

Creating Ethnic Studies Ecosystems for Student, Teacher, and Community Well-Being: Lessons for Supporting Emerging Ethnic Studies Teachers

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Abstract

Through an analysis of the most compelling texts, models, and frameworks of Ethnic Studies practice, this article provides an overview of the shared tenets of Transformative Ethnic Studies through the lenses of curriculum, pedagogy, and culture. As the necessity for teacher training in Ethnic Studies increases, we organize an approach to these efforts that centers teacher commitments aligned with the core Ethnic Studies frameworks. We consider the challenges in implementing this approach through our efforts in two distinct contexts: the largest school district in Oregon (Portland Public Schools) and the first and only teacher residency program in the state of California to center Ethnic Studies. We resist the tendency to center whiteness and white comfort as is often deemed necessary in developing alternative approaches to reimagining our learning spaces. Instead, we build a framework to create Ethnic Studies Ecosystems that center and support the collective well-being and upliftment of students, families, and communities of Color.

Introduction

Ethnic Studies is essential to supporting all students with the ability to collectively understand the world they live in, the history that led us here, and their own role in creating a just and caring society that supports the holistic well-being of all (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). When we imagine the role of schools in the greater societal project of justice and care for all, we envision an Ethnic Studies Ecosystem in which every aspect of schools and schooling work in collaboration for the well-being of everyone: students, families, communities, teachers, counselors, social workers, administrators, and the entire support staff. This is the Ethnic Studies project.

In the midst of the contemporary political conflicts surrounding the teaching of racial history in the United States, we find it imperative to center holistic Ethnic Studies Ecosystems in the building of policies and practices for fulfilling emerging Ethnic Studies requirements. We recognize that

there is intense resistance to Ethnic Studies (Jones, 2025; Zaske, 2025), and that the furor behind that resistance has led many districts to scale back their vision of what is possible in Ethnic Studies (Buller, 2025; Marquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025) and even to redefine Ethnic Studies in ways that placate conservatives and minimize the backlash against the larger Ethnic Studies project. This is most clearly reflected in the narrow-minded restrictions placed on the California Ethnic Studies model curriculum created for the high school graduation requirement in California (Buller, 2025; Jones, 2025; Marquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025). How do we avoid the pitfalls that have plagued efforts to address issues of inequity in U.S. schooling for generations, whereby the commitment to justice is performative at best and too easily and often sacrificed for the comfort of those invested in dominant narratives? We center the insights of Ethnic Studies approaches that have proven not only to support the academic success of students, but that have supported their well-being across ethnic, racial, gender, and class lines as they imagine and work toward the upliftment of their communities.

This project is led by two Ethnic Studies practitioners who have engaged in K-20 Ethnic Studies teaching as well as the training of teachers and teacher candidates in communities across the Western United States. We understand and have witnessed the most profound challenges involved in this training. We have seen district administrators and school leaders buckle to pressure from conservatives and abandon efforts to build Ethnic Studies curriculum and opportunities for training Ethnic Studies teachers because they lacked the racial literacy and commitment to push back against those who deny both our racial history and its role in shaping contemporary manifestations of white supremacy, institutional racism, and school-based oppression.

Furthermore, we have witnessed other projects developing Ethnic Studies curriculum and training Ethnic Studies teachers that have depoliticized these efforts and centered conservative responses to Ethnic Studies (even without any direct resistance to their efforts), resulting in incomplete and inadequate racial realities and histories in their curriculum along with the abandonment of the goals of Ethnic Studies (Buller, 2025).

Finally, we have also monitored the inadequate responses of state governing bodies to the inclusion of Ethnic Studies as high school and college requirements. Most recently, despite the powerful testimony made in the 2022 hearing on the current Ethnic Studies teacher workforce led by California state assemblymember Jose Medina, in which it was made apparent that credentialed social studies teachers do not have the expertise to teach required Ethnic Studies courses, the credentialing body of the state of California maintains that both credentialed single subject social studies teachers and multiple subjects teachers are qualified to teach Ethnic Studies (Smith, 2025). We know that many teachers are and will continue to teach Ethnic Studies K-12 courses or subjects without any Ethnic Studies coursework or training.

