

# Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Race: Ethnic Studies and Literacies of Power in High School Classrooms

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**Abstract** This article explores the potential of a critical pedagogy of race in high school classrooms to foster civic engagement and academic development. We begin with an exploration of the role of white supremacy in “race-neutral” curricula in US schools. Even as the largest 60 school districts in the nation are 80 % non-white and states such as California and New York move toward non-white pluralities in their school systems, curricula remain largely unchanged. We outline some of the larger systemic inequities that result from this often alienating and exclusive approach to teaching in city schools, and we conclude this first section by acknowledging various efforts to name and resist racially oppressive curricula and pedagogies. The second section of the article provides a brief historical context for the Ethnic Studies movement as a response to white supremacist curriculum and instruction in high school and college classrooms. We trace this movement back to its inception in the 1960s to provide a framing for our work. Our goal is to show that (1) the tradition of teaching Ethnic Studies in the high school is as old as the movement itself; (2) the teaching of Ethnic Studies has always been tied to both academic development and civic

engagement; and (3) Ethnic Studies courses and content have been infused across disciplines and taught to racially heterogeneous groups since the outset of the movement. The third section of the paper will focus on three case studies of the critical pedagogy of Ethnic Studies with high school students. Two of these cases are of high school classes and the third explores a summer and after-school program where high school students engage in youth participatory action research projects around issues impacting youth of color in their neighborhoods and communities. Across each of these cases, we define our conception of a critical pedagogy of race and we explore the connections between the teaching of Ethnic Studies and the development of literacies of power, agency, social awareness, civic engagement, and academic achievement. We conclude the article with implications for pedagogy, policy, and praxis in city schools.

**Keywords** Ethnic Studies · Critical pedagogy · Race and education · Urban education · Curriculum Theory · Social justice

The 60th Anniversary of the *Brown* decision offers an opportunity to reflect on the current state of race and education in the USA. Along with scholars, advocates, and educational leaders, we pondered this question at the NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools’ *Brown: 60 and Beyond* conference held on that campus in May 2014. The focus of our talk and this article is the potential use of what we call a critical pedagogy of race to increase academic achievement and social awareness for students of color, whose voices and perspectives are often absent from contemporary pedagogical and curricular approaches. One explanation

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for this absence is that an approach that centers upon race detracts from the development of core academic competencies. To the contrary, we argue that a critical approach to the teaching of race not only has the potential to make curricula more relevant and engaging, but such an approach also has the potential to foster standard-based academic development across the disciplines. We explore these possibilities through the study of three case studies of projects involving high school students.

We begin with an explanation of the new demographic reality in American education. In doing so, we make the case that the new non-white majority in US schools demands a rethinking of curriculum and teaching. We next introduce our conception of a critical pedagogy of race, which draws from the fields of critical pedagogy and Ethnic Studies. We then explore the limitations of a race-neutral curriculum and situate our focus on high school Ethnic Studies within a tradition that dates back to the late 1960s. The article then presents three cases of critical race pedagogy with high school students. We conclude with implications for curriculum development, educational policy, and praxis.

### The Demographic Reality of American Education

When looking at the 2014 data gathered from the Council of Great City Schools on the largest school districts in the country, the necessity for a critical pedagogy of race becomes all the more salient. Of the 6.9 million students who are enrolled in the nation's largest 60 school districts, 71 % of them are either African American or Latino (as opposed to approximately 35 % for the nation as a whole), 69 % are eligible for free or reduced lunch as determined by household income, and 17 % are classified as an English Language Learners (ELL), while many, many more come from homes where languages other than English are spoken. Nationwide, the largest central city school districts are home to 28 % of all African American students, 24 % of all Latino students, 19 % of all Asian American students, and 25 % of all ELL (Council of Great City Schools 2012). It is interesting to note that only 5 % of white students in the USA attend schools in these larger city districts.

What do these numbers tell us? At one level, they speak to a large demographic shift in the ethnic population across the nation. While a generation ago, America's schools could have been identified as predominantly white, this group now just comprises 52 % of the national public school population (National Center for Education Statistics 2014), and, by 2023, it is projected that nationwide white students will only comprise 45 % of the US Public School population. In 2014, there are already several states with a non-white majority such as California, New Mexico, and

New York. These numbers also speak to the intense segregation of students of color in America's central cities. A recently published report by the UCLA Civil Rights Project (Kucsera and Orfield 2014) shows that 60 % of all of the African American students in the state of New York are contained within the five boroughs of New York City, while only 10 % of white students are found in this same geographic area. While a growing non-white student population should bring forward important conversations about diversifying curriculum for all students, what we have instead are hyper-segregated non-white educational spaces where students are still provided a curriculum and a set of pedagogical practices representative of an ethnically homogenous America that never existed.

Unfortunately, while there are many exceptions, in the aggregate, it is possible to make strong correlations nationally between hyper-segregated non-white schools and systems and academic underachievement. Many of these school districts have higher dropout rates and lower standardized test scores than their suburban counterparts. As a nation, it appears that we have come to expect schools serving large numbers of African American and Latino students to fail; that they will have fewer educational resources and substandard academic performance. How is it, in such a wealthy nation (with a GDP north of 15 trillion dollars), that we have allowed ourselves to become so comfortable with so much racialized educational failure?

