

Curtailing the Slow Violence of White Supremacy in School Districts through Critical Ethnic Studies Praxes, Pedagogies, and Partnerships

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Abstract

Urban school districts are increasingly tasked with advancing anti-racist change while simultaneously reproducing the white supremacist logics embedded within public education systems. While these school districts are often framed as progressive hubs of educational innovation, conflicts over race, curriculum, and equity continue to plague public schools and enable forms of racialized harm that undermine student learning. Amid entangled legacies of coloniality, white dominance, and racialized exclusion, this study documents the everyday forms of domination that subtly weaken rigorous and liberatory learning. More importantly, we simultaneously chronicle strategies for how San Francisco Unified School District middle school teachers resist educational domination through collaborative experiments in critical Ethnic Studies. This paper draws upon the conceptualization of *slow violence* as a framework for reconciling the district's progressive ethos with recent local and state divestments from Ethnic Studies. We partnered with middle school social studies teachers to co-design a 6-week Ethnic Studies curriculum from inception to evaluation. Findings indicated that Ethnic Studies educators thrived when they were provided opportunities to nurture an intimacy with critical theory, translate educational theory into practice, and reimagine healthy relationships with district leaders, which was strengthened through theory-aligned collective study, deep teacher passions, and humanizing relationships between researchers and educators. In politically volatile contexts, teacher agency and research collaboration become essential in sustaining Ethnic Studies.

Keywords: Ethnic studies, middle school, urban schooling, slow violence, teacher collaboration, social design-based research

Introduction

A few weeks after the last school bell of the academic year rang across San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) schoolyards, the newly appointed Superintendent, Dr. Maria Su, convened a meeting with district principals in late June 2025. One agenda item in particular—the continuity of a yearlong mandatory Ethnic Studies curriculum—stirred turmoil within one of the birthplaces of Ethnic Studies, at least at the institutional level. With a polarizing appointment process in her

wake due to an accelerated selection process and community concerns over its lack of transparency (DeBenedetti, 2025), Superintendent Su had a tall order in delivering news about the fate of Ethnic Studies. In that meeting, principals across the district learned that Superintendent Su was considering pausing the implementation of Ethnic Studies for the 2025-2026 academic year while the district assessed the curriculum's content.

Many conservative stakeholders within the district lauded the decision and its politically opportune timing to seize the momentum of the U.S. Department of Education's "Dear Colleague" letter, national anti-DEI attacks, and California's budget cuts to Ethnic Studies, which consequently destabilized Ethnic Studies efforts at the local level (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2026; Trainor, 2025). Critical education scholar Michael W. Apple (2005) conceptualized these coordinated, yet always contested, attacks on "egalitarian norms and values" in education, such as the aforementioned examples, as enactments of "conservative modernization," which is "the successful struggle by the right to form a broad-based alliance" that restructures the way we do education to be more individualized, privatized, depoliticized, and stratified (p. 272). Notably, what often falls outside the frame when we think about the organizing strategies of conservative social movements is the subtle way they seize power. Without the heightened public attention of press conferences, packed school board meetings, or community listening sessions, Superintendent Su and the school district attempted to slowly and quietly sunset one of the nation's most progressive and effective Ethnic Studies programs in favor of re-establishing white colonial norms in the district.

Superintendent Su's question to pause the curriculum came as a shock to many advocates of Ethnic Studies across the district. Many defenders of Ethnic Studies pointed to the curriculum's national acclaim and widespread success, as evidenced by its ability to improve student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017), as a rationale to invest in the program. Progressive stakeholders cautioned that an abrupt interruption would make curricular planning more difficult for teachers and the logistics of course scheduling more challenging for the school year beginning in August. Advocates of Ethnic Studies viewed the proposed pause by district leadership as a swift divestment from Ethnic Studies despite SFUSD's historical eminence as a progressive thought leader in the field. The principal at Thurgood Marshall High School questioned in a public comment at the SFUSD school board meeting if "the push to pause ethnic studies is about a national wave against DEI and truth-telling in schools" and asserted that "SFUSD must resist" (San Francisco Unified School District, 2025). Accepting this call, a coalition of progressive school leaders, parents, and students engaged in a collective effort to plot, plan, and make meaning beyond the district's control. This coalition made the quiet workings of "conservative modernization" loud and, through petitions, rallies, and press conferences, successfully organized for Superintendent Su to reverse her decision to sunset Ethnic Studies in August of 2025.

