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Ramon Vasquez & Dana Altshuler

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## **A Critical Examination of K-12 Ethnic Studies: Transforming and Liberating Praxis**

Ramon L. Vasquez\*  
*Westfield State University*

Dana Altshuler  
*Holyoke Public Schools*

*The purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to use the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to highlight and understand the vision, process, and practice of creating an Ethnic Studies program in an urban public school district; and (b) to inform social justice praxis by producing counter-hegemonic knowledge about K-12 Ethnic Studies programs. By focusing on K-12 Ethnic Studies, this paper seeks to show how everyday social justice praxis interrupts “race-neutral” or colorblind master narratives and White cultural hegemony in traditional social studies (Apple 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hursh & Ross, 2000; Ross, 2001).*

**Keywords:** Ethnic Studies | Social Justice | Praxis | Critical Race Theory

In 2014, the number of students of color in U.S. public schools surpassed that of White students for the first time (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Students from racially and linguistically diverse groups already fill many previously homogeneous classrooms across the country (Ball & Tyson, 2011). Despite shifting demographics and calls by some students and parents to include Ethnic Studies in the K-12 social studies curriculum, little has changed (Alemán & Alemán, 2010). The mainstream social studies curriculum continues to privilege the ideologies, interests, and perspectives of White students (Apple, 2004; Arce, 2016; Morales, Aviña, & Bernal, 2016).

Although interest in K-12 Ethnic Studies programs has increased among teachers, few studies have examined or discussed the practice and everyday struggles of creating such programs (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). In order to elucidate the process of creating an Ethnic Studies program, this study examines the everyday experiences of a social studies instructional leader. This paper focuses on Dana Altshuler’s work at Holyoke Public Schools, a school district in western Massachusetts serving 5,344 students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). As co-author of this paper, Dana explains the purpose and underlying need for embedding Ethnic Studies programs in the K-12 social studies curriculum.

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\* Correspondence can be directed to Ramon Vasquez at [rvasquez@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:rvasquez@westfield.ma.edu)

praxis interrupts “race-neutral” or colorblind master narratives and White cultural hegemony in traditional social studies (Apple 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hursh & Ross, 2000; Ross, 2001).

### **Ethnic Studies Programs**

Ethnic Studies programs, courses, and pedagogy have always been and continue to be rooted in a legacy of student social activism dating back to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Banks, 2005). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s specifically focused on advancing social, gender, and racial equity in the U.S. by reconstructing institutions, including higher education (Banks, 2005; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). The demand by students that colleges and universities create spaces for Ethnic Studies to challenge essentialist and racist narratives developed in tandem with the broader Civil Rights Movement (Bernal, 1998; Rojas, 2007). For example, Chicano high school students in East Los Angeles and college students at San Francisco State University led historic student strikes in the late 1960s. Organized by students in 1968, this movement led to the development of the first Ethnic Studies programs in colleges and universities in the U.S. (Bernal, 1998).

From their inception, Ethnic Studies programs have challenged the uncritical and “race-neutral” positioning of all Americans as voluntary immigrants requiring help assimilating into a melting pot (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). This mainstream notion of the melting pot erases the voices and perspectives of students from historically marginalized groups, including Puerto Rican students. Moreover, it positions schooling and schools as a great cauldron that stirs the “otherness” out of students in order to construct Americans (Rojas, 2007). In doing so, school becomes the space where students encounter the hegemonic force of institutional oppression on a daily basis. School is also where students from racially marginalized groups learn that to be “successful” they must forgo parts of their identity (Villenas & Foley, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

In Ethnic Studies courses, educators recognize and privilege the voices, narratives, and experiences of people from traditionally marginalized groups (Yosso, 2006). By challenging Eurocentric narratives that omit or misrepresent people of color (and other people from marginalized groups) Ethnic Studies teachers problematize the curriculum (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). In this way, Ethnic Studies educators help students hone a sense of self-identity and challenge dominant perspectives in society (de los Rios, López, & Morrell, 2015).

In the 1960s and 1970s, students of color united in solidarity to demand the integration of ethnic content and multiple perspectives into the traditional curriculum (Rojas, 2007). This movement led to colleges and universities recognizing Ethnic Studies as a legitimate field of study (Banks, 2005). Ethnic Studies programs, specifically Black Studies, led to changes in the way race, class, and gender were constructed, especially in academia (Rojas, 2007). Social activism continues to comprise the central purpose of Ethnic Studies programs (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Sleeter & Bernal 2004). Today, in Ethnic Studies programs in public high schools from Los Angeles, California to Holyoke, Massachusetts, students engage in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). In YPAR, students study social problems that impact their lives (Freire, 2014). Through YPAR, students study and determine actions to address injustice and social problems (Cammorota & Fine, 2008). Ethnic Studies programs provide students a lens for understanding injustice and oppression

(Arce, 2016; Morales et al., 2016). Currently, as student demographics shift, teachers, students, and community members demand Ethnic Studies programs in K-12 schools across the country (Curammeng, Lopez, & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004).

### **Literature Review**

Successfully advancing social justice education and praxis for all K-12 students requires hearing the narratives and voices of students of color (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). Although Ethnic Studies programs recognize the significance of student voice and counter-narratives, available literature on these programs is limited (Morales et al., 2016; Rojas, 2007). The majority of literature on K-12 social studies curricula focuses on ways of tinkering with the contours of existing mainstream programs, rather than creating new ones (Banks, 2005; Grant, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Studies specifically examining the everyday praxis and experiences of educators and students involved in creating Ethnic Studies programs in K-12 schools are even less common (Arce, 2016; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Morales et al., 2016).