In 2010, the United States Department of Education released a report entitled *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. The report begins by outlining the relative decline in college completion rates for the USA. In one generation, the USA has fallen from second to eleventh worldwide in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who have completed a college degree. The slide represents challenges we are facing in our educational system providing adequate and equitable college access for all of our students. Particularly, these problems are most acute for historically marginalized populations; those who are poor, those who are non-white, and those who attend schools in our nation's central cities. The lack of college access for students of color represents a problem for the USA, which wants to maintain its global economic hegemony; however, we argue that the lack of college access among historically marginalized populations holds tremendous implications for our ability to increase the pipeline of educator advocates who will lead the next generation of educational reform. The nation's teaching force is becoming increasingly homogenous even as K-12 classrooms and schools are becoming increasingly diverse (Feistritz 2011; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force 2004).

Students who do not finish high school are more likely to be underemployed, they are more likely to go to prison,

to have children at a young age; they are less likely to vote; and they are more likely to have children who do not finish high school (Rumberger 2011). When the *Blueprint* identifies that less than 20 % of African American and Latino students in the 25–34 age group are completing college, it reveals a problem of epic proportions; a problem that would be mitigated by a critical pedagogy of race in American education.

### **Toward a Critical Race Pedagogy in American Education**

Without access to a critical global education, there is little that ordinary individuals will be able to offer to the twenty-first century, with its high demands for academic literacy and technological competency needed both for professional opportunities in the knowledge economy and civic responsibilities in our expanding and complex democracies. There is no question that a high-quality education is invaluable to the future of our nation and to the individuals who will shape that future. As the president, the secretary of education, and numerous members of congress and the business community have reminded us, an educated citizenry is essential for our economic growth and our national security (USDOE 2010) but, more importantly, a critically educated population is a non-negotiable for the strength of our multicultural democracy and our national character. How might we rethink the philosophy and practice of American education to ensure the eradication of institutional racism, low expectations, and the general moral disinvestment in our nation's most impoverished schools?

Critical pedagogy is an educational process that engages members of historically underserved groups in humane and problem-posing dialogue to name and ultimately transform oppressive social and structural conditions within schools and the larger society (Freire 1970). Critical pedagogy is an approach to formal and informal education that challenges the concept and idea of “culture-free” learning (Grant and Sleeter 1990) and seeks instead to build authentic educational experiences that begin with the local experiences of students, families, and communities (Freire and Macedo 1987; Yosso 2005). In addition, proponents of this approach desire to foster an awareness of the structural conditions and societal norms that perpetuate inequity and oppression (McLaren 1994). Moving beyond critique, however, the goals of critical pedagogy are to develop powerful readers and writers who can draw upon their literacy skills and their concern for justice to facilitate action for change (Darder 2002; Freire 1970). The very premise of critical pedagogy seeks to move away from the banking model of education that is based on a one-way transmission (or deposit) of knowledge to students' minds

to an approach where teachers and students pose questions of the world (Freire 1970) and engage in a process of inquiry and action. (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008).

The project of critical pedagogy is a humanizing one in that it has as a goal to help historically marginalized groups to obtain an education that will help in attaining a fuller humanity (Bartolomé 1994). Critical pedagogy is committed to democratizing power and access through collective action that involves those who have been muted, disregarded, or even worse, targeted as objects of scorn, hate, or rejection (McLaren 1994). Critical pedagogy is a belief in the potential of everyday people to function as catalysts of change; it is a dialogic and mutually constitutive process between educators and students that develops skills, sensibilities, and identities; and it holds the promise to become one of the most relevant and revolutionary tools in urban education today (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008).

While critical pedagogy has much to offer, it lacks an explicit attention to race and racial relations that is at the center of Ethnic Studies. Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary field that begins with the assumption that race and racism have been and will continue to be strong social and cultural forces in American society (Hu-Dehart 1993). It builds on the pioneering work of Carter G Woodson (1990) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), Third World movements for decolonization (Fanon 1963), black independent schools and Afrocentric public schools, and tribal schools (Sleeter 2011). Ethnic Studies—which was first identified as “Third World Studies” and changed at the moment of its institutionalization—emerged from a swiftly flowing confluence of revolutionary work and theorizing in the late 1960s. The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) coalition formed at San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley, was inspired by the anticolonial, antiracist strivings of the majority of humankind in what W.E.B. Du Bois memorably termed “the problem of the twentieth century”—a momentous transnational project that aspired to undo over 400 years of world history (Okiihiro 2011). Prior to the 1960s, the large corpus of scholarship by black intellectuals (and other scholars of color) was rarely taught at colleges and universities (Rojas 2007). The TWLF demanded inclusion, access, democracy, representation, and new academic units buttressing multicultural and antiracist curricula at both the postsecondary and K-12 contexts (Umamoto 1989).

Furthermore, Ethnic Studies centers race and racism as the primary terrain of academic inquiry and interrogates the construction and deconstruction of racial projects. Omi and Winant's (1994) seminal work on racial formation provides a critical framework in deconstructing social institutions as “racial projects,” where racial categorizes are at once

made real, but are also contested and reconfigured. Schools and curricula themselves have become “racial projects” where racial inequity has become naturalized. Ethnic Studies scholars and K-12 teachers also tap into the untold and untapped knowledge production of communities of color that is often absent from mainstream curricula at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Ethnic Studies, as a field, is very broad and critical in that it seeks to deconstruct the forces that contribute to the normalizing of racialized inequity and in that it also seeks to affirm and include multiple voices, perspectives, and artifacts within the corpus of sanctioned knowledge. Recent studies of Ethnic Studies high school courses have demonstrated robust academic and media literacy skills (Morrell et al. 2013), an ethical responsibility to self and community (de los Ríos 2013), and students as re-constructors of history (Jocson 2008). From exposure to Ethnic Studies curricula, students are better able to develop a language of critique and possibility; and students of color are far more likely to have access to their histories and a fuller humanity in the educational arena.

