

“Impact of Ethnic Studies Pedagogy on Latinx Student Achievement”

Jose Tapia

University of California, Santa Barbara

Department of Chicana Studies

Abstract

Latinx students currently make up a large portion of the K-12 student population in the U.S. Because the Latinx population is the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the U.S., it is critical to address the persistent educational achievement gap between Latinx students and White students, or the future of the U.S. economy will suffer. Many scholars in the field of educational studies have suggested including more culturally relevant pedagogy in K-12 education. Culturally relevant ethnic studies have been shown to boost academic success and student engagement among K-12 Latinx students, but more research must be done. This study examines the impact of an ethnic studies course, Mexican-American Literature, on a Latinx student in a Southern California high school and compares this to the narrative of a student who has never taken an ethnic studies course. The results show that both students believe that ethnic studies pedagogy can effectively improve student classroom engagement in K-12 education. The student in Mexican-American Literature expressed feeling more engaged in this class than in most of the other classes in his K-12 experience, and the other student expressed that she would have wanted to learn about her history and culture.

Introduction

Latinx students currently make up 26% of the K-12 student population in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In California, 54% of the student population is Latinx (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Perez et al. (2015) report that the Latinx population continues to be the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the US. Unfortunately, the growth in baccalaureate attainment among Latinx students is not keeping pace with this statistic. The level of educational attainment among Latinx students continues to lag behind that of White students and other ethnic groups. For instance, in 2014, 75% of White people 25 years or older obtained a bachelor's degree, compared to only 6% of Latinxs. That same year, 80% of White students graduated from high school, compared to only 54% of Latinx students (Perez, et al., 2015). There will be serious consequences to the U.S. economy if the Latinx population does not receive adequate academic preparation and career training. In California alone, nearly 2 million jobs will be unfilled by 2030 if Latinx educational underachievement persists (Excelencia Report, 2018).

Researchers have suggested the need for culturally relevant pedagogy in U.S. K-12 schools as a way to help close the achievement gap (De los Rios, et. al, 2014). Scholars argue that ethnic studies courses can boost classroom engagement and encourage positive attitudes toward school among K-12 Latinx students. In turn, better engagement will boost academic success. Ethnic studies is defined as curricula that centers around the socio-historical perspectives of ethnic minorities by emphasizing multiculturalism, community activism, social justice, intersectionality, personal narratives, and Critical Race Theory (Perez et al., 2015). The purpose of this interview study is to examine the impact of an ethnic studies course on student engagement. Therefore, two in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews with local Latinx high school students were conducted. The first interviewee participated in an ethnic studies course and the second did not.

Literature Review

Impact of Ethnic Studies on K-12 Latinx Students

Multiple researchers have shown that ethnic studies pedagogy can help Latinx high school students significantly increase their school attendance and their grades. For example, researchers from Stanford University partnered with the San Francisco Unified School District, which has a 26% Latinx student population, to launch an ethnic studies pilot program in four

high schools (SFUSD School Site List and Summary, 2015). The researchers tracked 1,400 ninth graders enrolled in the ethnic studies program for the entire school year and found that the participants increased their attendance by 21% and improved their GPAs by an average of 1.4 points (Dee & Penner, 2017).

Furthermore, Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) tracked 41 Latinx students in three Detroit middle schools over the span of two years. The researchers interviewed the students about their ethnic identity and monitored their academic outcomes. On average, the students' grades dropped as they moved from middle school to high school, but the grades of students with strong self-reported ethnic-identity pride dropped the least. This is critical because ethnic studies courses have been shown to instill ethnic pride in K-12 Latinx students (Perez et al., 2015).

Additionally, ethnic studies courses have been found to boost Latinx students' performance on standardized tests. Cammarota and Romero (2009) demonstrated that Chicax students enrolled in the Social Justice Education Project, an ethnic studies program at Cerro High School in Tucson, Arizona, significantly outscored White students on state standardized tests. Among the participants, 34 out of 36 students passed the reading exam, 35 out of 36 passed the writing exam, and 27 out of 36 passed the math exam. In personal interviews, the students consistently credited the ethnic studies program for their academic success. Also, Cabrera, Millem, and Marx (2014) sampled 26,022 Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) high school students, 80% of which were Latinx. The researchers determined that students enrolled in TUSD's Mexican-American Studies program were more likely to pass the standardized tests than students who were not in the program.