Given these experiences over years and across contexts, we have been analyzing these realities and our experiences with successful efforts to develop K-12 Ethnic Studies projects to create a roadmap for Ethnic Studies teacher training that centers the principles and goals of Ethnic Studies with implications both for classrooms serving communities of Color and those that are whitespaces (while acknowledging that the centering of whiteness defines most aspects of schooling in this country). Our intention, as the subsequent sections make clear, is to support those committed to the training of teachers in Transformative Ethnic Studies practices and ways of being toward the

collective upliftment of students, families, and communities of Color. We do so by first mapping out the insights from essential Ethnic Studies Frameworks and subsequently offering lessons from our own work training Ethnic Studies teachers, highlighting the challenges that emerge in institutional spaces and a framework that centers embodying Ethnic Studies values in ways that support teacher, student, and community well-being.

Lessons from Ethnic Studies Frameworks

In order to understand the unique demands of Ethnic Studies in the process of mapping pathways toward effective teacher training in Ethnic Studies, it is helpful to learn from existing frameworks that have been used in or applied to the development of Ethnic Studies K-12 curricula. We reviewed, unpacked and connected four of the most well-developed, frequently cited and applied (in curriculum development) efforts to organize and map out the core elements and best practices of Ethnic Studies (each from a collective of Ethnic Studies scholars and practitioners): the Critically Compassionate Intellectualism Model for Transformative Education in *Raza Studies: The Public Option for Intellectual Revolution* (Cammarota & Romero, 2014); *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (Cuauhtin et al., 2019); *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools* (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020); and the *Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Coalition* (Liberated Ethnic Studies, 2020). Each of these frameworks represents years of expertise and implementation and has its unique features. Collectively, they also have significant overlap and, in many cases, authors in each project were involved in, connected to, or inspired by the others. To help us understand the insights from this body of work, we read through these texts in their entirety and identified the key ideas in each framework (both in sections where this was explicitly written and through the themes that emerge in the full body of the works). While the frameworks did not always make these distinctions, we found it helpful to organize them in terms of the guidance they provide related to Ethnic Studies curricular development, pedagogical practices, and the process of building classroom culture through an Ethnic Studies ethos.

The four frameworks are explicit that Ethnic Studies curriculum is distinct from conventional approaches to U.S. history and that it must:

- 1) Analyze indigeneity and center indigenous knowledge and knowledge production in pre-colonial and contemporary contexts;
- 2) Confront and challenge white supremacy, colonialism, genocide, and racism;
- 3) Engage in intersectional analysis that also addresses interlocking forms of oppression including (but not limited to) capitalism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, patriarchy, xenophobia, compulsory heterogenderism, islamophobia anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity;
- 4) Center the historical and contemporary transformational resistance of communities of Color against white supremacy, imperialism/colonialism and racism, as well as other forms of oppression in the pursuit of justice; and
- 5) Emphasize the cultural and knowledge production of communities of Color, as well as the joy and beauty within these communities; along with the dynamic, diverse and expansive nature of each of these communities and their cultural and knowledge production.

It is important to note that pedagogy is as essential to Ethnic Studies as the content that is covered, and in fact, Ethnic Studies practitioners often assert that, in places where curriculum is restricted

by district leadership, pedagogy has been the primary tool for moving toward classrooms that pursue Ethnic Studies objectives. The four frameworks do not always emphasize pedagogy in and of itself as it is often integrated into discussions of curriculum, but they demonstrate that Ethnic Studies pedagogy requires:

- 1) student-, family-, and community-centered learning and knowledge creation;
- 2) justice- and change-oriented approaches through problem-posing, critical consciousness-raising, and responding to student, family, and community needs; and
- 3) culturally sustaining, revitalizing, regenerating, and extending approaches that also explore and confront the role of positionality in classrooms and support the development of affirming, holistic identities that center the well-being of the members of the learning community.

Finally, there is a third aspect of Ethnic Studies practice that is actually the heart of this transformative approach to learning. It is also the most challenging to explain and center in the training of Ethnic Studies teachers. Ethnic Studies practitioners often describe the heart or spirit that is required of Ethnic Studies teachers. They explain that Ethnic Studies is who they are, as they emphasize the love they have for BIPOC students, as well as the families and communities they serve. When Ethnic Studies is strongest, what is most striking is the culture that is nurtured in the classroom, which is the product of ways of being among Ethnic Studies teachers that are built around specific values. Creating Ethnic Studies classroom cultures involves teachers and students embodying values such as:

- 1) Framing learning as the pursuit of justice, freedom, and liberation;
- 2) Building solidarity across communities and identities as essential in all learning;
- 3) Centering and valuing students, families, and communities for their wisdom;
- 4) Grounding knowledge production in accountability to families and communities; and
- 5) Fostering *cariño* by embodying love and nurturing self-love, building *confianza*, and shared visions of wellness. [Note: We use the specific examples of *cariño* (deep, holistic care) and *confianza* (trust built on relational accountability) to bring these values to life in ways that are vivid while acknowledging that there are parallel values across BIPOC communities.]

