

# The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies

## A Research Review

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Research Department  
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*Great Public Schools for Every Student*

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The National Education Association is the nation's largest professional employee organization, representing 3.2 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.

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What is the value of ethnic studies in schools and universities? Supporters say ethnic studies promotes respect and understanding among races, supports student success, and teaches critical thinking skills. Critics, however, increasingly question the relevance of ethnic studies education programs in the post-integration era.

As issues involving ethnic studies take center stage in education policy and practice, the National Education Association believes any discussion of the role of ethnic studies in education and in student achievement rightfully begins by asking:

- What do we know from prior research and practice about ethnic studies, especially as they relate to student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps?
- Are there ways to examine and talk about what we have learned that will enable us to apply those lessons to creating and establishing ethnic studies programs that support student and teacher learning?

The evolution of ethnic studies has sparked its share of controversy. NEA commissioned a review of the research on ethnic studies programs and curricula—specifically the ways in which such programs and curricula serve to improve student achievement and narrow achievement gaps—to inform the discourse on this issue. This paper provides a research base for discussing best practices for designing and implementing ethnic studies programs and curricula that meet those targets.

We hope this review is useful for revisiting ideas and generating new thoughts about the relationship between ethnic studies and student achievement. And we hope that our efforts in this regard will help ensure a great public school for every student.



Dennis Van Roekel  
President  
National Education Association



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## Executive Summary

**E**thnic studies includes units of study, courses, or programs that are centered on the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in that group's lived experiences and intellectual scholarship. Ethnic studies arose as a counter to the traditional mainstream curriculum. Numerous content analyses of textbooks have found an ongoing marginalization of scholarship by and about African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. In acknowledgement of the dominance of Euro-American perspectives in mainstream curricula, such curricula can be viewed as 'Euro-American ethnic studies.' As students of color proceed through the school system, research finds that the overwhelming dominance of Euro-American perspectives leads many such students to disengage from academic learning. Ethnic studies curricula exist in part because students of color have demanded an education that is relevant, meaningful, and affirming of their identities. This review analyzes published studies and reviews of research that systematically document the impact of ethnic studies curricula, Pre-K through higher education, on students, academically as well as socially.

Ethnic studies curricula designed primarily for students who are members of the group under study are usually part of a broader effort to improve the quality of education afforded to those students, and are often used in conjunction with other dimensions such as culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers who are members of the group, and links to the community. Ethnic studies curricula are supported by research documenting a positive relationship between the racial/ethnic identity of students of color and academic achievement, as well as research on their impact. Three studies with middle school students documented high levels of student engagement when literature by authors within the students' ethnic background was used. Research on five literacy curricula (three involving African American secondary students and two involving Native American students) documented significant growth in students' literacy skills. Research on two math/science curricula (both involving Native American students) found a positive impact on student achievement and attitudes toward learning. Research on five curricula (three in social studies, one in literature, and one in 'life skills') found a positive impact on students' achievement and sense of agency. Only one reviewed study did not have the intended impact, largely because how ethnic culture was conceptualized in the curriculum conflicted with how students lived culture everyday.

Research finds that the overwhelming dominance of Euro-American perspectives leads many students to disengage from academic learning.



Ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups that include White students, while sometimes aiming to improve student achievement, usually focus more on influencing students' understanding of and attitudes about race and/or people who differ from themselves. Several studies, mostly with children, reveal features of curricula that make a difference. Simply infusing representation of racially and ethnically diverse people into curriculum only marginally affects students' attitudes because racial attitudes are acquired actively rather than passively. Curricula that teach directly about racism have a stronger positive impact than curricula that portray diverse groups but ignore racism. A large body of research in higher education that examines the impact of various diversity experiences, particularly course-taking and interracial interaction, reports quite consistently that such courses have a positive impact on 'democracy outcomes,' particularly when they include cross-group interaction and particularly on White students, since

There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students.

exposure to a systematic analysis of power and cross-racial interaction is newer to White students than to students of color. Research on the academic impact of ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups, while not voluminous, shows that such curricula, when designed to help students grapple with multiple perspectives, produces higher levels of thinking.

In short, there is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students. Curricula are designed and taught somewhat differently depending on the ethnic composition of the class or school and the subsequent experiences students bring, but both students of color and White students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies.

## Review of Ethnic Studies Research

Carlos entered my office to find out more about the graduate program in Education that I was directing in order to decide whether to apply to it.<sup>1</sup> I asked him to tell me about himself, which is how I usually began such conversations. He said that he had graduated from a local high school. While not a good student, the fact that he graduated mattered since most of his friends had dropped out. But he found school very boring, so he decided to enter the military rather than college. After completing a tour of duty, he returned to his hometown and got a minimum wage job. One day he ran into a friend from high school who was attending a local community college. The friend was taking Chicano studies courses, and encouraged Carlos to come check them out. At first Carlos had no interest in more school, but his friend was so enthusiastic that Carlos finally decided to go see what Chicano studies was all about. That hooked him on education. For the first time in his life, the curriculum was centered on his reality. Carlos completed two years of community college, taking as many Chicano studies courses as possible, then went on to complete a BA degree in Spanish. In the process, he became an avid reader about Mexican vaquero (cowboy) culture, and accumulated a mini-library at home on this subject. He wanted to continue his education in order to teach, which to my knowledge, he is still doing today.

The impact that Chicano studies had on Carlos is not unique. Informally, for many years I have witnessed similar impacts on students, especially, but not exclusively, students of color. This paper synthesizes research on the social and academic value of ethnic studies curricula and programs. Since ethnic studies can be understood as a counter to the traditional mainstream curriculum, the paper begins by framing the mainstream curriculum as 'Euro-American Studies.' Then, after briefly defining ethnic studies, it reviews research on the impact of ethnic studies curricula, first as designed specifically for students of color who are members of the group under study, and second as designed for diverse student groups that include White students. While there is some overlap between these kinds of curricula, there are also some differences.

### Mainstream Curricula as Euro-American Studies

Beginning in the late 1960s, educators and scholars of color pressed schools, school districts, and textbook companies to produce and offer curricula that reflected the diversity of the United States population. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, textbook publishers

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<sup>1</sup> This account, which actually happened with a student whose name I changed here, represents several similar conversations I have had with students over the years.

As national concern shifted toward standards and accountability, efforts to make curricula multicultural gradually subsided.

addressed the most glaring omissions and stereotypes, but as national concern shifted toward establishing curriculum standards and systems of accountability, with a few exceptions, efforts to make texts and other curricula multicultural gradually subsided. Educators, particularly those who are White, often assume that publishers ‘took care’ of most forms of bias.