An assumption of this paper is that improving social justice education and praxis requires knowing more about the struggles of creating and maintaining K-12 Ethnic Studies programs, such as the one highlighted in this study. While much is known about mainstream or traditional practices, little is known about the everyday social justice praxis in Ethnic Studies. The limited literature on Ethnic Studies and social justice praxis is problematic. The paucity of research obscures the vision and everyday struggles for social justice education in K-12 schools (Apple, 2004). A related body of critical race literature, not specifically on Ethnic Studies programs, does examine power and representation in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Leonardo & Boas, 2013). These related studies of the curriculum use a critical approach or Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework to examine hegemonic, racist, and essentializing representations of students of color (Apple 2015; Brown, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Yosso, 2005).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical approach used by activist scholars to examine and understand the role of racism in producing and maintaining social inequality, especially in public schools (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). A core principle of CRT is that racial inequality is deeply and permanently entrenched in U.S. society, including in the mainstream curriculum (Bell, 1979; Haney-Lopez, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In other words, racism is normal rather than an aberration in U.S. society. Critical race scholars use CRT to examine, understand, and challenge institutional structures and everyday practices that overtly or covertly maintain racial inequality in schools (Delgado 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The overarching purpose of CRT is to interrogate and challenge all forms of oppression; however, the main unit of analysis is race (Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2005). CRT is rooted in the tradition of transformative scholarly critical theories, critical traditions, and critical intellectual practices (Apple, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In this paper, we use CRT to show how counter-narratives embedded in Ethnic Studies disrupt the hegemonic influence of the

mainstream curriculum and master narrative by recognizing and emphasizing the voices of students from racially marginalized groups.

As a theoretical framework, CRT includes several complementary principles. These principles distinguish the CRT framework from related critical analytic approaches. A key CRT principle, for instance, is the principle of counter-narratives and counter-storytelling (Leonardo & Boas, 2013; Yosso, 2006). Counter-narratives and counter-storytelling are ways of listening to and understanding the voices and experiences of people from historically marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1989). The counter-narrative principle of CRT provides opportunities for the voices of people usually not heard (especially members of racially marginalized groups, but also others) to correct erroneous assumptions constructed and perpetuated about them by mainstream narratives. This principle of CRT creates a way of challenging the manner in which mainstream scholarship and the curriculum renders the voices of marginalized people mute (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) situated counter-storytelling as a method that provides a way to communicate the experience and complex realities of people from historically oppressed groups. In this paper, Dana's personal story provides a way of understanding the experiences of students in Holyoke through the lens of CRT.

Acknowledging and theoretically addressing the complexity of everyday social justice work requires challenging accepted dominant paradigms. CRT enables participants to tell their counter-narratives in a way that captures the fluid nature of their experiences (Yosso, 2006). Listening to unheard voices is more than a matter of providing a voice to those typically ignored by "race-neutral" approaches (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Attending to the voices of the unheard is necessary for interrogating unexamined ideologies embedded in master narratives and traditional curriculums. According to Yosso (2006), counter-narratives challenge perceived wisdom by exposing privilege and providing a context for understanding and transforming accepted belief systems and narratives. Incorporating the voices of people from racially marginalized groups is one way that Ethnic Studies challenges the oppression of the master narrative.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

This study uses a narrative inquiry approach to tell Dana's story, including her struggle to implement an Ethnic Studies curriculum in her school district. Researchers using narrative inquiry purposely emphasize storytelling and narratives as a way of improving understanding of human experiences and complex social phenomena (Phillion, 2008). Using narrative inquiry allows researchers and participants, such as Dana in this case, to construct and reconstruct meaning from the personal stories and reminiscences collected from research participants (Chapman, 2011). Constructing and reconstructing meaning is also a key component of theorizing about social phenomena--including racism (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

The narrative inquiry approach is related to accepted cultural traditions and practices of oral history, as well as to the CRT principle of storytelling (Clandinin 2006). Telling stories is a valued tradition that has existed in most cultures for many years as a way of transmitting important knowledge and history (Linde, 1993). For people from marginalized groups, such as students of color, storytelling remains a tradition. For this reason, anthropologists have used narrative inquiry to collect data from participants across various

sites, including schools (Clandinin, 2006). According to Clandinin (2006), narrative inquiry focuses on stories as data because most people shape their daily lives by the stories they create and tell. People also interpret their past through these stories. Using stories as a way of understanding people increases the possibility of capturing the complexities and contradictions of human experience in ways that are meaningful and theoretically significant for a social justice study (Phillion, 2008). For complex issues related to everyday social justice and identity, narrative inquiry plays an important part in advancing theoretical understandings that are too nuanced to be understood through mainstream methods that privilege dominant perspectives (Yosso, 2005).

### **Role of Researcher**

Collecting personal stories is the most significant way that researchers using narrative inquiry interact with study participants. Unlike methods where collecting data involves using questionnaires, surveys, or other static instruments, in narrative inquiry research the data are collected specifically through personal interviews (Yosso, 2006). Researchers using narrative inquiry emphasize gathering the personal stories and anecdotes as told to them in the participants' own words. Using the participants' own words, in this case Dana's, makes narrative inquiry a co-construction process and collaboration (Mishler, 1999). Clandinin (2006) emphasized narrative inquiry as a social process. Including Dana as an active co-creator of this paper reflects the social process feature that sets narrative inquiry apart from other qualitative methods. In narrative inquiry, participants' own words are used in a deliberate attempt to represent complex experiences in ways that are comprehensive. Using traditional research approaches that keep the interviewee positioned only as a subject may limit the counter-narrative aspect of the paper (Clandinin, 2006; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008).

