

Developing White Racial Consciousness: Ethnic Studies Pedagogies and the Transformative Learning of White Students

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Abstract

In the context of increasing restrictions on teaching about race and racism in schools, this study explores the impact of a high school social justice program grounded in Ethnic Studies pedagogies on white students' learning and development. Through focus groups with white alumni, this research examines how students made meaning of lessons on systemic racism, whiteness, and racial identity. Findings show that participants experienced these classrooms as transformative spaces that fostered critical consciousness, empathy, and a deeper understanding of social inequities. Students reported feeling more confident participating in academic spaces, more comfortable engaging in difficult conversations, and more invested in their learning across subjects. Emotional responses such as discomfort and guilt were reframed as necessary components of growth, supported through structured dialogue and community-centered learning. Beyond high school, participants described sustained engagement in civic and social justice efforts, as well as career pathways informed by their education. These findings highlight the power of Ethnic Studies pedagogies in predominantly white spaces to cultivate critically engaged, socially responsible students, as well as underscore the importance of educators intentionally creating inclusive, reflective, and justice-oriented classroom environments.

Keywords: Social justice education, racial justice education, Critical White Studies, Ethnic Studies, critical consciousness of race, anti-racist consciousness

Introduction

Color blindness has become a powerful weapon against progress for people of color, but as a denial mindset, it doesn't do white people any favors, either. A person who avoids the realities of racism doesn't build the crucial muscles for navigating cross-cultural tensions or recovering with grace from missteps.

— Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, 2021, p. 230

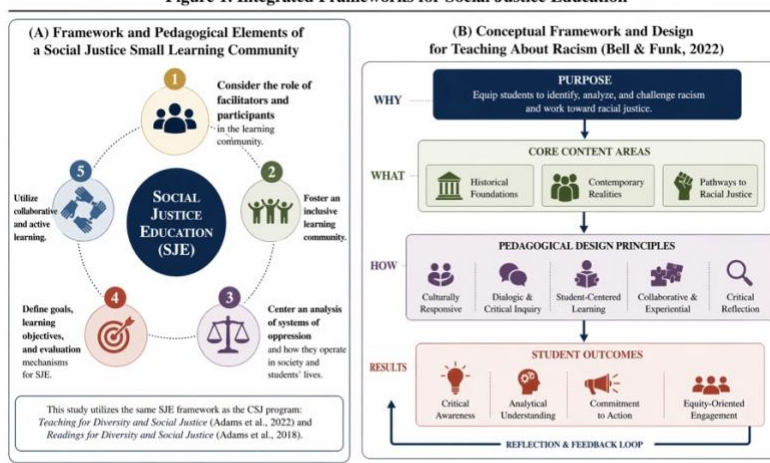
Debates about what can and cannot be taught in public schools are nothing new. Throughout the 20th century, everything from evolution, religious influences and prayer, and periodic book bans have permeated public education policy. Since the 2016 election, there has been an increase in disagreements over the overall purpose of schooling and whether to include topics around race

and racism, and other Ethnic Studies approaches, in the classroom (Aronson & Ashlee, 2018; Butcher & Canaparo, 2024; Gonzalez & Butcher, 2021; Kim, 2021; Tetelbaum, 2022; Welton & Lent, 2023; Wolfe-Rocca & Nold, 2022). Civic education and critical discussions about systemic inequalities, like racism, are being discouraged, and even outlawed, through local and state policies across the country.

While a substantial body of research documents the benefits of Ethnic Studies and racial justice education¹ for students of color (Byrd, 2016; Farag, 2021; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), far less scholarship has examined how Ethnic Studies pedagogies operate in white-dominant spaces or how white² students experience and make meaning of such learning. This piece intervenes in that gap by showcasing the reflections of white alumni from a high school social justice interdisciplinary program that incorporated themes from Ethnic Studies, particularly critical consciousness of racial identity of self and others. It examines how they recalled learning about systemic racism and racialized identity and whether they contributed this education to their beliefs and attitudes about people of different racial identities. It also surveyed whether alumni continued social justice-related practices and civic and social engagement after graduating.

While social justice education is often situated as a broader framework, the learning experiences collaborators³ were exposed to align closely with Ethnic Studies pedagogical commitments to (a) situating contemporary racial inequalities within historical contexts, (b) examining whiteness and white privilege as systems of power, (c) using counter-narratives to disrupt dominant historical accounts, (d) nurturing students' critical thinking skills, and (e) fostering a community learning environment (Dominguez et al., 2023; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

Figure 1. Integrated Frameworks for Social Justice Education



Note. (A) Adapted from Adams et al. (2022, 2018). (B) Adapted from Bell & Funk (2022).