An essential aspect of Ethnic Studies teaching and learning is that it demands a commitment to these values in pursuit of the liberation of BIPOC communities. As we reviewed the frameworks and our own practices, we recognized the importance of explicitly naming the commitments required of Ethnic Studies teachers as a way of imagining the most engaged means of supporting the training of Ethnic Studies teachers. As understood in the frameworks and our own teaching and training of teachers, *Ethnic Studies teachers must be willing to commit to:*

- 1) **Developing racial literacy and critical consciousness** as a lifelong process of growth;
- 2) **Racial justice** in terms of:
 - a. content (through transdisciplinary works); and
 - b. culturally sustaining, revitalizing, regenerating and extending pedagogy that center students in active, praxis-based learning opportunities (e.g., Youth Participatory Action Research built on Ethnic Studies theory and existing research) (Paris & Alim, 2017; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015);

- 3) **Centering both the realities of racial oppression and the dynamic assets and strengths of communities of Color** (historically and contemporarily), including the ways of being (ontologies) and the intellectual production and knowledge systems (epistemologies) of communities of Color;
- 4) **Analyzing the intersectional nature of oppression** and the pursuit of liberation that addresses (but is not limited to) multiple forms of racism (including anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity), patriarchy, capitalism, islamophobia, homophobia, compulsory heterogenderism, xenophobia, and ableism, as well as the contributions and strengths of those who have been impacted by these forms of oppression;
- 5) **The development of critical hope** (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1998; Kaba, 2021) and specific skills to confront racial inequity and oppression and benefit communities of Color in the pursuit of liberation: including school- and community-based actions, initiatives, and policies;
- 6) **Centering and nurturing the wellness, beauty, and joy of students and communities of Color** as they define these constructs intergenerationally (building on concepts such as autonomy, fugitivity, self-determination, and sovereignty) (Givens, 2021; Love, 2019; Simpson, 2017);
- 7) **Developing students' holistic, dynamic, intersectional identities** that integrate and nurture strong intellectual (not necessarily academic) identities as defined with students, families, and communities;
- 8) **Building healthy intergenerational relationships** between and among students, teachers, families, and communities within a framework of relational accountability, solidarity, and accompliceship across communities.

We have used these commitments with the teachers and teacher candidates we support, not as a set of unchanging requirements, but as an example of what it means to dedicate themselves to Ethnic Studies and to the upliftment of BIPOC communities. We create space for them to make and embody their own commitments in ways that reflect their identities and communities, and those of their students. Teachers and teacher candidates have found these guideposts helpful because they often affirm and put into words values that they have learned and lived, but which have neither been acknowledged nor centered for their power as classroom practices. This reflects the fundamental conflict between Ethnic Studies ways of being and the ways in which mainstream approaches to “schooling” center standards, methods, performance measures and a host of other normalized practices grounded in individualism and whiteness that are harmful to the well-being and success of students.

The process of reviewing the literature helped us put these experiences in context of the larger body of research in Ethnic Studies and the insights of Ethnic Studies scholars who base much of the literature in their own training of Ethnic Studies teachers. We turn now to an analysis of the insights gained through our distinct experiences in the training of Ethnic Studies teachers through this framework.

Teaching Teachers Ethnic Studies (Portland, Oregon) – Robert Unzueta

In this section I share my experience building Ethnic Studies at a district level as an Ethnic Studies scholar/practitioner in an administrative role. I highlight how, even with good intentions, funding support, and a desire to develop new approaches to Ethnic Studies, these efforts can fall short if

we do not confront our own investment in whiteness. Ethnic Studies praxis is, by nature, in contention with institutional ways of being and requires change, both in our approaches and in ourselves.

Ethnic Studies became a high school graduation requirement across three states where I have worked: Oregon (House Bill 2845 in 2017), Washington (Senate Bill 5023 in 2018), and California (Assembly Bill 101 in 2021). Each state's implementation has varied and each reflects a lack of clarity about the discipline and how to enact the legislation in districts and schools. As the Ethnic Studies requirement unfolded in these states, I was concerned with ensuring that Ethnic Studies would be taught with integrity and wondered who would teach Ethnic Studies, particularly in a state with such a low percentage of teachers of Color (over 85% of the teachers in Oregon were white when I worked there in 2021–22, and that number has shifted only slightly since). I lived in Oregon during the early days of their Ethnic Studies requirement, working as an assistant professor of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership at Lewis & Clark College. As someone with extensive Ethnic Studies teaching experience in the community college system, I wanted to support the development of curricula to fulfill the requirement. My original intention was to offer a dual enrollment class at a credit recovery high school through a local community college as an adjunct, in hopes of helping students who had been deemed disposable (Unzueta, 2020) earn both high school and college credit. The goal was to build the foundations of a pathway program for students being pushed out of the K-12 pipeline into college, given that research has demonstrated that disenfranchised students who engage in high school Ethnic Studies have greater school success (Cammarota & Romero, 2009).