Systematic analyses, however, consistently find the opposite. While content related to African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans has been added, deeper patterns and narratives that reflect Euro-American experiences and worldviews, and that have traditionally structured K–12 textbooks—particularly history and social studies texts—remain intact (Byrne 2001, Clawson

2002, Feiner and Morgan 1987, Foster 1999, Gordy and Pritchard 1995, Loewen 1995, Marquez 1994, O’Neil 1987, Powell and Garcia 1988, Reyhner 1986, Romanowski 1996, Sanchez 2007, Sleeter and Grant 1991). Whites continue to receive the most attention and appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating story lines and lists of accomplishments. African Americans, the next most represented racial group, appear in a more limited range of roles and usually receive only a sketchy account historically, being featured mainly in relationship to slavery. Asian Americans and Latinos appear mainly as figures on the landscape with virtually no history or contemporary ethnic experience. Native Americans appear mainly in the past, but also occasionally in contemporary stories in reading books. Immigration is represented as a distinct historical period that happened mainly in the Northeast, rather than as an ongoing phenomenon (Vecchio 2004). Texts say little to nothing about contemporary race relations, racism, or racial issues, usually sanitizing greatly what they mention (Hughes 2007).

In other words, racial and ethnic minorities are added consistently in a ‘contributions’ fashion to the predominantly Euro-American narrative of textbooks. Scholarship by and about African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans continues not to be used to frame academic content. Even texts published within the last ten years, while having added content that previously was absent (such as depictions of racial violence directed against African Americans during slavery), continue to disconnect racism in the past from racism today, and to frame perpetrators of racism as a few bad individuals rather than a system of oppression, and challenges to racism as actions of heroic individuals rather than organized struggle (Alridge 2006, Brown and Brown 2010). Additional recognition of communities of color usually takes the form of Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo, rather than substantive curriculum revision (El-Haj 2006, Lewis 2001).

Although state curriculum frameworks have not received the attention that textbooks received, my analysis of the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (California Department of Education 2001) reveals similar patterns (Sleeter 2002). Of the 96 Americans who were named for study in the *Framework’s* course descriptions, they were 77 percent White, 18 percent African American, 4 percent Native American, 1 percent Latino, and 0 percent Asian American. All of the Latino and all but one of the Native American names appeared at the elementary level. At the secondary level, 79 percent of the named people were White, mostly either U.S. presidents or famous artists and authors. I then analyzed the deeper narrative embedded in the *Framework*, finding it to fit comfortably within a story of European immigration and the progress of

those immigrants' descendents, a story that negates historical accounts and analytical frameworks of scholars of color (see King 1992).

As Hughes (2007) explains, the result of continuing to minimize attention to racism and White complicity

is that students perceive racism as a tragedy of the past divorced from other historical issues...and the contemporary realities of power in American society. When textbook authors bury the history of American racism within a larger narrative of inevitable American progress, students perceive race relations as a linear trajectory of improvement rather than a messy and continual struggle over power that encompasses both progress and, in the case of the decades after Reconstruction, significant steps backward in terms of racial justice.

Ethnic studies scholarship by and about racial minority groups presents a different narrative that is shaped partially by histories of oppression in the U.S. as well as by the intellectual and cultural resources and traditions of those communities. In an analysis of ethnic studies scholarship, I identified the following consistent themes that differentiate it from Euro-American mainstream school knowledge:

- 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 2002).

Juxtaposing textbooks (as well as California's standards) against these themes reveals a wide chasm that students of color become aware of as they go through school.

Beginning as early as elementary school, students have been found to respond to curricula based partly on what they learn and experience in their homes and communities. Epstein (2001, 2009) reports interviews with Black and White children in grades 5, 8, and 11 regarding their perspectives about topics taught in social studies. While perspectives of White fifth graders tended to resonate with the mainstream school curriculum, perspectives of many Black fifth graders diverged. For example, although White fifth graders believed that the Bill of Rights gives rights to everyone, about half of the Black children pointed out that not everyone has rights. While Black children were beginning to articulate a sense of racial oppression, White children described the U.S. as being built on progress, democracy, and opportunity for all. What teachers taught added detail to what the children knew, but did not change their overall interpretive framework, which derived from their experiences outside school.

Ethnic studies scholarship by and about racial minority groups presents a different narrative.

Middle school students of color, when asked, are able to articulate frustrations with Eurocentric curricula. Like the eighth graders interviewed by Epstein, 43 gifted Black middle school students interviewed by Ford and Harris (2000) all expressed a desire to learn more about Black people in school; most agreed that this would make school more interesting, and almost half agreed that they got tired of learning about White people all the time. Similarly, in a study of a professional-class, White middle school that had recruited a significant number of students of color (mainly African Americans), El-Haj (2006) found that the students felt marginalized and “angry that African American history was rarely discussed outside Black History Month and was almost always portrayed in terms of victimization.” Students posited that teachers avoided in-depth discussions of race and racism out of fear that the Black students would react violently. A few teachers did try to create curricula that represented multiple social groups, but most of the students of color “framed their desire for a more representative curriculum in terms of learning about one’s ‘own’ cultural history and literature” first, before going on to study other groups.

By the time they reach high school, students of color are not only aware of a Euro-American bias in curriculum, but they can describe it in some detail, and view it as contributing to their disengagement (Wiggin 2007). Epstein (2000, 2009) found African American students to bring a fairly sophisticated analysis of racism to their understanding of U.S. history. Although their perspectives varied, rather than discussing the U.S. in terms of individual rights, they interpreted its history in terms of systemic racism, from which African Americans continue to struggle for emancipation. Epstein points out that the academic perspectives offered in social studies frameworks did not address the perspectives of African American adolescents, and only partially addressed perspectives of White students, some of whom expressed interest in learning more about diverse peoples. As a result, Epstein (2009) concluded that African American students “learned to distrust the historical knowledge taught in schools and turned to family, community members, and Black oriented texts” for their education.

Students of color are not only aware of a Euro-American bias in curriculum, they can describe it in some detail.

University students also notice and react to whose knowledge is represented in curriculum. Based on a survey of 544 university students, Mayhew, Grunwald, and Dey (2005) found that students—and especially students of color—judge the extent to which their university values diversity primarily based on willingness to integrate diverse racial and ethnic perspectives into curriculum. While students also saw extracurricular activities as important, whose perspectives are in the university curriculum was the most important factor they used to assess the campus’s commitment to diverse students.

White adults generally do not recognize the extent to which traditional mainstream curricula marginalize perspectives of communities of color and teach students of color to distrust or not take school knowledge seriously. Epstein (2009) found that, while White teachers were willing to include knowledge about diverse groups, they did so intermittently and within a Eurocentric narrative. She found that White parents, like their children, “thought only of Europeans and white Americans as nation builders, portrayed Blacks as victims and one-time freedom fighters, and Native Americans as first survivors and later as victims of government policies. They never mentioned Whites (other than Southerners) as perpetrators or beneficiaries of racism and 80 percent believed that Blacks had achieved equal rights today.” Lewis (2001) found several White

parents she interviewed to believe that talking about race would be divisive, even in the context of Black History Month, and to dismiss ethnic diversity with statements such as “We should all be Americans.” Informal discussions I have had with White adults suggest that they base their evaluations of textbooks on comparisons with those they used when they were in school, rather than on comparisons with ethnic studies literature (which most White people have not studied).

