that my admin had my back 100%.

As teachers struggle to clarify understandings of what is taught in Ethnic Studies this intellectual and emotional labor of defending what you teach is also labor that can potentially take away from the planning and the teaching of Ethnic Studies.

**Parental Questions About Rigor and Legitimacy.** Questions about and defending what is taught in Ethnic Studies, as well as contending with limited curriculum and professional

development, are all part of the struggle that Ethnic Studies teachers navigate. For example, when parents at one school in Urban School District surfaced the idea that “Ethnic Studies ‘isn’t real history,” one Ethnic Studies teacher responded that this was “inherently problematic.”

The course’s status as an elective is also problematic in that teachers have to encounter the implicit bias of rigor and legitimacy that delegitimize the esteem of elective classes. One teacher shared that it was as if the ways in which she was working to humanize Ethnic Studies students by having them self-reflect and bringing in their identities in to the course made the class non-academic in the minds of teachers, parents, and students alike.

Students sometimes question the legitimacy of Ethnic Studies in ways that they do not question or are not critical of other histories or what is taught in other social science classes. A teacher in each of the participating districts shared that students will sometimes approach Ethnic Studies classes from a very critical vantage point. Sarah, an Ethnic Studies and U.S. History teacher in Urban School District, offered,

I’m just learning like about World War II. Like everything they say is true, probably. But with Ethnic Studies, it gets more maybe personal. Sometimes they’re like, more dissonance, more controversy. And I guess that’s natural toward Ethnic Studies, but it’s so funny to me that we can just accept certain parts of these historical past events. And we can’t accept certain known truths about identity or counternarratives or things we know are true and they’re still questioned or even question if they should be taught.

Questioning the validity of what is taught in the Ethnic Studies classroom is a recurring theme that 4 of the 21 teachers interviewed specifically discussed. In districts where the course is only a semester in length, teachers are working to manage these challenges with the reality of time pressure and wanting to include many important elements in their Ethnic Studies courses.

**Insufficient Time.** Finally, many of the Ethnic Studies teachers commented on the need for more time for Ethnic Studies courses. This element is heavily dependent on a variety of school site factors, as some Ethnic Studies classes are a full year while others are only a semester. The limited time was especially prevalent with respondents who only had a semester with their students. The pressure to fit in the amount of learning in a semester course was often a cause for discomfort for teachers. Mariana, a teacher in Suburban School District, specifically highlighted this tension, and it was echoed by five other Ethnic Studies teachers. When discussing planning for Ethnic Studies, Mariana said, “I feel a lot more liberated, but also like restrained because there’s so much that I could teach in Ethnic Studies, but I don’t have that much time.” Henry, a Black teacher close to retirement, but who teaches Ethnic Studies with the specific motivation of helping his students learn about the local Black community, summed it up by simply stating, “but really it should be a yearlong course – let’s be honest.”

In interviews and surveys alike, many Ethnic Studies teachers commented on how important Ethnic Studies is for students and the limited time that they have to really support student learning of complex ideas. In a survey response, a Suburban School District teacher stated, “the course is only a semester long - there's too much good stuff to cover in too short of a period of time!” He added,

My students only have Ethnic Studies their 9th grade year so it is difficult to fit so much important content into a year. Furthermore, there are a lot of complex topics in Ethnic Studies that are difficult for many people to understand so it can be hard to break down some of those concepts.

Another survey respondent teaching in Urban School District commented,

In addition to race and ethnicity, there is pressure to address LGBTQ+ content as well. I consider Ethnic Studies to be an opening of student minds to issues that they should continue to study throughout high school and not just in social studies courses.

As Ethnic Studies continues to be more integrated into course offerings and curricula the struggle to teach complex topics and rich learning as Ethnic Studies teachers work to center the histories of those previously marginalized will persist.

The work of Ethnic Studies teachers is complex and ripe with struggle and drawbacks. While the Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed did acknowledge the incredible challenges that they navigated on a daily basis, they also described the benefits and joy that they experience. I turn now to some of the benefits described by Ethnic Studies teachers.

### ***Conditions That Enhance Teaching Ethnic Studies***

Even with all of the challenges identified above, Ethnic Studies teachers in the sample expressed enjoyment of curricular freedom. Currently, Ethnic Studies courses do not have curriculum standards or outside accountability from the state in the form of standardized tests. There is an Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum that was approved by California's SBE in 2021, but this curricular guidance is not mandated in Ethnic Studies classrooms, and it was approved after the bulk of the teacher interviews took place. Derived from the interviews and survey responses, more than half of the participating teachers appreciated the freedom of not having curriculum standards tied to Ethnic Studies teaching. In some cases, this freedom afforded teachers the ability to be responsive to the needs of their classes and prioritize units of study that teachers and students wanted to explore. April, a teacher who was once a librarian but longed for closer ties to students and more exciting ways to engage with kids about meaningful experiences, put it, "in an Ethnic Studies class, we are trying to decolonize education. [...] We are breaking



free from a lot of the noise.” Teachers also appreciated the freedom to be responsive to the cultural background of students in the classroom, as well as feeling able to explore their own subject related passions and interest with students. Finally, making curriculum relevant for students and not having outside pressures of cumulative tests were all described as the benefits of marginalization which led to joyful Ethnic Studies teachers.

**Curricular Dynamism and Connection to Current Events.** Many Ethnic Studies teachers commented on their appreciation of being able to bring into the classroom events that were happening in the larger social context in real-time. They shared the importance of being able to do this as the course allowed for flexibility and responsiveness. Many teachers spoke of the benefits of curricular dynamism as it pertains to issues commonly discussed in Ethnic Studies. One teacher offered as an example bringing in the Stop Asian Hate movement that took place during an early wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic. This teacher is in Suburban School District that has a sizeable Asian American student population. In being responsive, she shared how appropriate it felt to discuss xenophobia and the attacks on the Asian American community because she had created a classroom space that was affirming and offered students a chance to discuss how the violence was impacting their lives. In reflection, she believed that her ease with this topic was because she had previously taught anti-Asian histories and resistance earlier in the semester. The depth of conversations and ability for her students to make historical connections to today’s issues was because according to her, the learning that they had previously done.

Lexi, a teacher in Suburban School District, plainly stated what this means in practical terms. She shared, “I’ve done four semesters, four full semesters now, and I have never taught the same thing. I’m always modifying stuff.” In describing the malleable and responsive nature of the course, one teacher offered,

the course itself has remained remarkably stable in terms of the themes. Um, sometimes I get to more of them than others, but I'm always adding to the class, things that come up as I am teaching, because that's the thing that's been so, so cool about the class. I mean one of my favorite things about teaching is developing curriculum. And so, for me, that's been like a real, a real source of satisfaction and joy and passion.

Students are often impacted by things happening in their worlds outside of the classroom but finding the space and connection to discuss these things in the classroom is in some ways unique to Ethnic Studies pedagogy. As Ethnic Studies teachers are working to support student understanding of things that come up in society during their courses, they are also working to make things relevant and interesting for their students.

**Responsiveness to Student Needs.** Being dynamic and flexible can allow for teachers to better connect to student needs and cultural realities. Ethnic Studies teachers construct learning environments with their students in mind trying to bridge the gap between traditional pedagogues and culturally relevant practices. They work to intentionally craft classrooms that center students and incorporate their interests as part of Ethnic Studies teacher planning and practice so that their students will engage.

Ethnic Studies teachers work to be responsive to the cultural background of students in the classroom. When asked about how teachers bring in cultural backgrounds, a survey respondent teaching in Urban School District shared,

We use an anthology of African American Literature but the students create and share their own anthologies. Many contemporary African American writers bring up issues that are very important to the students and I work to give their voices a wide audience.