Furthermore, Latinx students in ethnic studies programs are more likely to graduate from high school. Chicax students in the Social Justice Education Program at Cerros High School attained graduation rates exceeding those of their White peers: 95% compared to 84% (Camarota & Romero, 2009). Cabrera et al. (2014) also found that Chicax students were much more likely to graduate high school if they were enrolled in Mexican-American Studies classes.

Ethnic studies can also enhance literacy skills among Latinx students. Gay (2010) examined the effects of the Multicultural Literacy Program, which emphasized diverse authors, on students in grades K-8 in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The student population in this area is largely non-White and includes a 4% Latinx population. Through classroom observations and analyzing students' work, the researcher found that students showed improvements in knowledge of

various writing forms and structures, vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency, and writing proficiency. Similarly, Morrell, Duenas, Garcia, and Lopez (2013) showed that students at Wilson High School in Los Angeles, where 92% of students are Latinx, improved their writing skills when their teachers approached their English classes using ethnic studies pedagogy (U.S. News & World Report, 2016).

Morell et al. (2013) revealed that students in classes that implemented ethnic studies pedagogy developed more positive student-teacher relationships and felt more engaged in the classroom. One Wilson High School teacher indicated that this style of teaching allowed her to “better understand her students and create a classroom environment that is welcoming.” In fact, students feel more welcome and engaged in the classroom if the material is culturally relevant in terms of themes and content (Gay, 2010).

De los Rios (2013) offers a case study of 35 Latinx students of different backgrounds enrolled in her Chicano/a-Latino/a studies program at Pomona High School. After analyzing weekly written reflections, recording class discussions, and conducting interviews, De los Rios concludes that the course gave students a stronger sense of belonging and solidarity within their school and their communities.

Lastly, Latinx students enrolled in ethnic studies programs feel more motivated to pursue higher education. Cabrera et al. (2014) found that students enrolled in Mexican-American studies classes conveyed intention to enroll in college at a higher rate than their peers. Ten of seventeen Latinx Cerros High School students enrolled in college after two years in their high school’s ethnic studies program (Cammarota, 2007). Students overwhelmingly reported that the Social Justice Education ethnic studies program influenced them to consider attending college.

Impact of Ethnic Studies on White and Non-Latinx Students

Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, and Landreman (2002) sampled 8,051 incoming first-year college students from three major universities about their K-12 education experiences. The sample primarily consisted of 70.8% White students, 22.5% students of color, and 4.2% Latinx students. The researchers concluded that students who had significant interactions with peers of different ethnic backgrounds in their K-12 schooling were more likely to acknowledge the importance of social justice and displayed better critical thinking skills. This is similar to Social Contact Theory (Valencia, 2010), which posits that exposure to students of different racial

backgrounds can reduce the prevalence of racial discrimination and prejudice within student populations.

Vasquez (2005) examined the responses of 18 college students who were interviewed about their experience in a Chicano literature course. Eleven out of the eighteen students were Latinx, who all said the texts helped them develop a sense of community and empowerment; however, all seven of the non-Latinx students reported positive experiences as well. They found shared human issues in the texts that they could relate to while learning to sympathize with the struggles of Latinx people.

The Present Study

Overall, the literature indicates that ethnic studies can enhance multiple achievement factors among K-12 Latinx students, including improved attendance, grades, standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, literacy skills, classroom engagement, sense of belonging at school, and interest in attending college. While the benefits of ethnic studies on quantitative student outcomes (grades, attendance, etc.) are clear, more research needs to be done on how ethnic studies can impact student engagement. Therefore, the research question for this study is, How does taking an ethnic studies course influence classroom engagement and views on education?

Method

In order to examine the impact of ethnic studies pedagogy on student engagement and attitudes towards school, the researcher conducted two in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews of Latinx high school students to get a full understanding of their K-12 educational experience. Both students, who are high school seniors and 18 years old, were recruited using a convenience sample from a local high school in Southern California in which the student population is 56% Latinx, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian, 38% White, and 1% African American (Santa Barbara High School, 2018). Their identities will be kept confidential throughout the study and pseudonyms will be employed: “Cas” for the student who has taken an ethnic studies course and “Iris” for the student who has not taken one. In the interviews, the researcher analyzed (1) family background, (2) K-12 educational experiences, and (3) future educational goals. After transcribing both interviews, thoroughly analyzing each transcript, developing codes, and searching for emerging themes in the data, three major themes emerged:

student frustration at the lack of accurate historical interpretation, the general importance of ethnic studies, and student differences in future education goals.