While the public narrative focused on conservative efforts to undermine Ethnic Studies and the subsequent resistance from progressive educators and families, the impact of these district policies and politics on teachers who must navigate these polarizing politics every day in the classroom with young people is less often discussed. In this context of subtle and gradual attacks on Ethnic Studies, this paper turns our attention to the everyday realities of teachers working to enact, sustain, and honor the liberatory tradition of Ethnic Studies in tense political environments where conservative challenges are raised in progressively imagined spaces. With this in mind, our study is guided by the following research questions: (a) How do middle school teachers in SFUSD

navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies amid political uncertainty and uneven institutional support?; (b) How do collaborative relationships among teachers support Ethnic Studies implementation across different middle school contexts?; and (c) How do research-practice partnerships shape teachers' experiences of implementing and sustaining Ethnic Studies within politically contested educational environments? By grounding this project in the lived experiences of teachers currently navigating shifting political issues, we illuminate the tensions, possibilities, and resilience that shape Ethnic Studies implementation in SFUSD.

Background

San Francisco is typically framed as a radical city, with progressive-minded thinkers and educators shaping its future. Compared with large urban districts such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, San Francisco often stands out for advancing progressive educational policies related to Ethnic Studies, restorative justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and sanctuary protections for immigrant communities, many of which influence educational standards and strategies nationwide. Much of what comes out of the city leads to trends that reshape educational advancement. Shifting the national landscape toward justice-centered education, San Francisco's consequential curricular contributions included the Ethnic Studies movement. As one of the birthplaces of Ethnic Studies, San Francisco is often presumed to embody the field's commitments to identity affirmation, critical consciousness, and social justice (Sleeter, 2011). However, San Francisco's progressive reputation is not neutral; it is discursively constructed. In this gap between ideal and practice, we are interested in the everyday decisions that middle school teachers make to unsettle the contradictions in what Shange (2019) described as San Francisco's "progressive dystopia."

Progressive Schooling and Racialized Contradictions

The city of San Francisco is powerful, but small, only 49 square miles, with a single public school district to serve the city's population, concentrating educational governance and policy decision-making within one system. The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) serves as a critical site where competing narratives of progress and persistent inequality converge. The district is characterized by its racial, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity, serving a student population that reflects the complexities of the city and nation alike. While SFUSD often celebrates and boasts about its diversity and leadership in advancing equity-oriented policies, these conditions coexist with decades-long disparities in access to resources and educational outcomes for Black, Latinx, multilingual, and low-income students. Despite progressive commitments, SFUSD continues to navigate tensions between symbolic policy leadership and unequal implementation, consistently letting down public school families who rely on its systems.

San Francisco's educational system is structured by coloniality and whiteness. These "epistemes of domination," or knowledge systems that undermine pursuits of freedom (Turner et al., 2023), such as coloniality, whiteness, antiblackness, xenophobia, and so on, pierce into the ecosystem of the classroom to maintain environments that value racial hierarchies, dominant knowledge systems, and enact institutional practices that marginalize people of the global majority (Leonardo, 2009). Apple (2005) clarified the danger of being seduced by these white colonial logics given their unassuming nature that is "often couched in the discourse of 'improving' competitiveness, jobs, standards, and quality in an educational system that is seen as in total crisis" (p. 271). This shows up in curriculum, policy, and resource allocation decisions. Specifically, this includes staffing

shortages, budget cuts, limited support from district leaders, and the dilution of race-conscious curriculum, resulting in uneven implementation of Ethnic Studies. Here, it is important for us to continually acknowledge that attempts to do liberatory work are always operating alongside the very conditions that constrain the work of Ethnic Studies, leading to the persistence of racialized inequities.

In recent years, SFUSD has also experienced significant political and administrative instability, including leadership transitions, shifting policy priorities, major budgetary constraints, and the constant threat of state involvement. These changes have contributed to inconsistencies in program support, delays in staffing key positions, and uneven implementation of district initiatives. For educators, this impact is real in their day-to-day experiences, producing uncertainty around curricular expectations, limited access to resources, and an increased reliance on their individual initiative to sustain justice-oriented teaching. These organizational conditions set the stage for the heightened political tensions surrounding Ethnic Studies and the vulnerability of its continued implementation within the district.