In interviews, Ethnic Studies teachers explained that engaging in critical dialogue and discussion with young people was essential in an Ethnic Studies classroom as it allows for teachers to bring in relevant topics and issues for students. But critical dialogue can only be had in intentional settings where appropriate classroom culture and norms are built. Molly expressed that they “want students to feel safe and comfortable” as well as trying to make Ethnic Studies relevant to their students’ lives.

As teachers work to teach the content of Ethnic Studies, they are also attending to student social emotional needs and bringing themselves and their experiences into the classroom. In a final reflection Lexi, a teacher in Suburban School District offered, “One other thing I wanted to add is that I also wanted to make sure I created space for them [the students] to reflect and then to be able to share their experiences.” Attending to student social emotional learning, making content relevant for students, and finding ways to engage with students in critical dialogue are all important aspects of Ethnic Studies courses. However, they are not always normalized in traditional schooling or pedagogy and can often focus heavily on students retaining taught information.

Attending to student curiosity and discussing relevant topics in the Ethnic Studies classroom may look different given the particularities of different contexts. Often Ethnic Studies teachers work to honor student curiosity and interest by addressing questions or topics that students bring into the classroom. Sarah shared how she tries to honor student curiosity through choice, “I offer the students as much choice as I can - they share what moves them, just as I share what I think is important.” Adjusting the curriculum to fit the interests of students can sometimes be challenging for Ethnic Studies teachers to navigate as Ethnic Studies classes are not divorced from a wide variety of viewpoints and beliefs that exist in our society. When asked about how

teachers navigate this challenge and what might be considered controversial topics in the classroom, Nadia, an Ethnic Studies teacher with a year-long 9<sup>th</sup> grade class, commented,

I'll even just make sure I start the day with is like this foundation of love, respect, humanity, and compassion. So, if we're talking about two-spirit people and transgender people, a kid can and should feel comfortable to say, 'I don't understand the transgender people. Like it confuses me. I don't get it.' That's fair. That should be a safe question to ask, but they cannot say, 'Well, that grosses me out. I'm okay with gay people, as long as they're not around me,' because then that takes away from their humanity.

Being attuned to the nuances of guiding a student driven conversation can be challenging regardless of the topic. This is especially true of topics that are sensitive in nature or that can feel rooted in personal beliefs. Ethnic Studies teachers harness student curiosity and real life application of learning in the classroom to foster student intellectualism and academic growth.

Nearly every Ethnic Studies teacher that I interviewed also spoke of how applicable Ethnic Studies is for students in their daily lives outside of the classroom. Vanessa, a math teacher who teaches high school courses using Ethnic Studies pedagogies and frameworks in Rural School District, commented, "It feels like so much of the relevance in math is a struggle. But because of the Ethnic Studies framework, it's there for you if you can kind of imagine and create what the math looks like." Some Ethnic Studies teachers interviewed were very forthcoming with their hopes for students and the practical application of what they were learning in the classroom in their lives. Mireya a teacher in Urban School District, offered,

I became a teacher, a history teacher because I am an activist and I was like, what is the best way to work towards empowering our community and helping them get the tools that they need to, to transform our society, to meet their needs.

The application of the skills that students are learning in Ethnic Studies classrooms can be empowering for students. It is the reason why Molly shared,

we start out [each semester] with identity and looking at all the different things that can contribute to our identities and what makes us who we are and how our identities evolve over the course of our lives and kids really like that unit a lot. And so, it's a way also of getting to know the kids.

She went on to share that discussing identity is essential for building trust and for getting students to think deeply about themselves before they begin learning Ethnic Studies content. She does this in her classroom in order to bolster their skills of self-reflection and connecting the class to students lives as they move through the course.

Ethnic Studies teachers navigate the complexities of the classroom and work to ensure that students' curiosity is fostered while curriculum is relevant and applicable. They enact these parts of instruction, while attending to the persistent challenges and drawback of the course and still manage to find joy in their work.

**Ethnic Studies Teacher Joy.** Joy, passion, and love for teaching Ethnic Studies was present in many of the interviews with Ethnic Studies teachers. None of the teachers interviewed were forced into to teaching Ethnic Studies. Some of the Ethnic Teachers interviewed were asked by administrators to teach the class, but all of the teachers indicated that they wanted to and enjoyed teaching the course for a variety of reasons. Even though the amount of personal research and investment needed to teach Ethnic Studies is substantial, one teacher noted the joy that she gets from developing curriculum based on all of the new learning that she is absorbing for the class. Molly commented, "One of my favorite things about teaching is developing curriculum. And so, for me, that's been like a real source of satisfaction, joy, and passion. All of

the reading allows me to be really creative in my classes.” When reflecting on their feelings towards teaching the class more generally, teachers offered comments like, “I love what I do” and “I bring a lot of passion to it.” Henry, the teacher from Urban School District who spoke a lot about nearing retirement, shared, “It’s been a joy. I mean it is the one thing in my day that I still look forward to teaching. The one course,” and finally, “I mean I love being an Ethnic Studies teacher. It’s yeah. I appreciate being able to; I feel like it’s something that allows me to stay reflective and I appreciate that.” The joy that is experienced in Ethnic Studies classrooms is meant to be collective. Jennifer, a teacher in Suburban School District, decided to return to the classroom to teach Ethnic Studies after minoring in it in her undergraduate days. When discussing her intention for her students, she offered,

I just want them to find joy cause it’s such a joyful class. I think that’s the thing that I’ve really learned in the last three years is like so much joy, so much love, in the midst of trying to figure out the world around us.

Ethnic Studies teachers clearly faced both struggles and benefits as they are able to navigate the terrain of the current context and employ their own agency in the process of have a clear focus on the discipline, their students, and liberatory pedagogy. Teaching the course without the outside distractions of competing interests, such as standards, testing, or doubtful adults, allows Ethnic Studies teachers to grapple with their course goals and the enduring understandings that they want students to gain throughout and beyond the course.

### **The Origins of Ethnic Studies Effectiveness**

The Ethnic Studies teachers who participated in the study were able to navigate the challenges and benefits because they were uniquely prepared by a pre-existing critical consciousness developed in prior educational, familial, and social experiences. The teachers in

my study who want to talk about Ethnic Studies curriculum on their personal time are teachers who feel successful and confident about their instruction. These teachers were uniquely prepared to teach Ethnic Studies in part because of developed levels of criticality prior to teaching Ethnic Studies. This is another significant and recurring theme that arose from the data that exemplifies why the Ethnic Studies teachers in my sample were able to address the multiple hallmarks and frameworks of Ethnic Studies. Familial, educational and social experiences set them on the path of having a developed level of criticality prior to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher.

### ***Familial Experiences***

Many teachers discussed the ways in which their upbringing led them to a place of critical conscious. Anthony, a Black teacher who had taught at the same school site for 18 years, reflected on his own life experiences and his development of criticality. In response to the interview question of how he became an Ethnic Studies teacher, he began the story of his journey by reflecting on his upbringing. He described being raised in a majority Black community in Southern California, or as he put it, “a designer community.” He further described the area as a “self-contained Black community, Black schools, Black merchants, Black families, everything. And we were middle-class, weren't rich, we weren't poor, we weren't oppressed. We felt good about ourselves.” He reflects on college as his turning point where his critical consciousness began to grow as this was one of the first times that he was outside of that protective neighborhood environment and interacted with privilege in ways that he had never before. He elaborated,

When I got to college, I went to USC, I experienced the culture shock, and I experienced the culture of privilege there. [...] I wanted to bridge the gap between the culture of privilege I saw at USC and opportunities that I may or may not have seen in the

community I grew up in. So, I saw education as a really good way to do that. [...] as I studied education, I learned more about achievement gaps. I learned more about systemic and institutionalized racism, but I did not have a knowledge of institutionalized racism, growing up, because like I said, I lived in a middle class community. [...] But when I got to college, that is where I saw the disparities. And that's where I saw some of the inequalities. And I wanted to go into education and bridge that gap.

