

2016

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Recommended Citation

Vaught, Destiny L., "The Necessity of Minority Ethnic Studies in the American Education Curriculum" (2016). *2016 Symposium*. 9.
https://dc.ewu.edu/srcw_2016/9

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The Necessity of Minority Ethnic Studies in the American Education Curriculum

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First Year Experience (FYE): Truth, Lies, & Uncertainties

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Author's Note

Destiny L. Vaugh is a freshman student at Eastern Washington University. This paper was presented at the 19th Annual EWU Research and Creative Works Symposium on May 18, 2016 in Cheney, WA and was submitted as an assignment for First Year Experience (FYE): Trues, Lies & Uncertainties (ITGS 120-03; Spring 2016)

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Abstract

From the very start of the educational career students are rarely exposed to the history, culture, and contributions of other ethnic groups that tie together the American way of life, past and present. Not until individuals reach higher education, are they introduced to studies that are designed specifically to enlighten the student's knowledge of minorities and other ethnicities in the United States. In this study, I used peer review sources to highlight the advantages of schools that teach ethnic studies classes and the importance of understanding different groups of people at an earlier stage in a student's life. The study will narrow down its focus to Chicana/o studies and the lack of diverse curriculum in the US education system. This work also explores the content taught in Chicana/o Studies wherever it is offered and the reasons for the existing gap in ethnic studies curriculum before college. Finally, this study focuses on how did we get to exclude the histories that make up so much of our American history, and how do we move forward in developing more ethnic studies programs to enhance the knowledge of younger people today?

Keywords: Chicana/o, ethnic studies, education, diversity, history

America is not as it used to be, especially when it comes to our educational systems. Racism still exists today, and raising up culturally competent individuals has never been more important. Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to shift your perceptions into a worldview that applies to multiple cultures, establish your own identity that challenges the self to other belief systems, and identities globally, engaging with diverse groups and creating relationships that are grounded in mutual understandings of each other (Odag et al., 2016). Intercultural competence implies being able to be around people of different cultures, and having a conversation with them. Being able to be in their presence with an awareness of who they are, where they come from, and what they may have been through and giving them grace to not offend or patronize them because you took the time to know them and things about them.

The history of America is often taught from one point of view in our education, contributions of other cultures forgotten. Ethnic studies help people understand those who are not like themselves. Ethnic studies give insight to different lives, trials, tribulations, and moments unlike their own that they may experience themselves. Educating others around you, of different cultural groups unlike yourselves gives a knowledge that you cannot just obtain on your own, unless you are seeking it. The knowledge of other ethnicities bridges a cultural gap and brings people together, it diminishes the divide that they feel because for once, everyone understands each other better and can work together against adversity and stereotypes.

The education system has changed a lot, especially the people within it. Whereas the majority of people attending schools used to be predominantly white, now it is more evenly spread and much more culturally diverse. According to Maxwell (2014) the new majority of minority schoolchildren was projected to be more than half of the population in our school. This is causing more minority students to feel as though they cannot identify with the curriculum that

is taught, further widening the gap. The education system is from mainly one set of eyes, and is seen through a nationalist lens. For example, Sleeter's (2011) study found that:

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... In other words, racial and ethnic minorities are added consistently in a contributions' fashion to the predominantly Euro-American narrative of textbooks. (p. 11).

In correlation with the Chicano culture specifically, they are often overlooked in the history of the civil rights movement, almost as if they had no participation. Dauphine questions the lack of knowledge or talk of the part that Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, and Latinos played when civil rights was at its peak (Dauphine, 2014). Especially when such a significant case such as Mendez, et al v. Westminster School District of Orange County is hardly mentioned in civil rights accomplishments, or you never hear of it. Considering Sylvia Mendez challenged the segregation in the schools of Orange County against people of Mexican descent and Mexican Americans, you would hope that people of her culture would know who she is so they can honor her name for her work in the equality for their culture. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in February of 2011, yet you don't hear of her in the curriculum in our schools. Ethnic studies that focus on the contributions of diverse cultures other than the majority will help give insight and provide knowledge of other groups of people and the things they did that made our country progress for the better.

Furthering the idea of being able to identify with your culture, historical background and yourself, ethnic studies plays a big part in self-identification and acceptance. Imagine sitting in a

classroom where you are obtaining knowledge only of people you have no relation to. You cannot see yourself in the life that they have lived, nor in the contributions to our country. Combine that with only negative ideas of what people think you are, and perceive you as, you will begin to be swayed into thinking that you yourself are like what you are told you are. Brown (2012) states that students who hold their cultural identity in higher regards, feel stronger about who they are, felt proud of where they come from, and have more interest in a school (p. 2).