### **Data Analysis: Interest Convergence**

For this paper, we use the CRT tenet of interest convergence to examine and analyze the role of curriculum in reproducing master narratives and racial inequality (Alemán & Alemán, 2010). Using this analytic lens from CRT, we also analyze how Ethnic Studies programs can interrupt hegemony in the mainstream curriculum (Crenshaw, 1989). *Interest convergence* is a theoretical concept positing that Whites, who as a group occupy the dominant position in society, will support the rights and interests of people from racially marginalized groups, only when those rights coincide with the political, economic, and social interests of Whites (Bell 1979; Delgado, 2000; Haney-Lopez, 2006).

Critical race theorists use the interest convergence principle in a wide range of writings. For example, CRT theorists, such as Bell (1979), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Haney-Lopez (2006) apply interest convergence to issues of racism in order to produce new ways of understanding institutional racism, including ways oppression is manifested and reproduced in mainstream curriculums. The interest convergence principle assumes that people believe in and strategically support what they deem beneficial to them. The dominant group (Whites), for example, tolerates some advances for racial justice and greater equity, but only when such advances suit the political and social interests of their dominant group (Bell 1979; Delgado, 2000). Bell (1979) argued that Whites will not

support civil rights policies, such as expanded Ethnic Studies, when they appear to threaten their superior social status. In other words, any progress toward greater social justice must not be seen as a disruption to the status quo way of life for the majority of Whites. Converging of interests sometimes results in movement toward greater equity in schools. But this movement stops when Whites view change as a threat (Bell 1979; Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2004). The struggles to implement Ethnic Studies programs that challenge the legitimacy of the “race neutral” master narratives are rooted in this tension and conflict as evidenced by Dana’s story.

### **Ethnic Studies as Social Justice Praxis: Dana’s Story**

I came to western Massachusetts in 2013 after teaching in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). While teaching in California, I worked with a cohort of SFUSD Social Studies teachers who developed and implemented a revolutionary curriculum. This work was revolutionary, and continues to be, because as teachers we became part of a movement rooted in the Civil Rights era. In 1968, student activists from Los Angeles to San Francisco organized a movement that demanded public education be grounded in the principles of access, relevance, and community (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). From this movement, the first Ethnic Studies courses emerged on college campuses; and by 2015, Ethnic Studies would be offered at several schools across SFUSD as a course that meets the California State University “a-g” requirements (SFUSD, 2014).

During the time that I worked with this cohort of talented Ethnic Studies educators in San Francisco, I felt like an outsider. I was super insecure and terms like “White Supremacy” made me uncomfortable. It was not until I implemented the curriculum in 2012-2013 with a group of 60 ninth grade students at International Studies Academy (a public middle and high school located in Potrero Hill) that I understood the meaning of the work we were trying to do. I now understand that Ethnic Studies is more than a course, more than a pedagogy. For me, Ethnic Studies has become a way a life. Ethnic Studies is the lens I use to navigate the world—to read and speak back to the world. Many of my insecurities were rooted in my own concerns about whether or not White teachers could do this work. I have to believe that White educators can engage, create and implement Ethnic Studies curricula. I am a Queer, White, European Jew and this is the work I do every day. Various scholars in the field of Ethnic Studies and education have taken on this very question in their research. In *Beginning with El Barrio: Learning from Exemplary Teachers of Latino Students*, Irizarry and Raible (2011) discussed the characteristics of teachers who have success working with Latina/o students and Puerto Rican students in particular. The teachers in the study represent diverse ethnic and racial identities. They wrote about Puerto Rican, African American, White Eastern European Jewish, and White teachers who work within a primarily Latina/o community in western Massachusetts.

These teachers span from 22-56 years of age and have varying years of teaching experience. Through their research, Irizarry and Raible (2011) identified three key findings shared by each teacher participant. Of the 10 teachers who participated in the study, each spoke about how they centered the community (in which they teach) in their teaching practice. First, these teachers immersed themselves in the community of their students by finding authentic opportunities to engage with community members. Irizarry and Raible (2011) wrote that these teachers “saw learning with and from the community as integral to

their work in the classroom” (p. 196). Second, these teachers intentionally connected the voices, experiences, and narratives of the community to their curricula and in their classrooms. Finally, each of these teachers believed that students’ home language was an asset. In fact, 8 of the 10 teachers made efforts to learn Spanish and identified as bilingual.

Similarly, in Duncan-Andrade’s (2007) study, “Gangstas, Wankstas and Ridas: Defining, Developing, and Supporting Effective Teachers in Urban Schools” he follows the work of four classroom teachers based in South Central Los Angeles who he describes as “Ridas.” In short, “Ridas” are teachers who have a critically conscious purpose, a sense of duty, see themselves as members of the community where they teach, spend a tremendous amount of time preparing curriculum, units, and lessons, have a Socratic sensibility by constantly reflecting on their daily practice, and are committed to building trusting relationships with their students (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). The teachers in this study identified as White, Filipino, Black, or Chicano. Duncan-Andrade wrote that he believes that “despite the fact that effective teachers can come from various backgrounds (racial, social, economic), they are bound by a set of common principles.” (p. 624). As with Irizarry and Raible’s (2011) work, Duncan-Andrade believes that White educators can do this work, and *some* are engaging in this critical work.

