

ACCELERATE ETHNIC STUDIES WITH “ALL DELIBERATE SPEED!”

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ABSTRACT

America is known as the Land of Opportunity, yet one may ask, “Opportunity for whom?” Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/ Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander along with other traditionally and historically underrepresented groups have experienced being marginalized in the United States as well as the school systems within our society. Since the inception of the concept of schooling in the United States, public education has had a minimal acknowledgment of historically and traditionally marginalized groups as contributors to the cultivation and development of the United States. It’s beyond time to redesign our educational system to reflect a system that will contribute to a *true* and sustainable democracy. This will require social justice educators with the capacity to teach our youth the complete truth of their cultural and ethnic imprint within the history and fabric of our country.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Social Justice, Historically Marginalized, Cultural Relevance, Civil Rights, Transformative, Equity, Institutional Racism

INTRODUCTION

And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn, the right to have examined in our schools not only what we believe, but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what the leaders of other groups and nations, and the leaders of other centuries have said.

(Du Bois, W.E.B. 1949/1970, pp. 230-231)

This quote by W.E.B. Du Bois, as though trapped in an echo chamber, rings as true and important today as it did over 71 years ago. During a tumultuous time that has seen the resurgence of a national divide drawn along racial and political lines prompted by political tectonic shifts, an unjust murder described as a modern-day lynching of a Black man, that fueled worldwide social justice demonstrations, and the worst pandemic in over 100 years that exposed the privilege and entitlement of a democratic society, one could surmise that this “perfect storm” has brought us to a tipping point of the American experience. Our collective and overwhelming response will either cause it to be an abject failure or the purification and rebirth of a truly democratic society.

One could argue that the political perspective created by colorblind post-racial liberalism began to unravel beginning with the 2016 election of our 45th President. A monumental and historical event that was a response to the election of our 44th and first and only Biracial President. Having said this, we caution you to resist the inclination to fault or give too much credit to any one individual or one specific event in history. We are reminded of what Princeton University Professor Eddie Glaude said on a popular American news cable show when he refuted this inclination to blame one individual, but instead proclaimed, “...this is us!”

Looking back at the fore mentioned series of political events, few forecasted that they would serve as precursors for a perfect storm. A combination of liberal contentment at having “arrived” to being repudiated by the backlash of a conservative *not-so-fast* response dog whistled as a call to “Make America Great Again.” But *great* for whom? The timing of this political confrontation could not have come at a *worse* time or depending on your perspective, at a more *perfect* time. Building on the urgency of ending school segregation outlined in Brown vs the Board of Education II, this series of events gives added significance to the term *deliberate speed*. Whether deliberate or not, Governor Newsom and the newly signed bill AB101, making Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement for all California high schools beginning the 2029-30 school year, we posit that not only is this change long overdue but *the time is now*.

Setting the context of why the time is now, one has only to consider a once in over a 100-year pandemic that arrived in December 2019 to remind us of both our human frailties and vulnerability as a free society and democratic nation. Then as if one *virus* was not enough, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, at the hands of law enforcement, created a worldwide firestorm to eradicate the virus of institutional racism. This resulted in a global call for social justice not seen since the 1960s Civil Rights movement. Culminating in what can only be described as a tipping point for our nation, the cries of a stolen election coupled with an insurrection’s attempt to overturn a modern-day election by disrupting the peaceful transfer of power. This chain of

events begs the question, if not now, when and how can we simply return to “*normal*?” Or for that matter, how and why should we return to the conditions that got us where we are now?

Never has there been a more appropriate and necessary time to reimagine and redefine our educational system. An educational system that will contribute to a *true* and sustainable democracy. This will require social justice educators with the capacity to teach our youth the complete truth of their cultural and ethnic imprint within the history and fabric of our country. This needs to start with shifting the responsibility to the educational system to institutionalize cultural knowledge in a way that will provide future generations with the capacity to help redefine and reposition the dynamics of difference as it pertains to the American social constructs of power, justice, and democracy.

A Time for Transformative Change

“The global pandemic known as COVID-19 gives us an opportunity to dig more deeply into our study and use of culture as a way to re-set education”

(Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 76).

In a diverse California where students of color have become the majority student demographic in (K-12) public schools (U.S. Census Bureau 2018), educational leaders need the capacity to address individual, organizational, and institutional barriers to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Educational leaders need to be able to challenge and transform a longstanding and unchanged educational system that historically has struggled to engage, motivate and inspire California’s students of color and other underserved groups. It is for this reason that we choose to focus on the groups identified by the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum’s foundational disciplines which include: Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian America and Pacific Islander, bi-racial ethnic groups and other historically marginalized groups. In this article and our writings moving forward, we also intentionally choose not to use the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). In our opinion, this acronym can be perceived as exclusionary or make invisible segments of the foundational disciplines.