Results

Lack of Accurate Historical Representation

The interviews revealed that both of these students have noticed a lack of accurate historical analysis and representation of Natives and Mexicans in K-12 education. Iris repeatedly said that she has not learned about the history and culture of Mexicans in the U.S. in school. For instance, she expressed that she did not learn about the history of Santa Barbara as Chumash land or as one of the first Mexican pueblos of California. When I mentioned this historical background briefly, she seemed to believe that this lack of representation in K-12 education is tied to larger societal discrimination against Mexican people. For example, when the researcher asked her, “Why do you think they don’t teach Mexican-American history in school?” She said, “They just want to hide it, or maybe not let us know...they don’t want Mexicans here.” Iris feels that ignoring the history of Mexicans in the U.S. within mainstream curricula is driven by a racist political agenda.

Similarly, Cas explains that he has experienced continual dissatisfaction with the emphasis on Eurocentric, colonial historical perspectives in mainstream curricula throughout his K-12 education:

[Studying history in high school] is about, like, understanding a certain narrative and memorizing key aspects of a certain narrative and regurgitating that on a multiple choice test, and that’s not really historical analysis. It’s sort of frustrating and boring.

In fact, Cas believes that most subjects in school are “tainted by colonial narratives and Whiteness”. He reports strongly disliking English classes in high school: “My traditional English experience has been—it was very much like White—really boring.” Cas is also highly critical of the standardization of pedagogy in the K-12 public schooling, as shown by the excerpt below:

Pedagogically, a lot of the teachers are very much entrenched in the traditional Western style of teaching of top-down hierarchy within the class—and that’s just reinforced by the bureaucratic system where teachers who try to innovate and stuff are restricted by the standardized and rules set over everything.

Cas is clearly critical of standardized pedagogy, which he has experienced in most of K-12 education.

Importance of Ethnic Studies in K-12 Education

However, Cas posits that the ethnic studies class he is currently taking, Mexican-American Literature, deviates from the norm in terms of pedagogy:

This class, coming from not only a literary perspective, but its context within conversations about race and borders and putting in that context gives a different value to what you're reading, you know. It's less obscure to some conversation about Shakespeare and Europe. This [Mexican-American Lit] class more relates to the conditions, you know, happening in Santa Barbara.

Cas emphasizes the idea that the Mexican-American Literature class has presented narratives that are relevant to the social issues he sees in his community, especially immigration: "Chumash people have to work with the immigrants affected by neocolonialism in Latin America and so the circles are very much interwoven."

In addition to challenging hegemonic historical narratives, Cas attributes his positive experience in the Mexican-American Literature class to his relationship with the teacher. He relays:

Yeah, I think there are teachers that really try to base their practice in like a creative and student-driven approach, and I think that, definitely, Mr. V approaches it from that angle...like right now we're incorporating theater into it—El Teatro Campesino [United Farm Workers theatre troupe] and their work in the classroom is for me just much more engaging.

Cas reports feeling much more engaged by the content and teaching style within Mr. V's class than by the content and teaching styles within other classes. For example, Cas explains that he really enjoyed reading culturally relevant texts like the *Popol Vuh* [Maya creation stories].

Both students establish the fact that they have not learned much about their own cultural backgrounds in K-12 education, but they both assert that it is important to shape education in a way that represents the diversity of students in their school. Iris has not had any exposure to Mexican-American history or any other type of ethnic studies in school; however, when asked, "Why is it important for Latin-American people to know their history?" she explains how she thinks this type of education would be beneficial:

To know about what has happened to us, I think it's important to know their history... to know each person's history and understand how they are and how they feel.

She believes that students from different backgrounds can relate to each other better if they understand each other's history and culture. Similarly, Cas thinks that high school curricula

should offer more critical analyses of history, which would include “indigenous people, Black history, etc.” Cas conveys the idea that ethnic studies pedagogy is necessary to give marginalized students better representation in the social sciences.

Future Education Goals

The two students had different perspectives on higher education and college. When asked what her goals were after high school, Iris expressed some interest in going to college, but she was unsure of what she wanted to study:

[I applied] to SBCC [Santa Barbara City College]. [Interviewer: What are you interested in studying?] I don't know.

She did not express in concrete terms whether or not she would pursue a college degree. On the other hand, Cas stated that he will surely attend college: “I applied to a few different colleges and I'm seeing where I'm getting in. I see the importance of higher education, so that's sort of the path that I'm going to take.”

However, Cas stated that he will only stay in college and finish a degree if he feels a sense of belonging in the community and finds a fulfilling area of study. He said he is “skeptical” as to whether he will really enjoy the college academic experience, due to the fact that he has been so disillusioned by his K-12 educational experience. Cas describes feeling “jaded and angry”, but he hopes that college will offer a more wholesome experience.