My concern about implementation soon shifted as I was hired in one of Oregon's largest school districts to attempt the following: (a) help develop an Ethnic Studies curriculum for the entire district; (b) provide training to current teachers on Ethnic Studies teaching; (c) develop a dual enrollment Ethnic Studies partnership with the local community college system; and (d) create the first-ever student oversight mechanism whereby paid student interns would review Ethnic Studies curriculum. The district had experienced a highly contentious divide and disconnect between educators, administrators, community members, and student leaders with regard to the development and implementation of Ethnic Studies. The push for Ethnic Studies came from students of Color who were experiencing severe racial discrimination in the district. The district's teaching force, 91% of which remained white, had a track record of failing its students of Color, but over 100 courses on the books from middle to high school had recently been deemed appropriate for Ethnic Studies. My hiring was the third attempt to establish a cohesive vision of what K-12 Ethnic Studies could be in collaboration with educators, students, and higher education and community partners.

My first task was to develop partnerships and relationships with all of the educators within the district who had been involved in the multiple attempts to develop Ethnic Studies. My approach was informed by my previous work building a transfer cohort model through grant funding from the Lumina Foundation & Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors Racial Justice & Equity Grant (in 2018), and my most recent role as faculty liaison between the college and the Center for Equity and Inclusion (in 2020). I began by sharing an announcement in the district newsletter detailing who I was and what I had been brought to the district to do. I also emailed and called individual teachers who were known advocates for Ethnic Studies. I was able to connect with over 20 educators and administrators from multiple schools, grade bands, and with a wide range of Ethnic

Studies experience. I learned about the work they had done within the district for Ethnic Studies, the ways that they believed the district had sabotaged previous efforts to get Ethnic Studies off the ground, and the uneven implementation and teaching of Ethnic Studies. Throughout this process, it was clear that I was being evaluated to determine if I had the appropriate experience as a student, researcher, practitioner, and lineage to lead the district's Ethnic Studies work.

Based on the insights I gained from these conversations, I constructed professional development and partnerships that would support educators and students who were interested in creating three key approaches to developing Ethnic Studies that emerged from the literature and my own experience in the field. First, I knew we had to center the tenets of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline (Taylor, 2010). Second, I knew we needed to co-construct Ethnic Studies curricula in a collaborative method to disrupt traditional top-down approaches to curriculum development (Freire, 2005). Third, I knew that our Ethnic Studies work should establish pathways for students who traditionally had been excluded from a college track by bringing college-level courses to the high schools and providing them dual credit for both high school and college (Aleman & Bernal, 2017). We had to create ways for our educators to align their Ethnic Studies courses with the student learning outcomes of the community college to create a new, aligned standard of what Ethnic Studies needed to be. Through targeted training and collaborative curriculum development in a series of paid workshops, educators who completed the training were able to offer dual enrollment classes at their high schools, creating greater college access to students of Color (most dual enrollment courses do not focus on these students, but the new Ethnic Studies requirement meant that every student in the district would be engaged in these dual enrollment opportunities).

The teacher training was broken into six sessions followed by 60 working hours in the summer to develop lesson plans aligned with the scope and sequence that was created by the district. Our sessions were organized into key themes that aligned with the district's scope and sequence and also with Ethnic Studies frameworks as described above. We started with a focus on identity through community and relationship building, as well as exploring teacher positionality within the power structure of schooling. Next, we explored the context of education as a force that created and maintained inequality and the role of Ethnic Studies in challenging these systems and processes. Then, we aligned the district's scope and sequence with the community college Ethnic Studies learning outcomes and the key tenets of Ethnic Studies. In addition, we centered the importance of our accountability to our students and their families and communities as a unique approach to assessing our efforts. Finally, we considered the division of labor within the group and how we could build Ethnic Studies collectively.