As we adhere to the urgency for representation of Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, California is leading the nation by becoming the first state to require ethnic studies as a high school graduation requirement. In addition, California has adopted the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) to guide schools and districts as they implement Ethnic Studies in high schools to meet the state requirement. The ESMC defines Ethnic Studies as: “An interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses many subject areas including history, literature, economics, sociology, and anthropology (AB 101, 2021).” The ESMC also includes the following information about ethnic studies.

It emerged to both address content considered missing from the traditional curriculum and to encourage critical engagement. As a field, ethnic studies seeks to empower all students to engage socially and politically and to think critically about the

world around them. It is important for ethnic studies courses to document the experiences of people of color in order for students to construct counter-narratives and develop a more complex understanding of the human experience. Through these studies, students should develop respect for cultural diversity and see the advantages of inclusion. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this field, ethnic studies courses may take several forms. However, central to any ethnic studies course is the historic struggle of communities of color, taking into account the intersectionality of identity (gender, class, sexuality, among others), to challenge racism, discrimination, and oppression and interrogate the systems that continue to perpetuate inequality (AB 101, 2021).

The California (K-12) public school system, composed of predominantly White educators, shows no indications of a significant future influx of educators of color (Boser, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This necessitates a paradigm shift toward culturally proficient educational leaders capable of challenging and changing individual, institutional, and organizational cultural perspectives (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey; 2019; Shields, 2018). Educational leaders must have the capacity to address and challenge individual, organizational, and institutional barriers confronting a majority-marginalized student population that the system’s design positions to remain underserved, while their White peers continue to have higher student achievement and college and career goals.

These demographic and cultural differences require culturally competent educators capable of leading change through *praxis*. Praxis is defined as what Freire (2014) alluded to as a critical examination of our awareness, reflection, analysis, and action. Shields (2018) further substantiated that it starts from within: “It begins with awareness -- of self, of the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of our society, and of our school system” (p. 11). This inside-out approach is critical to finally transforming not only our educational system but addressing the societal issues that created the perfect storm for change. More specifically, intentional activism with a focus on widening and challenging existing individual and societal perspectives, values, and beliefs of an unchanged “status quo” educational system (Flores, 2019).

When one looks at the history of American public-school educational reform, it becomes evident how educational policy and decision-making are influenced by power and ideology (Rippner, 2016). The United States public school system has a long history of being deeply rooted in Eurocentric, neoliberal, and meritocratic perspectives reinforced by a colorblind discourse (Briscoe, 2014). These components fused together drive narratives that influence the existing foundation for educational beliefs and expectations in the United States, and closer to home, at the state and district-level. The challenge, as Rippner (2016) stated, is that “educational leaders and policymakers must focus on all students achieving at high levels in order to meet national attainment goals” (p. 3). Research and data show that the American public-school educational system and structure are presently not meeting the needs of all students, but more specifically, students of color (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Griner & Stewart, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013; Sleeter, 2011; 2018). Rippner (2016) further points out that what makes this

challenging is that education consists of a set of interrelated systems that lack the ability to improve itself due to continued institutionalization.

To this point, our public schools need culturally proficient formal leaders to lead and be able to “address issues that emerge when cultural differences are marginalized in schools and other organizations” (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 5). Cultural differences found within an unchanged educational system primarily led by a largely White dominant group in charge of teaching a majority-marginalized group that historically has been seen by our society and educational institution as inferior, resulting in deep-rooted systemic marginalization and oppression. Lindsey et al. (2019) stated that our call to action begins as an inside-out approach to how we view cultural differences. This necessitates an educator’s leadership style inclusive of perspectives and expectations that look to create a more just and equitable educational system. It is our contention that the implementation of Ethnic Studies is a great example or outcome of this goal. This will equate to a system that is more culturally competent, culturally responsive, inclusive, and accessible that will benefit *all* students and families.

Our educational philosophy is consistent with other educational scholars who recognize the importance of a quality education capable of engaging all students to reach their full potential despite their socio-economic status, class, race, ethnicity, gender, language, and special needs (Franco, Ott, & Robles, 2011). Providing a quality education begins with our public school educational leaders understanding that the family, as defined by each culture, is the primary system of support in the education of children. This responsibility begins with school leaders having a critical consciousness of personal, societal, and institutional barriers. This critical consciousness includes, but is not limited to, understanding the dynamics of difference and how organizational culture, created and influenced by an educator’s beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and practices, impacts and affects student achievement.

Background of the Problem

Throughout our nation’s history, the impact of laws, especially relative to civil rights, has left an indelible mark on public school education. American history shows the impact that civil rights laws have had on the educational access and rights of students to receive a free, appropriate, and quality public education. Despite best intentions, policymakers and educators have missed the mark in providing equity, access, and inclusion for all students. (Flores, 2019). American societal and educational perspectives leveraged by the dynamics of power and privilege status of a dominant, White, male, and Eurocentric hegemonic views have both purposefully and unconsciously oppressed or marginalized American minorities (Banks, 2008; Briscoe, 2012; Cruz-Janzen, 2009; Sleeter, 2011).