The coupling of critical pedagogy and Ethnic Studies serves as a response and intervention to a racialized education crisis. Through combining the student as agent approach of critical pedagogy and race-conscious inquiry that grounds Ethnic Studies, we feel it possible to create powerful curricula that simultaneously develop academic literacies, self-efficacy, and collective action for racial justice. The necessity of this approach is made even clearer, considering the continued growth of “post-racial” ideologies that have naturalized racial inequity in schools. (King 1991; Philip 2011).

### America’s “Race-Neutral” Curricula

The concept of “race-neutrality” permeates US curricula, schooling, and education policy (Wells 2014). Schools as racial projects operate under the assumption that the process of becoming educated is a race-neutral or color-blind experience. On the contrary, not only formal school curricula but also informal, hidden, and null curricula work to maintain economic, political, societal, and cultural order (Apple 1982, 1990; Bernstein 1975). Since the beginning of schooling, curricula have served as a tool for acculturation and a depository of white supremacist ideals and values. As Tyack (1974) recounts, it has been the epistemologies, values, and beliefs of White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASP) that have been historically (and currently) deemed of most worth in public schools.

Those in control of schools, white businessman for the most part held a common set of WASP values,

professed a common core (that is, pan-Protestant) Christianity, where ethnocentric, and tended to glorify the sturdy values of a departed tradition. They took their values for granted as self-evidently true—not subject to legitimate debate. (Tyack 1974, p. 109)

As “the key institution in the practical process of social differentiation and selection and the heart of the ideological process through which inequality is made to seem legitimate” (Shapiro and Purpel 1993, p. 62 as cited in Goodwin 2010, p. 3110), schools have been instrumental in maintaining hegemony via a variety of structures and mechanisms, especially curricula.

Recent cases across the country convey the ways in which white supremacy is standardized through “race-neutral” curricula. The struggle over Texas history standards is a prime example (Au 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al. 2012). A bloc of conservative evangelical Christians on the state Board of Education eliminated the Seneca Falls Convention and women’s suffrage activist, Carrie Chapman Catt, from the standards, while also removing Harriet Tubman off the list of good citizens. Texas also swapped out Martin Luther King Jr. Day, minimized the incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII, reduced the discussion of slavery, and removed United Farm Worker labor leader, Dolores Huerta (Foner 2010; McKinley Jr. 2010).

Furthermore, the ideological battle in Tucson, Arizona, over representation, historical memory, and epistemology was seen through the dismantling of the once academically successful Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District (Cabrera et al. 2013). A program based on socio-culturally and historically contingent curriculum and pedagogy (Romero et al. 2009) that drew from counter-hegemonic frameworks like Meso-american epistemologies (Rodríguez 2012) and which has been empirically shown to increase the achievement of its students using typical indicators (Cabrera et al. 2012; Cappellucci et al. 2011) was deemed “un-American,” “divisive,” promoting “sedition,” and encouraging students to “overthrow the government” (Sleeter 2011).

Howard (2010) has argued that color-blind perspectives in curriculum development and schooling perpetuate racial inequality and “reproduce racial and cultural hegemony in school practices” (p. 53). Thus, curriculum—as a tool for acculturation and a conduit for whitestream epistemologies and values (Urrieta 2009)—has historically promoted the de-Indigenization, axiological subjugation, miseducation, and the assimilation of students of color to the dominant Western culture. In effect, educational practices that appropriate “color-blind” ideologies are not color-blind at all—these strategies of erasure are simultaneous practices of whiteness.

Reconfiguring learning spaces from color-blindness to race-consciousness signify the relevance of Ethnic Studies approaches.

### Ethnic Studies in American High Schools

As we contemplate a more widespread use of a critical pedagogy of Ethnic Studies in America's high schools, it is important to understand the rich tradition of Ethnic Studies teaching in these settings that already exists. Erroneously many believe that Ethnic Studies has only been taught in universities and colleges. However, the tradition of high school Ethnic Studies is as long and rich as the postsecondary context that we know and hear much more about.

As early as 1968, students at Berkeley High School in Northern California were demanding an African American Studies department (Ogbar 2004; Rojas 2007), which has now been a part of that school's curriculum for more than 45 years. In addition, the Chicana/o Blowouts in East Los Angeles, also of 1968, became the largest student mobilization in US history (Acuña 1996); students attending Garfield, Lincoln, Belmont, Roosevelt, and Wilson high schools protested against the schools' substandard material conditions and quality of education. One of the key points of protest for the students at Garfield, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Lincoln high schools was the lack of curriculum dealing with Chicana/o history, language, and culture (García and Castro 2011; Ochoa 2008).

It is out of that rich tradition of pedagogy and praxis in California schools that dates back nearly 50 years that we offer three case studies of recent work employing what we have come to call critical pedagogies of race with high school students. The first of these cases explores students' critical close readings of federal legislations affecting their lives and futures and their organizing of social justice community posadas to raise awareness and create local solutions. The second case, from Roosevelt High School, shows how López looked to community resources to design a Community Cultural Treasures Project that united teachers, non-profit arts organizations, and literacy directors to create an assignment that addressed the life, culture, local history, and voice of students. The final case study describes a 12-year project where high school students used youth participatory action research (YPAR) to unpack issues of social and racial injustice in their neighborhoods, schools, and communities. The case exemplifies the tremendous passion and purpose youth bring to racial justice work, and it also shows the potential to leverage this intense engagement to increase academic achievement and college access.

