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Why Our Public Schools Need Ethnic Studies

In 2010, Arizona passed a law that essentially banned Ethnic Studies programs in K-12 public and charter schools. Schools that did not eliminate any and all courses that “advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” would lose up to 10 percent of their funding, which for most districts amounts to millions of dollars. The bill was developed to specifically target the Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program instituted in Tucson’s public school district, which opponents believed to be akin to segregation.

The debate regarding the implementation of Ethnic Studies courses is complex and multifaceted. Some are concerned with the potential for Ethnic Studies courses to isolate students of different races and encourage racial antagonisms, while others believe that the content of such courses instills anti-American values. Certain constituents perceive the field as illegitimate and quasi-academic, a concession to “political correctness,” and a waste of taxpayers’ money.

So, why should we teach courses that “advocate ethnic solidarity” and acknowledge racial difference? While pupils do deserve to be treated as unique individuals, there is indeed value in learning about the histories and cultures of marginalized ethnic groups in the United States, for both white students and students of color. Additionally, as I will emphasize, rather than encouraging division and discord, these types of courses both enlighten and unite students, preparing them for their lives after graduation.

What is Ethnic Studies?

Much of the resistance to Ethnic Studies courses being taught in public schools stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what happens in an Ethnic Studies classroom. Politicians in opposition to ethnic studies will often describe the content of such courses as radical, anti-American, and antagonistic. I will argue against such claims later on, but let us begin with what Ethnic Studies *is* rather than what it is not.

The academic field of Ethnic Studies emerged in the aftermath of the civil rights era as a response to the reality that disciplines such as anthropology, history, literature, sociology, and political science were conceived from an inherently Eurocentric perspective, that is to say, from the perspective of European Americans. In the words of Curtis Acosta, a high school Ethnic Studies teacher in Tucson, “the purposes of our classes are varied, but our main objective is to rehumanize the academic experience for our students through culturally and socially relevant curriculum.”

Thus, where traditional history courses explore colonization from the perspective of the colonizer, Ethnic Studies courses could consider in more detail the experience of the colonized. While a regular high school literature class might read several books authored by white men and one book by a person of color, an Ethnic Studies class would allow students to read multiple texts by authors who share their experience as people of color whose cultures have been marginalized in the United States.

Why do Ethnic Studies courses matter?

Teacher Curtis Acosta explains that due to the fact that students belonging to an ethnic minority “have been historically marginalized and ignored in mainstream public school curriculum...the drop-out/push-out rates for [these] communities are far out of proportion compared to European-American students.” These courses allow students of color to connect with the content that they are learning in a way that may not be possible in other classes. Learning about the history of their own ethnic group in the United States promotes a sense of belonging and can boost the self-esteem of students who feel otherwise marginalized in academia. Furthermore, by learning about barriers to success like the school-to-prison pipeline, ethnic minorities recognize, in a new way, the value of a high school diploma and a higher education, as well as the potential for these achievements to improve the material conditions of their communities.

But, these courses do not serve students of color alone. Students of all ethnic and racial identities can benefit from a more nuanced look at social sciences and the humanities. In Tucson, MAS students had significantly higher rates of test passing and graduation than non-MAS students, despite the fact that they were more likely to be English language learners, more likely to be from lower-income households, and more likely to suffer from low GPAs towards the beginning of high school. All of these factors generally correlate with lower rates of graduation and lower test scores but, when Ethnic Studies courses were incorporated in their curriculum, students thrived in those classes and outside of them.

Do Ethnic Studies courses promote racial divisions and antagonism?

Charges that ethnic studies programs promote separatism and antagonism to the U.S. are generally made without proof. In fact, Ethnic Studies works to create a more inclusive academic environment by deepening our understanding of each other and by producing engaged citizens. According to students enrolled in MAS in Tucson, classes will often begin a reading of the poem “In Lak’Ech,” which is the Mayan phrase for “You are my other self.” Translated, the poem reads “You are my other me/If I do harm to you/I do harm to myself/If I love and respect you/I love and respect myself.” So, while there been no tangible evidence that the content of Ethnic Studies courses encourage divisions, students themselves attest to the courses’ ability to enhance mutual understanding and a sense of community.

While some believe that acknowledging and discussing race in the classroom will result in a reinvigoration of old racist ideas, those who study such structures of power advise otherwise. After all, it is ignorance, not education, that fuels discrimination. Ethnicity and race still play a large role in the United States and avoiding the topic will leave students extremely unprepared for how to combat discrimination in their lives after graduation.

Do ethnic studies courses instill students with anti-American sentiments?

The simple answer to this question is “no.” Ethnic studies responds to the necessity that is an equality of viewpoints in academia. We must keep in mind that the perspectives of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans are, in the most literal sense, American. American values like equal opportunity, justice, courage, and progress are central to the curriculum of most Ethnic Studies courses. These programs are not anti-American so much as they tend to incorporate more nuance into students’ understandings of the United States.

The reality is that the teaching of US history can never be entirely neutral because a truthful record of our nation inevitably chronicles our people’s fallibility and culpability. Sean Arce, the former Director of MAS at Tucson High School explains that these classes teach real history from a critical point of view. He explains that despite popular belief, the purpose of Ethnic

Studies is not to slander the names of our founding fathers. “We need to have real courage to look at the good and the bad with our own history.” Ethnic studies is, indeed, in the best interest of the United States, in the sense that it empowers students to learn from history and take on leadership roles in order to guide the future of our nation.

Why should Ethnic Studies courses be in public schools?

Both those who argue for and against ethnic studies program tend to agree that student achievement should be the focal point of public education. In light of the data that reveals the higher success rates of students enrolled in Ethnic Studies, it seems quite sensible to incorporate such programs into public schools. Those students from lower-income households benefited greatly from the availability of Ethnic Studies courses on their school campuses and any sort of privatized system would deny such students access. Furthermore, teaching Ethnic Studies through the public school system ensures that the courses will not stray into the sort of discourses that opponents fear, such as anti-Americanness, antagonism, and separatism.

During the height of the controversy in Tucson, six UN human rights experts released a statement expressing concern about Arizona’s ban on Ethnic Studies courses. “All people have the right to learn about their own cultural and linguistic heritage,” they agreed. Implementation into public schools is the most effective way to protect this right. Ethnic Studies courses provide insight and fill in the gaps currently plaguing mainstream history, social science, and humanities courses and it is, therefore, worthy of the minor investment it takes to keep the programs running.

The students in these classes are not indoctrinated into a political point of view but, rather, are provided with a more nuanced and complete understanding of racial relations and experiences specific to certain ethnic groups in the United States. Ultimately, those parents who want to shield students from the opportunity to learn about such topics can simply choose not to enroll their children in Ethnic Studies courses. I would advise, however, that both parents and educators take the time to consider the data which points to the higher rates of success and academic participation associated with adolescents who participate in Ethnic Studies programs before making any choices.

Sources

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