Beginning work grounded in the values of Ethnic Studies in middle school social studies classrooms comes at an even more precarious time. Recent efforts to pause Ethnic Studies in SFUSD must be understood within the context of organizational instability and gradual disinvestment. While the recent attempt to pause Ethnic Studies may have appeared abrupt, it reflects years of accumulating policy shifts, resource constraints, funding reductions, and political backlash that gradually reshaped the conditions under which such a curriculum could be sustained. This includes decades of disrespect to the city's Black residents (Har, 2024), public attacks on the school district's attempted equity audit (Peña, 2021), and a billionaire-funded recall campaign to remove three progressive school board members (Lagos, 2022). These developments are also situated within a wider national landscape of backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, in which Ethnic Studies and race-conscious teaching have become focal points of political controversy (Buller, 2025; Tucker, 2025), and gaining school board seats is a part of the conservative playbook (López & Sampson, 2024). As elsewhere across the nation, these dynamics have taken shape in San Francisco through culture war debates over curriculum, funding, and especially the role of race-conscious teaching in public education.

Rather than an isolated disruption, the vulnerability of Ethnic Studies in SFUSD reveals how progressive policies can be undermined. It is within this context that understanding how teachers navigate, adapt, and collaborate becomes critical to examining the conditions that enable or constrain the implementation of Ethnic Studies in middle school classrooms.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholarship has examined the political dimensions of teaching, particularly within spaces where race, equity, and curriculum are contested. Rather than positioning teaching as neutral, this work highlights how educators engage in political practice through their pedagogical decisions, curricular content, and their focus on relationship- and trust-building with students and communities. While Ethnic Studies and culturally sustaining pedagogies are distinct traditions, both position teachers as key actors in advancing educational approaches that center students' lived experiences and challenge dominant narratives (Paris & Alim, 2017; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). Research has shown the benefits of Ethnic Studies courses, noting that they

can support student engagement, foster positive relationships with schools, and enhance academic achievement while also providing a deeper understanding of structural inequality (Dee & Penner, 2017). These perspectives bring light to the importance of classroom practices that are deeply entangled with broader social, cultural, and historical conditions, particularly in urban settings.

Existing scholarship has documented how teachers implementing Ethnic Studies and other race-conscious pedagogies must navigate institutional constraints, political and public scrutiny, and shifting expectations around what is considered permissible within schools (Kohli et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Scholars have also highlighted the increasing pressures placed on educators attempting to sustain justice-oriented teaching amid broader backlash against race-conscious education and diversity initiatives (Kohli, 2019; Michael, 2015).

In response to this complexity, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a prominent approach for bridging the gap between research and practice. RPPs are typically defined as long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners that aim to address problems of practice through sustained inquiry and shared engagement (Coburn et al., 2013). Within the context of Ethnic Studies implementation, collaborative approaches can serve as a buffer, supporting teachers as they navigate political scrutiny, local tensions, and uneven institutional support. Scholars have noted that these partnerships can challenge hierarchical distinctions between researchers and practitioners by positioning teachers as knowledgeable actors within the research process rather than passive recipients of external expertise (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez et al., 2020).

At the same time, existing research has raised questions about the extent to which research collaborations fully engage with the broader political and institutional conditions shaping justice-oriented educational work. While RPPs often emphasize collaboration and improvement, they may still prioritize solving technical problems within existing systems rather than addressing the structural conditions that constrain race-conscious teaching and the implementation of Ethnic Studies. Existing literature has also tended to focus more heavily on measurable outcomes, such as instructional change or student achievement, than on the relational, political, and ethical dimensions of collaboration itself. This study builds on this scholarship by examining how teachers and researchers collaboratively navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies in a context marked by political contestation, institutional instability, and broader backlash against race-conscious education.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, we draw on Sociologist Ranita Ray's (2025) concept of "slow violence" to conceptualize the conditions that affect the feasibility of Ethnic Studies in middle school classrooms, including gradual disinvestment in infrastructure, evidenced by coordinator vacancies, reduced funding, and a lack of institutional support. Additionally, organizational and political instability lead to leadership turnover and shifting district priorities, which in turn exacerbate these issues. These conditions accumulate over time in patterned forms of harm, often appearing as routine administrative decisions while simultaneously constraining justice-oriented teaching. Slow violence is sustained by the normalization of seemingly minor or procedural decisions.

Furthermore, we draw on Zeus Leonardo's (2009) theorization of whiteness as a structuring force in education to explain how these conditions operate within SFUSD. White supremacist school logics function by organizing what is recognized as legitimate knowledge, appropriate pedagogy, and acceptable forms of political engagement by teachers within their classrooms. These logics depend on claims of neutrality, on keeping "politics out of the classroom" (Tucker, 2025), and on notions of balance, often positioning race-conscious teaching as controversial or outside the bounds of standard practice. These basic practices thus shape decisions about curriculum adoption and resource allocation, constraining the sustainability of initiatives such as Ethnic Studies.