His time away from his neighborhood in a local university demystified the inequality that was present in his home community. As he studied more and more, he was able to see and ask critical questions as to why there was inequality and what mechanisms continued to keep the inequality in place. This is what brought him to education as a means to level the playing field for students and a way to engage kids in these critical and relevant conversations.

Steven, a White teacher in Suburban School District, shared a similar experience when reflecting on his upbringing. He also identified the neighborhood in which he grew up as having significant impact on his criticality. His very diverse childhood neighborhood, as well as the political belief system of his parents as revolutionaries in the 1970s and 80s, played a significant role in his critical consciousness. He highlighted that his parents made a conscious decision to raise him and his sibling in the inner-city so that they could “be like proletarian and [live] amongst the people.” For him, living in that multicultural inner-city environment meant that race was a conversation that was ongoing in his home. He shared that he was very comfortable talking about diversity and being with a very diverse peer group. When discussing his schooling environment, he shared that it was a very “multicultural, urban environment and going to schools where I was plausibly the minority because of power dynamics that didn't feel like the minority



in the way schools are set-up.” These ongoing conversations about race and class and power all significantly impacted his worldview and levels of criticality from a very young age.

### *College Experiences*

College majors both in undergrad and graduate programs along with college clubs were another frequently cited source of a growing criticality that teachers referred to as a meaningful source of knowledge that they take into their Ethnic Studies teaching. Pedro was able to draw a through line from majoring in Black and Chicano Studies at UCSB to his decision to teach Ethnic Studies. Sarah discussed her entry to teaching Ethnic Studies from her mentor in the teacher education program that she attended. She connected the pedagogical foundation to the reflection questions that were posed to her by her mentor throughout her training. She commented, “my mentor would ask me questions, I would do a curriculum map for world history, very Eurocentric from the standards. [...] and she would come over in the classroom and be like, you know, you're spending like seven months on Europe. What about Africa? What about Latin America? What about Asia?” Working with her mentor and reflecting on her responses, she was able to see how she was “reproducing the hegemony of white normalcy and Western ideology as like the center of everything.” These questions helped this teacher to begin thinking about an entry point to decolonializing her World History classroom and continued in her Ethnic Studies classroom.

Molly, a current Ethnic Studies teacher who was asked to design the course by administrators at her magnet school, referred to the importance of her doctoral studies in providing her comfort in talking about race in the classroom and growing her criticality. She has been teaching Ethnic Studies for many years, and when reflecting on the process of creating the course, she explained,

I created the class really drawing on my career to that point. My PhD is in Latin American history. So racial issues, racial ideologies, racial hierarchies, talking about race was something that, you know, basically was, I mean, I've learned a lot about it otherwise, but like, I, wasn't afraid to tackle those issues. And I view that as like, how do you talk about Latin American history without talking about race and, you know, how do you talk about ultimately, my, you can't talk about American history without talking about race either.

In this teacher's case, having interrogated the racial hierarchies and ideologies of Latin America provided a sense of comfort having a critical and comparative lens when discussing race in the United States. For these teachers, the growth that comes through building their knowledge and reflection on their classroom practice prior to teaching Ethnic Studies had a direct impact on their criticality that they took into their Ethnic Studies instruction.

Participation in college based clubs was another significant experience that influenced many teachers in my study. They mentioned college clubs on their reflection about the early stages of their budding critical consciousness, and most of the clubs seemed to be politically or racially oriented. A few different teachers spoke of being involved with Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), a student activist club on their college campuses. When discussing the development of his criticality, Francisco talked about beginning college as a psychology major, but after becoming more involved with MEChA, he changed his major to Chicano Studies. In recounting that time in his life, he offered the importance of this club of like-minded community members as well as this club's focus on activism, cultural identity and support of his indigenous roots. Because of his participation in this club, he shared, "I became more interested in like my family history, and it was just so empowering. I've never experienced ever in my life.

And I felt a sense of liberation and like just this kind of weight leave my shoulders.” In his reflection about the growth of his criticality, it is evident that MEChA and what he was learning in cultural histories’ classes were directly connected and allowed him to understand forces at play in his own life. Additionally, he offered that his time in MEChA allowed him to take on roles where he interacted with high school aged students and supported the youth in developing their knowledge of self and critical consciousness even before they reached college.

### ***Internships***

Internships are social spaces identified by some of the teachers as a way in which their criticality grew. Internships will often provide instruction or present their vision statements for the ways of being that they value. Vanessa, the teacher in Rural School District who teaches a Statistics class through an Ethnic Studies lens, discussed how her work in the CalTeach program was really instrumental in positioning her to teach this course. In commenting on the program, she said that the intention was “to try to get students of color into the STEM fields.” In her interview she discussed the intentionality of the program and the social justice framework that this program instilled in her. Her connection to CalTeach as an undergraduate student made the decision to join the Ethnic Studies committee in her district very easy. She was aware that the math graduation requirement was a gatekeeper for many students in her district and wanted to build a relevant math class that would be responsive to student need and would help them to understand statistics in the context of the world around them. She knew that teaching statistics through an Ethnic Studies lens would not be easy. She would have to put in a lot of work to blend Ethnic Studies with math, but she was willing to do so because the intention of CalTeach afforded her a personal mission to support students in learning Statistics with a relevant and meaningful connections to issues of race and social justice.

Like CalTeach, AmeriCorps is a service oriented organization that was also discussed in interviews as a program that addresses inequities in education, builds criticality, and was a conduit to Ethnic Studies. Jennifer reflected on how invisible she felt in her high school classrooms. The first time she recalled seeing herself in classroom curricula was in college at Cal Poly: “I was an Ethics Studies minor way back in 2004, [...] it was my first interaction with seeing myself in a curriculum. And I just remember thinking like, wow, this is, it's amazing.” She talked about how her work as an intern in the program on the East Coast prior to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher prepared her well to teach the course. Combining the community service orientation of AmeriCorps with the minor in Ethnic Studies where she engaged with conversations of power and privilege in our society prepared her for her role as an Ethnic Studies teacher. The criticality that she built prior to teaching Ethnic Studies no doubt helped her to see what might be possible with students when they, too, can see themselves in the curriculum similar to her own experience in college.

### **Conclusion**

As Ethnic Studies grows in its popularity across K-12 schools, so does the need to explore and capture the experiences of teachers who are teaching the course. With little suggested guidance of many different aspects of Ethnic Studies teaching from governing bodies, Ethnic Studies teachers, much like the discipline itself, have embodied the struggle for inclusion and navigated various problematic factors in the K-12 educational system to build courses that represent the hallmarks of Ethnic Studies in their classrooms and practice. They have mitigated the benefits and challenges of teaching the course and have come to teach Ethnic Studies with levels of critical consciousness built from experiences gained prior to becoming a teacher. In some cases, and despite limited support for students, they have built powerful learning spaces

that remain true to principles of Ethnic Studies. The themes explored in Chapter Four will have major implications for all aspects of Ethnic Studies as it continues to grow and be required across schools in California.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Ethnic Studies at the K-12 level is continuing to grow in visibility and popularity. There are a variety of reasons why school sites are looking to include Ethnic Studies courses for students, such as addressing the long-standing racialized opportunity gap; trying to increase marginalized student attendance; being responsive to growing diversity in student populations; including a class that centers previously marginalized voices in course offerings; being responsive to conversations of diversity, equity and inclusion; and being responsive to the local community demands. Because of the long fight for representation and inclusion of Ethnic Studies in both institutes of higher and K-12 education, research is available that documents the positive academic and social impact of Ethnic Studies for students. Even so, the teachers who do the work of Ethnic Studies instruction are an essential yet understudied element in the holistic understanding of Ethnic Studies. Largely absent from the scholarship is the empirical research centered on Ethnic Studies teacher experiences and perspectives needed to understand the unique and complex nature of teaching Ethnic Studies in the K-12 secondary educational context.

