

Academic Benefits of an Inclusive and Diverse Social Studies Curriculum

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Abstract: Discussions about racism and the history of systemic oppression of minority populations in the United States is being legislated out of classrooms in many states. The purpose of this manuscript is to argue there are academic benefits for students who are exposed to learning about racism and diversity in the classroom. The studies examined follow outcomes from ethnic studies classes and are limited in their sample size and scope. The existing research is minimal, and this manuscript makes a case for continued research of the impacts of ethnic studies classes and classrooms that address racism and systemic oppression. The research presented about students exposed to information about racism and diversity, shows promising results of academic and civic participation benefits for all students.

Introduction

Social Studies education is under attack. So far in 2022, twenty-eight states have enacted legislation or have bills circulating in their congresses limiting teaching about the issue of racism and systemic oppression of people of color, otherwise labeled by the bills as prohibited concepts. While the language in many of these bills is vague, the restrictions would not only apply to curriculum, but also to professional development. Social studies teachers cannot be expected to accurately instruct students on history, civics, geography, and the social sciences while omitting systemic oppression certain populations have faced. Student learning will be incomplete. As a woman who felt excluded from the social studies curriculum in her own schooling and as a teaching intern at a school with a multicultural student population, I became curious about the academic benefits of an inclusive social studies curriculum that considers the history of racism in the United States and how racism has affected large portions of Americans. Unfortunately, despite all the political conversations around teaching about racism in the classroom, there is paltry research on how discussions about race academically benefit or harm students. This manuscript will address a few small studies that have promising results and hopes to encourage further research.

Defining Social Studies Curriculum

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) defines social studies as, “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence, [and declares] The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 2022, para. 2). In agreement, E. Wayne Ross of The University of British Columbia describes social studies in Chapter 1 of his book, *The Social Studies Curriculum*. “Social studies in the broadest sense, that is, the preparation of young people so

that they possess the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for active participation in society...” (Ross, 2006, p.18). In this chapter, Ross includes thoughts from Dr. Susan E. Noffke (2000), saying she:

argues that debates over social studies have failed to acknowledge the widening gap between haves and have-nots and the racialized and gendered patterns of privilege and oppression, which to a large degree form the basis of U.S. economic and cultural life, are also not addressed in contemporary proposals for curriculum reforms. (Ross, 2006, p. 20)

People like Noffke believe that social studies curriculum should be reconstructed constantly to stay relevant with current issues presented in our culture and society. One can take a conservative view that social studies should teach “content, behaviors and values that reflect views accepted by the traditional dominant society,” (Ross, 2006, p. 21). or the liberal view that teaches “content, behaviors, and values that question and critique standard views accepted by the dominant society” (Ross, 2006, p. 21). The debate over the “correct way” to develop social studies curriculum will continue beyond this manuscript, but the following will present what research and theory have to say about the academic benefits for all students by including the study of racism into said social studies curriculum.

Ethnic Studies

Ethnic studies is the most relevant facet of social studies regarding teaching about racism in the classroom. Not all schools offer ethnic studies programs, but social studies and English language arts teachers can frame their teachings around similar themes that fit state standards. By examining a definition of ethnic studies, middle grades and secondary social studies and English teachers can review their curriculum and align it with ethnic studies themes. There are many definitions of ethnic studies given in the literature; the simplest may be Harvard’s ethnic studies major that, “emphasizes histories of racial formations within and beyond the United States” (Harvard, 2022, para.1). Dr. Christine E. Sleeter of California State University, Monterey Bay, gives a thorough explanation of ethnic studies in her 2011 research review on the topic. Ethnic studies courses typically include:

- 1) explicit identification of the point of view from which knowledge emanates, and the relationship between social location and perspective; 2) examination of U.S. colonialism historically, as well as how relations of colonialism continue to play out; 3) examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation; 4) probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold; and 5) studying one’s community’s creative and intellectual products, both historic and contemporary. (Sleeter, 2011, p. 3)

Sleeter’s review (2021) also summarizes that evidence gathered up to that point shows that white students and students of color academically benefit from a mindful, well-prepared ethnic studies class, taught by a qualified teacher. There is a positive impact on democracy, civic outcomes, and cross-group interaction as well as the courses specifically encouraging a higher level of critical thinking.