We started with 15 educators from different grade bands and schools, who served distinct student bodies, including credit recovery schools, online school for students who were "falling behind," schools that served a majority of students of Color, and high-performing schools (recognizing that these last two categories do not have to be but are often seen as distinct). Educators came to our training with various levels of experience in Ethnic Studies and radically different understandings of what Ethnic Studies is. To be granted community college equivalency, they each had the support of their administration and agreed to complete the training and summer work hours. Yet only four teachers completed the training and summer work. In hindsight, it is clear that this attrition and the failure of the program as conceived was due to larger political forces that led to a shift in organizational priorities and reflected deeply embedded forms of racism in district practices.

Ethnic Studies had been established in the district as an elective prior to becoming a graduate requirement in the school district. There had been no oversight of what constituted an Ethnic Studies course. Furthermore, few teachers or district leaders had any Ethnic Studies training. Everyone had their own definitions of what Ethnic Studies was or was not, which allowed for very different approaches to course content, pedagogy, and classroom culture that were rarely aligned with the tenets of the discipline. This created an atmosphere of personal ownership and attachment to courses as “Ethnic Studies” even though they were simply not Ethnic Studies. Teachers’ professional identities had become interwoven with teaching an Ethnic Studies course that was not grounded in the discipline or the research in the field (Cuauhtin et al., 2019). This led to disputes over who was really doing Ethnic Studies work and who was not.

The sense of ownership and territorialism that developed around implementing Ethnic Studies in the district thwarted the opportunity for educators to co-construct curriculum, build a pathway with the local community college, and systemically create an approach to Ethnic Studies at a district level that was transformative. I spent much of my time addressing in-fighting between educators as they tore down each other’s lesson plans in an effort to maintain their ability to teach Ethnic Studies as they had, rather than learning together how to build Ethnic Studies aligned with its core tenets. They resisted learning and adopting the core values of Ethnic Studies: being critically self-reflective, iterative, and employing praxis-based approaches centered on the abolition of racism (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Related, many resisted aligning their curriculum with the community college standards, again reflecting their unwillingness to change their courses and grow in their Ethnic Studies approaches. This also reinforced the ways in which their schools reproduced inequality, as they resisted the opportunity to support students of Color toward community college entrance through a challenging and engaging curriculum that gave them college credit and the skill development to thrive in college.

There was a larger issue underlying the internal conflicts that had emerged in our training. Ethnic Studies is little understood, and teachers believed they had the expertise to teach Ethnic Studies, even with no training in the discipline. This led to conflicts as teachers pushed back against the training and each other because they sought to ensure that they could continue to teach as they had. They did not believe that they needed training or professional development in Ethnic Studies and they sought to continue to work in silos, valuing their individualistic approach to teaching over a collective process of Ethnic Studies curriculum-building that could benefit all students. In so many ways, these educators were committed to maintaining the centrality of whiteness, unwilling to disrupt white comfort, and unable to adapt the Ethnic Studies principles in their own approach to developing Ethnic Studies.

From these experiences, I learned two valuable lessons for the work of training Ethnic Studies teachers. First, for the district to implement transformative Ethnic Studies across the curriculum, they needed to address the harms built into schooling that teachers had experienced, working towards a space of healing/trust. It is one thing to claim alignment with Ethnic Studies and another to create the working environment and conditions in which it can be implemented, transforming not just our relationship with students but also our relationships with each other. For educators, new and seasoned alike, it is critical that we examine how we contribute to upholding the toxic environments and cultures we aim to dismantle, particularly in our relationships with peers, administrators, and other stakeholders. Engaging in Ethnic Studies work is contentious by nature,

and often that conflict is not only external but comes from within, through the ways we perpetuate and uphold whiteness.

Training Teacher Leaders, Future Teachers and Social Workers in Ethnic Studies (East San José, California) – Marcos Pizarro

Over the years, I have provided many different forms of support for teachers who sought to grow in their Ethnic Studies practices, from individual consults to professional development for teachers across an entire county over multiple years. In July of 2022, for the first time and with a collective of colleagues, we were able to design and implement a teacher training in Ethnic Studies practice that fully aligned with the principles of transformative Ethnic Studies.