### Pomona High School

Despite research conveying that Latina/o families are the least likely to participate in political activism (Bloemraad et al. 2011; Martínez 2005), up to five million (mostly Latina/o) immigrants and their allies took part in a historic national mass mobilization in spring of 2006 (Zepeda-Millán 2014). An unprecedented wave of immigrant activism captured the nation's attention with a series of mass demonstrations to protest *The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005* (H.R. 4437), which sought to change the penalty for being undocumented from a civil violation to a federal felony. The bill also targeted anyone who assisted "people without papers" by punishing them with monetary fines and incarceration (Zepeda-Millán and Wallace 2013). de los Ríos, a teacher at Pomona High School (PHS) at the time, observed that many of her students and their families, im/migrants themselves, developed an oppositional consciousness (Morris and Braine 2001) around this nativist legislation as deportations and the separation of families were at an all-time high in their communities. From these experiences emanated a series of *charlas* (community discussions) and later a vision for a high school curriculum that would center topics like im/migration, investigate conceptual themes from women and Ethnic Studies, labor history, and English literature, and would allow students to explore the lived experiences of Chicana/o-Latina/o young people and other people of color and connect them to larger historical trajectories. Pomona High School's Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies courses and program became the product of this vision and the first college-preparatory Ethnic Studies courses offered in the Pomona Unified School District (de los Ríos and Ochoa 2012).

True to Ethnic Studies' disciplinary commitment to grassroots communities (Okhiro and Tsou 2006), PHS's Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies courses offer multiple opportunities for high school students to engage in grassroots community organizing projects. One of these cultivates civic engagement and critical literacies alongside *jornaleros* (day laborers) and staff of the Pomona Day Labor Center, also known as the Pomona Economic Opportunity Center (PEOC). The PEOC not only provides a safe place for workers and their potential employers to meet up and negotiate a day's work, it also organizes day laborers so that they are active leaders in their own communities who take on issues important to day laborers and the greater immigrant community. As the founding teacher of the Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course, de los Ríos hoped that her students would not only develop both critical and academic literacies through this partnership, but also gain knowledge and skill sets that would help them better address their material conditions (Freire 1970) within a pervasive anti-migrant

hegemony (Gonzales 2013). At the commencement of the collaboration, the skillful organizing demonstrated by the *jornaleros*, the Director Susan Foster, Pitzer College Professor José Calderón and others, provided and continues to provide our high school students with fruitful learning experiences and fecund soil for critical thinking.

In the winter of 2008, students enrolled in the PHS Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies courses began organizing social justice *posadas* with *jornaleros* from the PEOC (de los Ríos 2013). Since then, hundreds of young people, parents, and community members participate in a candle light procession every year in resistance to the increasing anti-immigrant sentiments and call for a path to citizenship for the twelve million undocumented immigrants in the USA. Rooted within a framework of service learning, Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies students partner up with Pomona Day Laborers—many of whom are immigrants from México and Central America—to organize a community procession that seeks to promote awareness around current state and federal policies affecting immigrants, especially undocumented students. This project is a modern adaptation to the popular religious ritual celebrated throughout the USA Southwest, and México. A *Posada*, meaning inn or shelter in Spanish, is traditionally celebrated in the season of Advent with the biblical re-enactment of Joseph and Mary traveling home-to-home seeking shelter and refuge during the week before Christmas. While this project is not a religious *posada*, it still draws from the community's funds of knowledge and honors long-standing spiritual rituals and culturally relevant practices. Rather than centering the biblical narrative of the Holy Family's experience with rejection in seeking acceptance, the current social climate of undocumented students and im/migrant families seeking amnesty, justice, and opportunity is centered. Instead of singing the traditional religious songs, historical social justice songs like "De Colores" are bilingually sung, and poetry and chants that advocate for human rights are read and chanted. However, prior to the *posada*, high school students engage in a rigorous unit that explores some of the important concepts and theories necessary to understand immigration.

First, students read excerpts of Francisco Jimenez' book, *The Circuit* and Helena Maria Viramontes' book, *Under the Feet of Jesus*. *The Circuit* is an autobiographical novel based on the author's journey as a young boy migrating from Mexico to the USA and living in migrant labor camps in California. Similarly, Viramontes' book tells the story of a young girl and her migrant family's arduous struggle with working the fields in the summer months. These novels provide an important context for migrant labor and California agricultural history. Additionally, for two weeks, students study the history of immigration as a global phenomenon, agricultural labor, wage discrimination, and hear first-hand *testimonios* from *jornaleros* in the Los Angeles

and San Bernardino areas. Later, high school students compare wages and labor conditions from the Delano Grape Strike in 1965 to various twenty-first century agricultural strikes and conduct close readings of both federal and state legislations affecting immigrant families.

Moreover, students have developed academic position papers, written letters to local council members, and spoken publicly at various forums in the community advocating for both the California and Federal DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform. Utilizing a non-hierarchical and asset-based approach to unite Pomona day laborers and PHS students, this collaboration continues to be unique in that it brings together two marginalized communities that are usually kept apart—the grassroots labor community and the urban public K-12 sector. It entails the co-creation of a liberatory space—a Social Justice Community *Posada*—that engages families, teachers, and administrators in critical discussion, collective action, and literacies of humanity and justice.