Finally, in “Towards an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research,” Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) identified four findings that characterize exemplary Ethnic Studies teachers: (a) an effective Ethnic Studies teacher helps students critique racism and its personal and social impact, as well as challenge oppressive conditions; (b) exemplary Ethnic Studies teachers bring a culturally responsive pedagogical orientation to their work; (c) effective Ethnic Studies teachers understand the importance of building relationships with their students, parents, and wider community; and (d) while there are effective White Ethnic Studies teachers, being a person of color is a distinct asset. Ultimately, to teach Ethnic Studies, teachers must understand that Ethnic Studies is a decolonizing pedagogy, a culturally responsive pedagogy, and a community responsive pedagogy. While all teachers who teach Ethnic Studies must be reflective, White teachers in particular must engage in critical self-reflection about race, culture, and identity.

### **What About White Teachers?**

It is critical that White educators engage with Ethnic Studies pedagogy. The current teaching force in urban districts across the country is predominately White. More than 80% of all teachers in U.S public schools are White and middle-class (Moss, 2016). As a result, there are cultural disconnects between teachers and students. The impact of having a teaching force that represents White hegemony has dire consequences for students of color, such as high push-out/drop-out rates amongst Black and Latino students. In order to bridge this gap, White teachers have important work to do. They must engage all students by: tapping into the cultural assets of the communities where they teach, believing in their students, and becoming the “Ridas” that traditionally marginalized students deserve. Ultimately, teacher credential programs at colleges and universities must work in tandem with local school districts to create a pipeline of teachers of color who are prepared to use Ethnic Studies pedagogy into public schools.

As part of my current role as the Coordinator of Culturally Responsive Education, I

facilitate curriculum development and professional development for a cohort of ten Ethnic Studies teachers in Holyoke Public Schools (HPS). Like other urban districts, the teachers in Holyoke are predominately White. Of the teachers in our Ethnic Studies program, nine out of ten are White, one is African American, three teachers openly identify as Queer, while two identify as Jewish. Importantly, our city holds the largest percentage of Puerto Ricans living on the U.S. mainland. According to the most recent data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016), 79.5% of students in HPS are *Hispanic*. In 2010, the Mauricio Gaston Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, identified that 76.4% of the students in HPS were Puerto Rican. In 2011-2012, HPS data notes that there was a 52.8% graduation rate overall, and that a dire 42.6% of *Hispanic* students graduated that year (HPS, 2011). Critical to our work is understanding Ethnic Studies curriculum and pedagogy as an intervention to school push-out/drop-out rate of Puerto Rican students. Other school districts where Ethnic Studies was implemented with constancy over a period of time saw increases in graduation rates and improvements on test scores for those students who engaged in Raza Studies (Ethnic Studies) classes (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2014).

In addition to developing curricula for eighth and ninth grade Ethnic Studies courses, our cohort focuses on honing teachers' knowledge of Ethnic Studies as a movement and as pedagogy rooted in social justice. In August 2016, all Ethnic Studies teachers created a critical autobiography that required them to consider the ways their social positionality can build or hinder trusting relationships with students. In this exercise, it was particularly important for the 9 White teachers to reflect on the power of their Whiteness in the context of working with Puerto Rican students. Through this activity, teachers reflected on their own intersectionality and how knowledge of self can foster *cariño* (authentic relationships) with students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). One teacher, a White Irish American male, drew parallels between his family's Irish immigration story to Holyoke with the experiences of the growing Puerto Rican migrant population to Holyoke from the 1970s to the present. In our group conversation, we found overlapping spaces where Holyoke's large Irish population had commonalities with the "DiaspoRican" population in Holyoke (Irizarry & Antrop-González, 2008). For example, both Ireland and Puerto Rico are island nations who have long fought for independence. Interestingly, we learned that Puerto Rican Nationalist, Pedro Albizu Campos, understood Puerto Rico's struggle against colonialism to be in solidarity with the cause of Irish Independence and was asked to consult on the Free Irish State Constitution when Southern Ireland became free in 1921 (Denis, 2015). Additionally, unpacking the critical autobiography required that we challenge one another to recognize systems of oppression, such as racism, that make the Irish immigrant narrative different from the Puerto Rican migration experience. While initially the Irish were perceived as inferior to Anglo-Saxons the Irish eventually had access to social mobility that in the U.S has been traditionally denied to people of color, including Puerto Ricans (Brodkin, 1998).

### **Access, Relevance, Community**

Currently, the focus of Ethnic Studies in HPS is eighth and ninth grade. When I came to HPS from San Francisco, I was teaching eighth grade English. I designed this course around the educational ARC of Ethnic Studies. The ARC of Ethnic Studies centers on

concepts of access, relevance, and community (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Borrowing from what I learned in San Francisco, I knew it would be imperative for my curriculum to be culturally relevant and connected to the community where I was teaching. This was in 2013-2014, and I taught fifty-five eighth graders at E. N. White School; these were the first students in Holyoke to take an Ethnic Studies class. The following year I became an Instructional Coach. In this role, I had access to various classrooms across the District. In learning more about systemic challenges, such as the nearly 50% push-out/drop-out rate and dire outcomes for language learners, I saw an opportunity to spread Ethnic Studies as both a course and pedagogy to other teachers and students that I worked with throughout the district.