Changing the Narrative in Service of All Students

The United States has had countless reforms in our education system that aim to close the achievement, opportunity, and equity chasms. Many schools and districts throughout the United States have a mission and vision that support the concept of a “student-centered Culture,” however,

we have yet to ensure that all ethnic groups see themselves represented in the curriculum. Leaders throughout the educational system, at all levels, Pre-K-16, are preparing to move beyond the discussion of closing the chasms we describe as achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps. This is a primary reason why we support and advocate for implementing Ethnic Studies as early as possible throughout the public school experience.

As we seek to band together as a nation and eradicate the modern-day lynching of our Black/African Americans, call out and stop Asian American Hate, eliminate the continued and historical discrimination experienced by Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x American population and acknowledge the genocide that left our Native American/American Indian population confined to only portions of their land, Ethnic Studies is an important start point to dispelling stereotypes that cause America to be biased and prejudice against these and other ethnic groups. The anti-Asian Hate, I Can't Breathe, and Dreamer's path to citizenship for undocumented student campaigns are examples of the push for a fair and accurate representation of people of color. Each of these campaigns validate the need for schools and districts to implement Ethnic Studies as part of their curriculum. This approach would require a systemic approach to inclusion of those who traditionally and historically have been excluded and marginalized from the current school experience which would also serve to counter their feelings of marginalization and imposter syndrome. Equally important would be that Ethnic Studies courses would benefit students of the dominant culture by informing and addressing potential cultural blindspots as a result of privilege and entitlement and lack of proximity to different cultural experiences. This improvement to curriculum and instruction will more accurately reflect a holistic approach to the opportunities, challenges, and travails of the cultural experience greatly influenced and informed by our country's history.

Ethnic Studies Completes our Educational Programs

“Ethnic studies seeks to rehumanize experiences, challenge problematic Eurocentric narratives, and build community solidarity across differences.”

(Sleeter and Zavala, 2020, p.4)

The recent and historical experiences of Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, brought about the decision to develop a Model Curriculum for Ethnic Studies and the talk of an Assembly Bill to include Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement. So, what is Ethnic Studies? It is the multidisciplinary inquiry and study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with an emphasis on experiences of Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, in historical events in the United States. Schools in California have been offering courses in Ethnic Studies since the 1960s, and as of 2021, there is a Model Curriculum, as well as an Assembly Bill, which will add a graduation requirement that will require scholars 9-12 grade to complete at least one semester in Ethnic Studies by the 2029-30 school year. The implementation of Ethnic Studies aims to empower Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American

Indian, Asian American, and Pacific Islanders and other historically and traditionally marginalized groups and to encourage scholars to tell their own stories in the form of the counter-narrative and share their journey towards self-discovery. Scholars are more likely to be engaged in exploring topics that are relevant to their lived experiences. Ethnic studies is designed to develop the cultural competencies of educators and to provide a platform to ensure that Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander scholars see themselves and the accomplishments of people who represent their culture in the curriculum. Schools and districts that incorporate ethnic studies with fidelity have leaders, teachers, and scholars who have the capacity and desire to think more critically about the current world in which we live. Ethnic studies provides a great opportunity for educators to facilitate the exploration of the true and complete history of all Americans in the United States, their lived experiences, contributions, and trauma in the U.S. Through the adoption of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and the passing of the Assembly Bill that will include ethnic studies as a high school graduation requirement, scholars of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds will benefit from learning about the untold history and literature of our Nation’s most underrepresented populations which have not only been omitted from our history books but due to this omission, continue to experience discrimination, hate, oppression, bias, and limited opportunity.

Ethnic Studies PK20

The history of slavery, school segregation, Mexican Schools, Native American Boarding Schools, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and other acts of discrimination and marginalization, as well as positive contributions of Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, is not introduced in detail in schools, however, it should be covered at all levels. It is vital to incorporate ethnic studies at every level of the educational journey so that scholars of all ages and ethnicities are afforded the opportunity to learn about their culture and history as well as others in our society. It is time we eliminate hierarchy and chasms in our society that have caused much discord amongst different racial and ethnic groups. We must incorporate ethnic studies so that as a society we do not repeat the same malpractice of marginalizing our scholars. We must revisit the policies and procedures put into place that have systematically caused Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander scholars in our PK-12 system to feel and be regarded as inferior. We need to ensure that no one feels marginalized and that all our student groups see themselves represented in the curriculum and receive the support they need in order to not perpetuate cycles of marginalization. Due to our nationalistic pride, we tend to bury things that we are ashamed of, however, we must rise above our shame and discomfort so that we can disrupt educational inequities and dismantle the system to create equitable outcomes for students from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities. It’s important to begin by focusing on those who have experienced marginalization as an inheritance, passed down intergenerationally for centuries. Focusing on the historically marginalized is a starting point that is necessary to dismantle a system that does not serve all scholars in ways that

provide equitable access and outcomes. Once the system is re-examined, redesigned, and transitioned to a more inclusive curriculum, all student groups will begin to benefit socially and academically.