Discussion

Ultimately, both students claimed they were proud of their ethnic identity. This is important because research has shown that students with a positive ethnic identity are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes (Altschul et al., 2006), which is why ethnic studies pedagogy tries to promote this (Perez et al., 2015). Cas says that he would have wanted to study Native history more in school to better understand his background and to feel more engaged. Iris is not able to discuss her indigenous roots in Mexico. Through centuries of colonization, many Mexicans have had their Native identities and histories erased. Reclaiming Native identity, history, and knowledge—the process of “decolonization” —is a central tenet of Chicano/a/x studies ideology, which Iris has not been exposed to in her K-12 education. Due to the lack of this type of ethnic studies pedagogy, she has missed out on the opportunity to study her roots, as many Chicano/Latinx students in college ethnic studies courses do.

Cas's positive relationship with his Mexican-American Literature teacher, Mr. V, is evidence that ethnic studies courses are often spaces that allow for more positive student-teacher relationships than traditional classes do (Morell et al., 2013). Also, as a Latino teacher with Mexican roots himself, Mr. V could serve as a positive role model, since Chicano teachers who share a similar background with their students can enhance the students' learning more effectively (Valencia, 2010). Furthermore, Cas's satisfaction with the class reading material is a testament to the fact that multicultural reading material can increase students' enjoyment of reading (Gay, 2010). However, he states that he would have developed a better sense of belonging if he had encountered ethnic studies before high school, an idea that is supported by the literature (De Los Rios, 2013). Cas clearly emphasizes that he would have felt much more engaged in his classes throughout his K-12 education if he were exposed to more multicultural perspectives on language, history, natural sciences, and social sciences. On the other hand, Iris feels like she missed out on learning more about her own history and culture entirely.

Both students clearly state that they believe K-12 education in the U.S. should include ethnic studies courses so students can better relate to each other. This is crucial, because students who learn about different ethnic backgrounds can develop broader social perspectives, better critical thinking skills, and increased social justice values (Hurtado et al., 2002). Students can also identify shared human issues and similar social conditions between ethnic groups, which allows them to build intergroup solidarity (Vasquez, 2005).

Lastly, the literature indicates that ethnic studies courses can encourage students to pursue a college education. However, in this study, family influences had the greatest effect on shaping the participants' future education goals. Although Iris is not sure about attending college, she is adamant about finishing high school because her parents did not have that opportunity. Likewise, Cas wants to attend college largely because family members who struggled in education have encouraged him to do so. Although it was not the ethnic studies course that inspired Cas to pursue higher education, he explains that his family and community members have exposed him to ethnic studies pedagogy in the way they critically analyze the history of colonization in Santa Barbara and in the books his father has shared with him at home.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature supports many of the findings of this study. For instance, the literature reveals that ethnic studies courses can enhance K-12 student classroom engagement

and attitudes. The researcher found that the student enrolled in the Mexican-American Literature ethnic studies course felt much more engaged by the course content and teaching style of this class than that of his other classes. The literature also shows that ethnic studies courses can create a better sense of belonging at school among Latinx students. In fact, the student enrolled in Mexican-American Literature reported that he would have felt a better sense of engagement and belonging in elementary and middle school if he had been exposed to ethnic studies. Instead, he experienced constant disengagement due to the lack of diversity and culturally relevant pedagogy, and he felt like an outsider in predominantly White schools. This experience also makes him skeptical of finding meaningful diversity in college-level academia.

While Iris had not taken an ethnic studies course, she stated that she would have felt more engaged in her K-12 history classes if the curriculum included opportunities to study her own cultural background. The literature demonstrates that non-Latinx and White students can gain critical thinking skills and democratic justice values through ethnic studies pedagogy. Both students agree that it is beneficial for all students to learn about the historical/cultural background of other students to better understand their struggles. Even though the literature indicates that students in ethnic studies courses are more likely to graduate from high school and pursue a college education, this study found that both students were primarily influenced by their families to succeed in school. Clearly, ethnic studies can improve classroom engagement among K-12 Latinx students. Better engagement will lead to better academic outcomes, which is necessary to address the achievement gap between White and Latinx students in our increasingly diverse society. K-12 public school educators and administrators must implement ethnic studies courses in order to help reduce this persistent academic disparity. Closing the achievement gap will ensure proper education and job training to fuel the vitality of the future U.S. economy.

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