The organizing of the actual *posada* occurs primarily after-school with the *jornaleros*; students work in committees with day laborers for four weeks. Together they form a procession route in downtown Pomona, contact businesses, local and national newspapers, create songs of justice and peace, research bilingual poems that stand in solidarity with immigrants, and ultimately build community with their neighbors, including the local business they would eventually visit and sing at. Every year, the success of the *posada* depends on the efforts of the six committees—publicity, documentation, route, songs, food, and community liaison. Students have also created iMovies, Prezis and photo essays documenting their journeys with this assignment. These digital artifacts are often used for the following year's *posada* as teaching tools and have also been presented at national conferences to not only convey students' passion for social justice, their twenty-first century literacies, and the critical thinking skills that derive from this project, but also serve as examples of young people who are civically engaged and active in fighting for the self-determination and dignity of their communities. Lastly, the institutionalization of the partnership between PHS and the Pomona Economic and Opportunity Center has given students a stronger sense of membership within the school campus community where students have articulated feeling significantly "safer" as members of immigrant and transnational communities both inside and outside of school (de los Ríos 2013).

### Roosevelt High School

Serving culturally rich Chicano/a-Latino/a communities such as the Eastside of Los Angeles offers educators

opportunities to design Ethnic Studies units that address students' history, culture, and humanity. As a result of the nation's reliance on high stakes testing and standardized curricula, teachers are restricted from freely building student community literacy and implementing culturally empowering pedagogies. However, by taking interdisciplinary approaches, and partnering with the local community organizations, and building alliances across cultural communities, educators can supersede irrational and dehumanizing hegemonic forces (Darder 2002). In the spring of 2013, López, a history teacher at Roosevelt High School, engaged his 10th grade World History students in a community grounded Ethnic Studies project.

López participated in the designing of the Community Cultural Treasures Project that brought together teachers, non-profit community arts, and literacy directors to create a project that addresses the life, culture, local history, and voice of students. Partnering with long-standing and respected community arts leaders was fundamental for the success of this project, because they brought a wealth of knowledge and connections to leaders who have historically transformed and continue to transform the neighborhood into a culturally rich hub. Students learned to identify community-based cultural assets and generate empowering community knowledge through a critical textual product (Morrell 2008) that offers an alternative and liberating counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. Students published a book of biographies, poems, narratives, and interviews that challenge racist notions of their neighborhood and shared their work to community members at a local theater arts space.

To generate the content for the book, students were guided in setting up interviews with *community cultural treasures*, individuals who have made positive contributions to the culture and people of East Los Angeles. Students conducted in-depth interviews with people from their neighborhood who promote the preservation of Boyle Height's culture and ethnic wealth. Seeing positive images of community members who are transforming and expanding the cultural landscape is critical for the development of empowered youth. Projects like these allow for students to read about people who have made powerful contributions throughout history, and more importantly collaborate with them in the writing of their own community history. Students who have a passion for art chose to interview Willie Herron and Wayne Healy, two of the first public artists who began painting cultural murals in East Los Angeles in the 1970s. Other students sat down with local musical artists from the bands Quetzal and La Santa Cecilia to explore how their music addresses and celebrates the Latino community. Students also met directors of community spaces, such as Casa 0101, a theater arts center, and *Espacio 1839*, a local bookstore, radio station, and cultural art space where young people converge to create

and share diverse forms of empowering arts and approaches to change. There were over 70 different community-based cultural assets that students identified, engaged with, and wrote about. Many were local food vendors and resilient people who reflect the cultural diversity and ethnic wealth of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles.

Students told stories of Boyle Height's musicians, muralists, activists, cultural landmarks, educators, and families in their book product, *La Vida Diferente* (A different life). Through the process of having students meet and listen to stories of their community's culture, they were exposed to existing cultural capital and learned to perceive their community as a space that culturally empowers its members, rather than seeing their neighborhood through a deficit lens. Ethnic Studies amplifies the voices of students and communities that have historically been spoken for. The student writings are products that dispel racist stereotypes of Chicana/o-Latina/o communities generated in the dominant media.

In the classroom, students learned how to write in multiple genres. Tutors from a local non-profit organization volunteered in both López's and his partnering English classes to offer students support in their written pieces. Students had a lot of support through this project, which was central to its success and fundamental in what Ethnic Studies teachers must do—gather support and resources from local communities. One of the many positive outcomes that came out of this project was that students became aware of and connected to the many resources, spaces, and people in East Los Angeles that they can tap into for support, guidance, and inspiration. For example, a student Paula became aware of a community cycling club for women of color and can now turn to the group of empowered women, while expanding her support network of people that can help her navigate through society as a female of color. Another student Giselle interviewed public artist Raul Gonzalez, who has painted many murals around Boyle Heights on themes that promote community culture, history, and empowerment. Giselle became much more interested in murals and later helped paint a mural at her school.

When the book was published, a book release celebration was organized at a local theater space. Family, teachers, and people who were interviewed for the book were invited to hear students read their pieces. This culminating event was transformational for youth, who had in their hands the fruits of their hard work; they experienced shifting identities as writers, historians, scholars, and authors of community culture. The space facilitated an intersection of community leaders of the past and cultural advocates of the present. López believes that authentic critical Ethnic Studies curriculum and projects must create opportunities for students to participate in the reading of the world, rather than it being imposed by teachers and academics (Freire 1998).