In sum, it is important to recognize that ethnic studies grew from a desire to counterbalance both inaccuracies and the predominance of Euro-American perspectives that underlie mainstream curricula. Because of this bias, mainstream curricula contribute to the academic disengagement of students of color. Ethnic studies can reverse that disengagement, as the remainder of this paper shows.

## Ethnic Studies and the Scope of this Review

Ethnic studies arose as a counter to Euro-American studies curricula. Ethnic studies curricula and programs are often traced to their beginnings in 1968 at San Francisco State University, then to other campuses in California; from there, ethnic studies spread across the country. Ethnic studies has a much longer history, however, building on pioneering works such as the writings of Carter G. Woodson (1933) and W. E. B. DuBois (1903), freedom schools of the 1960s, Black independent schools and Afrocentric public schools (e.g., Durdin 2007, Lee 1992, Span 2002), tribal schools (e.g., Begay *et al.* 1995), and language immersion schools.

Before briefly describing what ethnic studies is, I will note what it is not. First, although commonly described as “divisive,” un-American, and teaching racial separatism and even overthrow of the U.S. government, as the examples in this paper will show clearly, ethnic studies curricula very intentionally include historically marginalized communities and students in a multicultural American curriculum and narrative, often supporting and developing cross-group communication. Second, although commonly perceived as touchy-feely and non-academic—even as lowering academic standards, as examples will illustrate—ethnic studies curricula are academically based, usually designed to improve students’ academic performance, and sometimes explicitly focus on university preparation. Third, although sometimes characterized as cheating students of color by substituting ethnic pride for knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the mainstream society, this paper will include research that shows how well-designed ethnic studies curricula do, in fact, prepare students to succeed while embracing their ethnic identity at the same time; indeed, these are linked, rather than competing, goals.

It is highly significant that ethnic studies came about because students of color demanded, and have continued to demand, an education that is relevant and meaningful, that affirms their identities and selfhoods, and that works toward human liberation (Hu-DeHart 2004, Rangel 2007). Mainstream Euro-American studies deny all students—both White and of color—an education that takes seriously the realities of institutionalized racism that people of color live everyday, and knowledge that arises from within communities of color. Ethnic studies, by allowing for multiple voices to enter dialog constructing the narrative of this country, is critical to the development of a democracy that actually includes everyone.

Although commonly perceived as touchy-feely and non-academic, ethnic studies curricula are academically based.

Whether one is referring to Black studies, Chicano/a studies, American Indian Studies, or Asian American studies, ethnic studies have similar foci that center around “their objective of systematically examining and dismantling institutional racism” (Hu-DeHart 2004). For example, King (2005) explains that, given the “inherent liberatory potential of Black education, the ultimate object... is the universal problem of human freedom. That is, a goal of transformative education and research practice in Black education is the production of knowledge and understanding people need to rehumanize the world by dismantling hegemonic structures that impede such knowledge.” Similarly, in a discussion of American Indian studies, Riding In and colleagues (2005) explain that the main objective is decolonization, empowerment, and sovereignty: “We have been cast as peoples who do not have the moral authority of non-Indians. And so we have to establish ourselves as humans with a moral situation equal to all others.”

As ethnic studies matured, epistemologies have been developed around the most significant ways to understand and address the concerns of historically marginalized communities. For example, Macías explains that the issue is not curricular separatism, but rather reorganizing knowledge and research processes around questions that are central to the well-being of communities of color:

We’re not talking about Chicana/o history, Chicano sociology, Chicano education, Chicano political science, Chicano literature, etc. We are talking about different topical, thematic, problem, situational sets within the studies of Chicana/o studies communities, in the United States and throughout the Americas, that has to be driven by its own visions, its own view of itself in the future, and its own methodologies, including approaches to it to scholarship (Rangel 2007).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) propose “pan-ethnic studies,” which connects related fields of ethnic studies, critical pedagogy, postcolonial studies, critical race theory, multicultural education, and youth popular culture. Pan-ethnic studies begins “with the relationship between racialization in U.S. society and dehumanization of students of color.” Duncan-Andrade and Morrell show how pan-ethnic studies can intersect with the K–12 curriculum across the disciplines. Significantly, their model includes students as producers rather than only consumers of knowledge: students learn to become public intellectuals engaging in research and collective agency to address problems in their own communities. Also, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell specifically prioritize the importance of *cariño*—relationships between teacher and students that are based on reciprocity and commitment to improving the welfare of the community students live in.

Ethnic studies exists in one form or another from the Pre-K level onward.

Although ethnic studies began and is most recognized at the higher education level, it exists in one form or another from the Pre-K level onward. At the elementary level, one can find Black culture-based schools (particularly private schools; see Lee 1992) and Indigenous-culture schools such as Navajo schools (e.g., Begay *et al.* 1995). There are also many teachers who have designed and taught developmentally appropriate ethnic studies curricula in their own classrooms, some such efforts having become programs at a school district level. At the secondary level, one can find ethnic studies classes (such as Filipino history or Chicano literature), although these are not

terribly common. In a survey of 8,051 entering freshmen in three large universities, Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, and Landreman (2002) found that very few (only about 6% of the students) had taken a diversity class in high school. Only one school district—Tucson Unified Public Schools—has a full-fledged ethnic studies program.

For this review, I sought published studies and reviews of research that systematically document the impact of ethnic studies curricula, Pre-K through higher education, on students. I specifically focused on academic outcomes (such as test scores) as well as attitudinal outcomes. Currently in education, the ‘gold standard’ for program evaluation consists of experimental research using randomized assignment to control and experimental groups, with pre and post assessments that include standardized achievement tests. While some research on ethnic studies takes this form, much of it consists of small-scale qualitative studies that use outcome measures (such as descriptions of student engagement) that were meaningful to the context and time in which the study was conducted.

Ironically, what counts as program evaluation data shifted toward experimental research using test scores at the same time that education policy made it more difficult to develop and sustain K–12 ethnic studies curricula. The standards-based reform movement, although ostensibly designed to address the racial achievement gap, has pressed schools that serve students of color and students from high-poverty communities toward standardized, often scripted, test-prep curricula (Au 2007, Valli and Chambliss 2007), a shift that careful perusal of NAEP test scores from the 1970s onward, disaggregated by race, should cause us to question (National Center for Education Statistics 2008).