Building on our discussion of RPPs, we examine how collaborative researcher-teacher relationships can help educators navigate and transform these conditions. Teachers are not passive; they have always done this work, particularly in San Francisco, where teacher-led organizing groups provide opportunities for teachers to organize and effect meaningful change in schools (Ginwright, 2015; Quinn, 2020; Alridge et al., 2023). Researchers must reposition themselves in order to meet the needs of these same educators who believe in the values of Ethnic Studies. However, dominant approaches to RPP position researchers as outside experts tasked with diagnosing problems and prescribing solutions, often negating the ongoing labor and knowledge that educators already bring to this work (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez et al., 2020). In this study, we instead conceptualize research as operating through co-conspiracy, in which researchers align politically with teachers and participate in the collective labor of sustaining critical pedagogy (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2023).

Co-conspiracy, as we designate it, requires more than collaboration; it demands that researchers lean into the relational, political, and material conditions that shape classroom practice, rather than remain at an observer's distance. This manifests as a commitment to co-designing processes that are responsive to teachers' existing knowledge, hopes, and constraints, while also working to expand what is possible within those conditions. Research becomes a site of collective inquiry and shared responsibility, and less so one of intervention upon teachers, organizing opportunities for educators to study and apply Ethnic Studies in ways that both respond to and push back on the conditions that constrain it. Together, these frameworks help us understand the challenges teachers face in sustaining Ethnic Studies and how collaborative partnerships can support justice-oriented teaching under difficult political and institutional conditions.

Methods

The insights presented in this paper draw upon a larger study of an Ethnic Studies curricular intervention implemented within middle school social studies and elective courses. In that project, we employed critical qualitative and Social Design-Based Experiment (SDBE) methodology to evaluate the curricular intervention, co-design equitable learning environments, and remain attentive to other emergent insights from the social world of the classroom. SDBE is the process of "co-design[s] learning ecologies in which learning is made equitable and consequential for youth from nondominant communities" (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, p. 330). Through this adaptive methodology, we assessed how the middle school curriculum can lay a positive foundation for the secondary Ethnic Studies requirements. Here, we move the role of the research-practice partnership from high-level, cursory engagement with districts to licensing our research to more personally engaging with educators, striving to sit with the curricular, political, and structural tensions our partners are working through in real time.

In our study, we partnered with middle school social studies teachers to co-design a 6-week curriculum, “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies,” from inception through evaluation. This project was launched twice—once in the Spring of 2025 with five teachers and again in the Spring of 2026 with three teachers who participated in the first iteration of the study. Three teachers identified themselves as women, one as a man, and one as transgender. Two teachers racialized themselves as white, one as Asian, one as Black, and one as Latine. The data analyzed in this paper were collected during both iterations of the curricular design and implementation.

We conducted two rounds of coding to identify emergent patterns related to curriculum, pedagogy, research feasibility, and student learning in the Ethnic Studies curricular intervention. The first round of coding relied on an a priori coding scheme based on the seven youth abolitionist principles (Saldaña, 2009). Subsequently, we conducted a second round of coding using emergent coding schemes that surfaced from our data (Miles et al., 2014). After revising the code definitions from round one and two coding, we performed a third round of thematic coding—applying both the a priori and emergent codes—and collectively deliberated on this final set of data to achieve inter-rater agreement between our team. To ensure validity, our findings and selected transcript excerpts were shared with our community partners and community advisory board to understand how an Ethnic Studies pedagogical standpoint influenced the curriculum, teaching, and student learning during the study.

Learnings from Collectivist Engagements with Critical Ethnic Studies

In times of heightened political uncertainty in the school district, fueled by the logics of coloniality and whiteness, the teachers in our project experimented with new forms of collectivity to persevere amid the political turmoil surrounding attempts to rescind the district's commitments to Ethnic Studies. Hence, we observed that teachers in our study chose to resist an educational structure that encourages isolation and hyper-individualism within the profession (e.g., lesson planning and evaluation meetings). They sought alternative relationships that nurtured their Ethnic Studies praxis and their humanistic need for meaningful connection. In this section, we first discuss how teachers built consequential relationships of care with one another and, subsequently, with other teachers across the district. Then, we explore how the structure of our research-practice partnership created a unique opportunity for teachers to nurture an intimacy with critical theory, translate educational theory into practice, and reimagine healthy relationships with district leaders, which was strengthened through theory-aligned collective study, deep teacher passions, and humanizing relationships between researchers and educators. Taken together, we argue that teachers' study, commitment, and engagement with critical Ethnic Studies pedagogies and praxes ushered in a collectivist orientation that transformed their art of teaching, learning, and student development.