¹ Racial justice education is defined as, “an introductory overview and understanding of racism with the aim of cultivating a racially just society. . . focusing on helping participants develop a historical and conceptual understanding of racism and helping participants take action toward racial justice in their personal and institutional lives” (Bell & Funk, 2022, p. 158).

² The term “white” is lowercase in alignment with The Associated press (AP) stylebook based on several factors, including the risk of subtly legitimizing white supremacist beliefs (Daniszewski, 2020).

³ Volunteer participants in this study were referred to as “collaborators” and not “participants” to acknowledge their essential contributions to my study and not for it.

In my research, particular attention was paid to the experiences of white students because the conservative narrative being pushed is that learning about racial concepts, like white supremacy, is inappropriate and puts white students in a position to receive hateful messaging in schools (Farag, 2021; Gonzalez & Butcher, 2021; Rufo, 2021; Wolfe-Rocco & Nold, 2022). Rather than centering white students as victims or beneficiaries, my analysis—grounded in Critical White Studies (CWS)—focuses on how this learning experience supported students' development of critical consciousness of racial identity, empathy, solidarity, and democratic participation.

Literature Review

There is a realm of research, specifically in Critical White Studies (CWS), which addresses the process of white racial consciousness in adults (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018). However, the experiences of white students learning about white racial consciousness in high school is very limited. CWS conceptualizes whiteness as both a racial identity and a structural location of privilege that must be critically examined to disrupt racism (Aveling, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic, 1997). Because white students are rarely asked to analyze their racial position, this study responds to a critical gap by examining how they come to understand whiteness as a socially constructed racial identity rather than a neutral norm.

The available research suggests that white students may experience a level of moral culpability or even shame when exploring their own ignorance and misunderstandings of racism, and a level of discomfort can occur when they acknowledge their own racist assumptions and socialization (Aveling, 2004; Bandy et al., 2021; Heinze, 2008; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Tatum, 1994). The inevitable emotional reactions of learning about racism are what is being weaponized by policy makers without the contextual understanding that a “transformative understanding of what it means to be white today rarely occurs in those classroom communities where such risks are not run” (Rich & Cargile, 2004, p. 352). Courses that utilize Ethnic Studies pedagogies foster substantial instructional support and learning environments that promote critical consciousness and student engagement, while bans and restrictions constrain opportunities for these educational outcomes to occur.

Introducing white students to this content is beneficial as it encourages them to critically assess dominant white historical perspectives and aids in building constructive partnerships and relationships with other students of different racialized identities. Farag (2021) argues that rather than “producing feelings of shame and guilt about their racialized identity, a thorough understanding of systemic racism can actually lead to a better understanding of their identity and a sense of allyship” (p. 22). It is important to convey to students that this awareness is not intended to evoke permanent feelings of guilt or shame but rather to facilitate discussions about how one can responsibly address white privilege upon acknowledgement. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of utilizing the power inherent in that privilege to actively promote social justice and equality.

Many white students grow up in a cultural context that prioritizes individualism, which can make it challenging for them to grasp that their personal experiences are significantly influenced by and interconnected with the lived experiences of others. Ledesma and Calderón (2015) highlight that “we must teach Whites to understand themselves through the history of the other, in much the

same way many communities of color understand themselves in relationship to Whites” (p. 209). When these students start to recognize the historical origins of white supremacy and the ways it has been challenged, they may experience a profound identity crisis. Research shows that many white individuals resist acknowledging racism due to the belief that being labeled “racist” is a moral endpoint (DiAngelo, 2018; Rich & Cargile, 2004). CWS challenges this binary by reframing racism as systemic rather than individual, creating space for reflection, accountability and growth.

CWS emphasizes the development of an explicitly anti-racist consciousness that includes rejecting whiteness as a position of unearned power. Scholars emphasized that feelings of discomfort—such as guilt, shame, or uncomfortableness—are a natural and necessary part of the learning process for white students when engaging in topics related to race, racism, and racial justice (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; Farag, 2021; Heinze, 2008; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). This emotional engagement encourages students to confront uncomfortable truths about racism and history. Exposure to diverse perspectives helps white students develop deeper emotional and empathetic awareness, leading to significant growth in their understanding of racial justice. This is particularly important for white students because in the absence of sustained interaction with peers of different racial identities or lived experiences, they are less likely to engage in meaningful reflections on race, racial identity, and racial privilege while in school.