Unlike alienating curriculum, this project had the support of community members and cultural workers. Through this nurturing and caring approach in building student skills and scholarship, students further revealed their community cultural wealth while contributing to the struggle for racial justice (Yosso 2005). This project highlights the importance of developing projects in solidarity (Freire 1998) with grassroots communities. Working in community develops stronger relationships within the school and the neighborhood. As a result of this project, López developed new relationships with community cultural workers who are interested in working on future projects to support student learning and empowerment. The youth-authored book is currently used by teachers at Roosevelt High School in their Ethnic Studies and English courses.

Ethnic Studies curriculum must create avenues for students to see manifestations of love, which humanizes the learning environment and supports student learning (Morrell et al. 2013). Teachers must also possess a love for the community they serve if they wish to impart in students this value. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) call on educators to practice revolutionary love, which is the manifestation of love in the classroom that is strong enough to bring about radical change, which requires endless dedication, passion, commitment, and belief in the potential of every student. The cultural workers and community cultural treasures that students interviewed possess this radical love for their community and people. Teachers who possess this commitment and love will be much more successful in developing in students the value of community love through their pedagogical practices.

Ethnic Studies pedagogy has numerous benefits for students such as an increase in academic confidence in writing, identity development, and critical literacies. At Wilson High School in Los Angeles, teachers who taught through an Ethnic Studies lens had students improve their writing abilities and develop a positive and caring student–teacher relationship (Morrell et al. 2013). One Wilson High teacher indicates that her assignments allowed her to “better understand her students and create a classroom environment that is welcoming to all” (p. 58). Another teacher asserts that students learned to write reflective poems and produced a deep analysis of their world, while drawing parallels to Chicano writers from the Chicana/o movement. Students benefited from being exposed, for the first time, to concepts of oppression and learned to examine their own personal histories (pp. 111–112). Los Angeles educators who taught lessons on identity in their Ethnic Studies courses and units made meaningful connections to students while constantly affirming their potential during the school year, resulting in successful academic outcomes (p. 156). At Roosevelt High School, students learned to document public places within their community using media devices and created community youth counter-narratives. In

the Ethnic Studies course, students were successful in producing videos that addressed existing community problems and youth cultural expressions (p. 92).

### The Council of Youth Research (CYR)

On a hot August day, Morrell is in the Tom Bradley Room, the 26th floor of Los Angeles City Hall, setting up students’ PowerPoint presentations and digital video documentaries. Audience members and members of the media are starting to file in as the high school students prepare with their groups for their presentations. Over the course of the next 3 hours, they would speak to the deputy mayor of Los Angeles and the staff of his Office of Education about the conditions of youth in Los Angeles schools. The students had consulted literature from social theory and the sociology of education that offered various reasons that youth drop out or are pushed out of Los Angeles public schools. They were divided into five research teams, each tasked with studying a particular neighborhood and school where the four-year completion rates hover between 25 and 40 % (meaning somewhere between 60 and 75 % of incoming ninth graders do not finish high school with a diploma 4 years later). They presented various forms of data they collected and analyzed including interviews, surveys, photographs, participant observation, digital video, and descriptive statistics. The 25-min presentations provided only a snapshot of the larger body of work, which also included a formal academic research report that the students co-authored in small groups. All of this work was completed in the scope of a 6-week summer course that brought together high school students attending underperforming schools across central, south, and East Los Angeles. After the culmination of the presentations, the students heard from the deputy mayor, his staff, and ultimately the Mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa. They were also interviewed by various members of the print and film media and featured on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. The students’ reports, PowerPoint slides, and digital video documentaries were sent to the mayor’s office for use in work with Los Angeles schools, and they were also uploaded onto the websites of the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) at UCLA, the university sponsor of the program. Several students were involved in a weeklong written debate, also carried by the *Los Angeles Times*, with a former school board member about the best ways to move forward in reforming schools to serve the needs of underperforming schools better.

The City Hall presentations served as a capstone for an annual course that brought high school Students of Color<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Schools selected for the Council of Youth Research were essentially 100 % non-white. Over the 12 years of the project, 99 % of the students were identified as members of non-white ethnic groups, the



to the university each summer course to study YPAR for Educational Justice. For 12 years (1999–2011), Morrell and his colleagues offered a five-week college-level course for high school students that taught them about the process of conducting research in their schools and communities to promote social, racial, and educational justice. In preparation for conducting research in schools and communities, the students read a great deal from social theory, the social sciences, Ethnic Studies, and educational research. Students also composed in various genres including fieldnotes, journals, interview transcripts, research reports, and personal essays that were referred to as critical memoirs.

During the academic year, the Council of Youth Research students collaborated with UCLA and the mayor's office of education to collect and analyze information about life in Los Angeles schools. The work, conducted largely in the context of English and Social Studies classrooms, was distributed to students, teachers, parents, and more globally to policymakers, elected officials, and community organizations around the city. Students also began to share their work more broadly. For instance, students travelled to the California State Capitol to dialogue with legislators around issues of educational injustice. Students involved with the Council also travelled to Seattle, Denver, New Orleans, and San Francisco to speak at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), a professional organization of over 15,000 members. At one of these annual meetings, the students were granted a Presidential Session, focused solely on the promise of Youth Research.

Council students have also been involved in social media, creating Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, blogs, and YouTube channels where they share their PowerPoint presentations, research reports, and video documentaries. Local and national print and television media outlets regularly featured students and their work.

The goals of the project were to promote academic literacy development, civic engagement, and critical racial consciousness for the young people involved, while also providing a knowledge base that could help to transform the curricular and pedagogical practices in English and Social Studies classrooms by pushing educators to think about how to merge a critical pedagogy of race within the demands of these academic disciplines.