My study sought to focus on Ethnic Studies teachers throughout different regions in California. I included three districts across California where Ethnic Studies was an established graduation requirement because of the investment in Ethnic Studies that comes with a district commitment to teaching the course. The teachers included in my sample willingly volunteered to teach Ethnic Studies. I investigated two research questions through multiple data methods. First, I conducted a survey primarily as a recruitment tool, and it also asked a few general questions about Ethnic Studies teachers, goals for their course, and common practices, providing important descriptive information for the next two stages of my study. The survey presented an opportunity

for teachers to submit their course syllabus and participate in an interview; several teachers opted to take both opportunities, while a few opted to just engage in one follow-up activity. As a result of the interviews, I obtained a more complete and detailed understanding of the experiences and reflections of Ethnic Studies teachers. Through the document analysis of the submitted syllabi, I gained important data to complement the quantitative and qualitative aspects of my study. These multiple data sources allowed me to answer my guiding research questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do Ethnic Studies teachers' goals and pedagogical practices align with Ethnic Studies' theoretical goals?
2. What conditions enhance or limit the ability of Ethnic Studies teachers to reach the theoretical goals articulated in frameworks for Ethnic Studies teaching?

After the data was gathered, I analyzed survey data, coded interviews and open-ended survey questions, and engaged in document analysis to reach my findings. The intention of my research was not only to learn from Ethnic Studies teachers, but also to center their voices and bring them into the discourse as contributors to the established scholarship on Ethnic Studies.

In this final chapter, I summarize and interpret my findings while connecting them with the literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter Two. I will also present the implications for this study, discuss the limitations of this study, and conclude with suggestions and ideas for further research.

## **Review of the Findings**

### **Ethnic Studies Teachers Mostly Meeting Theoretical Goals**

Curriculum as counter-narrative, criticality, reclaiming cultural identities, intersectionality and multiplicity, community engagement, pedagogy that is culturally responsive and mediated, and students as intellectuals are the delineated Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies as

described by Sleeter and Zavala (2020). Regardless of teacher education or other factors that help to influence pedagogy in the classroom, the majority of Ethnic Studies teachers in my sample were incorporating a majority of these hallmarks into their classroom practice. Ethnic Studies teachers who voluntarily participated in the study were largely the type of reflective and critical educators discussed in the History-Social Sciences Framework. They engage students and craft classrooms where inquiry is evident (SBE, 2017). The study data suggests that, regardless of the geographical region or training prior to teaching Ethnic Studies, teachers from the sample are enacting all but one of the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies on a consistent basis. “Engaging with the Local Community” was the only hallmark that was the least addressed in interviews, survey responses, and syllabi.

These hallmarks are not to be understood as elements of Ethnic Studies classrooms that can be checked off, but rather seen holistically as the elements that come together to comprise strong Ethnic Studies based experiences for students (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Also, despite diverse geographical regions, they also had remarkably similar goals for their courses and for student learning. For many current Ethnic Studies teachers, even those who have not studied the theoretical goals of the course, there is remarkable similarity in what teachers are doing in the classroom. This is true even as teachers come to teach Ethnic Studies through a variety of different channels (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). The underlying intention of the course is evident even through various teacher interpretations, instructional decisions, and pedagogical choices.

The participants’ experiences bring to life critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970) and value the intellectualism and funds of knowledge students bring into the classroom daily. Ethnic Studies teachers make space for this knowledge and incorporate it into their curriculum. The data



suggests their pedagogy and practices exemplify culturally responsive teaching by instructing content through an intersectional lens, as well as an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach (Gay, 2002). Teachers worked hard to incorporate student voice and experiences as they supported students to make connections between their lives and the taught curriculum (Yosso, 2005).

Teachers are able to be responsive to the needs of their students in part because of the marginalization that they experience as Ethnic Studies teachers. Ethnic Studies teachers are often building their own curriculum as there are limited textbooks that offer the types of counternarratives central to Ethnic Studies (Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Kauffmann et al., 2002; Sleeter, 2017). As teachers build curriculum, my data suggests that they are responding to current events and the needs of their students. They can bring in intersectional identities, therefore making the class relevant to the lived experiences of their students (Gay, 2002).

Engaging with the local community was the least commonly discussed hallmark by study participants. This could be for a variety of reasons including the tension of limited time that Ethnic Studies teachers shared. Numerous Ethnic Studies teachers mentioned the struggle of trying to fit so much new and important information into the often-semester-long class. A teacher's lack of knowledge of the local community or an unsupportive school structure or environment for activities or projects could also be possibilities for the limited community engagement. A few of the participants discussed how their colleagues felt like Ethnic Studies was not a rigorous or academic class and how community based learning is outside of the traditional ways of teaching (Mignolo, 2011). These doubts about the validity of Ethnic Studies by some in the school system hinder Ethnic Studies teachers' ability to engage in the construction of their Ethnic Studies courses. However, the importance of inquiry and action must

not be lost to the mitigating factors. It is essential in Ethnic Studies courses that students are provided opportunities to inquire and have authentic learning opportunities centered in their community (Freire, 1970). Truly liberatory and critical pedagogy ask that of educational systems.

Teachers that responded to my requests for information in the study really mirrored the majority of the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies describe by Sleeter and Zavala (2020) in their classroom practice. Interestingly, teachers participated in the study before any type of curricular offerings were provided by the state or any other type of educational governing body. Therefore, guidance for Ethnic Studies teachers at the high school level was as varied as the curriculum that teachers choose to teach in their classrooms. A foundation of identity, the interrogation of systems and structures that analyze power and oppression, a focus on relevance, and the weaving of lived experiences and cultural backgrounds into the classroom can serve as examples of praxis, or the theoretical frameworks and hallmarks discussed by scholars and the practical application of this ideology at play in Ethnic Studies classrooms. Given that there is no one way to be an Ethnic Studies teacher, it is important to reflect on how teachers arrived at this place of working in distinct districts throughout California yet engaged in such similarities of practice.

### **Conditions that Impact Ethnic Studies Teachers Achievement of Theoretical Goals**

#### ***The Costs and Benefits of Curricular Marginalization***

Additional findings suggest that the opportunities and drawbacks of the marginalization of Ethnic Studies are abundant. For many teachers interviewed, a theme of marginalization became apparent. The marginalization is evident in that the course intentionally prioritizes the histories of groups widely erased from mainstream history standards not taught universally throughout the state, there are no standards set for the course, and there is no specific grade level

where the course is taught for students in California. There is also not a specific path for becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher nor is there a certification that one must meet to teach the course (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). There is very limited infrastructure for becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher at this point. Teachers discussed how the course and expectations may change as Ethnic Studies grows on high school campuses across the state. They also discussed the freedom that they currently feel from being able to work outside of the traditional limitations of education, bring counternarratives into the classroom, and engage in curricular dynamism, all while tailoring instruction to the students in their classroom (Gay, 2002).