The demographics of my collaborators intentionally include white students specifically to address the gap in research and offer insight into this perspective and experience learning about racial identity through Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Collaborators reflections attest that their education encourages critical thinking and reflection on one’s own identity, privilege, and position within social structures, while at the same time, learning and hearing lived experiences outside of their own. They contribute their educational experience with helping them break down their own conscious and unconscious stereotypes and biases. This deeper awareness of both their own racial identity and the racialized experiences of others promoted a sense of coalition building, allyship, and solidarity that stayed with them well after high school. As educators, isn’t that all we could hope for? To foster a lasting analytic lens through which they move through their worlds?

Methodology

My research focused on the experiences of students who participated in a high school social justice program, The Social Justice Institute (SJI)⁴ for at least two years. Alumni from SJI served as collaborators for my study which explored their experiences learning about systemic racism through a social justice curriculum, how that experienced influenced their own and others’ racialized identities, and if they continued their social action engagement after leaving the program. Collaborators graduated high school between 2012 and 2019, so they were reflecting back on this experience, which for some was over ten years ago. Nonetheless, they were able to vividly recall experiences and articulate the impact SJI had on their personal development, outlook on life, and civic engagement after high school.

The interdisciplinary SJI program incorporates thematic social justice courses in English Language Arts as well as Social Studies. It also includes a social action engagement elective course, which

⁴ Pseudonyms were utilized for the social justice program, public high school, and town to adhere to anonymity.

serves as an introduction to understanding current issues of social diversity and social justice in The United States. The course provides a theoretical framework, based on the social justice pedagogy outlined in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, M. et al., 2022). This includes the chapter “Racism” which offers an overview of key as well as a design for teaching about racism (Bell & Funk, 2022). Students are provided the accompanying text *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, that include an introduction to the conceptual framework of social justice as well as chapters on a wide range of social oppressions from a social justice standpoint (Adams, et al., 2018). Teachers in SJI use the pedagogy and strategies from the *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2022) text and incorporate readings that are timely and made relevant to students through active discussions, reflection activities, connections to current events. In all three courses in the program, there is an emphasis on empowerment and allyship, and a true belief that “teaching about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered people of color and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners in the establishment of a more just society” (Tatum, 1994, p.474). This is reflected in the culminating projects at the end of each unit, in which students work together to create an action plan addressing the specific form of oppression they just learned about and present to the community.

Students form very close relationships with each other as well as teachers, and there is a true community fostered throughout the program. These relationships continued even after high school, which is how I was able to acquire volunteers to collaborate on my research. It is important to note that students elect to be in this small learning community, with the support of parents and/or caretakers. Therefore, parental pushback on topics like race, or progressive policies, was not an issue.

Three focus groups of three to four SJI alumni of different racial identities were conducted. This piece focuses on the reflections and interactions of collaborators who identified as white, or white-passing.

Table 1

<i>Focus Group Identifiers</i>		
Participant Pseudonym	Self-identified Ethno-racialized identity (presented in the order stated)	Self-identified “white Passing” (if more than one race)
Colton	Italian, Argentinian Jewish	yes
Edith	white	n/a
Jessie	white	n/a
Jordan	white, Black	yes
Mary	white	n/a
Shelby	white	yes
Silas	Black	n/a
	white	n/a

The focus group conversations revolved around their reflections on learning about systemic racism and the development of their critical consciousness of racial identity of self and others. Overall, a profound reflective feeling of nostalgia and gratitude was observed during collaborators' reflections on their experiences in SJI and overall motivation to contribute to social justice in their current lives.

Learning about Systemic Racism and Whiteness through Ethnic Studies Pedagogies

Focus group collaborators described their high school experience in SJI as transformative, often using metaphors such as “doors being opened” and “finally making sense of the world. They recalled the SJI classrooms as pivotal spaces where they began to understand themselves, others, and their place in society. Importantly, collaborators emphasized that the impact extended beyond their academics in the small learning community. They described feeling more empowered to participate in their other classes, more confident in their interactions with teachers, and a deeper sense of academic investment. Many spoke with nostalgia and gratitude, emphasizing that SJI laid the “foundation” for lifelong reflection, learning, and civic engagement. Jessie profoundly stated:

That experience of learning and just being in an environment where it's okay to talk about things that may be more difficult in an unsafe space. It really was good, like quite a privilege to be able to do that . . . to hold on to those teachings and actually have that come into my way of life in so many ways, especially socially.