Collaborating with a dynamic social studies teacher and with the support of the HPS Humanities Director enabled us to create a space for other middle school social studies teachers to develop their pedagogy and practice. Within a year, we re-imagined an eighth-grade Social Studies experience for students and renamed the course Ethnic Studies. This eighth-grade curriculum is a Puerto Rican Studies class and today 350 students are taught this curriculum across the district. At the core of this curriculum is the belief that students deserve access to relevant curriculum, which empowers youth to transform their communities by tapping into cultural assets in their community to grow them over time. Importantly, none of the original social studies teachers had Ethnic Studies content knowledge and all of the teachers were White. Therefore, much of our work in the Ethnic Studies cohort has focused on both curriculum development/implementation and thoughtful/intentional professional development.

This current school year, Ethnic Studies classes are taught across the district in nine different locations as we expanded our work to a group of 130 ninth graders who take Ethnic Studies in both their ELA and Social Studies classes. Next year, we will spread this critical work to 350 seventh graders and a group 130 tenth graders. The Ethnic Studies cohort has intentionally focused on the 7th through 10th grade experience because we understand Ethnic Studies as an intervention to address the pushing out of Puerto Rican students from our schools. In our research on the middle to high school transition, we determined that most students left school by ninth or 10th grade. An incentive that drives this work is Ethnic Studies as an intervention at the moment where students are most likely to disengage with school. The transition from middle school to high school is a pivotal moment where many of our students decide to leave. Our eighth and ninth grade Ethnic Studies teachers collaborate to bridge the middle to high school experience as one intervention to address the push-out/drop-out problem in our city.

### **Puerto Rican Identity**

There are many factors that fuel the pushing out of Puerto Rican students in Holyoke. While almost 80% of HPS students identify as Puerto Rican and 1,310 students were labeled as English Language Learners in 2015, our teachers are predominantly middle-class, White, English speakers (HPS, 2015). While some of our families are new arrivals, some parents struggle to navigate the school system and to advocate for their children because of this language gap. Other parents were raised in Holyoke and have gone through the public school system themselves. As former students, some of these parents experienced marginalization within the school system. In an interview with local Holyoke historian

Maria Cartagena, she discusses her own experience as a Puerto Rican student at Holyoke High School in the 1980s (M. Cartagena, personal communication, December 15, 2016). She described feeling ostracized in honors classes. Maria shared that one of her teachers refused to call her by her name, Maria. The teacher said, “In this class you are Marie.” For a Puerto Rican high school student in an honors class with all White students, Maria understood that in this space she was expected to forgo her *Puerto Ricanness*. In a different instance, Maria recounts being stereotyped by her guidance counselor. During her senior year, Maria sought out her guidance counselor to explore options after high school graduation. He told her she would be pregnant soon so they should focus on getting her into the workforce, thus limiting Maria’s options post-graduation. In December 2016, Maria returned to Holyoke High School to co-teach a series of lessons with me for the ninth-grade Ethnic Studies program. She told students that it was not until she returned to college as an adult that she learned about Puerto Rican authors, poets, and scholars. She was both moved by and impressed with the ninth graders’ knowledge of Puerto Rican history.

For our students, “education is the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2014). By knowing their history, honing a lens for recognizing systems of oppression and becoming active members in the community, Ethnic Studies is the pedagogy of liberation that will equip these young people to develop tools for transformational resistance. At a meeting during Summer 2015, the original team of six middle school social studies teachers and myself, as the instructional coach, committed to developing and implementing curriculum grounded in the ARC of Ethnic Studies. We agreed to develop and implement culturally relevant units promoting critical consciousness towards social transformation. Students would learn about systems of oppression in order to dismantle hegemonic and socially constructed ideas about power. We would identify spaces where students could apply their knowledge to interrupt the master narrative. Thus far, Ethnic Studies students have led professional development discussing how Ethnic Studies can disrupt the school to prison pipeline, presented to school and district administrators on why Ethnic Studies classes matter, participated in an anti-colonialism march to free Oscar Lopez Rivera, and hosted a teach-in for students in younger grades where they re-imagine Columbus.

Most recently, two Holyoke High School students who took eighth grade Ethnic Studies and now take ninth grade Ethnic Studies presented to a group of educators at a University of Massachusetts (UMass) class titled, “Teaching in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” One student, a 15-year-old Puerto Rican female, spoke about the School to Prison Pipeline as it directly impacts her family. Her personal narrative included two older brothers who had gone through HPS, neither of which graduated. Rather, both brothers stopped attending school and ended up incarcerated. This Ethnic Studies student believes that if Ethnic Studies would had been an option for her brothers, they would have had the opportunity to learn about and name their frustrations with school. Also, they would have had the tools to avoid acting out self-defeating resistance (skipping classes, fighting, suspensions) and instead engage in transformational forms of resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Therefore, through Ethnic Studies, their trajectory might have been different, and potentially the pipeline could have been disrupted in each instance (UMass class presentation January 17, 2017).