When looking for evidence of impact, one can point to the transformation in the students themselves. Whether through student-written critical memoirs, comments made in presentations, focus group interviews, or informal

personal reflections, students identified that the CYR provided a unique space for student voice inside of an education system where they were often muted. Additionally, much of the ethos for research questions, actual research design, and the carrying out of studies came from students themselves. Finally, the students had ownership over much of the process of production and distribution of research, which ultimately led to the creation of digital video documentaries (a student idea) as a complement, or even a supplement on occasions, to the traditional research report.

Morrell et al. (2013) have reported elsewhere about the academic progress of the students, but there was clear evidence of higher student graduation and college access within the CYR student populations when compared to historical trends in the schools where the project took place. In Morrell's dissertation study (2004) of the original cohort of students, more than 95 % graduated high school and matriculated into college in a school where the graduation rate for Students of Color hovered around 50 %. In follow-up studies, we identified increased mathematical reasoning (Rogers et al. 2007), the development of college-level writing (Morrell 2008), nearly 100 % high school graduation rates (Mirra and Morrell 2011), and powerful examples of critical media production (Morrell et al. 2013).

There are two additional spaces where there appears to be evidence of change. One is at the school sites themselves. In one high school, Council students created a social action club that grew to possess tremendous influence throughout the school. Led by students, this organization dedicated itself to bringing youth together to address problems in the school and the community. In their first year, club members conducted research on the police department's ticketing of tardy students, they held press conferences, lunchtime rallies, and helped to plan a major conference that focused on research and organizing for social justice.

Other campuses throughout the city with Council students followed suit in creating their own social justice clubs. Students modeled a problem-posing pedagogy when establishing their clubs, as they wanted them to honor youth voice, and they also wanted young people to have the opportunity to share their concerns with each other, away from the influence of adults. Several members of these student-led groups became active in working with the administrations to improve campus climate. Students also used their research skills to create "bottom-up" measures of successful schools, and they shared their survey instruments and interview protocols with others via our project website and other social media outlets.

In another example, Council of Youth Research members invited the principal and several department chairs to their research presentations at City Hall. From this initial involvement, the principal became an enthusiastic

Footnote 1 continued

largest being Latino (over 60 %) and African American (35 %). The CYR demographics closely correlate to those of the schools where the project took place.

supporter of the project, coming to visit the students as they worked after school, coming into the teacher's classroom for presentations, and offering himself to be interviewed by student research teams from around the city. The school was in the process of transitioning into small learning communities, each having its own theme and identity. One of these communities, formed around concern for social justice, came to be called Agents of Change (AOC). It is important to correlate the timing of these events, the connection between the principal and the Council, and the naming of the first leader of the small learning community, a teacher who had been involved in several summer seminars with the Council of Youth Research.

The students attending this school also established relationships with their local State Senator, who attended their presentations, the president of the School Board who participated in interviews with them, and the Superintendent of the city schools. During the following academic year, the principal was promoted to local Deputy Superintendent and was replaced by one of the assistant principals, also a strong supporter of the Council of Youth Research. During her first few weeks on the job, changes in school security threatened the safety of students. In a routine conversation with the Superintendent, the Council students shared their concerns. Within days, the District Superintendent had spoken with the local Deputy Superintendent, who then connected with the principal about how to address the problem of inadequate security on campus. While there are many other ways that this issue could have been handled, there is no mistaking the influence and credibility that the students in the Youth Council garnered in the school and the local community.

## Implications for Pedagogy

### Redefining Rigorous Instruction

Too often in conversations about educational reform, "rigorous" instruction is juxtaposed against instruction that is relevant and meaningful to students. The underlying assumption is that work that students enjoy (or are able to do) must not be rigorous. If we aspire to make practices such as the ones outlined in this article more prevalent in classrooms across the country, we have to challenge these misconceptions. In each of the case studies, teachers worked to create curricula that developed the academic competencies of reading, writing, critical analysis, public speaking, media literacy, and critical language awareness to name a few.

Those who are committed to a critical pedagogy of race in secondary schools must also be committed to developing academic skills that students can use to better navigate

their professional, social, and civic futures. However, we argue that this can be done through a curriculum that focuses on social awareness, reclaiming lost and stolen histories, and the struggle for equity and racial justice. Even further, we argue that curricula that expose students to multiple historical viewpoints, that position youth as AOC, and that appeal to young people's sense of fairness and equality will increase engagement and interest, which will lead to increased academic achievement. One of the key reasons that young people are often not interested in school is not because they do not care about education, rather they do not see education as connected to their lives. A critical pedagogy of race is rigorous and relevant in that it is centered within the everyday and historical experiences of young people and it pushes them to connect intellectual rigor with the pursuit of a fuller humanity. Or, as Paulo Freire says, "to study is one's revolutionary duty!"

### Ethnic Studies Across the Curriculum

Although the mandated tests and teacher evaluation systems designed to measure student achievement threaten to push the Common Core State Standards in the wrong direction, this reform, with its focus on deeper learning, critical citizenship, and cross-curricular literacy actually has far more "progressive" potential than is currently being realized (Wells 2014). Ethnic Studies curricula have been successfully implemented in disciplines currently regulated by the Common Core State Standards such as history and English. López has collaborated with English teachers on a 10th grade inquiry-based unit, *Voices of Change*, where students in both World History and English explored the essential question, "What needs to change to generate more justice and equity in Boyle Heights?" Another example includes López partnering with an 11th grade English teacher to develop an interdisciplinary unit on the Chicana/o Student Movement. Students read *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* by Oscar Zeta Acosta in their American Literature class while examining in their US History class news articles of the 1968 walkouts and interviewing former leaders in their quest to answer, "How can we resist educational and social inequalities and achieve social justice?" These units dealt with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3 and CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH11-12.3, two English Language Arts standards that emphasize the evaluation of various explanations and view points of historical events, and determining which best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the texts leaves matters uncertain. Each of these units also focus on close and critical reading and evidence-based argumentative writing, which are hallmarks of the new Common Core State Standards and essential skills for college, career, and civic readiness.