Contexts of Ethnic Studies Implementation

The five educators in this study taught Social Studies, Special Education, and Public Speaking across four middle school sites within and adjacent to SFUSD, each shaped by distinct racial, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions. Three teachers worked at schools in neighboring working-class communities on the southern side of the city, while another taught at a more affluent school site serving students in one of San Francisco's wealthier neighborhoods. A fifth

educator worked within a county-operated educational setting serving students who had experienced significant disruptions within traditional systems.

The teachers also entered the project with varying levels of teaching experience and familiarity with Ethnic Studies. Three participants were first-year teachers navigating both the demands of entering the profession and the implementation of a race-conscious curriculum amid broader district instability. One of whom had formal training in the Mastering Cultural Identity (MCI) model, a school-based program designed to support students' cultural identity development, leadership skills, and engagement with Black historical and contemporary experiences (Parents for Public Schools of San Francisco, 2024), which shaped their approach to identity, power, and student engagement. Another educator had nearly a decade of classroom experience and had formed long-lasting relationships within the district. Teachers entered the project through a combination of institutional relationships and trusted networks. One educator had previously worked with a co-researcher through a local university's partnership and was recruited because of their demonstrated commitment to critical and culturally responsive teaching. Other participants joined through district-level relationships and word-of-mouth recruitment among colleagues. In one case, a teacher invited a coworker from their school site to participate alongside them.

These uneven pathways into the project, after significant challenges of finding qualified teachers willing to teach an ethnic studies curriculum in an eighth-grade classroom, reflected the broader instability surrounding Ethnic Studies implementation and fear within the district. Some educators become deeply engaged in the collaborative process, regularly participating in curriculum development conversations, cross-site reflection, and collective problem-solving. Others struggle to sustain participation amid burnout, competing institutional demands, and uncertainty surrounding their positions within schools. One teacher, already questioning whether they would remain in teaching after their first year, gradually disengaged from the project as the year progressed. Another educator attended meetings inconsistently while traversing a co-teaching arrangement that researchers had not initially been aware of, complicating communication and curriculum implementation. During the following year, teachers also dealt with city-wide labor tensions, including a week-long strike that further disrupted continuity and trust.

Teacher Disposition toward Critical Consciousness

Teachers in this study approach Ethnic Studies with a deeply political and moral commitment, viewing it as central to addressing injustice and shaping students' understanding of the world around them. This orientation is reflected in how educators both understand their role and describe their motivations for teaching, often grounded in their work in broader commitments to social change and collective responsibility. As one teacher explained, "the best way that I could see to fix [problems in the world] them was to become a teacher," while another described their role as helping students "examine politics and their beliefs." These perspectives, rife with moral and political purpose, position teaching not as a neutral act, but as a powerful engagement with social and political purposes.

For many educators, Ethnic Studies is viewed not as an elective or new graduation requirement, but as a necessary component of students' learning. Teachers describe the work as "not optional . . . necessary if we're going to get free," and emphasized its urgency given "the climate of the world right now." In this framing, Ethnic Studies becomes a critical space through which students can

develop the tools to understand and respond to systems of inequality. Teachers also articulated a sustained attentiveness to how knowledge, power, and identity operate within the classroom. This was evident in their efforts to question dominant narratives, foreground multiple perspectives, and critically examine whose stories are centered in the curriculum (Kolluri and Edwards, 2023), especially given how closely related the creation of Ethnic Studies is to the students in this city. As one educator noted, a central aim of their teaching is to remain aware of their positionality as a white teacher working with students of color and to actively consider how that shapes classroom dynamics.

Collaboration also extended into public and professional learning spaces beyond individual school sites. During this project, teachers and researchers co-facilitated a workshop at a local conference on justice-oriented teaching and learning for educators across the region. The session invited educators to collectively reflect on the conditions shaping Ethnic Studies implementation, including where they experienced support, constraints, political risk, and possibilities within their own school contexts. Teachers led conversations about adapting the curriculum, fostering students' connection to identity and history, and navigating the practical realities of race-conscious teaching in politically contested environments. These exchanges created opportunities for educators across different schools and districts to collectively problem-solve and affirm one another's work during a period of broader, statewide uncertainty surrounding Ethnic Studies. This work also extended beyond professional collaboration to include deeper engagement with students' families and communities. Assignments such as oral histories created opportunities for students to connect classroom learning to lived experience and foster relationships across generations.