## **Bridging Gaps**

Central to our curriculum in both eighth and ninth grade Ethnic Studies courses is bridging the community to the classroom and the classroom to the community. In ninth grade, guest teachers from the community and Five College Consortium share their knowledge and narratives. For example, during the unit “What’s Up with School?” students critiqued the history of public education from inception to the present. They reflected on their experiences in Holyoke Public Schools in order to propose alternative approaches for addressing current issues in education. The essential question that anchors this unit is: How can our knowledge of the history of schooling inform possibilities for education now? During this unit, Holyoke historian, Maria Cartegena, taught a series of lessons on the migration of Puerto Ricans to Holyoke. She presented school as a critical space to understand the moment of xenophobia that manifested in school desegregation discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s in our city. Through this lesson, students made connections to school and neighborhood segregation today. As part of this unit, students learned about schooling as a tool of colonialism in Puerto Rico and on mainland U.S. During this unit on school, the teacher and I prepared a series of lessons on Indian schools as a model for assimilation. A professor of Native American Studies from one of the institutions in the Five College Consortium prepared and implemented an interactive lecture that covered the history and legacy of Native Resistance from Wounded Knee to Standing Rock. By tapping into the assets of our surrounding community we enrich the educational experience of students. However, an important challenge is bridging the work from within the classroom out to the larger Holyoke community. This year all eighth and ninth grade Ethnic Studies students will engage in youth participatory action research, applying their knowledge of praxis by engaging in transformational resistance.

Currently, one group of eighth graders is applying their knowledge of praxis by creating a mural to display publicly. The mural will address a social issue that students identified while also highlighting the cultural wealth of the greater Holyoke community. The mural is a culminating project that evolved out of a unit titled “Puerto Rico from 1492 to the Present: A Case Study of Colonialism.” The final lesson of this unit “Using Praxis: A Model for Resistance,” brings together topics of colonialism, imperialism, and resistance through two powerful case studies of Puerto Rican resistance: Vieques and the Young Lords. Students use Paulo Freire’s (2014) theory of praxis to analyze instances of Puerto Rican Resistance on the island and mainland (HPS Ethnic Studies Cohort Wikispace, 2017). Through the mural project, students demonstrated their understanding of praxis as counter-hegemony and identified murals as an art of resistance. These students applied their knowledge of praxis to a reading of their own city by identifying social issues in our community and researching the root causes of these social issues. Through this project students began to problem solve around issues that directly impact their lives.

## **Struggles and Triumphs for Ethnic Studies in HPS**

Some challenges to sustaining and growing this work in Holyoke are teacher turnover and recruiting educators who are prepared to teach using Ethnic Studies pedagogy. During the 2016-2017 school year, one middle school transitioned Ethnic Studies teachers three times

because of teacher resignation. This is the outcome of being a Level 5 school district that is under state receivership. In 2015, the state assumed control over the district. This moment in HPS is marked by uncertainty and is, therefore, unsettling, which results in teacher turnover in the Ethnic Studies teaching cohort. As a result, every new teacher must be caught up on professional development and the tenets of this work. An additional challenge for Ethnic Studies is a lack of funding for Ethnic Studies curriculum development and for a centralized position to maintain and grow this work.

My current role as Coordinator of Culturally Responsive Education is a high school instructional coaching position with limited time for focus on Ethnic Studies. Also, the culture of testing that has come to dominate public education has resulted in an attack on social studies education. For example, in middle schools across the district, minutes for social studies courses (in this case Ethnic Studies) have been chopped in an effort to prioritize math and English language arts (ELA)—both disciplines subject to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). An additional struggle is district support around reimagining high school History requirements for graduation. While there is currently no state test for history (social studies) at the secondary level, within two years, students will be required to pass a history MCAS. Within this culture of testing, I anticipate that the move to make ninth grade Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement will be challenged by non-Ethnic Studies teachers and members of the larger Holyoke community. Right now, Ethnic Studies is in its pilot year at the high school. In the ninth grade, only 130 students of approximately 400 are enrolled in Ethnic Studies. Because in ninth grade there is a Social Studies Ethnic Studies curriculum and an ELA Ethnic Studies curriculum, in eighth grade these students opted to sign up for either “United States History 1” or “Ethnic Studies” as their Social Studies requirement and opted for “English 1” or “English (Ethnic Studies)” as their ELA requirement. Several students who selected Ethnic Studies for Social Studies and ELA were denied access to these classes because there were only five sections of each course offered for all first-year students. In order for the program to grow we will need to provide intensive professional development to current non-Ethnic Studies ninth grade Social Studies and ELA teachers or recruit teachers with the capacity to teach Ethnic Studies courses in order to open up more sections to meet student demand.

With that said, in 2017-2018 there will be a total 960 students enrolled in Ethnic Studies courses in HPS, spanning four grades (seventh to tenth). Community partners, professors, and students from the Five College Consortium are working in collaboration with Ethnic Studies teachers to support the expansion of Ethnic Studies in Holyoke. Most important, Ethnic Studies students are engaged and seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum. With the support of a coalition of students, community members, and scholars in favor of Ethnic Studies—Ethnic Studies teachers are committed to push forward this critical work.

### **Discussion**

An initial objective of this paper was to examine the creation and practice of the Ethnic Studies program in Holyoke schools. As Dana’s personal narrative shows, the program was developed to provide Puerto Rican students a voice in the social studies curriculum. In this paper, voice encompasses both Dana’s story and the voices missing from the curriculum. According to former student Maria Cartagena, student perspectives had been missing from

the standard curriculum for years. As Maria's comments show, teachers systematically denied Puerto Rican voices in the standard curriculum. This erasure of was in fact a long-standing pattern of upholding the master narrative (Morris & Braine, 2001). Voice and counter-narratives are important tenets of CRT and help illuminate oppression by the master narrative. Puerto Rican student voices were silenced to maintain the interest of Whites and the existing racial hierarchy in Holyoke schools. In previous studies, critical researchers have described similar hegemonic oppression of students from racially marginalized groups by the so-called "race-neutral" curriculum (Apple, 2004; Morales et al., 2016).