Teachers named some of the challenges in teaching a course that is marginalized. Specifically, they commented on the inadequate professional development opportunities across the districts, the limited curricular options and the ensuing challenges to develop responsive lessons, and the misrepresentations of what is taught in Ethnic Studies along with the need to dispel misinformation put forth by colleagues and parents. Current Ethnic Studies teachers also shared the challenges of having the legitimacy of their classes and rigor of the course content regularly questioned, as well as the insufficient time they felt they had for all of the important topics that they wanted to cover in the class.

Though the challenges connected to teaching Ethnic Studies were numerous, teachers also spoke of many benefits that exist because of the limited oversight and marginalization of the subject. Curricular dynamism and the ability to make relevant and clear connections to current events as well as a lack of teaching standards that do not have expected outcomes or standards dictated by the state or other educational entities brought and renewed teachers' joy and love for teaching Ethnic Studies. Teachers felt free to pursue their interests and be creative in collaborating to build curriculum that is relevant to their community of students and the local

community by working outside of traditional boundaries of knowledge and schooling (Mignolo, 2011).

Critical pedagogies coupled with decolonialism layered into Ethnic Studies curriculum is challenging the traditional K-12 school environment. K-12 schooling is inherently biased and exists to uphold and reproduce the “matrix of colonialism” (Mignolo, 2011) where students are thought of as empty vessels that teachers need to fill with knowledge (Freire, 1970). Standards of learning and expectation are predetermined long before the students taking the class are present. The epistemology that is embedded within Ethnic Studies is in itself counter to western ideals of intellectualism and questions the foundational sources of knowledge (Cuauhtin et al., 2018). Where traditional schooling is a stark example of colonialism, Ethnic Studies intentionally challenges that notion and seeks to decolonialize knowledge by sometimes relying upon indigenous or community asset centered ways of knowing. Some teachers work to fold in student interest and identities into core social science courses, while others overlook it completely and prioritize subject matter over student learning. My study revealed that Ethnic Studies teachers are taking entirely different pedagogical approaches to a traditional way of thinking about classroom spaces (Gay, 2002). They attempt to teach in dynamic and relevant ways that honor Ethnic Studies epistemology and students’ home cultures. In many places they are succeeding and anecdotally experiencing some of the same tangible academic and social outcomes for students discussed by scholars (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Duncan, 2012; Kisker, 2012).

Ethnic Studies teachers grapple with this tension of curricular marginalization. They named both the drawbacks and benefits of the independence they are afforded as Ethnic Studies teachers in a K-12 structure that is not set up for the complex liberatory pedagogy that is fundamental to the discipline. So how then are these teachers able to navigate the incorporation

of Ethnic Studies into a rigid K-12 structure? The next section draws upon interviews, survey responses and syllabi to understand how Ethnic Studies teachers are able to reconcile this tension.

### ***Preexisting Critical Consciousness***

The Ethnic Studies teachers who participated in the study were able to navigate the marginalization of Ethnic Studies as it currently stands because they had significant foundational critical consciousness. Their knowledge of the discipline came in part because each of them spoke about having a developed critical consciousness that was shaped over time, through impactful personal experiences, and by self-reflection. This in-depth understanding of the world allowed them to elevate the benefits of Ethnic Studies while managing the drawbacks as suggested by the data. An established sense of criticality was present and discussed in each of the interviews and informed the teachers' path to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher. This critical consciousness is evident in the critical pedagogies utilized in the classroom. It helped teachers navigate and prioritize the independence that teaching Ethnic Studies affords. The teachers in my study were able to accomplish these things while crafting empowering learning environments and meeting the theoretical goals of Ethnic Studies teaching.

Clearly, teaching Ethnic Studies requires a breath of critical knowledge that teachers can use to establish a pedagogy that is in line with the Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies. Teachers are able to foster student curiosity and exploration through a variety of different avenues because of this knowledge. They are able to bring relevant and timely topics into the classroom. As was noted in the literature, resources to support an Ethnic Studies class can be scarce (Pérez Huber et al., 2006) and it can be hard to exist in a place of curricular dynamism while attending to the demands of the K-12 context. Critical consciousness helps teachers to engage students in

discussions of social justice, conversations of power associated with systems and structures in our nation, and learning about the marginalized histories of groups of people who were mostly erased from traditional history courses. Utilizing critical consciousness is empowering and can foster action oriented solutions to the existing problems in our society.

### **Study Implications**

This study adds to existent research on Ethnic Studies that often overlooks Ethnic Studies teachers and their daily practice of learning, planning and teaching Ethnic Studies courses to students in California. As I discuss in this section, there are many implications for policy makers and practitioners working in the field of education generally and Ethnic Studies specifically. For example, the findings address the need for trust and training for Ethnic Studies teachers as Ethnic Studies transitions from marginality to expanded implementation in K-12 settings, particularly in California due to the recent inclusion as a high school graduation requirement. Existing policies commonly found in the K-12 setting would need to be shifted to support the teaching and learning of Ethnic Studies.

### **Recommendations**

As Ethnic Studies shifts from existing on the margins to being included in core course programming, it is essential that Ethnic Studies teachers are offered support, resources, and independence. As suggested by the data, in some cases teachers will have to work to educate themselves, their colleagues, and the larger school community in addition to the students that they teach. Preparing and recruiting educators who know how to work in the community and have a developed critical consciousness will be essential for the strength of Ethnic Studies. Teachers in all of the regional contexts also shared that supportive administrators and others in the educational hierarchy are imperative to strong Ethnic Studies programs. It will also be

essential to cultivate growth for these programs over time and ensure teacher voice is utilized when making decisions about program oversight.

### ***Increase Youth Participation Action Research***

Many of the teachers in my study called for the need to increase professional development opportunities for Ethnic Studies. They talked in depth about the amount of time they put into their own research to prepare to teach the class and the desire for more opportunities to build their knowledge. Focused professional development opportunities that highlight or provide examples of Ethnic Studies teachers connecting to the local community would be a welcome resource for many Ethnic Studies teachers. Professional developments that also offers frameworks for engaging with local communities, such as frameworks like YPAR, could also be a concrete way to help bolster Ethnic Studies teachers ability to center the local community in their classrooms. Because YPAR is a community-based social justice research framework that offers specific steps to support student-community engagement, it is a bridge for teachers to support students working on issues that impact their local communities. There are many community-based organizations that work to support Ethnic Studies teachers in engaging with local communities; however, making the explicit link between community engagement and Ethnic Studies in professional development, along with supportive administrators, could significantly bolster Ethnic Studies teachers' connections to the local community.

### ***Critical Credentialing Pathways for Teachers***

Constructing credentialing pathways that center and help grow pre-service teachers' critical consciousness is essential. Teacher education programs that establish a pathway to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher are a vital and necessary step. Programs that build teachers Ethnic Studies knowledge of the discipline coupled with developing their teaching skills are a

vital step in moving Ethnic Studies from the margins of education. As the teachers from my study shared, they each had a level of criticality prior to learning the core subject matter that exist in Ethnic Studies classes. But as the need for Ethnic Studies teachers grows, we will need a way to ensure that Ethnic Studies teachers are prepared to teach this course. Developing content knowledge, understanding critical pedagogies, and utilizing culturally sustaining pedagogies and practices are all essential elements of being an Ethnic Studies teacher. It is incumbent on the credentialing body to create a path for teachers to become Ethnic Studies teachers that relies on and teaches Ethnic Studies pedagogy. This new programming is a necessary revision to our current system where Ethnic Studies teachers must still take either a traditional English Language Arts or History-Social Science CSET exam. Passing the CSET will afford a teaching credential in California, but it will not prepare teachers to teach Ethnic Studies. A pathway to becoming an Ethnic Studies teacher needs to highlight the types of liberatory pedagogy that is missing from the current testing to become a credentialed teacher in California.