Much of the work in ethnic studies has been developmental in nature—researching subjugated and often forgotten knowledge, creating curriculum, developing pedagogies that link ethnic studies content with core academic concepts, preparing ethnic studies teachers, locating resources, navigating school district administrative and hiring policies, and so forth. And, because of their challenge to race relations, ethnic studies programs are always engaged in defending their existence. As Hu-DeHart (2004) explains:

Ethnic studies programs are always engaged in defending their existence.

As long as ethnic studies and multicultural education in general remain within the confines of ‘sensitivity training’ and ‘celebrating diversity,’ it is safe and uncontested. But the minute ethnic studies and multicultural educators take seriously the edict that education’s highest purpose is to liberate and empower (as opposed to socialize), then it becomes controversial and, frankly, threatening to the status quo.

In many cases, energy to develop high-quality programs and courses has simply taken precedence over efforts to systematically document their impact on students.

Nonetheless, I was able to locate a sizable body of research on the impact of ethnic studies on students. I have organized this review into two main sections: first, ethnic studies curricula as designed primarily for students of color who are members of the group under study and, second, ethnic studies curricula as designed for diverse student groups that include White students.



## Impact of Ethnic Studies Designed Primarily for Members of the Group under Study

Ethnic studies curricula include units of study, courses, or programs that are centered around the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in lived experiences and intellectual scholarship of that group. Although usually open to students from all backgrounds, curriculum reviewed in this section is pitched primarily toward students who are members of the focal ethnic group, usually as part of a broader effort to improve the quality of education afforded to them. Although this review focuses primarily on the impact of curriculum, it is important to note that well-designed ethnic studies courses and programs include other related features, including interactive and culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers who are members of the ethnic group and well-versed in ethnic studies, and connections with the community.

Ethnic studies curricula are supported by a body of research documenting the relationship between racial/ethnic identity of students of color and academic achievement. Studies using different research methodologies, investigating students at middle school through university levels, in different regions of the U.S. consistently find a relationship between academic achievement, high level of awareness of race and racism, and positive identification with one's own racial group. For example, Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) surveyed 98 African American and 41 Latino students in three low-income Detroit middle schools periodically over a two-year period. Although students' grades dropped as they moved from middle school to high school, grades of students with the highest racial-ethnic identity dropped the least. Chavous and colleagues (2003) surveyed 606 African American students from four predominantly Black high schools during twelfth grade, then again two years later. The students most likely to graduate and go on to college expressed high awareness of race and racism and high regard for being Black. Those least likely to stay in school expressed low awareness of race and racism, low personal regard for being Black, and a perception that other people do not value Blacks (see also Miller and MacIntosh 1999, Sanders 1997). Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2008) surveyed 185 Latino/a eighth graders in three low-income middle schools where students ranged from being recent immigrants to second and third generation; most were of Mexican descent. Students with higher grades tended to have bicultural

Students who identified little with their ethnic origin tended to achieve poorly.

identities, identifying with their ethnic origin as well as focusing on overcoming obstacles within mainstream society. Students who identified little with their ethnic origin tended to achieve poorly, as did the relatively fewer students who identified exclusively with their culture of origin and not at all with the mainstream society (see Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke 1997 for similar findings with

African American students). The researchers also found that, from the time of immigration through subsequent generations, Latino students identify progressively less with their ethnic community, often resulting in a downward spiral of achievement.

Carter (2008) and O'Connor (1997) each conducted in-depth interviews with small numbers of high-achieving African American adolescents, both researchers finding that students' critical consciousness of race and racism helped them develop an achievement ideology to navigate a racially hostile environment, and that a strong Black identity contributed to their sense of agency. O'Connor (1997) noted that the students'

familiarity with individual and collective struggle did not curtail their academic success, but rather contributed to their sense of agency and facilitated their academic motivation.

Ethnic studies teachers may not be aware of this research. What they are aware of, however, is the negative set of experiences that many students of color have in school, the relative absence of their ethnic group in the curriculum, and the lack of effort in many schools to help them develop an academic ethnic identity that connects school learning with their ethnic self, and helps them to see how education can serve as a tool for their own advancement as well as for serving their community. Students of color experience racism; ethnic studies does not introduce them to that concept. Rather, by taking racism and culture seriously, ethnic studies curricula attempt to give students the tools to navigate racially hostile systems—tools that many high-achieving students of color acquire in their communities.

Ethnic studies curricula have been studied in relationship to three overlapping effects on students: academic engagement, academic achievement, and personal empowerment. Because these areas have been studied somewhat differently according to academic subject area, the discussion below is organized mainly by subject area, beginning with literacy.

Several studies have examined the relationship between using a culturally relevant literacy curriculum, student engagement, and, in some cases, student academic achievement.<sup>2</sup> Three qualitative studies with middle school students documented high levels of student engagement when literature by authors of the students' ethnic background is used.

Brozo and Valerio (1996) described responses of eighth grade Mexican American students to high-quality literature by Mexican American authors, such as Rudolfo Anaya, as the teacher introduced works over the year. It was “immediately apparent” to the authors that students connected with the literature, as formerly passive students become highly engaged in reading. Bean, Valerio, Senior, and White (1999) documented the high level of engagement among racial and ethnically diverse classes of ninth graders as they read a young adult novel about a bi-racial adolescent's ethnic identity development. Some students developed a strong connection with the main character; others reported learning a good deal. The authors concluded that literature with which racial and ethnic minority students can identify engages them in the process of reading and writing. Copenhaver (2001) analyzed 12 African American elementary school children's responses to reading *Malcolm X: A Fire* in small groups. She found the children to bring a good deal more knowledge of the life of Malcolm X than their teachers were aware they had, and in groups composed of only African Americans they drew readily on their shared knowledge of African American media, civil rights leaders, and everyday racial issues to follow the plot, make connections, and interpret the story.

Studies have assessed the impact of five ethnic studies literacy curricula on students' achievement: three involving low-achieving African American secondary students in high-poverty schools and two involving Native American students.

In the Webster Groves Writing Project (Krater, Zeni, and Cason 1994) 14 middle and high school English teachers in school districts adjacent to St. Louis used action

Ethnic studies curricula have been studied in relationship to three overlapping effects on students: academic engagement, academic achievement, and personal empowerment.

<sup>2</sup> To keep this review manageable, although I recognize that language is central to literacy of students for whom English is not the primary language, I excluded research on native language immersion/bilingual education unless the project included ethnic culture in the curriculum.

research to improve writing achievement of their African American students; the project was then extended to all students (Black and White) performing below grade level. The project gradually developed several principles based on what was working, which included using various literary works by African American authors and a process approach to teaching writing in which some direct instruction was embedded. Over time the teachers realized that they needed to “acknowledge [students’] culture—not just by incorporating their cultural heroes into the curriculum, but by weaving the threads of their culture into the tapestry of our classroom” (Krater and Zeni 1995), which included recognizing how teachers’ cultural biases got in the way. A significant realization was that dialect was a problem only when teachers focused on correcting grammar rather than on helping students communicate ideas; as students’ ability to communicate ideas developed, students began to correct their own grammar. Over the years of the project’s existence, participating students made greater gains in writing than non-participating students on the local writing assessment, then later on the state writing test (see Gay 2010).