In conceptualizing our approach, we followed the framing in this article, culling through the four Ethnic Studies frameworks to create a guide that reflected the common themes, constructs, and approaches across each, in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and culture-building (as described above, we understand that culture-building involves centering ethics, principles, commitments, and collective accountability/support that foster a caring learning community). In doing so, we modeled and shared examples of Ethnic Studies practice and provided space and time for reflection, application, and addressing pressing needs. Some of the key components in this training were:

- Conocimiento – Centering the teachers as we built community by sharing our and their stories, journeys, challenges, wisdom, expertise, and power.
- Agreements leading to Commitments – Building a shared vision of how we would embody Ethnic Studies practice through how we worked together and committing to ourselves and each other to work actively toward this collective vision.
- Defining Ethnic Studies in complex terms – Centering epistemologies, complicating history, challenging traditional disciplines, acknowledging the holistic nature of Ethnic Studies knowledge production and community building, and highlighting spirit and joy in our approaches.
- Creating a Working Ethnic Studies Framework for the project – Given the context-specific nature of Ethnic Studies, we worked together to create an evolving framework for the participating schools that built on existing models of Ethnic Studies development and brought them together in ways that honored the students, families, and communities in the district.
- Building and curating a Freedom Dreaming Space – Engaging in a process of deep collaboration that centered collective wellness (particularly for BIPOC students, families, teachers, and communities) and supported the pursuit of our shared vision through individual units, classroom practices, and principles that were then evaluated and assessed through the emerging Ethnic Studies Framework.

The approach that we took over the 2022–2023 school year helped the teachers begin to not only deeply understand Ethnic Studies, but to see its embodiment through each aspect of the training. As this article has made clear, Ethnic Studies demands accountability to students, families, communities, and histories that holds its practitioners to standards that are much higher than that of a district office, school board, or state standards. What was most profound about this experience was that the teachers going through the process recognized that the foundation for

their work would be in the area of culture-building. Unlike typical professional development spaces that center content and pedagogy, through our time together and the ways in which we embodied Ethnic Studies values and curated a culture that centered well-being, they began to understand that, above all else, the values we modeled in our work were at the heart of the practices that they would have to invoke in their classrooms. So, in building our collective Ethnic Studies working framework for this project, we focused on carefully envisioning and implementing a transformative culture: ethics, principles, commitments, and accountability. In doing so, the teachers then began to build units that would start their academic year and model a foundation of Ethnic Studies ways of being, all of which required the centering of students and their families as knowledge producers and emphasized supporting the holistic well-being of their students.

In this project, through our approach, we emphasized the construction of a healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem. In developing the ecosystem that we imagined for this collective, the goal was that it would be nurturing and support everyone's growth and development, building an understanding of the diseased aspects of our school communities and our own individual, community, and historical experiences, and establishing supports to foster the holistic well-being of our collective and of the students, families, and communities we would be working with. The ecosystem metaphor is useful on multiple levels, particularly in the recognition that the basics are required first and foremost to allow us to thrive: the air, water, soil, and sunlight must be healthy. Fire is also critical as we have to burn and let go of so many aspects of schooling that are unhealthy and harmful to students and teachers alike, including: Eurocentric curriculum; teacher-centered pedagogy; and carceral approaches to "discipline." Identifying these harmful realities—many of which have been normalized and accepted in our schools—calling them out, and burning them and their damaging impacts, allowed us to focus on building alternatives. The culture that we create in our classrooms, the air that our classroom communities breathe, must be healthy for us to work toward a space of thriving. The curriculum is the heart of what we engage in with our students—the soil—and it also must be rich with culturally sustaining content to nurture student engagement and wellness so that they can thrive (Paris & Alim, 2017). This is supported by the water we provide our students, the pedagogy, as we find ways to quench their thirst for both knowledge and healthy, holistic identities in this climate that is designed to support their well-being.

Additionally, sunlight is also essential and we understand it as the shared purpose, care, and joy that we foster and center in our classrooms. And, of course, when we nurture health in an ecosystem we understand interdependence and recognize that every part of the ecosystem, every single person in our classrooms, have to be healthy or supported on a path toward wellness in order for the ecosystem to function as it should: our collective wellness is dependent on the wellness of each of us, and requires that we feed and support each other uniquely, as we may each require different forms and amounts of sustenance to thrive. This is reflected in our sense of collective accountability to each individual, never sacrificing any member of our community (as is often done in schools through multiple forms of "discipline"). We recognize that the dandelions and "weeds" in our ecosystem need to be understood and honored for their essential role in the well-being of all of us. Through this approach, we are able to nurture mutual resistance, resilience, regeneration, adaptation, shared vulnerability and interdependence.

This framing helped us understand that the future of Ethnic Studies training for teachers and teacher candidates will require that we move far beyond typical approaches and create ecosystems that are grounded in the values and principles of transformative Ethnic Studies that

foster a commitment to racial and intersectional justice, and the holistic well-being of BIPOC communities, while holding ourselves accountable, above all else, to these communities, families, and students.