### **Voices in the Curriculum**

In this paper, Dana explains how she helps teachers and students use Ethnic Studies as a tool to challenge systems of oppression. In this case, power operates in and through the mainstream curriculum by excluding oppositional voices and narratives, such as those of Puerto Rican students (Yosso, 2006). Racial oppression and domination of this type, hegemonic, normally operates implicitly through the curriculum, rather than explicitly (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kohli, 2014; Leonardo & Boas, 2013). This form of marginalization and oppression is connected to "commonsense" notions of what constitutes a sound curriculum for American students (Apple, 2004). The idea of a "sound" or neutral social studies curriculum suggests that ideology has no place in schools, yet this is hardly the case (Hursh & Ross, 2000). Typically, histories, experiences, and voices from racially marginalized students are added to the curriculum only when they serve the interest of the mainstream narrative. Earlier related research helps put the lack of voice into context. For example, this is the case with the work of CRT scholars who use the principle of interest convergence as an analytic tool (Yosso, 2005).

Our study was guided by an overarching question: How does social justice praxis operate in the everyday experiences of Ethnic Studies educators such as Dana? In response to this inquiry, an interesting and recurring theme emerged from her personal narrative—critical consciousness. Overall, Dana's narrative reflects a strong personal consciousness and motivation. By implementing what she recognizes as an authentic Ethnic Studies program, rather than a superficial "diversity" celebration program, Dana is upholding that personal commitment. For Dana, the work of providing students in her district with a voice in the curriculum is driven by her conviction that racism and oppression must be discussed openly and honestly in the curriculum. Dana clearly understands that the mainstream curriculum and the master narrative hinder the development of a critical consciousness among students by reproducing systems of oppression.

As Dana's narrative shows, K-12 Ethnic Studies programs have the potential to cultivate critical perspectives and consciousness among students, especially students from historically marginalized groups. These students can learn to use their perspectives to challenge the dominance of White hegemony, as well as to expose the myth of a "race-neutral" curriculum (Sleeter, 2011). This critical aspect of Ethnic Studies is something all K-12 students can benefit from, including White students. The critical perspectives provided by Ethnic Studies can make interrogating racism and recognizing the problem of a "race-neutral" master narrative possible. Ethnic Studies courses and pedagogy provide students, including white students, opportunities to rethink and challenge hegemonic

ideologies that position students from racially marginalized groups as inferior or deficient (de los Rios et al., 2015).

### **Critical Consciousness**

This paper elucidates the potential of K-12 Ethnic Studies programs to help students develop a critical consciousness about the salience of race and racism in contemporary U.S. society (Bell, 1979; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Morales et al. 2016; Morris & Braine, 2001). Dana's reflections show how "race-neutral" curriculums obscure the perspectives and voices of students from racially marginalized groups. This paper contributes to an understanding of the significance and necessity of Ethnic Studies programs in public K-12 schools.

In this study, we seek to theoretically situate K-12 Ethnic Studies as an oppositional and critical social justice project in the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using the narrative inquiry approach of storytelling, Dana's narrative includes facts and necessary context about her personal commitment to interrupting racial oppression through Ethnic Studies. By highlighting the way Ethnic Studies challenges "race-neutral" or mainstream social studies, this paper argues for the need to integrate the voices of students from racially marginalized groups in the curriculum (Yosso, 2005). Moreover, this paper also argues for recruiting more educators like Dana who demonstrate a personal commitment to social justice.

The results of this study are noteworthy in several respects. An important finding of this paper is that the instructional coach, Dana, positions herself as someone on the margins, actively interested in social transformation. She is not merely interested in superficial diversity that serves the interests of the dominant culture. Her use of the term margins is especially powerful and relevant, as is the term queer. In typical or mainstream education discourses, teachers usually refer to generic or ambiguous concepts such as cultural celebration, Ethnic celebration, or celebration of diversity (Grant, 1999). These vague but positive sounding terms are very different from the core social justice concept of empowerment for the transformation of society. Empowerment through voice plays an important part in the development of social justice education (Banks, 2005; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Sleeter, 1996). As her narrative shows, Dana understands how merely adding superficial content to the master narrative does little to create or support opportunities for authentic social justice and critical consciousness. For this, the critical perspectives and voices of an Ethnic Studies program are required.

### **Transformative Education through Ethnic Studies**

Transformative education through Ethnic Studies programs challenges the status quo. Standard, or "race-neutral" education, including the master narrative, obscures issues of race, power, and oppression (Apple, 2004). By erasing the experiences of students from racially marginalized groups schools reproduce inequality. Using interest convergence, this study shows how generic social justice education that does not disrupt mainstream narratives is a way for schools to appear to make concessions to students from racially marginalized groups while actually preserving the status quo (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Without Ethnic Studies, schools allow a limited type of superficial change through

policies and practices associated with shallow iterations of social studies education. For example, schools might include in their curricula discussions of key players in the Civil Rights movement such as Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Schools, however, generally do not extend social justice education policies far enough. They do not, for instance, change the master script in a way that challenges the existing social and racial order (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For example, according to Ladson-Billings (2004), maintaining “this master scripting means stories of African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominant culture authority and power, in effect Rosa Parks is reduced to a tired seamstress instead of a long-time participant in social justice endeavors” (p. 59). In much the same way, the mainstream narrative in Holyoke schools erased or marginalized the voices and experiences of Puerto Rican students. Before Dana and the cohort of Ethnic Studies teachers created the program, social studies teachers in her school district routinely taught content that would serve the interests of the dominant culture (Hursh & Ross, 2000).