Students became very engaged because they were able to identify with “deep structure” themes such as struggle, perseverance, and family tensions.

In a qualitative study, Rickford (2001) studied the impact of culturally relevant texts (African American folk tales and contemporary narratives), coupled with emphasis on higher-order thinking, on 25 low-achieving African American middle school students’ enjoyment and comprehension of literature. She found that the students became very engaged because they were able to identify with “deep structure” themes such as struggle, perseverance, and family tensions, as well as with surface structure features such as African American vernacular. In assessment of their comprehension, she found that the students excelled on the higher order comprehension questions, while they missed many of the lower order questions. Rickford concluded that familiarity with situations and people in stories increased students’ motivation, and that even while missing many lower-order comprehension questions, students were able to analyze and interpret the stories well.

The Cultural Modeling Project (Lee 1995, 2001, 2006, 2007) has worked extensively to connect the language reasoning skills that African American English speakers develop with the English curriculum, extending and deepening findings of the more limited studies above. Lee (2006) explains that Cultural Modeling “is a framework for the design of curriculum and learning environments that links everyday knowledge with learning academic subject matter, with a particular focus on racial/ethnic minority groups, especially youth of African descent.” The curriculum leverages the ability of speakers of African American English to interpret symbolism, a skill students use routinely in rap and Hip Hop but do not necessarily apply to analysis of literature in school. Cultural Modeling moves from analysis of specific language data sets students are familiar with and that draw on elements of Black cultural life, such as Black media or the Black church, to more general strategies of literary analysis and application to canonical literary works. Lee has conducted several studies to assess the impact of Cultural Modeling, using tests in which students write an analysis of a short story they have not seen before.

For example, in an experimental study in two low-achieving African American urban high schools, four English classes were taught using Cultural Modeling and two

were taught the traditional English curriculum. The experimental students' gain from pretest to posttest was over twice that of the control group students (Lee 1995). Lee's qualitative research in classrooms documents that students gradually learn to direct discussions interpreting and analyzing texts, through the Cultural Modeling process (Lee 2001, 2006), although traditional English achievement tests often do not capture this learning process (Lee 2007). She posits that African American life affords young people a wealth of cultural scripts and contexts that can be used in the classroom to develop literary analysis strategies students can then apply to unfamiliar texts, and that a curriculum that enables students to use their cultural frames of reference immediately engages them in much higher levels of cognition than is usually the case with a traditional curriculum (Lee 2006).

Two bilingual/bicultural indigenous literacy curricula have been examined in relationship to their impact on student achievement. The Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program (RREN LAP), originally funded by Title VII of the Bilingual Education Act, was designed to develop biliteracy skills of K–6 students, the majority of whom spoke Navajo as their primary language. Because a written Navajo literacy curriculum did not exist, the teachers needed to develop materials written in Navajo and relevant to the lives of the children. An example of a thematic unit the teachers created was Wind, “an ever-present force at Rough Rock” (McCarty 1993). McCarty (1993) reports that, after four years in the program, the students' achievement on locally developed measures of comprehending spoken English had increased from 51 percent to 91 percent, and their reading scores on standardized reading tests rose steadily after the second year, although students were still below national norms. Those who participated in the bilingual/bicultural program for 3–5 years made the greatest gains. Similarly, Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) explain that in Peach Springs, Arizona, teachers worked with parents, elders, and linguists to develop a writing system for the Hualapai language, then developed culturally relevant teaching units and materials across the academic subject areas in Hualapai. While, initially, non-Indian teachers objected to this curriculum, they relented when they saw children's positive responses, improved academic learning, ability to work in English, and 100 percent high school graduation rate.

In both of these related projects, indigenous students responded well to a curriculum designed around their culture and language. Even if, as in the case of the Navajo students, they were not yet performing at grade level on standardized tests in English, they were doing much better academically than they had been prior to the curriculum's development and implementation; they were also thriving psychologically. Lomawaima and McCarty suggest that these programs have not survived, not because they were not serving students well but, rather, because they require teachers who speak the indigenous languages, thereby posing a threat to non-indigenous teachers who did not speak the language, and because indigenous control over curriculum challenges federal power over the tribes.

I located studies of the impact of two ethnic studies math/science curricula on student learning,<sup>3</sup> both focusing on Native American students. *Math in a Cultural Context* (MCC) grew from collaboration between Alaska Yup'ik Native elders, teachers,

Indigenous students responded well to a curriculum designed around their culture and language.

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<sup>3</sup> While many articles discuss culturally relevant pedagogy broadly in math and science, only a few specifically examine the impact of curriculum on students.

and math educators to develop an elementary level curriculum that connects Yup'ik culture and knowledge with mathematics as outlined in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards. Lipka, Hogan, and colleagues (2005) describe it as offering a “third space” that weaves together math content and local cultural knowledge. The curriculum has ten modules that link mathematics with community culture; for example, “Parkas and Patterns” focuses on geometry. The curriculum also supports traditional ways of communicating and learning, such as collaborative learning and cognitive apprenticeship. The modules and assessment materials, as well as papers reporting research on the project, can be found on the project’s website (Math in a Cultural Context 2010).

For about two decades, Lipka and colleagues have been documenting the curriculum’s development, use, and impact (e.g., Lipka 1991, Lipka, Hogan, *et al.* 2005, Lipka, Sharp, *et al.* 2005). Most of the publications describe in detail how teachers and students work with the curriculum (e.g., Lipka 1991, Lipka, Sharp, *et al.* 2005). Some also report experimental studies that use a pretest/posttest control group design, assessing students’ learning based on the state’s benchmarks or achievement tests. These studies find that students in classrooms using the MCC curriculum make more progress toward the state mathematics standards than students in classrooms not using it (Lipka and Adams 2004, Lipka, Sharp, *et al.* 2005). Not only does the curriculum help make mathematical concepts comprehensible for the Yup'ik children, studies also find it to improve Yup'ik teachers’ practice by drawing on what is culturally familiar to them, thereby giving them confidence and authority over what they are teaching, as well as helping them to structure their math curriculum (Lipka, Hogan, *et al.* 2005).

Matthews and Smith (1994) reported an experimental study (pretest/posttest control group design) investigating impact of a much more modest project—using Native American science materials—on Native American students’ attitudes toward science, attitudes towards Native people, and understanding of science concepts. The study investigated fourth through eighth graders in nine schools administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The intervention, which lasted 10 weeks, involved use of biographies of Native Americans using science (such as a silversmith or a water quality technician) and other activities that related science to Native communities. The experimental group made greater gains in achievement than the control group, and expressed more positive attitudes toward science and toward Native Americans in the posttest. The findings suggest that the materials, limited in scope as they were, made a positive impact on students.