Overall, their reflections suggested that learning about social and racial justice functioned as more than a high school course—it became a lens through which they continued to interpret the world and deepen their perspectives on the lived experiences of other people.

The Journey into and through Racial Critical Consciousness

Collaborators described how exposure to racial justice education and Ethnic Studies pedagogies—particularly historical inquiry, structural analysis, and critical dialogue—shaped their *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). They learned to situate individual experiences within broader systems of racial power and to understand racial identity as socially constructed and historically produced. Rather than viewing racism as isolated acts, collaborators came to see its systemic nature and the role of whiteness in maintaining racial hierarchies. This understanding enabled them to see the interconnectedness of individual experiences with wider societal issues, which is a core aspect of critical consciousness (Deimer et al., 2017; Freire, 1970).

For people who identify as white, cultivating an awareness of their racial identity involves understanding the implications of being white in a society that prioritizes whiteness, and recognizing the limitations of adhering to a colorblind ideology. In white-dominant spaces, teachers must be deliberate in “bring[ing] critical race discourse into the classroom . . . specifically on whiteness and its role in perpetuating a racial system of privilege” (Chaisson, 2004, p. 346). Shelby recalled this prolific realization and remembered thinking, “I’m not lucky, I’m privileged. This was something I was born into that I did not have to work for. I did not earn what other people should also have.” In the context of CWS, critical consciousness for white people involves developing an awareness of the ways in which whiteness functions as a social and political identity that grants privilege and power (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997).

All collaborators identified SJI as the first space where whiteness was framed as something worthy of critical analysis. They reflected on developing a deeper understanding of their own white privilege, and expressed a newfound understanding of systemic issues like racism grounded in their high school social justice education. Jordan described his education, specifically on microaggressions, as the “dot connector” that helped him reinterpret earlier racialized experiences with friends. Similarly, Colton recounted a conversation with his lifelong best friend, who is Black, where, despite being in Colton’s company, had been subjected to racial profiling and discrimination. He explained, “I was so angry that that had happened to him. And quickly I was like, ‘Oh, shit! I get it now.’” Through their education, collaborators began to recognize their prior complicity and unawareness, marking a shift toward what CWS describes as rejecting whiteness as a position of unearned power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). Through SJI, these collaborators did not further perpetuate racial oppression by avoiding discourse on racial justice. Instead, they were engaging and learning about social justice daily, acknowledging their privilege, admitting past experiences where they had been unconsciously biased or unaware, and wanted to take steps to move forward in a social justice way.

Feelings of Guilt or Shame are not Roadblocks

When asked if they ever felt guilt or shame around learning about white supremacy or white privilege, collaborators did not view these emotions as barriers to developing their critical consciousness. Instead, they described them as necessary steps toward awareness and growth, consistent with CWS scholarship (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018). Silas admitted that when he learned about white privilege it did initially make him feel bad and guilty. But he explained that it actually helped him develop empathy and an awareness of what marginalized people experienced. He explained:

I just felt bad. I wish that all people with any background had those same privileges. . . . I didn’t really think as much about it and those kind of world problems before SJI. And I feel like SJI made me take more into consideration other peoples’ experiences and get to know a lot of people better.

These perspectives and historical understanding were something that he would not have been able to be aware of through his own personal lived experience. Similarly, Shelby confessed:

I just felt horror, I felt guilt. I felt shameful. I looked around, and honestly, I felt like a fraud for having made it so far in life, and just didn’t understand what the people around me were going through . . . looking around and there was a whole world I knew nothing about going on right in front of me.

The discomfort associated with these feelings can lead to personal growth and a deeper understanding of social justice. These emotional responses were not paralyzing but transformative. CWS suggests that engaging with feelings of guilt or shame can ultimately motivate individuals to become more active in advocating for equity and justice. Collaborators emphasized the importance of moving from discomfort toward responsibility and action. Edith explained:

I remember just being like, okay, I know I'm a white woman. So, I'm gonna take a seat and just listen. And I feel like that was such a huge learning thing for me too, to just be like I'm gonna let other people speak. Like, I don't need to always be the one upfront.