Not a Minority

In our careers as educators and our experience as lifelong learners, we know what it means to be classified and referred to as minorities. This designation often causes us to feel as if we do not belong, causes us to be treated as inferior, and consequently, requires us to work twice as hard just to get a seat at the table and to be invited to the conversation. Undeterred, our hope and reason for writing this article is to embolden equitable opportunities and a relevant educational experience for the demographic groups identified in the model curriculum because they should see themselves just as qualified and capable as their white peers who have historically been classified as higher-achieving. It is past due that all scholars see themselves positively and accurately represented in the curriculum. Marian Wright Edelman wrote, “It’s hard to be what you can’t see (Wright Edelman Founder and President Emerita, 2018).” Thus, it is critically important for the US educational system to commit to providing enriched educational experiences where all Americans see themselves represented in the curriculum.

As times change and our society continues to grow more diverse with people of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, it is well beyond time to introduce ethnic studies as an integral and essential course for public schools. Although ethnic studies will be a requirement for high school graduation, we find it equally vital to incorporate ethnic studies in early education, elementary, and middle school as well. We are aware that we must begin somewhere and like the Brown vs Board II ruling recommended for education in the 1950s, let’s move to establish ethnic studies as essential with “All Deliberate Speed.” Christine Sleeter, Professor Emerita from Cal State Monterey Bay, and author of the book *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum Pedagogy & Research* conducted research to determine the impact of ethnic studies. Her research indicates that students of color can be disengaged because the curriculum has a heavy European American influence that leaves little room to add the cultural background and lived experience of our diverse and ethnic population (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). It is for this reason, that ethnic studies is being endorsed as an essential content area and a high school graduation requirement. Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/ Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and other historically and traditionally underrepresented scholars deserve to have an opportunity to be engaged in school with content that is relevant to their historical and lived experience. As students journey through an educational system designed to adhere to what Thomas Jefferson imposed, “twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish” (Louden, 2010 p.43), let’s be reminded that the domination of European Culture has influenced our society and our school system and causes Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/ American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander scholars to be underrepresented, underserved and disengaged. Thomas Jefferson’s proposal of a two-track system for the “laboring and the learned,” has created the chasms that exist

even though Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander scholars were not included in the original plan for those to be educated in the American school system.

As educators, we have experienced and have witnessed, the impact the present structure of our educational system has on the potential of Black/African American, Hispanic/Chicano/a/x/Latino/a/x, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander students. Unfortunately, for many of our students, existing curriculum standards continue to ignore, fail to accurately recognize, and even worse, misrepresent or seek to bury their cultural, generational, and societal experiences. Keeping in mind the historical significance of the indigenous to the land, the different diasporas of people entering the United States by free will, force, or refuge, or history that predates the Mayflower, it is time for educators, to champion a more complete and inclusive curriculum that will move ethnic studies from the fringe to the mainstream.

This leaves educators and students of color with a similar experience as described by the foretelling of W.E.B. Du Bois when he spoke of an African “double consciousness” where he states “it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” (W.E.B Du Bois, 1903). That this situation still exists today and considering how long we have failed to give all students the opportunity to explore the fullness of diverse histories and perspectives, is why we advocate for accelerating the implementation of ethnic studies with all deliberate speed.

Closing the Chasms

It is time or as it is described in Spanish, *es tiempo*, to reexamine public school education by recognizing the impact of power and privilege, addressing bias, and intentionally preparing future generations to eradicate racism so that our society may more fully realize and sustain democracy in our country. W.E.B. Dubois (1949/1970) further stated “We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be.” (p. 230-231). To this point, as educational leaders, we must recognize the systemic structures and barriers that continue to unfairly advantage some while continuing to marginalize and disenfranchise students most affected by the chasms of achievement, equity, and opportunity.

Beginning with the acknowledgment and understanding that our public education system is not meeting the needs of all students, not as a matter of unintended consequence, but intentionally as designed, brings educators to the conclusion that our educational system requires transformative change. As educators, all we want is a more inclusive education that accurately and honestly portrays the challenges and struggles as well as accomplishments experienced by generations of families that comprise the American experience represented today by a majority of students of color. Our hope is that by doing so will change the narrative of a “single story” to all of our stories, no longer being seen from a deficit perspective. Likewise, we collaborate on this

journey so that the doors of opportunity will stop being closed roughly in the face of generations of historically marginalized populations whose contributions make the United States great.

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