Research investigates the impact of five ethnic studies curricula (three in social studies, one in literature, and one in ‘life skills’) on students’ achievement and empowerment, which in these studies refers to students’ sense of agency and ability to take positive action on problems in their communities.

Tyson’s (2002) case study examined the use of literature about social issues in an African American urban middle school social studies class of 20 students. Literature was linked with social studies to enable students to begin to think about how to participate in social life. The literature included five adolescent novels: three were African American, one was multiethnic, and one was set in Japan. All featured social justice concepts and characters acting on the world around them, such as working with neighbors to transform a vacant lot into a community garden or taking a stand on behalf of one’s community. The researcher documented students’ developing understanding of complexities of

social action, as well as their ability to use text to derive meaning; most of the students demonstrated growth in both areas over the semester.

Lewis, Sullivan, and Bybee (2006) reported an experimental study of a one-semester African American emancipatory curriculum for eighth graders in a predominantly Black inner-city public middle school. Students were randomly assigned to the experimental course or the control course (life skills). The experimental course focused on African and African American history and culture, African rituals and practices, building communalism, student leadership and activism, and school/community partnerships. It included considerable attention to racism, oppression, discrimination, White privilege, need for Black empowerment, and self-reliance. Youth in the experimental curriculum scored higher than those in the control group on communal orientation, school connectedness, motivation to achieve, overall social change involvement, and (contrary to the study hypothesis) individualism and competitiveness. The authors point out that by giving considerable sustained curricular space to African American heritage rather than bringing it out only at certain times (Black History Month, study of slavery in history), students could see that their own heritage has worth.

Vasquez's (2005) case study examined the responses of 18 college students to a Chicano literature course, in which all of the selections were authored by Chicana/os and dealt with topics such as immigration, migrant labor, poverty, and Catholicism. Eleven of the 18 students were Latino/a. The Latino/a students all said that they identified with the texts, and that the texts filled in blanks in their understandings of their families' biographies. They reported developing a sense of community based on recognition of similar experiences and hardships. Realizing there is an abundance of Chicano literature prompted feelings of ethnic and personal affirmation, confidence, empowerment, and finally occupying the place of 'insider' in an academic institution. For one student, recognition that there is a strong Latino American culture strengthened his identification as American. The non-Latinos found shared human issues in the texts to identify with; they had to wrestle with recognition of differences while also seeing cross-group human similarities. They also had to deal with lacking the authority of shared experiences with the authors and characters and not being able to direct where discussions went. For the White students, not being insiders to the content was a new experience.

Halagao (2004, 2010) examined the impact of *Pinoy Teach* on Filipino American college students. *Pinoy Teach* is a curriculum she co-developed that focuses on Philippine and Filipino American history and culture using a problem-posing pedagogy that encourages students to think critically through multiple perspectives on history. She explains that *Pinoy Teach* offers a different perspective about history than students learned before, and some of it is uncomfortable; the pedagogical issue is not replacing one master narrative with another, but rather helping students grapple with and think their way through diverse and conflicting perspectives then consider what to do with their new knowledge. As part of the learning process, the college students mentor and teach what they are learning to younger students. Through a series of interviews, Halagao (2004) examined the curriculum's impact on six Filipino American college students at the end of the course. Like in Vasquez' study she found that, since none of them had learned about their own ethnic history in school, they described this curriculum as

By giving considerable sustained curricular space to African American heritage, students could see that their own heritage has worth.

“filling in the blanks.” Students also described collisions between their prior knowledge of Philippine history, learned mainly from their parents, particularly around the experiences of Spanish then U.S. colonization. The students expressed interest in learning about their own history in relationship to that of other groups. Like in Vasquez’ study, they moved from seeing other Filipinos through learned stereotypes to building shared sense of community, and they developed a sense of confidence and empowerment to stand up to oppression and to work for their own communities.

Several years later, Halagao (2010) reported a follow-up survey of 35 who had participated in the curriculum about 10 years earlier; 30 were Filipino American and five were Euro-American; all had completed college and were working in various professions. Students reported that what remained with them was a “deeper love and appreciation of ethnic history, culture, identity, and community.” The curriculum, through its process of decolonization, had helped them to develop a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy that persisted, as well as a life commitment to diversity and multiculturalism. They also developed ongoing activism in their work as teachers, in other professions, and/or through civic engagement where they lived. The two Euro-American respondents had learned to work as allies; for example, one became an editor for a textbook publisher so she could influence textbook content in a positive way.

The Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), located in the Mexican American/Raza Studies Department in Tucson, Arizona, grew from collaboration between Chicano studies teachers and the University of Arizona (Cammarota 2007, Cammarota and Romero 2009, Romero, Arce, and Cammarota 2009). The four-semester high school social studies curriculum is based on a model of “critically conscious intellectualism” for strengthening teaching and learning of Chicano students in a school district where over 40 percent of its Chicano students leave school during the high school years (Cammarota and Romero 2009). The model has three components:

- 1) curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to the students, focuses on social justice issues, is aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge, and is academically rigorous;
- 2) critical pedagogy in which students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness, creating rather than consuming knowledge; and
- 3) authentic caring in which teachers demonstrate deep respect for students as intellectual and full human beings.

The curriculum teaches about racial and economic issues, immersing students in university-level theoretical readings. It includes a community-based research project in which students gather data about manifestations of racism in their school and community and use social science theory to analyze why patterns in the data exist and how they can be challenged. During the first year of the project, 17 students who were on the verge of dropping out participated. Cammarota (2007) reports that 15 of the 17 had graduated at the time he was writing and 10 had enrolled in college; on a survey at the end of the project, students overwhelmingly reported that the project made them think more about their other classes, about their future, and about going on to college. Cammarota and Romero (2009) report that Chicano students in the SJEP outscored Anglo students in the same school on the state’s exams: 34 out of 36 passed the reading exam, 35 out of

36 passed the writing exam, and 27 out of 35 passed the math exam, which was a considerably higher pass rate than the Anglo students attained. SJEP students' graduation rates (about 95%) exceeded those of Anglo students (about 84%) in the site(s) where the program was offered. Importantly, in interviews SJEP students consistently credit the program for their academic success.

I located one study of an ethnic studies curriculum project that did not achieve the intended outcomes. Ginwright (2004) documented an initiative to transform an urban high school that served mainly Black youth from low-income families, for the purpose of increasing students' academic performance and preparing them for higher education. To formulate a plan, school district leaders consulted with several prominent African American scholars whose work focused on Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy, who subsequently persuaded them to base reform in "African precepts, axioms, philosophy" and to structure the curriculum around themes in African knowledge. As the reform was implemented, however, the Black students rejected it because it ignored their needs, which pragmatically began with the need for employment. Ginwright argues that what became an unsuccessful reform pitted two conceptions of Blackness against each other: that of middle class Black reformers who connected African and African American knowledge systems with origins in Egypt, and low-income urban Black youth whose central concerns revolved around needs such as housing, employment, and health care and whose identity was formed through urban youth cultural forms and local experiences with racism and poverty. This study shows how problems arise when culture, which is highly complex and dynamic, is operationalized in curriculum in a way that conflicts with culture students know and live daily.

