



How Ethnic Studies Can Reduce Racial Achievement Gaps

Nolan L. Cabrera, University of Arizona

America has had massive educational inequality along racial lines for decades. Many want to address this issue, but few know how. Some want to address opportunity gaps because they harm the country's economy, while others make social justice appeals and point out that race-based educational inequities harm Communities of Color. Although most agree that educational gaps must be addressed, several recent attempts – such as standards-based reform, vouchers, Teach for America, and school choice – have exacerbated rather than reduced racial inequalities.

Despite more than 40-years of experience in U.S. universities and public schools, ethnic studies programs have been missing from national discussions of educational reforms – in part because of widespread, mistaken perceptions that such programs are divisive and lack rigor. New research presents a different picture. Evidence about the Mexican American Studies program of the Tucson Unified School District and the Ethnic Studies program of the San Francisco Unified School District Ethnic Studies program show the positive potential of this educational approach.

Evidence from Tucson and San Francisco

In the Tucson Unified School District, juniors and seniors were able to take a year-long, two-semester sequence in Social Studies or Language Arts from a Mexican American perspective. Research on the program shows that the curriculum was intentionally aligned with state standards and the students who took the classes tended to be: low-income, overwhelmingly Mexican American students who had very low grade point averages *prior* to taking the classes.

The results for students in this program were remarkable. Students who took at least one Mexican American Studies course were significantly more likely to pass their Arizona state standardized tests including those in math, even though there was no Mexican American Studies math course offered. Students were also significantly more likely to graduate from high school, and this likelihood increased as students took more Mexican American Studies classes.

The San Francisco Unified School District produced remarkably similar results. Students in 8th grade with either low grade point averages (under 2.0) or poor rates of attendance were offered in their 9th grade year options to enroll in a year-long Ethnic Studies class. Students who enrolled in these courses saw their attendance increase 21 percentage points, earned 23 more academic credits, and saw their grades improve by 1.3 points. Rarely do educational programs produce such noteworthy results – and these examples demonstrate that ethnic studies programs, if implemented correctly, can reduce racial inequality in education.

Lessons Learned and the Potential for Expansion

As other jurisdictions try to repeat the successes of the Tucson and San Francisco programs, key core components must be included to maximize educational effectiveness:

- **Effective ethnic studies classes should count for core credit and must be oriented to the cultural contexts of the students and taught by well-trained teachers.** Effective classes cannot be mere electives, because many of the students who can benefit did not like the first language arts or social studies classes they took and will not voluntarily sign up for second classes. Therefore, ethnic studies courses must count for core credit. Also, it is worth noting that teachers in both Tucson and San Francisco trained extensively in ethnic studies curricula and pedagogy over a period of several years. It would be a mistake to think that teachers with routine qualifications in other areas can teach ethnic studies courses effectively.

- **Ethnic studies programs should target low-performing students, but not be remedial.** In both Tucson and San Francisco, remarkably, students who were previously very low-performing showed dramatic improvements after taking ethnic studies classes. However, these courses were not remedial – and that was important, because students frequently believe that “remedial” classes are aimed at the unintelligent. Both the Tucson and San Francisco programs were academically challenging, and teachers repeatedly told students that they are scholars of their communities.
- **Effective programs focus on the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to inequality.** Not all multicultural approaches to education are equally effective. Those featuring “foods and fiestas” or “heroes and holidays” are superficial and are not the sorts of programs described here. Effective ethnic studies curricula address racial inequality and challenge students to consider possible solutions. These curricula highlight intellectual contributions traditional historical texts tends to ignore, contributions from racial minorities, women, the poor, and gay, lesbian, and transgender people. These courses help marginalized students develop an academic identity. Much more is involved than simply swapping Maya Angelou for Shakespeare or having students recite Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.
- **Structure classes as two-semester sequences.** Although one class can be useful, the real impact of the Tucson and San Francisco programs came from their full-year span and the programmatic efficacy increased as students took more classes. This makes sense because longer immersion allows students more time for academic growth.
- **Offer classes as early as possible.** The Tucson program offered classes only to juniors and seniors, while San Francisco allowed freshmen to enroll. Observers in both districts agree that earlier is better. Many students dropped out of Tucson Unified district before they ever had a chance to take the classes. Having earlier access to the program might have prevented some of these students from dropping out.

Some have asked: Isn’t teaching ethnic studies going to deepen segregation in schools? The short answer is no. Somewhat counterintuitively, students who have a stronger sense of who they are ethnically – and do well in school -- are more likely to interact confidently across racial lines.

The key point is that ethnic studies curricula show promise for addressing race-based educational inequality in education when they are *done well*. To be effective, ethnic studies cannot be treated as a side-show. Courses must be part of the core, for-credit curriculum, taught by well-trained teachers, available to students in many grade levels. Ethnic studies must become a rigorous discipline worthy of study, one that makes the histories and communities of targeted students central to curriculum, research, and pedagogy.

Read more in Nolan L. Cabrera, Jeffrey F. Milem, Ozan Jaquette, and Ronald W. Marx, “**Missing the (Student Achievement) Forest for all the (Political) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson**” *American Educational Research Journal* 51, no. 6 (2014): 1084-1118.