The Ethnic Studies program at Dana’s school district challenges the master narrative, including the status quo, White privilege, and the role of schools in maintaining the existing social order (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2004). Middle school teachers at this school district focus specifically on teaching about the oppression of Puerto Ricans, rather than merely cultural diversity content such as food and holidays. Through various methods and activities, Ethnic Studies teachers focus on Puerto Rican perspectives about racism and oppression grounded in a vision of social justice that challenges the traditional curriculum (Ross, 2001). For example, the Ethnic Studies program at Dana’s school district includes multiple references to structural racism, Puerto Rican identity, colonialism, and oppression.

For the Ethnic Studies program at the HPS, social justice is more than an abstract concept or an idea related to incremental progress. Ethnic Studies is a conspicuous part of the everyday experiences and praxis in social studies. For example, the Ethnic Studies program in this school district emphasizes education as a way of transforming society rather than merely celebrating diversity or culture. Using a social justice approach, teachers expand the traditional boundaries of the typical subjects discussed in social studies class, such as mainstream history and geography. Rather than disregarding the perspectives of Puerto Rican students, teachers actively work to keep the classroom discussions genuine and relevant to the students’ everyday lives and voices, especially concerning racial oppression.

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

Recent developments in U.S society, specifically in education, have led to a renewed interest in social justice in schools (Apple, 2015; Zeichner, 2009). However, little is known about what happens in schools or how teachers negotiate mandated curriculums (Cabrera et al., 2014). Using a critical race theoretical approach in this paper, allowed Dana an opportunity to discuss the multiple dimensions of the social justice work at her district (Denzin et al., 2008). Increasing the number of studies of teachers, students, and community members engaged in social justice work is vital. More research is needed to illuminate some of the gaps in knowledge about variations in everyday social justice practice, including in Ethnic Studies. Other studies could help inform teacher preparation programs, especially in social studies education (Hursh & Ross, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Dana's everyday Ethnic Studies social justice praxis interrupts commonsense assumptions and racist ideologies in her district's schools. For example, under her direction and mentorship, teachers and students in the Ethnic Studies program challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about students of color as deficient or passive. Fundamental topics discussed by students in Ethnic Studies courses include White privilege, racism, colonialism, and oppression. These discussions reflect a strong social justice orientation and practice (Zeichner, 2009). At its core, this program involves equipping students with the critical skills necessary for analyzing and understanding structural inequality within the context of their lived experiences, rather than merely celebrating diversity (de los Ríos, 2017). In this Ethnic Studies program, students engage actively in planning and learning about the history of oppression against Puerto Ricans. In this way, students have a genuine voice (Yosso, 2005).

## **Teacher Education Pipeline**

A remaining question, however, concerns teacher education programs that prepare teachers to work with children from diverse backgrounds (Brown, 2013; Grant, 1999). Dana's personal commitment to social justice drives her work. However, not all school districts have access to someone with her dispositions, qualifications, and training. This raises a question about the serious problems with the teacher pipeline (Brown, 2013). A growing body of research suggests that college-based teacher preparation programs routinely produce teachers who are unqualified to work with students from diverse backgrounds (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). How can educators like Dana help prepare the next generation of social studies teachers?

Another remaining question concerns school district leadership and commitment. For instance, even though Dana was able to implement an Ethnic Studies program for two years, her district's commitment to such a program is not guaranteed from year to year, and neither is her position as an instructional leader. In order to implement changes, school districts must draw on the latest research on the benefits of Ethnic Studies. Additionally, districts and teacher education programs must commit to improving teacher education significantly. Specifically, teachers must be trained to analyze and challenge the structures and content that reproduce master narratives in classrooms. Finally, schools must commit to listening to the voices of students, teachers, and community members already engaged in this critical work.

## **Author Notes**

**Ramon L. Vasquez** is an Assistant Professor of Critical Multicultural Education at Westfield State University in Massachusetts. His areas of specialization include Critical Race Theory, Latinx Studies, Critical Education, and Cultural Studies. Prior to working in higher education, he was an elementary teacher in Los Angeles. Dr. Vasquez received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Curriculum and Instruction with a minor in Educational Policy Studies. He can be reached at [vasquera@gmail.com](mailto:vasquera@gmail.com)

**Dana Altshuler** is the Coordinator of Culturally Responsive Education at Holyoke High School in Massachusetts. She earned an MA from Dartmouth College with a concentration in Cultural Studies in 2007 and was awarded the Gary H. Plotnick Memorial Prize in Jewish Studies for best graduate thesis. Dana earned a BA in Secondary Social Studies Education from the University of Delaware in 2001, having won awards for Outstanding Performance in Student Teaching. In 2015, she created the Holyoke Public School Culturally Responsive Educator Summer Study Abroad Program in Puerto Rico for Holyoke teachers. From 2013 to the present, Dana is the acting coordinator of Ethnic Studies for 7<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Holyoke Public Schools. Prior to working in Holyoke, she taught middle and high school Ethnic Studies, English, and History for 10 years. Dana's current areas of interests include Ethnic Studies, Puerto Rican Diaspora Studies, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. She can be reached at [daltshuler@hps.holyoke.ma.us](mailto:daltshuler@hps.holyoke.ma.us)

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