### ***Recruit Ethnic Studies Teachers from a Wide Variety of College Spaces***

Being well-versed in both criticality and counter-narratives are essential elements of strong Ethnic Studies teaching. As Ethnic Studies continues to grow in its popularity and is included on more and more school campuses, the question must be asked, how do we recruit and train more Ethnic Studies teachers. Currently in the state California there is a wide variety of ways for teachers to gain training for Ethnic Studies. We must expand and build more programs that specialize in training Ethnic Studies teachers. As we build these programs and opportunities for teacher education, it is incumbent that we recruit students from clubs, majors, and internships that prioritize criticality and counter-narratives. On campus clubs like the Black Student Unions,



MEChA programs, or other culturally based clubs may be essential for ensuring that we have enough Ethnic Studies teachers to fill the increased need.

Teacher preparation programs must also prepare pre-service teachers to contend with curricular marginalization that they will face at their school sites. New Ethnic Studies teachers may have a variety of responses to the benefits and challenges of curricular marginalization that they will face as they begin teaching but preparing teachers to expect to deal with the reality of curricular marginalization would be important. Learning opportunities centered on how to create Ethnic Studies lessons, debunk myths about Ethnic Studies, and defend your liberatory pedagogy and practices are all necessary training for Ethnic Studies teachers.

### **Study Context**

While this study utilized common qualitative methods for exploration, there were important factors that impacted the study that must be acknowledged. Each of the school districts that I worked with had a community of teachers or leaders within the district that lead the way and supported the inclusion of Ethnic Studies, resulting in creating Ethnic Studies courses and Ethnic Studies being an established graduation requirement. These districts had their own unique contexts with which to contend, but they each play a very important role in leading teaching and learning Ethnic Studies. One of the reasons that I selected districts in three different regions in California was to understand what impact the local community may have played on the teaching and learning of Ethnic Studies on school sites. Other than geographic variation, the different locations did not play a significant role in the teaching of Ethnic Studies. It is important to note, however, that because these districts had already made Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement, they are outliers. Their inclusion of Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement, must be considered when trying to generalize these findings to other school districts and contexts. These

school districts did not need to respond to top down mandates, but more often the push for the inclusion of Ethnic Studies came from the community, the students, or teachers. Because these districts and the inclusion of Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement came prior to any substantial offerings by the State Board of Education in California, these districts have had to establish, develop, or find partnerships to provide professional development for their Ethnic Studies teachers on their own. These Ethnic Studies programs were able to support the teachers' in their local context and be responsive to identified needs.

The three districts that I worked with are all in California; therefore, the findings in this study may not be generalizable to other states, contexts, and populations. California's political and educational landscape is more liberal than others. For example, in 2011, the California legislature passed the FAIR act a bill that "requires that California public schools provide Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful representations of our diverse ethnic and cultural population in the K-12 grade history and social studies curriculum" (Sacramento City Unified School District, 2016). California is one of few states that has inclusive legislative guidance. Even with these acknowledged limitations, this study is still beneficial for K-12 school communities thinking of expanding their course offerings to include Ethnic Studies both within and outside of California, institutes of Higher Education as they select and train future potential Ethnic Studies teachers, and country offices of education including local districts as they expand professional development offerings for Ethnic Studies teachers.

### **Study Limitations**

A clear limitation of the study is that the participating teachers self-selected into the different parts of the research, specifically the interview process. For the most part, these are teachers who feel a high level of confidence in their knowledge of Ethnic Studies and their

Ethnic Studies teaching practices. These are teachers who are seasoned and knowledgeable in Ethnic Studies, their districts have varying but existing support for them as Ethnic Studies practitioners, so their perspectives are unique. The teachers interviewed are not first-year teachers trying to figure out what it means to teach Ethnic Studies, rather they are collaborative veterans who have a grasp on the content and a vision for what transformative learning environments look like in practice. Many of the teachers interviewed discussed and made a distinction between this past year of teaching on Zoom and the limitations of teaching Ethnic Studies, a class where the classroom community is essential, remotely. For the purpose of my research, I did not focus this past year of remote teaching but more holistically on their experiences of teaching Ethnic Studies during non-pandemic years.

### **Suggestion for Future Research**

As Ethnic Studies continues to move from the margins, there are many opportunities for additional research that centers the many different facets of Ethnic Studies. California's Governor Gavin Newsom just signed AB101, making Ethnic Studies a high school graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2029-2030. Bringing Ethnic Studies into mainstream education will no doubt provide rich learning opportunities for high school students across California. But with no clear plan to scale the preparation of Ethnic Studies teachers right now, there will be clear areas for further research to identify and study support at all level of Ethnic Studies programming. Research will be needed specifically on how to ensure that students across California have access to highly qualified Ethnic Studies teachers once we deplete our supply of teachers who volunteer to teach Ethnic Studies and need teachers who do not have the personal connection to the discipline to teach the class. Additionally, research that addresses how teachers are and are not prepared to teach Ethnic Studies in teacher education programs, as well as limited

professional development for Ethnic Studies teachers, could also illuminate critical information about teaching and learning in the Ethnic Studies classroom. The research possibilities are truly vast since so little research on Ethnic Studies in the K-12 context currently exists.

Ethnic Studies is positioned as being a very powerful transformative learning environment for students that has quantifiable positive outcomes. The opportunities for Ethnic Studies focused research is endless. A study that is focused on the long-term impact of taking Ethnic Studies in high school as students graduate and transition out of the K-12 setting could illuminate the student experience to better understand the context, experiences, and impact of Ethnic Studies. Additionally, there is no one way to teach Ethnic Studies. Some schools take a comparative approach to Ethnic Studies while others focus on the historical experiences of one racial/ethnic group at a time. A study that looks at the impact of these instructional differences on student understanding could also shed new learning for the field of Ethnic Studies teaching.

After completing my research study, I am reflecting on how many additional questions that I would love to ask Ethnic Studies teachers. There is so much more learning and understanding needed on Ethnic Studies in K-12. The questions that guided my study tended to be more overarching, as I was trying to get a sense of what teachers experience and grapple with as they teach Ethnic Studies on a daily basis. Talking to teachers about their practice is important and can be revealing. Aside from practice, current Ethnic Studies teachers could offer their expertise on structural questions such as: Developmentally, what age or what age level is appropriate to teach Ethnic Studies? What should students be getting out of an Ethnic Studies class? What needs to be incorporated into teacher preparation Ethnic Studies courses to support the teaching of strong Ethnic Studies courses? Without a cannon of agreed upon resources, how are teachers creating materials and learning experiences for their students? We are so early on in

studying Ethnic Studies, the research opportunities are many and will offer more insight into a holistic understanding of the discipline.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study provide an important pathway into the experiences and reflections of Ethnic Studies teachers. Highlighting Ethnic Studies teachers' perspectives, this research investigated how salient Ethnic Studies theoretical frameworks were in practice and identified the underlying conditions that supported Ethnic Studies instruction. In the end this study provided a space for teacher participants to reflect on the beliefs that guide their classroom pedagogies and practices. By centering the voices and learning from the productive struggle of those doing the work of bringing Ethnic studies curriculum to life, this study honors those actively working in the tension of the peripheralization of Ethnic Studies. Given the current limited number of studies centered on Ethnic Studies teachers, this study will provide significant connections to the teachers' experiences from this research and continue to support those who work outside of traditional school pedagogies. The findings of this study provide insight into the current challenges and opportunities that current Ethnic Studies teachers navigate as they work to teach K-12 students and positively impact their lives.

