

# **The Role of Ethnic Studies in Addressing Educational Inequality: Evidence from Tucson and San Francisco**

Nolan L. Cabrera, PhD

Associate Professor, University of Arizona

## **Tucson Unified School District**

- *Context*
  - Mexican American Studies (MAS) courses for juniors and seniors
  - Year-long (two semester) sequence in Social Studies or Language Arts
  - Curriculum reflecting local concerns and issues, aligned with state standards
  - Students who took these courses were: a) Low-income, b) Overwhelmingly Mexican American, and c) Had very low GPAs *prior* to taking MAS classes
- *Results*
  - More likely to pass *all* AIMS (Arizona Standardized tests) including Math
  - More likely to graduate from high school
  - The more classes taken, the more likely these outcomes (passing AIMS and graduating)

## **San Francisco Unified School District**

- *Context*
  - Students with pre-high school GPA <2.0 or <87.5 attendance rate
  - Year-long ethnic studies courses targeting “at-risk” students
  - Offered to 9<sup>th</sup> graders
- *Results*
  - Attendance: +21 percentage points
  - GPA: 1.4 grade points
  - Credits earned: +23 credits

## **Lessons Learned**

- Targeting low performing students, but *not* remedial
- Classes need to count for core credit (*not* electives), and oriented in cultural contexts of the students implemented by well-trained teachers
- Classes need to be two semester credits
- Ideally offered as early as possible (Tucson was late)

***Ultimately, ethnic studies courses done well are a promising means of addressing educational inequality.***

## **Core Components and Additional Benefits of *Effective* Ethnic Studies**

### **Critique of Monoculturalism**

“What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, when someone with the authority of a teacher describes our society, and you are not in it? Such an experience can be disorienting—a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”

-Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*

### **What DOES NOT work**

- Heroes and holidays (e.g., reciting “I Have a Dream” and nothing else)
- Food and *fiestas* (e.g., giving out tacos on *Cinco de Mayo*)

### **What DOES work: Core Components of Effective Ethnic Studies**

- 1) Explicit identification of the point of view from which knowledge emanates, and the relationship between social location and perspective;
- 2) Examination of U.S. colonialism historically, as well as how relations of colonialism continue to play out;
- 3) Examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation;
- 4) Probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold; and
- 5) Studying one’s community’s creative and intellectual products, both historic and contemporary. (Sleeter, 2011)

### **Outcomes (when done well; from empirical scholarship)**

- Improved literacy
- Improved math/science skills
- Positive academic identity
- Agency development
- “Democratic outcomes” (Sleeter, 2011)

### **Further Reading**

Cabrera, N. L., Milem, J. F., Jaquette, O, & Marx, R. W. (2014). Missing the (student achievement) forest for all the (political) trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(6), 1084-1118. DOI: 10.3102/0002831214553705.

Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127-166.

Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

For Ethnic Studies Teacher/Administrator/Organizer Training, please see the *Xicanx Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO) Institute*:

<https://www.xicanoinstitute.org>

And *Acosta educational partnership*: <http://www.acostaeducationalpartnership.com>