In sum, all but one study investigating the impact of ethnic studies curricula designed for members of the group under study found a positive impact on students. Three studies documented high levels of student engagement when literature by authors of the students' ethnic background was used. Research on five literacy curricula documented significant growth in students' literacy skills. Research on two math/science curricula found a positive impact on student achievement and attitudes toward learning. Research on five additional curricula, mainly in social studies, found a positive impact on students' achievement and sense of agency. It is important to stress that these curriculum projects, on the whole, were well-designed, and taught by teachers who were prepared in ethnic studies and who, for the most part, were themselves members of students' ethnic group.

These various curricula share important features. Since all but one centered curriculum on students' cultural reality, students became classroom 'insiders' whose prior knowledge was valued and useful to academic learning. In that context, students' thinking and problem-solving abilities were evident; they became intellectually engaged. By reflecting the realities of students' lives, including racism and poverty, and providing students with tools to understand and act on those realities, curricula helped them develop a sense of constructive participation and hope about their lives. By being treated as intellectually capable, which many of these projects emphasized, students began to acquire an academic identity that links to, rather than conflicts with, their ethnic identity. Finally, by seeing the depth and richness of their own American ethnic history and

All but one study investigating the impact of ethnic studies curricula designed for members of the group under study found a positive impact on students.



culture, some students who had questioned their identity began to affirm and claim an American identity.

### **Ethnic Studies Curricula for Diverse Student Groups that include White Students**

Research on ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups that include White students is reviewed in this section. Most of the research has investigated impact on students' knowledge about and attitudes toward race and people who differ from themselves. This body of research is reviewed first, followed by the smaller body of research on the academic impact of such curriculum.

Several studies, mostly with children, reveal features of curricula that make the most difference. Simply infusing representation of racially and ethnically diverse people into curriculum, based on the assumption that students will develop positive attitudes by seeing diversity, makes only a marginal impact on students' attitudes. Bigler (1999) reviewed a large number of research studies on the impact of multicultural curricula and materials on children's attitudes about race. She found most of the research weak, consisting mainly of small-scale case studies that lacked processes for determining whether change had occurred and, if so, whether changes could be attributed to the curriculum. More significantly, she noted that racial attitudes are acquired actively rather than passively. Curricula that simply depict or label groups or group members (for example, pointing out a person's race, ethnicity, or gender) may draw students' attention to group markers and differences and invite stereotyping without engaging them in questioning their own thinking (Bigler, Brown, and Markell 2001). In addition, she noted that most curricula did not take account of children's age-specific cognitive development. She suggested that effective approaches would focus explicitly on stereotyping and bias, present strong counter-stereotypic models, and engage students in thinking about multiple features of individuals (such as race and occupation) within-group differences and cross-group similarities.

In subsequent experimental studies, Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007) and Hughes and Bigler (2007) documented the impact on African American and White elementary children of a few short lessons that include information about Black and White historical figures and (in the treatment condition) about racism. Both studies found that lessons teaching about racism and successful challenges to it improve racial attitudes among White children, allowing them to see how racism affects everybody and offering them a vision for addressing it. They posited that children's valuing of racial fairness accounts for much of the positive impact. Lessons about racism made less impact on the African American children (probably because it duplicated what they already knew), but the information about historical figures improved their regard for African Americans. A study at the higher education level complements these studies with children. In an experimental study, Carrell (1997) found that university students who completed an intercultural communication course that directly focused on cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence made significant gains in empathy, while students who completed an independent assignment about diversity that constituted a small portion of a control group course did not gain in empathy.

About and Fenwick's (1999) studies offer further clues as to how curricula affect racial attitudes. They reported two studies building on previous research that found that

Lessons teaching about racism and successful challenges to it improve racial attitudes among White children.

a great majority of White parents do not talk with their children about race, and those that do usually do not do so at a developmentally appropriate level. Aboud and Fenwick investigated two curricular inventions designed to help elementary children talk about race. Both studies used a pretest/posttest design, one with a control group and the other without. Both studies documented the kind of talk that reduces prejudice, especially among high-prejudiced children: talk that directs attention toward individual qualities rather than group membership only, or talk that offers positive information about a group, and talk that directly addresses a listener's concerns rather than general talk that does not.

A sizable body of survey research in higher education supports and extends the research findings on curricula for children. Much of the higher education research examines development of democracy outcomes, which Gurin, Dey, Gurin, and Hurtado (2003) define as including "commitment to promoting racial understanding, perspective taking, sense of commonality in values with students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, agreement that diversity and democracy can be congenial, involvement in political affairs and community service during college as well as commitment to civic affairs after college." This research examines the impact of various diversity experiences, with a focus on course-taking and interracial interaction. For the most part, the courses students took in these studies are required diversity courses on their campuses, lists of which include ethnic studies courses, women's studies courses, and courses that focus broadly on a range of forms of diversity.

The overwhelming and most consistent finding is that, in most studies, such courses have a positive impact on students' development of democracy outcomes (Astin 1993, Denson 2009, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin 2002, Lopez 2004). Engberg's (2004) review of 73 studies of the impact of a diversity course, a diversity workshop, a peer facilitated invention, or a service intervention found that 52 of the studies reported positive gains, 14 reported mixed gains, and only seven reported no change. Although most studies had methodological weaknesses (such as use of convenience samples and limitations stemming from wording of some of the survey questions), there was still a consistent pattern of finding a positive impact of diversity coursework on reducing students' biases.

The impact of such courses is considerably stronger when they include cross-group interaction (Astin 1993, Bowman 2010b, Chang 2002, Denson 2009, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin 2002, Lopez 2004), or as Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004) put it, "enlightenment and encounter." Because of the importance of cross-group interaction (encounter), some research focuses specifically on its nature. Gurin and Nagda (2006) found that participation in structured intergroup dialogs,

fosters active thinking about causes of social behavior and knowledge of institutional and other structural features of society that produce and maintain group-based inequalities...increases perception of both commonalities and differences between and within groups and helps students to normalize conflict and build skills to work with conflicts, . . . [and it] enhances interest in political issues and develops a sense of citizenship through college and community activities.

The overwhelming and most consistent finding is that such courses have a positive impact on students' development of democracy outcomes.