She realized that even the act of just listening to other perspectives and voices, without interjecting, held power. Shelby went on to say:

So having to kind of check myself on, well, yes, I do have white privilege. It's hard initially, when you learn it. But I think to come back the next day and be like, okay, obviously, I'm not a slave owner. Obviously, I'm not saying the n-word like, I am trying my best. But *how* do I try my best? Respectfully, in a way that's actually helpful.

She recognized the sometimes-difficult process of developing a critical consciousness around being white. It's hard. It's tough. But it's necessary to acknowledge the pain and suffering that white privilege has caused so many people in order to work towards dismantling it. Colton also acknowledged the importance of becoming unstuck in the uncomfortableness and moving towards action:

It's like, yeah, that may be uncomfortable in the moment, but you know what? How do you choose to grow from it? Versus how do you choose to make it too much about feeling that shame and pushing it onto somebody else? It's like you've got a choice when you have those uncomfortable moments.

During these lessons on white privilege, he realized that his privilege didn't have to be a marker of shame, but instead could be utilized as a tool to learn, understand, and advocate. Again, CWS says that this awareness is a critical first step in understanding one's position within society structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018; Kendall, 2013). When asked if anyone felt like they would have learned about their white racial identity outside of SJI, all of them said that they didn't think so. They actually expressed feelings of gratitude and nostalgia for going through that difficult process and contributed it to their continued personal growth which had significant influences on their lives after school, and even today.

Continuing the Journey Post-High School

After high school, collaborators remained actively engaged in social justice through forms of civic and social actions, ranging from voting to organizing Black Lives Matter (BLM) marches. For them, an understanding of racial identity not only heightened their awareness of systemic injustices but also instilled the understanding that all actions promoting social justice are valuable, no matter their scale. They participated in diverse activities, including voting, community organizing, advocacy, and volunteer work. Their actions reflected a strong understanding of social injustices and a commitment to combating these issues.

Furthermore, their education in social justice principles had a considerable influence on their career paths and choices, guiding them toward roles where they could continue to advocate for equity and inclusion. Collaborators credited their high school education for their success in the following careers: social worker, non-profit sector, middle school teacher, music business manager, human resources, content consultant for major television networks, legislative assistant and

canvasser, and communications director for large community center. They explained how their high school experience inspired some of their career paths, prepared them to be in diverse settings, and taught them to listen and acknowledge perspectives and lived experiences other than their own. Overall, the education these alumni received played a crucial role in shaping their ongoing dedication to social justice, empowering them to act as informed and active citizens within their communities.

Forging the Path: Implications for Practice

This study emerges at a critical historical moment, as anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, curricular censorship, and book bans continue to proliferate the United States. These efforts have intensified amid political rhetoric that promises to eliminate what is broadly, and often inaccurately, labeled “CRT” and “DEI” from classrooms, framing Ethnic Studies pedagogies as “left-wing indoctrination” that creates hostile learning environments, particularly for white students. Such rhetoric deliberately conflates CRT—a specific legal and academic framework—with broader pedagogical practices that engage students in learning about race, identity, equity, and systemic inequality. This misrepresentation not only distorts public understanding but also places educators under heightened scrutiny, discouraging them from addressing historical and contemporary realities that are essential to students’ civic and social development. My findings demonstrate that Ethnic Studies and social justice-oriented pedagogies support students in making sense of the world, developing a critical consciousness, and engaging meaningfully with their communities outside of school. When done correctly, it encourages an examination of how whiteness is constructed and maintained, often leading to challenging conversations about race, identity, and accountability. CWS emphasizes that discomfort can arise when individuals confront their own biases, privileges, and the realities of racial injustices. This discomfort is seen as a crucial part of the learning process, pushing individuals to critically reflect on their beliefs and societal structures. Grappling with these reactions is essential to understanding how racial hierarchies are reproduced and maintained. The findings of this study reinforce that when educators create structured, reflective spaces for students to engage these tensions, discomfort does not carry harm, but rather it can become part of transformational learning.

The testimonies of participants underscore the profound and lasting impact of learning about racial identity and developing a critical consciousness. As Edith described, “SJI really helped me to keep an open mind throughout my entire life and really integrate the learnings that are important for basic morals and basic human rights and basically everything.” Such statements affirm that utilizing Ethnic Studies pedagogies extends far beyond academic content; it shapes how students understand themselves, others, and their responsibilities as members of a democratic society. Don’t we want an educated, engaged, and civically minded population that cares about the well-being of others and the way our government functions? Don’t we want systemic change towards equity and equality? Utilizing Ethnic Studies pedagogies does not ask students to remain mired in oppression; it equips them to analyze and challenge it.