Also relating back to people of Chicano cultures, the idea of school context helps with academic achievement when the school teaches, acknowledges, and pushes their minority students for the better. Also according to Brown (2012) the way in which schools promote multiculturalism and value the diversity in which they are made up of, affects the way in which the experiences of the children are effected when it comes to discrimination and their ethnic identity once again (p. 2). If the school is not culturally diverse and does not appreciate the diversity the minority students, and those of different ethnic backgrounds will feel like the outsiders. They will internalize the fact that they are not valued, and in turn will begin to not value themselves. So, ethnic studies work to prioritize the school in valuing and promoting diversity, and bridging the gap between the minority and majority students so everyone can work towards success together.

Understanding people that are of different cultures gives you a new outlook and perspective of which you view everything in daily life. When you have built a cultural competence and understand people of different backgrounds you are able to see situations through the eyes of others, and the way you react to racially charged incidents is forever changed. In the school setting more than anything, there is still racism that is triggered from even simply having a diverse and multicultural student body. The framework of schools along with

interactions through ethnic studies courses combine to make people aware of racial gaps, and what they can do to promote an acceptance to the diversity in which they exist. The need for ethnic studies is heightened because it works to create culturally competent individuals who are aware and open to other cultures, and a better acceptance for who they are. Although the alternative argument for not implementing ethnic studies are valid in the fact that they are weary of bringing up past injustices of minority groups, the benefits of ethnic studies by far exceed the costs of providing them.

The Modern Language Association stated in a formal executive board statement that:

We therefore believe that all students in the United States should become acquainted with a wide variety of American ethnic histories and heritages. Such programs are designed to lead to a greater understanding of the histories and cultures of the people of the United States, not to any partisan political or cultural outcome (2013).

Just because people acknowledge the shortcomings of the U.S. as a nation when it has dealt with minority groups, does not mean that there will always be resentment.

If anything, giving insight to things we may have done wrong in the past may ignite a flame in people to ensure that some of the mistakes we have made will not happen again. People of minority groups whose ancestors have been done wrong will only be pushed to work harder to make sure their people will not fall into peril. It will also push people who are of the majority European descent to see the things that their own ancestors have done and to work towards a more unified future and that they will not fall into those footsteps once again. Ethnic studies gives light to a past and development of different groups of people and spreads knowledge of what we can do to not repeat history and to build a future of diversified people who understand

what they have gone through to get to this point and what they can do to push each other to the best that they can be in a unified cultural nation.

Ethnic studies made a name for itself when classes that had been present in the Tucson Unified School District were dismissed in 2010. Anderson (2015) found that the classes had begun in 1998. They were supposed to bring cultural diversity to the curriculum than what was previously provided. Ethnic chauvinism was accused, so the program was shut down, and any school unwilling to drop the courses was to lose their state funding. After many protests and a desegregation lawsuit in 2013, the classes were once again implemented with curriculum once again relevant to Mexican-American and African American perspectives. Anderson (2015) also expressed in this article are the facts that most children and teenagers in the schools today are people of color. In the past the curriculum taught excluded the histories of anyone other than white, male, heterosexual, able Christians even though people from all groups contributed to the world we have as of today, and that ethnic studies are essential because they allow younger generations the full blown access to all the knowledge we have as human beings, not just part of it.

The presence of ethnic studies programs and active implementing is showing to reap great benefits for the San Francisco Unified School District in California which followed suit from the Arizona diverse classes being required. In 2014 a policy was passed that provided access to every high school student in the district, and considering that 90 percent of the students are minority children it was very beneficial to include them specifically in the curriculum. The curriculum exposes the students to the histories of diverse cultures, and gives a more realistic grasp on the complex, cultural history of our nation. Boggess (2016) discusses that:

Students consistently testified about their frustration at the absence of historical and

cultural figures from communities of color and the dominance of White ones in school curricula. That void, they said, made them feel excluded from what was being taught in most classes” (p. 1).

The article also stated that when students learned about their own culture’s history they began to feel more invested in their education, and felt more accepted in the school community which boosted the whole climate in a positive way (Boggess, 2016, p.1).

Ethnic studies can only provide a positive gateway for the future for our youth, and students in the education system. They bridge cultural gaps and gives insight to lives you would know nothing about otherwise. They give minority and students of other ethnicities an empowered sense of self and of the people from which they have grown from. Ethnic studies show the history of our nation through multiple lenses, where you are able to see the full spectrum of our advancement of a nation from all different groups of people and the contributions that they provided to get us to where we are today. Ethnic studies bring people together in their education, and give them positive role models other than those of European descent that they normally hear of and hero’s to look up to that they can envision themselves as. Ethnic studies promote positive diverse unification in schools, and the acceptance of races other than one’s own, and lastly ethnic studies help to provide pure, and full cultural competence of a multicultural nation that we live in, and allow us to continue to better it from here on out.

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