In the 2023–24 school year we were able to take this approach to another level and witness the implications of the Healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem model for teacher support and development. Working across two K-8 and one high school district with teacher candidates, teachers, and social workers and centering the holistic embodiment of Ethnic Studies in all facets of the vocation, we understood the necessity of an ecosystem that centered wellness. The students represented a variety of different interconnected seedlings striving to grow and be healthy, and the teachers—particularly their care for students and the culture they built—were the air that enveloped the students and upon which their health depended. This culture was built on a care and love for students and centered the strength and power of students and their families and communities through art, activities, and projects that continually uplifted students as essential to our communities and our future collective well-being (leaning on tools such as Yosso's [2005] Community Cultural Wealth Model and Paris and Alim's [2017] Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies). The deficit-centered toxins that hung in the atmosphere and negatively impacted the well-being of so many students in East San José had been eliminated in these classrooms. The air became healthy.

Their teachings were the water that fed the students and supported their growth. Our community engaged in teaching approaches that were truly student-centered, moving from direct instruction to having, for example, elementary school students engage in Freedom Dreaming activities that allowed them to both imagine their communities as they want them to be and to begin to move toward those dreams. The teachers were constantly watering their students, who had become increasingly thirsty, to center both wonder and possibility.

The healthy and affirming curriculum was the soil that enveloped their learning and intellectual well-being. This challenge demanded constant re-imagining of the curriculum as teachers would have students critique the textbooks, comparing deficit-laden approaches to communities of Color to alternative materials that retold their histories in affirming ways. Often, the students themselves would create the curriculum: building a framework for the year that centered wisdom that was essential in their families (a Sabiduria Wall), or learning about the Ohlone people on whose land they were learning and creating innovative approaches to Land Acknowledgement that included letter writing to politicians supporting Land Back movements. These teachers learned to identify unhealthy curriculum (which could be difficult given how pervasive it is in our schools) and became increasingly adept at developing alternatives that were affirming to students and their communities as they nurtured advanced critical thinking skills. The soil was always being replenished for wellness.

The teachers became adept at moving from a school and district focus on testing and compliance toward a continual emphasis on joy, celebration, and wonder. They themselves glowed in the excitement of ensuring that their classrooms were joyous spaces from the moment that students walked in every day through the time they returned home. Students were excited to be learning in such affirming ways. Despite a perpetual fog that hung over their schools, the sun was shining in Ethnic Studies classrooms.

It was the larger school/district climate that our teachers and students experienced that we struggled with most. We could not ensure the safety of the school climate in which they were building these ecosystems, and in fact in many cases we had to support our teachers in dealing with its toxicity. We understood this climate as the larger school culture and the corresponding beliefs that shape practices across a school setting and district. So, for example, many of our teachers felt the weight of deficit approaches to students, families, and communities in the schools in which they worked as experienced through discipline, low expectations, and negative views of families. We saw this vividly at an assembly at one school site, where a carceral approach to compliance dominated what was intended to be a showcase of an arts program. The teachers and social workers constantly shared stories about the challenges they faced and the lack of support they experienced from administrators and district leaders who did not understand the necessity of embodying an Ethnic Studies ethos for their own practices related to supporting students, families, and communities and their well-being.

The struggle our teachers and social workers experienced is that their classrooms were not autonomous ecosystems, but existed within the larger school climate, which was often defined by significant toxicity that teachers did not have the capacity to address. While they sought to make their classrooms spaces in which they could inoculate their students from the harms they might encounter, they needed grade level colleagues, school staff, and in particular, school leaders to be part of the Ethnic Studies development process so that the culture we were creating was something that was pervasive across the school site. So, while the air in their classrooms had become healthy, teachers and students both had to find ways to protect themselves from the toxicity in the rest of the building. This is the true challenge of Ethnic Studies, as it always has been: we are engaged in efforts to reimagine and reconceive schooling as we do so within the very sites that have been inflicting harm on students, families, and communities of Color since their inception. The burning of institutionalized and often pervasive toxicity and harm is something that we have to engage in for the health of the entire ecosystem.