Why Teaching whiteness Matters

In the classroom, especially predominantly white classrooms, discussions of race often center exclusively on the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, while leaving systems of whiteness unnamed and unexamined. Focusing solely on the outcomes of oppression without

addressing its structural causes suppresses solution-oriented learning. As Tom Marshall's (1998) "Sand" lyrics metaphorically capture:

If you can heal the symptoms, but not affect the cause,
It's quite a bit like trying to heal the gunshot wound with gauze.

Teaching whiteness—its construction, maintenance, and normalization—is essential to understanding how racial inequality persists. When whiteness remains invisible, responsibility is implicitly shifted onto marginalized communities rather than the systems that produce marginalization. The onus must be placed on the oppressor, not the oppressed because "unless the students are trained in awareness of the forces that inform their subjective, their ability to recognize these relations is inhibited" (Chaisson, 2024, p. 346). Solutions stem from discovering and irradicating the root causes of issues in order to prevent them from happening to begin with. Addressing whiteness allows students to move beyond individual prejudice and toward systemic analysis, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of racial injustice and pathways towards change.

A Note for white Educators

White teachers may be apprehensive to include these topics out of fear of causing emotional distress or even their own discomfort with racial identity. In the context of educating white students, it is crucial to impart the understanding that racism often manifests not through overt hostility by through "blindness on the part of well-intended whites" (Heinze, 2008, p. 8). Silence, in this sense, is not neutral. It is complicit.

White teachers must commit to sustained critical reflection on their own positionality, privilege, and fragility. This work cannot be superficial or optional. While such efforts can support white students in critically examining privilege and developing racial literacy, they must also be undertaken with a deep awareness of the presence and experiences of BIPOC students. White teachers must ensure classroom discourse does not place undue emotional labor on BIPOC students or reinscribe marginalization. This dual responsibility requires intentional pedagogical choices that avoid reproducing harm, decenter whiteness, and create classroom spaces that are affirming, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all students.

Professional development in Ethnic Studies and social justice should be intensive, ongoing, and rooted in both theory and praxis. Being an educator comes with the responsibility to constantly critically reflect on our own biases and actions in order to treat all students fairly with respect, empathy, and to view all of our students as capable. Safeguarding white comfort preproduces white supremacy in classrooms by prioritizing ease over equity. Consistent and continuous critical reflection can help white educators hold themselves accountable for their actions and decisions, encouraging a commitment to high standards and ethical practices in their teaching.

Conclusion

Public education has become a battleground where competing visions of democracy collide. While framed as efforts to depoliticize schools, policies aimed at restricting Ethnic Studies instead place education at the center of political conflict. Opponents often characterize Ethnic Studies as

divisive or unnecessary; however, findings from this study demonstrate that Ethnic Studies pedagogies provide white students with conceptual tools to critically examine racial identity, systemic inequities, and their relationship to broader structures of power.

Collaborators described learning experiences rooted in inquiry, historical analysis, reflection, and dialogue that encouraged accountability without relying on guilt or shame. These pedagogies and learning environment fostered critical thinking rather than ideological conformity and helped students understand that recognizing systemic racism is not equivalent to accepting individual blame. Instead, Ethnic Studies pedagogies emphasize structural analysis, historical continuity, and collective responsibility, creating opportunities for growth, solidarity, and democratic engagement.

This study further suggests that resistance to Ethnic Studies often functions to preserve dominant narratives that leave whiteness unexamined. When Ethnic Studies pedagogies are removed from classrooms, particularly in predominantly white communities, students are less likely to engage critically with race, racial identity, and racial power. Such omissions limit students' intellectual and civic development while reinforcing the inequities public education claims to address.

As these collaborators demonstrate, students are capable of and eager to engage with challenging conversations about racial identity and systemic injustice when given the opportunity to do so safely in school settings. As bell hooks (1994) aptly stated:

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. . . . Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. (p. 12)

They want to understand the world honestly, situate themselves within it, and imagine ways to contribute to a more just society. Ethnic Studies pedagogies make this possible by equipping all students, including white students, with the tools to critically examine power, challenge injustice, and participate meaningfully in democratic life.

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