Similarly, de los Ríos has drawn from CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 to evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media, including the musical genre, Mexican Corridos, to explore the racialization of migrants in her Spanish for Native Speakers courses to promote cross-curricular literacy. She, too, has collaborated with other Spanish teachers to facilitate and teach Ethnic Studies units entirely in Spanish. There are numerous opportunities to collaborate with teachers across departments and within their disciplines. Creating a culture of collaboration around Ethnic Studies in which teachers are creating powerful units that address race, class, and gender, while applying critical pedagogy is fundamental for the sustainability of Ethnic Studies courses and programs. Within school spaces, it is important to bring together knowledgeable teachers in the field of Ethnic Studies with less familiarized teachers who desire to learn more about transforming their curriculum frameworks and pedagogical approaches. There remains a need for trainings, conferences, and institutes that help educators access tools to develop Ethnic Studies curricula. An excellent example—which no longer exists—was Tucson Unified School District’s (TUSD) Institute for Transformative Education, which brought together thousands of K-12 educators to engage in the praxis of Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Today, a number of teachers from Tucson, Arizona—many of whom are former teachers in the now dismantled TUSD Raza Studies Program—recently developed a three-day summer institute that intellectually engages and scaffolds the implementation of Ethnic Studies methodologies throughout K-12 contexts. The Xican@ Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO) is a unique blend of theory, practice, and community responsive organizing and serves as an extraordinary model of the type of institutes that are needed to build national capacity on Ethnic Studies pedagogy and practices.

### Implications for Policy and Praxis

Nationally, high school students’ access to Ethnic Studies courses remains limited. That could change with Assemblyman Luis Alejo’s (D-Watsonville) recent introduction of AB 1750, a bill requiring California to form a task force that would study how to best implement a standardized Ethnic Studies program for high school students throughout the state. Such a program would address important gaps in students’ knowledge and, coming from one of the most diverse states in the nation, serve as a powerful model for the rest of the country. More specifically, the article *Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research* (2014) addresses the need for teacher credentialing programs to instruct future educators

in the teaching of Ethnic Studies, and recommends the state of California to include Ethnic Studies coursework in the subject matter preparation for teachers. The aforementioned article also makes connections to the origins of Ethnic Studies as being responsive to grassroots communities. A community responsive pedagogy, as conveyed in the case studies mentioned in this article, is a hallmark of Ethnic Studies methodologies.

Teacher unions in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York are calling for schools to teach antiracist curriculum, and for teachers to engage in local community struggles and organizations. In Los Angeles, there has been an active campaign known as *Schools LA Students Deserve* that is working with educators and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) leadership to implement a list of changes in the school district, and one of them urged more Ethnic Studies course offerings for students. These efforts led to the recent historical resolution of mandating a college-preparatory Ethnic Studies course as a high school requirement in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Following the examples of LAUSD and most recently, San Francisco Unified School District’s ressemblant resolution with Ethnic Studies, we suggest that K-12 school districts offer Ethnic Studies courses beyond the frequent “social science elective,” and strongly urge that it be implemented as a high school graduation requirement in all American high schools. Elected officials and school leaders must come together to garner support for state policy to make Ethnic Studies a nationwide high school graduation requirement.

We are at a critical crossroad in American history—a breaking point at which efforts to ignore critical pedagogies of race will further clash with the racial and cultural complexity of our day-to-day lives. We recommend that policy makers address race-conscious policies, practices, and material conditions that perpetuate segregation and inequality while simultaneously tapping into the changing racial attitudes of Americans by supporting racially diverse schools and race-conscious curricula and pedagogical practices.

### *Brown at 60: Rethinking American Education*

While the American educational landscape has changed a great deal over the past 60 years, race remains a salient issue. Though conversations in the late 1940s and early 1950s centered upon the benefits of integrating African American students into a largely white schooling system, in 2014, we face an entirely different demographic and socioeconomic reality. We no longer have a school system that is predominantly white, and we no longer have the comfort (if we ever did) of living in happy isolation

removed from the diverse global society. As politicians and pundits discuss the “demographic imperative” or the need for global literacies, there is a growing admission that American schools and the world at large are tremendously heterogeneous spaces. There is also some tacit admission that at present, we do an inadequate job of preparing all students for this domestic and global reality.

Rethinking American education on the 60th anniversary of the *Brown* decision must entail questioning the education that all of our students receive, particularly as it relates to race, ethnicity, and intercultural understanding. While the quality and focus of mainstream education were largely unquestioned during the *Brown* deliberations, we no longer have that luxury. We must be willing to face the tough reality that the content of our curricula inadequately reflects the diversity of the nation. Further, our inability to deal with race effectively has consequences for all of our students. We firmly believe that increasing all students’ access to a critical Ethnic Studies curriculum not only helps to realize the ideals of *Brown*, but also it helps to prepare our students academically, socially, and culturally for the world today.

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