Cultivate Critical Consciousness in Classroom Practice

Teachers enact this orientation through intentional pedagogical practices that center identity, have conversations about how to disrupt dominant narratives, and create space for critical engagement. One key dimension of this work involves explicitly engaging students in honest conversations about identity, race, and power. Teachers described designing lessons that ask students to define and reflect on concepts such as race, ethnicity, and nationality, often beginning with students' own experiences and understandings, and whether they even recognized these dynamics as existing in their worlds. Teachers also demonstrated a commitment to addressing issues of harm and conflict as they arise in the classroom. Rather than deferring or minimizing these moments of tension, educators described intervening immediately when students used harmful language or reproduced oppressive behavior. As one teacher explained, when a student disrespected someone else's culture, "if you're going to say something problematic, we're going to have a conversation . . . in the moment." These responses reflect a pedagogical stance that treats such moments not as disruptions to instruction or punitive discipline, but as integral opportunities for learning. In addition to these responsive practices, teachers emphasized the importance of building relational and humanizing classroom environments. Several educators described approaching their teaching from "a loving stance," prioritizing trust, care, and emotional safety as foundational to students' ability to engage critically. This included the use of restorative practices and intentional efforts to create spaces where students felt seen and valued.

Simultaneously, teachers' efforts to cultivate critical consciousness were shaped by a range of constraints that complicated their work. Educators described challenges related to student

engagement, pacing, and the limitation of existing curriculum supports, at times characterizing the work as “whack-a-mole” as they attempted to address multiple competing demands in the classroom. These conditions required teachers to continually adjust their approaches, balancing their commitments to critical pedagogy with the practical realities of time, resources, and instructional expectations.

Teachers extend their work beyond individual classrooms through cross-collaboration, shared problem-solving, and community engagement, challenging the usual isolation of teaching in these areas. Several educators described limited opportunities at their school sites to engage in sustained dialogue about curriculum or pedagogy, and even shared moments that ran counter to or were at odds with Ethnic Studies values. In response, teachers sought collective reflection among themselves, emphasizing the importance of being able to “talk to people” about how lessons unfolded, how students responded to and engaged with the material, and how to navigate implementation challenges. Through cross-site collaboration, educators shared strategies, compared student engagement data, and worked together to adapt the curriculum in ways responsive to their distinct classroom contexts. With the looming risk of attacks by organized groups in the city, the lateral mentorship and support that teachers engaged in became an important space for refugee support and skill-building as they collectively navigated the district’s hostile political climate.

To better understand these broader issues unfolding in practice, we now turn to the story of one educator navigating the tensions, possibilities, and contradictions of Ethnic Studies implementation.

Wrinkles in Liberatory Learning: Striving for Alignment Between Purpose, Pedagogy, & District Policy

As the clouds swelled with rain over the San Francisco skyline, Natalie, a first-year teacher, used her prep period to ready a lesson on student protest movements from the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” curriculum, which reminded students that they, too, were part of a broader continuum of freedom seekers. In contrast to the conservative storms silently brewing and subtly chipping away at progressive gains in the district (Apple, 2005), Natalie created a classroom space that reminded her students that better worlds were possible (Wallace et al., 2026). As a teacher of a well-celebrated race-conscious curriculum in the district, the very classroom space was adorned with liberatory quotes, portraits of artists, intellectuals, and movement leaders (e.g., Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman), and student work that grapples with difficult questions of the relationship between race, education, and power. Despite the district’s local politics, Natalie remained steadfast in her purpose to nurture and design her classroom as a cradle of critical learning that valued positive affirmation, critical thinking, and embodied learning.

Unlike another content-knowledge-building day or another reflexive journaling session, the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” curriculum would require students to build their muscle for speaking truth to power by rehearsing the political act of protest. In honoring the Ethnic Studies imperative to “systematically examine and dismantle institutional racism” (Hu-DeHart, 2004, p. 874), the FDES research team and teachers intentionally built this lesson plan to help students think critically about “who decides what we learn in schools,” with particular attention to their own local politics of education (FDES Curriculum, 2025). Students ended their previous class session

by watching the mini-documentary film, *The Legacy of the Third World Liberation Front Student Strike at SF State*. For a few seconds, the screen hovered over a black and white visual of a San Francisco State Black Student Union member carrying a protest sign that read “teachers and students shut it down together. Parents support community.” After watching the film, one student journaled how they felt inspired by the idea of teachers and students working together. Kate noted in an exit interview that she was intrigued by her students’ initial observation that the “protest didn’t work on the first day.” However, that curiosity turned into admiration when she realized her students recognized the endurance required by movement work, and that it didn’t stop the protesters from getting “back to it.” Little did they know that the very next day, they would have an opportunity to step into the movement’s tradition themselves.