Benefits of Ethnic Studies Classes

In an article by Thandeka K. Chapman and colleagues, the authors sought to replace white-centered ethnic studies curriculum with a social justice curriculum that centered people of color, their stories, and their experiences. They found that a program that focuses on developing self-efficacy, critical consciousness, and academic skills catered to the educational needs of students of color (Chapman et al., 2020). The study involved ninth grade students in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) made up of Southeast Asian American, African American and Latine participants. “The curriculum integrates district requirements, state and national standards, college requirements, and past and present ethnic studies curricula. Each component of the course was chosen to help students gain academic skills and develop their critical consciousness” (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 574). The study was conducted with pre/post tests that measured vocabulary, text analysis, and content recall. The data revealed that students were learning, but the assignments were not developing writing skills or critical thinking. Teachers went back to the drawing board and added long- and short-form writing assignments and tied in films and guest speakers that the students reflected on regularly. In a follow-up study in 2018, the data was more promising, and the students showed a deeper understanding, increased self-efficacy, critical thinking, and academic skills (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 578-579). While this study does not solely address the teaching of the history of racism or systemic oppression, the 2018 data does show promising results for students by an intentional decentering of whiteness in curriculum, which included discussions about “issues of institutional and structural oppression” (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 576).

Dee and Penner (2017) conducted another study of the benefits of an ethnic studies program at the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) High School with 1,405 ninth grade students. The research measured “causal” academic outcomes like attendance, grade point average (GPA) and credits earned, and predicted a rise in high school persistence (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 2). Participation was required for students who had less than a 2.0 GPA in eighth grade and thus labeled as at-risk for dropping out of high school by SFUSD. Because the students were assigned to the class, rather than entering on a voluntary basis, that adds credibility to the measurement of causal effects as the students were “randomized” (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 3). The results were very promising. Student attendance increased 21 percent, the cumulative ninth grade GPA raised 1.4 grade points, and students earned 23 more credits than before (Dee & Penner, 2017). The student’s grades went up in classes like math and science as well. The researchers admit that scaling this curriculum to fit a much larger group would pose serious challenges, but it shows that ethnic studies classes are academically beneficial for the participating students.

In Arizona, a Mexican American Studies (MAS) program at Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) was dismantled when the state legislature passed House Bill 2281. A study of academic impact of the MAS program was done by the University of Arizona after it was eliminated by the state superintendent and conducted over 6 weeks of research (Cabrera et al., 2014). The researchers analyzing data from graduating classes from 2008-2011, took great care to consider the lack of random-

ization due to the class being voluntary, mitigated variable bias by including known covariates in the model, and acknowledged the limits of administrative data. The results of this study are also promising with indications that teachings about racism and systemic oppression increases academic success of participating students. Prior to taking any Mexican American Studies classes, eventual MAS students had significantly lower GPAs and lower rates of passing scores on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test, than their non-MAS peers. After participating in at least one MAS course, students had significantly higher graduation rates and passing AIMS scores compared to their non-MAS participating peers (Cabrera et al., 2014). Over the four cohorts analyzed between 2008-2011, MAS students were on average 8.4 percent more likely to graduate with the largest increase seen in 2008 of 15.9 percent more likely. On average MAS students were 4.7 percent more likely to receive passing scores on their AIMS test with the greatest increase seen again in 2008 of 11.1 percent (Cabrera et al., 2014). Across all four years, 84.8 percent of the students participating in the MAS classes were Latine, showing that classes focusing on racial disparities can help close the racial achievement gap (Cabrera et al., 2014). There is no reason any type of social studies class, especially history, cannot take on aspects of an ethnic studies course and strive to increase graduation rates and state standardized test scores of all students.