In an experimental study, Antonio and colleagues (2004) found that small group discussions in which students vary by race or by opinion produce greater cognitive complexity than when participants are homogeneous. Similarly, in a survey of 8,051 entering freshmen in three large universities, looking at the impact of completing a high school multicultural education course on students' skills and attitudes for participation in a diverse democracy, Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, and Landreman (2002) found that the impact was mediated by the extent to which students were engaged in active discussion of racial issues and interacting with peers whose perspectives are different from their own.

The higher education studies found that required diversity courses have a greater positive impact on White students than on students of color (Denson 2009, Engberg 2004, Bowman 2010a, Lopez 2004). This is probably because exposure to a systematic analysis of power is newer to White students than it is to students of color and, while most students of color have engaged in cross-racial interaction previously, a large proportion of White students have not. In addition, although the researchers do not note this, my experience is that introductory diversity courses are often pitched toward a White audience; students of color may appreciate White students being taught about racism, but they often do not find their own understanding stretched. Blackwell (2010), an African American woman who had been on the receiving end of such curricula, points out that students of color frequently feel marginalized in diversity curricula that focus on raising consciousness among White students by being positioned as cultural expert, teacher's aid, and witness of race and racism; she argues that "home spaces" where students of color can learn about race, ethnicity, and culture at a deeper level are also needed.

The studies also found that for many students—particularly White students—the first diversity course is emotionally challenging (Hogan and Mallot 2005). In a large survey study of students in 19 colleges and universities, Bowman (2010a) examined the impact of taking one or more diversity courses on students' well-being and on their comfort with and appreciation of differences. He found that many students who take a single diversity course experienced a reduced sense of well-being due to having to grapple with issues they have not been exposed to before. However, students who took more than one diversity course experienced significant gains, with gains being greatest for White male students from economically privileged backgrounds (who had the farthest to go). Completing a diversity course also appears to mitigate what is otherwise an escalation of intolerance in the university experience. In a pre-post survey study of students at the University of Michigan, Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) found that, while the students (majority White) who completed a one-semester race and ethnicity course did not shift in their attitudes about various groups (such as African Americans and Latinos), students who did not complete such a course became less tolerant.

Research on the academic impact of ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups, while not voluminous, shows that such curricula, when designed to help students grapple with multiple perspectives, produce higher levels of thinking.

In the Multicultural Reading and Thinking Project (McRAT), which was developed in Arkansas for grades 4–6 (Arkansas Department of Education 1992), lessons that use multicultural content across the curriculum were designed to develop both higher order thinking and cultural awareness. By the end of the second year of the project,

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which was being used in seven school districts, Quellmalz and Hoskyn (1988) found “substantial increases” in student achievement percentile rankings across social class and student achievement levels. They also reported qualitative data that showed an increase in students’ writing ability and parent reports that children were reading more at home. In a subsequent experimental evaluation of the project (30% of the students were of color), students using the McRAT curriculum outperformed the control group in analysis, inference, comparison, and evaluation (Arkansas Department of Education 1992, see also Fashola and Slavin 1997). The multicultural curriculum, with its multiple perspectives, complemented teaching of higher order thinking.

At the higher education level, Bowman (2010b) reported a meta-analysis of 23 statistical studies of the relationship between college student participation in diversity experiences (courses, workshops, and/or interactions), and cognitive development (such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, problem-solving). He found that participation in diversity experiences is “significantly and positively related to cognitive development.” While the magnitude was small, the effects were consistent across the studies. Diversity experiences that include interpersonal interaction related to racial diversity had the strongest positive impact because interaction across diverse perspectives forces students to think.

There is also indication that classes of diverse students find well-planned multicultural curricula to be interesting and engaging. Qualitative studies of two literature projects at the elementary level bear this out. The Multicultural Literacy Program (Diamond and Moore 1995 as cited by Gay 2010) entailed use of multiethnic literature with students in grades K–8 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, taught through a whole-language approach, learning centers, and cooperative learning. Qualitative data based on classroom observations and analysis of student work showed increased enjoyment of reading and writing, increased knowledge of various forms and structures of written language, expanded vocabulary and reading strategies, improved comprehension and reading fluency, and longer and clearer written stories. Grice and Vaughn (1992) reported an interview study of responses of nine Black and four White low-achieving third graders from a working class urban community to 20 “culturally conscious” books (set in inner city and some middle class Black neighborhoods, with Black protagonists and storyline that did not involve trying to gain White approval) and four “melting pot” books (middle class setting, no reference to racial identity) books. The children responded most positively to books with characters and situations they could identify with and that had a positive message.

To summarize, research on ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups that include White students reports that just infusing representation of racially and ethnically diverse people into curriculum without doing anything else makes only a marginal impact on students’ attitudes, in contrast with curricula that teach directly about racism. The large body of research in higher education that examines the impact of various diversity experiences—particularly course-taking and interracial interaction—on “democracy outcomes” reports quite consistently that such courses have a positive impact, particularly when they include cross-group interaction and particularly on White students. Research on the academic impact of ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups, while not voluminous, shows that such curricula, when designed to help students grapple with multiple perspectives, produces higher levels of thinking.

Participation in diversity experiences is “significantly and positively related to cognitive development.”

## Conclusion

Considerable research evidence shows that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students and that curricula are designed and taught somewhat differently depending on the ethnic composition of the students and the subsequent experiences they bring. These positive findings should not be interpreted, however, as meaning that schools can assign any teacher an ethnic studies curriculum to teach, or that students of color will automatically achieve more if ethnic content is added to the curriculum. As noted above, well-planned and well-taught ethnic studies includes related components.

Ethnic studies teachers must be able to relate well with their students, believe in students' academic abilities, and know ethnic studies content and perspectives well; often (but not always) they are members of the same ethnic background of most of their students. Pedagogical strategies need to engage students in active thinking. Culture, rather than being conceptualized as something static from the past, is viewed as complex and dynamic, and students' everyday lived culture and language is part of the ethnic studies

Both students of color and White students have been found to benefit academically as well as socially from ethnic studies

curriculum. Finally, particularly at the Pre-K through 12 level, ethnic studies is not a separate subject but rather a reconceptualization of subject matter that takes into account state standards and assessments for which students will be held accountable.

Both students of color and White students have been found to benefit academically as well as socially from ethnic studies. Indeed, rather than being non-academic, well-planned ethnic studies curricula are often very academically rigorous. Rather than being divisive, ethnic studies helps students to bridge differences that already exist in experiences and perspectives. In these ways, ethnic studies plays an important role in building a truly inclusive multicultural democracy and system of education.

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**Christine E. Sleeter, PhD.** (University of Wisconsin–Madison 1982), is Professor Emerita in the College of Professional Studies at California State University–Monterey Bay, where she was a founding faculty member. She was formerly a high school learning disabilities teacher in Seattle. Currently a visiting professor at San Francisco State University, she was a faculty member at Ripon College in Wisconsin and at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, and a visiting professor at Victoria University in New Zealand, San Jose State University, and the University of Washington–Seattle.

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