Chairs scraped against the tile, and desks creaked under Natalie’s hands as she moved furniture from the center of the classroom to the periphery to clear space for an embodied learning experience. We were witnessing Natalie transform her classroom into a “hush harbor” of learning that “nurtures a collective vision of what might be possible” (Hartman, 2022). Students were tasked with creating protest signs as if they were part of the protests themselves. Each group shared with the class why they chose the message/symbolism. At the conclusion of the activity, students reflected on the following questions collectively: “What is one thing young people today can learn from students in the 1960s and 70s? What is the role of youth in shaping social and political change? How can students use their voices to advocate for what they believe in, just as the Third World Liberation Front students did?” In many ways, this lesson was yet another enactment of a “pedagogical ritual of purpose,” which are the “soul-stirring acts of knowledge synthesis that cultivate love, dignity, truth, wisdom, and criticality through the facilitation of rigorous learning” (Wallace et al., 2026). Rather than teaching to the test or to the whims of a particular political moment, teaching in alignment with her purpose and the collective support of the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies team would prove instrumental in navigating broader district policies and norms.

As a member of the “Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies” research collective, Natalie drew on her experience as a student in the movement at San Francisco State University and honored the rich tradition of Ethnic Studies student activism in her classroom teaching. Natalie often radiantly reminisced about how her Ethnic Studies professors intentionally built learning environments in which she and her peers were valued as co-creators in the learning process. As a first-year teacher, she productively struggled to balance the liberatory foundations of her Ethnic Studies tradition with the district culture, becoming a “warm demander” of high academic expectations, orderly conduct, and human-centered personal investment (Delpit, 2013). This prompted her to take a few pedagogical risks in the classroom, which occasionally invited the district’s curiosity. We noticed, at times, that Natalie used the academic freedom established by the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies research project, through a research-practice partnership with the school district, to wrinkle the landscape of liberatory learning and push the bounds of what race-conscious education looks and feels like within her district through Ethnic Studies.

As discussed previously, San Francisco is well-known and respected as a progressive hub. As an MCI teacher, Natalie was given a curriculum to advance students, particularly Black students, with their sense of positive identity, leadership skills, and agency. Her engagement with the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies project allowed her to build upon the aims of that curriculum and add additional content related to critical theories, histories, and practices of race, ethnicity, nationality,

capitalism, and power. The embodied and liberatory pedagogical innovation that Natalie nurtured through the Freedom Dreaming in Ethnic Studies project in her classroom was, in many ways, aligned with the district's vision for a progressive education. However, at times, Natalie shared that there was "a bit of a challenge [with] the communication between my school, MCI, and the project." Even though Natalie knew the district approved and was "in partnership with the project," there was still this "added layer of checking in that I almost needed to do to put out the [Ethnic Studies] curriculum, because it had to also be run by them, just to make sure." The district supported the aims of this project at every turn during implementation; however, navigating the boundaries among the aims, content, and political orientations of the MCI and FDES curricular projects. With deep reflection, Natalie shared that she didn't want to do "anything wrong" and "wanted to make sure that . . . it was . . . everybody was comfortable with it" when designing and implementing the FDES curriculum. After all, the district leaders with whom Natalie worked closely had been very supportive of her growth as an educator, and she wanted to maintain good relationships with them while also developing a new curriculum.