Diversity in the Classroom

Although this manuscript focuses on social studies curriculum, addressing the benefits for students by being involved in a multicultural classroom setting should not be overlooked. Jeffery Milem of University of Maryland (2003) examined the educational benefits of diversity in colleges and universities. Diversity as defined in this study is two-pronged; as the representation of different races and ethnic groups on a campus, and by "diverse interactions" (p. 4) with new ideas, information, and exchanges with people outside of their culture. These benefits can be applied in a secondary education setting and should be used as a model because not everyone in America is able to attend higher education. Milem (2003) used "a three-dimensional framework that considers the ways in which diversity benefits: (1) individuals, (2) institutions, and (3) our society" (p.3). This manuscript will focus on the individual educational benefits. "Individual benefits refer to the ways in which the educational experiences and outcomes of individual students are enhanced by the presence of diversity on campus" (Milem, 2003, p. 3). Milem drew on research in several fields and found evidence which "suggests that diversity enhances student growth and development in the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains" (Milem, 2003, p. 4). He reported on three specific outcomes: learning outcomes, democratic outcomes—how the student engages as a citizen post education—and ability outcomes. Ability outcomes refer to the "ability of students to live and work effectively in a diverse society" (Milem, 2003, p. 5). The outcomes of the study were that students who learned in diverse environments had a mastery of critical thinking, levels of ethnocentrism declined, and their ability to distinguish between poverty and ethnicity as developmental risk factors increased (Milem, 2003). In white students, who tend to have the least interactions with other races, cultural acceptance and civic responsibility increased (Milem, 2003, p. 9). Social studies education emphasizes

learning outcomes like critical thinking and democratic outcomes like involvement in promoting racial understanding. These are goals that social studies teachers want their students to achieve in a secondary education setting. Milem's (2003) collection of research shows that interactions with people of other races and ethnicities increase educational benefits in white students and students of color.

Preservice and current teachers need to learn how to include diversity in their classrooms considering that seventy-nine percent of public school teachers in the United States are white (Spiegelman, 2020) and teachers do not decide the racial identities of their students. The Southern Poverty Law Center and Learning for Justice are two of numerous online resources for teachers. In addition, Boudreau's (2021) article for Harvard's education publication, *Usable Knowledge*, provided five tips for teaching hard history:

1. Create a classroom culture that recognizes and values the students' identities and provides windows into diverse histories and cultures...
2. Use primary sources when possible...
3. Ensure content is developmentally appropriate, and recognize that space and support to process emotions is necessary...
4. Highlight the stories of resistance and resilience alongside hard histories...
5. Remember this work takes a whole school. (Boudreau, 2021, paras. 3-10)

These tips were developed by Adrienne Stang, Cambridge Public Schools K–12 history and social studies coordinator, and Harvard professor, Dr. Danielle Allen, and are more easily listed than implemented. This is barely the beginning of learning to become a culturally competent educator but should be a goal for every teacher.

Conclusion

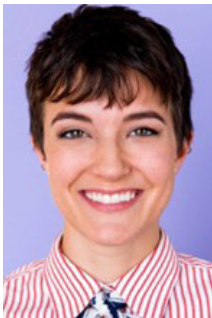
Social studies teachers have the duty to prepare students to be responsible and active participants in our democracy by teaching them history, civics, geography and the social sciences. Traditionally, curriculum has focused on the dominant white culture in our society with little inclusion of voices of people of color. Raising up every student in the classroom through culturally competent teachers, diverse classroom settings, and inclusive curriculum, will academically benefit every student. Not only will every student benefit academically, but they will also be more prepared to be responsible citizens of the United States.

The studies examined in this manuscript barely scratch the surface and are not comprehensive. Teachers need the training to effectively implement aspects of ethnic studies into their curriculum. There are surprisingly few studies compiling data about academic benefits for students that learn about racism and systemic oppression in a K-12 setting; and the gaps in that research deserve to be filled. The existing literature reveals that in providing an education that includes the voices of every American, the next generation will be more well-rounded and empathetic. An inclusive curriculum will provide young Americans an advantage in a multicultural society and on the world stage. Consolidating the evidence helps teachers become more active and informed advocates for inclusive education in public education facilities across America. Lawmakers are overlooking academic benefits when forming bills like House Bill 322 and House Bill 327 in the Ohio House of Representatives. If they prioritize student achievement through the inclusion of topics concerning

racism and systemic oppression in the curriculum, then a more unified nation can emerge. A nation where everyone's voice is recognized and students can graduate from a K-12 education with a fuller understanding of what the United States of America is and what we can become.

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