One example of this challenge was in the inclusion of school social workers in our community and trainings. Several social workers across one of our districts reached out to request to be included in the project, even though our focus was on teacher and student-teacher training. They made it clear that they wanted to learn and adapt Ethnic Studies approaches to their efforts to support students and families experiencing any number of challenges to their well-being. They faced resistance from their supervisor and from some district leaders, illuminating the fundamental contradiction we were attempting to confront. Certain leaders wanted social workers to focus on the work of disciplining students, and specifically engaging in superficial approaches to monitoring attendance, rather than supporting and challenging teachers at their sites who were unable and often unwilling to create healthy learning communities in their classes. Some of these district leaders did not understand how the work of Ethnic Studies—reimagining schools as sites of care that nurture the holistic well-being of students and families grounded in their strengths—was central to the social worker role in their schools. This reflected the focus on punitive, deficit based, and discipline-centered approaches to engaging students and families. It was vivid in all of our gatherings and small group meetings with the social workers that they and their students were stifled and suffering from toxic school and district climates that provided no support for them to begin to imagine and grow healthy ecosystems for their students, who our social workers saw as beautiful, smart, future leaders, but who others were unable and/or unwilling to support. This toxic climate prevented their and our ability to implement the lessons of Ethnic Studies in their schools

in the ways that our emerging Ethnic Studies framework and our students, families, and communities deserved.

The social workers, in many ways, were the mushrooms in our Ethnic Studies Ecosystem, as they absorbed the toxins in the climate to the greatest extent possible in an effort to prevent those toxins from harming the children. But they were too few and were working without support to sustain themselves and ensure that they could process the harm that they and their students experienced, while sustaining themselves. So we worked collectively to create protective suits for all of us to wear when we had to enter toxic spaces in our schools, since absorbing those harmful beliefs and practices was overwhelming. Until school leaders (who are responsible for the safety and health of the overall school climate) embodied an Ethnic Studies ethos in every aspect of their roles, we needed to deflect harmful practices and arm our students, families, and communities to do the same as they learned to grow and thrive in our classrooms. Those healthy classroom ecosystems allowed us to keep building innovative approaches to resist toxicity so that we constantly reinforced our protective suits with ways to: identify harmful framings we encountered, avoid engaging with toxic beliefs and practices if possible, resist dangerous norms/standards, and, when necessary, confront faculty and leaders who do not support our well-being (in the safest ways possible).

In our vision of where we were heading collectively, our healthy Ethnic Studies Ecosystem benefitted from moving beyond interventions against toxicity toward deep cultivation as we leaned on, learned from, and centered the wisdom of our indigenous communities and their practices of cultural burns. We understood that at times we needed to engage in intentionally burning the invasive undergrowth that works against the overall, long-term health of our ecosystems. If we did not burn and eliminate the harmful beliefs about and practices toward our communities of Color, they would lead to the decay of all that we created and nurtured. Our gatherings became a ceremonial burning, as we acknowledged these harmful realities, imagined ways to eliminate their impacts, designed and built alternatives, and shared the impacts of these approaches on the well-being of our students, families, and communities.



Creating a long-term vision of all that is required of Ethnic Studies is essential to fulfill our necessary mission. This ecosystem metaphor is purposeful, because, as we have experienced, without something like this to ground and direct us, we too easily accept the harmful beliefs and practices that those within these institutions understand as common practice without question.

Conclusion

In describing these processes, we intentionally decentered whiteness for this writing. The toxins we described above can be understood as the centering of whiteness, racist carceral approaches to discipline, and pervasive deficit beliefs and practices related to students, families, and communities of Color. Still, we chose to build an Ethnic Studies Ecosystem that centered the ways of knowing, being, and engaging in collective care in communities of Color. This model was helpful to our entire community, which included white teachers and student teachers, to disrupt the common practices of centering whiteness, even in spaces that are committed to the upliftment of communities of Color. In the Portland and San José examples in this piece, we strived to demonstrate the limits imposed by whiteness, as well as the power of imagining and cultivating other worlds that decenter whiteness in every possible way as we build on the power of communities of Color and of truly transformative Ethnic Studies.

As we look to the future of Ethnic Studies in K-12 schools, we must center the lessons from these processes:

- Recognizing that the embodiment of an Ethnic Studies ethos that defines the culture of our classrooms is essential;
- Building our classroom practices and pedagogies through that culture of embodiment; and
- Creating curriculum that honors Ethnic Studies commitments and our students, families, and communities.

Most importantly, we have to understand that Ethnic Studies is not simply a class or even a subject area or discipline. Ethnic Studies is the embodiment of learning as the pursuit of joy, justice, and liberation for all, and therefore requires that our schools become sites fully dedicated to that vision. As we strive to prepare teachers for this powerful manifestation of the vocation, we have to help school and district leaders analyze, understand, and commit to creating school and district climates that foster healthy ecosystems for our young people, reimagining “discipline,” family and community engagement, and learning itself.

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