Recognizing this as an opportunity for mutual understanding, the FDES team and Natalie decided to share a draft of a research paper on Natalie's pedagogical practice with a trusted district leader for feedback (Wallace et al., 2026). To our advantage, we were not engaging with a hostile district or particular personnel at that moment. Thus, the aim of this feedback session was to pre-emptively show the district the advances being made in the lesson plans, highlight the impact this orientation to Ethnic Studies had on student learning, and socialize the theoretical frameworks that underpinned this particular paper and the broader curricular design. What started as a routine consensus check evolved into much more. Natalie was overwhelmed with joy at the feedback she received, not just on the curriculum, but also on her care, rigor, and humanizing approach to the craft of teaching. This moment warmed the hearts of the FDES curriculum team because it served as a timely reminder that the time that our teachers spent reading Stuart Hall, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Toni Morrison during our FDES curriculum retreat proved to be useful beyond the scope of curricular design, but also aided them in better clarifying and defending their Ethnic Studies pedagogical standpoints to the district. Overall, this experience taught us that pairing the ability to speak the language of the district with the academic craft of explaining social customs through educational, Black Studies, and Ethnic Studies theory helped the district better understand Natalie's pedagogical decisions in the classroom and position it as in alignment with the District's aims to offer Ethnic Studies, however, with an added critical lens.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study illustrate how teachers navigate the implementation of Ethnic Studies within conditions shaped by disinvestment, organizational instability, and ongoing political tension at the local level. Across the three areas examined (teacher disposition, classroom practice, and collaboration across sites), educators consistently demonstrated a commitment to sustaining critical, justice-oriented teaching despite limited structural support. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of these policy shifts, teachers actively interpreted and adapted their work in response to the demands of their local contexts. These patterns highlight the importance of understanding Ethnic Studies implementation not simply as a matter of curriculum delivery, but as an ongoing negotiation within broader institutional and political conditions that most first-year teachers lack the context for.

These findings suggest that the challenges facing Ethnic Studies are not the result of isolated disruptions, but of the slow violence of cumulative effects from incremental decisions that shape the conditions under which this kind of teaching occurs. Teachers' descriptions of inconsistent curriculum, limited time, and uneven institutional support reflect how harm can be deeply entwined with organizational processes that pass as neutral or merely procedural (Young and Kolluri, 2025). However, the need to continuously adapt lessons, address emergent issues, and compensate for resource gaps placed additional burdens on educators, requiring ongoing labor that often goes unrecognized and uncelebrated. In this way, slow violence operates not only through policy shifts but through the everyday conditions that structure teachers' work.

Further, understanding the workings of white supremacist logics helps to explain how such conditions become normalized within educational systems. Teachers' accounts of navigating institutional uncertainty and concerns about what is appropriate to teach reveal how colonial norms of neutrality and depoliticization continue to shape classroom practice and attempt to subordinate the soul of Ethnic Studies praxis (Domínguez, 2026). These logics organize the boundaries of what is considered legitimate knowledge and acceptable pedagogy, often positioning Ethnic Studies as risky. Thus, teachers are required to engage in ongoing negotiation, making strategic decisions about how to introduce and sustain critical content within constrained environments.

Importantly, the findings also point to the limitations of understanding teacher practice in isolation. In addition to strengthening teachers' disposition towards Ethnic Studies (Domínguez and Kolluri, 2026), teachers' efforts to sustain Ethnic Studies were not solely individual acts of resistance but emerged through cross-site collaboration, shared curriculum, collective reflection, and ongoing dialogue about how to navigate political and practical tensions. Whether through research practice partnerships or informal networks, collaboration emerged as a critical mechanism for educators to share responsive approaches to their teaching. These dynamics suggest that sustaining justice-oriented education requires not only individual commitment but also structures that support collective inquiry and shared responsibility.

These findings carry several implications for research, policy, and practical application. For researchers, the findings suggest the need to move beyond models of collaboration that treat classrooms as sites for applying generalized equity without deep engagement with Ethnic Studies as a distinct intellectual and political tradition. This includes designing collaborative research that is responsive to teachers' priorities, attentive to power dynamics and commitments within partnerships, and grounded in the historical, political, and pedagogical foundations of Ethnic Studies itself. For districts and policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of providing sustained structural support for Ethnic Studies, including stable funding, coherent curriculum resources, and clear institutional commitments and leadership support that extend beyond symbolic endorsement and protect those who enact it. Without such support, the burden of sustaining justice-oriented education is disproportionately placed on individual educators.

Conclusion

As state and local attacks on Ethnic Studies continue, this study highlights the critical role teachers play in sustaining justice-oriented education despite growing political pressure and institutional instability. For the educators in this study, this work is not supplemental; it is "how [they] fix

problems in society” and a necessary part of broader struggles for freedom. Even amid instability, disinvestment, and political pressure that often becomes personal, teachers continue to adapt curricula, facilitate difficult conversations about race and power, create opportunities for student activism and reflection, and build collaborative spaces where students can critically engage with history, identity, and inequality.

Sustaining this work cannot rely solely on individual commitment or personal sacrifice. The future of justice-oriented education depends not only on whether Ethnic Studies remains in place, but also on whether the conditions exist for it to be meaningfully enacted and sustained for future generations.

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