## Appendix A

### Email Script - Recruitment Tool Survey

Hello. My name is Kimberly Young and I am a researcher at UCLA. I am studying Ethnic Studies teachers in order to incorporate teacher perspective and experiences into scholarship, as well as to understand the goals that Ethnic Studies teachers have for their students and courses. Given the historically significant moment that we are in, Ethnic Studies teachers have a great deal to contribute to conversations about how to build a more racially just society.

Please take 5-10 minutes outside of school hours to complete the following survey. All participation in this study is voluntary and your identity will be completely anonymous. At the end of the survey, there will be an option for further participation in the research project. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Thank you,  
Kimberly Young

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Survey

Question	Answer Options
How long have you been teaching?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>This is my first year</b></li> <li>- <b>1 – 2 years</b></li> <li>- <b>3 – 5 years</b></li> <li>- <b>6-10 years</b></li> <li>- <b>More than 10 years</b></li> </ul>
Do you currently teach an Ethnic Studies course at your school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Yes</b></li> <li>- <b>No, but I've taught one in the past</b></li> <li>- <b>No, I've never taught an Ethnic Studies course (Skip to end the survey)</b></li> </ul>
How long have you been teaching Ethnic Studies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>This is my first year</b></li> <li>- <b>1 – 2 years</b></li> <li>- <b>3 – 5 years</b></li> <li>- <b>6 - 10 years</b></li> <li>- <b>More than 10 years</b></li> </ul>
Please write in the course title of your Ethnic Studies course(s)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Write-in option</b></li> </ul>
If you teach multiple Ethnic Studies courses, please select the course that you have taught the longest when answering the remaining questions.	
How long is the Ethnic Studies course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Semester Course</b></li> <li>- <b>Year Course</b></li> <li>- <b>Other: Write-in option</b></li> </ul>
What is the best way to describe the Ethnic Studies course that you teach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Elective course</b></li> <li>- <b>Graduation requirement</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (Write-in option)</b></li> </ul>
At which grade level is your Ethnic Studies course taught? Select all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>9<sup>th</sup> graders</b></li> <li>- <b>10<sup>th</sup> graders</b></li> <li>- <b>11<sup>th</sup> graders</b></li> <li>- <b>12<sup>th</sup> graders</b></li> </ul>
What are the course of objectives of your Ethnic Studies class?	<b>Write-in open-ended response</b>
What informs these Ethnic Studies course objectives?	<p><b>Drop Down Menu</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Personal Research</b></li> <li>- <b>Ethnic Studies Scholarship</b></li> <li>- <b>Ethnic Studies Trainings</b></li> <li>- <b>Undergraduate Major</b></li> <li>- <b>California Social Sciences Framework</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (Write-in option)</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Explain (optional)</b></p>

<p>What are some common (or recurring) instructional practices that you use in your Ethnic Studies classroom?</p>	<p><b>Drop Down menu</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Activate students' prior knowledge</b></li> <li>- <b>Make learning contextual</b></li> <li>- <b>Make learning localized</b></li> <li>- <b>Encourage students to leverage their cultural capital</b></li> <li>- <b>Build relationships with students and families</b></li> <li>- <b>Reciprocal teaching strategies</b></li> <li>- <b>Differentiation</b></li> <li>- <b>Discussion</b></li> <li>- <b>Analysis of complex texts</b></li> <li>- <b>Image analysis</b></li> <li>- <b>Student-centered learning</b></li> <li>- <b>Research</b></li> <li>- <b>Action Research</b></li> <li>- <b>Cooperative learning</b></li> <li>- <b>Active learning</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (with write-in option)</b></li> </ul>
<p>What are some of the goals that are represented in your Ethnic Studies curricula? Please prioritize the top 5.</p>	<p><b>Drop Down menu</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Student empowerment</b></li> <li>- <b>Fostering student intellectualism</b></li> <li>- <b>Student academic engagement</b></li> <li>- <b>Student academic achievement</b></li> <li>- <b>Utilizing curriculum as counternarrative</b></li> <li>- <b>Incorporating historical narratives overlooked in other Social Science classes</b></li> <li>- <b>Analyzing structural forces of racism and colonialism in order to dismantle oppression in its many forms</b></li> <li>- <b>Exploring Cultural Identities</b></li> <li>- <b>Analyzing students' intersectional identities</b></li> <li>- <b>Engaging with the local community</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (with write-in option)</b></li> </ul>
<p>Are the previously identified instructional practices unique to your Ethnic Studies classes?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Yes</b></li> <li>- <b>No</b></li> <li>- <b>Explain (mandatory)</b></li> </ul>
<p>What are some challenges that you have experienced unique to being an Ethnic Studies teacher?</p>	<p><b>Write-in open-ended response</b></p>
<p>Imagine you are called upon by your school to help teachers be prepared to have</p>	<p><b>Write-in open-ended response</b></p>



conversations about race and policing, how would you approach this request?	
How would you describe your school setting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Urban</b></li> <li>- <b>Rural</b></li> <li>- <b>Suburban</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (with write-in option)</b></li> </ul>
Which single subject teaching credential(s) do you hold? Select all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>English</b></li> <li>- <b>Social Science</b></li> <li>- <b>Agriculture</b></li> <li>- <b>Art</b></li> <li>- <b>Biological Sciences (Specialized)*</b></li> <li>- <b>Business Chemistry (Specialized)*</b></li> <li>- <b>Foundational-Level General Science</b></li> <li>- <b>Foundational-Level Mathematics</b></li> <li>- <b>Geosciences (Specialized)*</b></li> <li>- <b>Health Science</b></li> <li>- <b>Home Economics</b></li> <li>- <b>Industrial and Technology Education</b></li> <li>- <b>Mathematics</b></li> <li>- <b>Music</b></li> <li>- <b>Physical Education</b></li> <li>- <b>Physics (Specialized)*</b></li> <li>- <b>Science: Biological Sciences</b></li> <li>- <b>Science: Chemistry</b></li> <li>- <b>Science: Geosciences</b></li> <li>- <b>Science: Physics</b></li> <li>- <b>World Language: English Language Development</b></li> <li>- <b>World Languages-Languages other than English</b></li> <li>- <b>Other (with write-in option)</b></li> </ul>

**Further research participation**

Optional, please attach your Ethnic Studies course syllabus after removing identifying markers such as the school name or your name.

Attach syllabus here:

Additionally, please include your name and contact information below if you would be willing to spend 30 minutes to be interviewed on Zoom about your experience and perspectives teaching Ethnic Studies. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card for participating in the interview.

Contact information: name, email address or phone number best to reach you

Thank you so much for participating in this important research.

## Appendix C

### Interview Script

Hello. My name is Kimberly Young and I am a researcher at UCLA. I am studying Ethnic Studies teachers in order to incorporate teacher perspective and experiences into scholarship, as well as to understand the goals that Ethnic Studies teachers have for their students and courses. Given the historically significant moment that we are in, Ethnic Studies teachers have a great deal to contribute to conversations about how to build a more racially just society.

The following consent form includes the details of the study which I will read to you now.

(Read form)

Again, all participation in this study is voluntary. Please sign the form and confirm verbally your consent to participate in this interview if you would like to proceed.

Thank you,  
Kimberly Young

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form - Interview

**TITLE OF STUDY: LISTENING TO THE TEACHER: Bridging Theory and Practice in Ethnic Studies Pedagogy**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kimberly Young**

**SPONSOR: Dr. Pedro Noguera and Dr. Kristen Rohanna**

The following information is provided to inform you about this research study and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or to end your participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not be held against you in any way.

**If you wish to participate, please sign the consent form and return it to the principal investigator, Kimberly Young. You will sign the form and email an image of the signature page to me at kimberlyyoung@g.ucla.edu. Please keep a copy for your records.**

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to better understand how districts develop and implement Ethnic Studies curricula. In particular, I am interested in the incorporation of new pedagogy about sports and social justice in the Oakland Unified School District.

### PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed once for approximately 30-45 minutes regarding your experience and goals in teaching Ethnic Studies courses. This interview will take place remotely using Zoom.

**The study will include up to 25 Ethnic Studies LAUSD teachers across different school sites. I will collect names and email addresses for each interview participant. However, responses will be confidential and pseudonyms will be utilized if/when necessary. Participant identifying information will not be shared with anyone other than the principal researcher of this study.**

*Please place your initial below to allow us to audio record the interview (if you do not consent, the researcher will take notes instead of audio record):*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I consent*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I do not consent*

I estimate that your maximum time commitment will be approximate 30 minutes over the course of the year (i.e. interview and member checks).

## COMPENSATION, COSTS, AND REIMBURSEMENT

**Participants will receive a \$10 gift card for participating in the interview.** No costs are associated with your participation in this research.

## RISKS

There are no known physical risks associated with taking part in the study. However, questions being asked may make you uncomfortable and if there is a breach of confidentiality, there may be embarrassment and/or a loss of social reputation. Also, completing study activities may be an inconvenience to your time. If you feel uncomfortable during any portion of the study, you may discontinue and end the data collection at any time. **If any particular question causes discomfort, you have the right not to answer**

## BENEFITS

There is no direct benefit to the participant for taking part in this study. I anticipate that the study will inform Ethnic Studies scholarship, Ethnic Studies teacher preparation, Ethnic Studies professional development, Ethnic Studies curricular development and Ethnic Studies instruction in your district.

## WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative to participation in this study is to choose not to participate.

- You may decline or discontinue participation at any time
- You can agree to be in the study now and change your mind later
- If you wish to stop, please tell us right away
- At any time, you may leave this study early or withdraw your data from the study

You may be taken out of the study if:

- Staying in the study would be harmful
- You fail to follow instructions
- The study is cancelled
- There may be other reasons to take you out of the study that we do not know at this time

If a participant says that they would no longer like to participate, any data they wish to be destroyed from the study will be discarded and will not be used for the remainder of the research. All recording and transcription files from computer and any recording devices will be deleted. Their name will be removed from the list of pseudonyms.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality will be ensured through careful procedures. Interviews will be conducted in private and consent forms will be stored in a locked, secure location where only I will have access. Identifying information will not be used in the storing of data. Data will be kept on a secure, password protected computer using encryption software. After the audio files have been transcribed, they will be destroyed.

The data will be stored on a password-protected computer that only I will have access to. The data will be kept until the completion of research projects related to the data. All research will be completed within three and a half years – by October, 2023.

I intend to share back the information that you provide to us during the interviews in ways that serve you and district leaders. Every effort will be made to ensure that no specific data will be connected back to particular research participants.

If the results of the study are published or presented, I will not use your name, or any other identifying information. **Data will be presented in the aggregate to the district. Any quotes from you will be entirely de-identified. The chance of identification of any participant will be near zero.**

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm. In some instances, a representative of the University of California, Los Angeles Office of Research Integrity may review research-related records for quality assurance in order to ensure that relevant laws and guidelines are followed.

## VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your decision to participate or not participate in this study is solely up to you and without penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. If you wish to withdraw from the study or withdraw your data from the study, please contact the principal investigator (Kimberly Young) at the University of California, Los Angeles at (650) 283-9461 or **kimberlyyoung@g.ucla.edu**.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the researcher at 650-283-9461. If you have questions about your rights or complaints as a research subject, please contact the IRB Chairperson at 310-825-7122 during business hours, or to contact them by email at [webIRBHelp@research.ucla.edu](mailto:webIRBHelp@research.ucla.edu).

### Participant's Statement

I have read this informed consent document and the materials contained in it has been explained to me verbally. All of my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Printed Name of Participant

---

Date

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol

Hello, the purpose of this study is to better understand the goals that Ethnic Studies teachers have for their courses and student learning.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and may be terminated at any time. If there is a question that I ask that makes you feel uncomfortable, you are under no obligation to answer it. This interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### **Interview Questions – Need to shorten and revise questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about how you came to teach Ethnic Studies.
2. Walk me through what you consider to be an effective day teaching in Ethnic Studies.
3. What goals do you have for your Ethnic Studies students?
  - a. Potential Follow-up Questions:
    - i. What do you want your ES to do for students?
    - ii. What do you want your students to take away from your ES course?
    - iii. What do you want the impact of your course to be? –
    - iv. Can you describe a takeaway, ideally if you were to see a student's describing what they learned in your class to another student who was deciding to take ES, what might that student talk about?
4. So then, how do you reach those goals?
5. So, tell me a learning experience you designed that led students to your boarder goals of the course? (What worked? What didn't work and how did you revise?)
6. In what ways is teaching Ethnic Studies similar to other classes that you teach or have taught?
7. What does your curriculum decision making process look like for your Ethnic Studies class?
8. What teaching practices do you use in your Ethnic Studies class?
9. How do you measure the level of impact of what you are teaching on students?
10. In what ways is teaching Ethnic Studies different from other classes that you teach or have taught?
  - a. Potential Follow-up questions:
    - i. What do you think is needed from the school?
    - ii. What do you think is needed in the classroom?
    - iii. What do you think teachers themselves need to have or embody?
    - iv. What do you think students themselves need to have or embody?
    - v. What do you think inhibits strong Ethnic Studies teaching?
11. As an Ethnic Studies teacher, what challenges do you face that you think are particular to teaching Ethnic Studies?
12. What do you need from the school, the classroom, to create a powerful learning experience?
  - a. What do you think is on the horizon for Ethnic Studies or Ethnic Studies teaching?

\*\*The interviews will be semi-structured. I will follow up with probing questions throughout.

## Appendix F

### Course Syllabus Document Analysis Protocol

Based on “Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies” (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) as a conceptual framework:

Research Question: In what ways, if at all, do Ethnic Studies teachers’ goals and pedagogical practices align with Ethnic Studies’ theoretical goals?

1. Curriculum as Counter-Narrative: Curriculum from the perspectives of people of color
2. Criticality: Structural analysis of racism and colonialism that works toward dismantling multiple forms of oppression
3. Reclaiming Cultural Identities: Deep knowledge of where students come from that challenges deculturizing processes; learning about the historical contributions of their communities
4. Intersectionality and Multiplicity: Attending to students’ multiple social identities and their positions within interesting relations of power
5. Community Engagement: Community-based pedagogies and experiences that bridge classrooms to community and social movements
6. Pedagogy That is Culturally Responsive and Mediated: Drawing upon students’ lived experiences and sociocultural environments; intentional design of learning spaces
7. Students as Intellectuals: Respecting and fostering students’ curiosity, thinking, and intellectualism

Adapted from: Sleeter, C. E., & Zavala, M. (2020). Transformative Ethnic Studies in schools:

Curriculum, pedagogy, and research. Teachers College Press.



## Appendix G

### Crosswalk of Stated Goals in the Survey & The Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies

Goals as stated in the Survey	Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies
Student empowerment/ Analyzing students' intersectional identities	Intersectionality and Multiplicity
Fostering student intellectualism	Students as Intellectuals
Utilizing curriculum as counter-narrative/ Incorporating historical narratives overlooked in other Social Science classes	Curriculum as Counter-Narrative
Student Academic Engagement	Pedagogy That is Culturally Responsive and Mediated
Analyzing structural forces of racism and colonialism in order to dismantle oppression in its many forms	Criticality
Engaging with the local community	Community Engagement
Exploring Cultural Identities	Reclaiming Cultural Identities

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