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# Teacher Professional Development for Ethnic Studies A Critical Youth Centered Approach

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## Teacher Professional Development for Ethnic Studies: A Critical Youth-Centered Approach

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*In this article, we discuss a partnership with a district-wide Ethnic Studies (ES) program, the Ethnic Studies Professional Development (ESPD) project, through which we designed and led a year-long teacher professional development series for middle and high school ES teachers in one school district. We describe the context of the ESPD project, our vision for a critical youth-centered professional development experience, how this vision aligns with scholarship on ES content and pedagogy, and how we operationalized this vision through key choices we made about the scope and sequence of the year. We conclude with a summary of what was accomplished, the project's next steps, and implications for teacher-educators.*

### Introduction

In recent years, a national movement has emerged to demand Ethnic Studies (ES) in K-12 public schools. Several major school districts have approved policies requiring the inclusion of ES or the designation of ES as a graduation requirement (Buonavista, 2016; Cuauhtin et al., 2019). ES is a transdisciplinary field dating back to the student activist movement of the 1960s. The resistance efforts of activists who were part of struggles such as the Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 (Cuauhtin et al., 2019), the 1968 San Francisco State University student strike (Pulido, 2006), and the East L.A. Chicano Blowouts of 1968 (Muñoz, 2007) represented a call for education that is liberatory and linked to various Third World and U.S.-based struggles against systems of oppression and

white supremacy (Elia et al., 2016; Pulido, 2006). The movement for ES in K-12 settings is rooted in this radical, counter-hegemonic project about “power and production of difference,” with a particular emphasis on the experiences of people from minoritized backgrounds (Kelley, 2016). Following in the tradition of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970/2000) and (critical) multicultural education (May & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2018), ES courses value, appreciate, and incorporate students’ home and cultural experiences while simultaneously supporting their critical consciousness development and engagement in praxis (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). A growing body of research suggests that ES courses can improve academic outcomes for students of color, including grade point averages and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). This research is consistent with the premise that affirming and bridging students’ cultural identities to academic content through critical multicultural curriculum can have a positive impact on students’ academic motivation and achievement (Banks, 2015; Byrd, 2016).

This article discusses our partnership with a public school district ES program, referred to as the Ethnic Studies Professional Development (ESPD) project. Through this partnership, during the 2018–2019 school year, we provided 44 h of teacher professional development to 13 ES teachers in the district. The purpose of this article is to describe the context and background of the ESPD project, the vision we co-constructed to guide it, and how this vision aligns with scholarship on ES content and pedagogy. Because ESPD is a long-term partnership that is still ongoing at the time of this writing, we do not report research findings but rather describe our rationale, approach, and process. We share this

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work as a way to advance scholarly conversations about the preparation of ES teachers for secondary school settings and the role of university-based teacher educators in the movement for ES in public schools. In the first section, we provide the context and articulate our vision for a critical youth-centered professional development experience. This includes a discussion of the scholarly frameworks we draw from, and how the vision aligns to scholarship on ES pedagogy and ES teacher preparation. Next, we describe how we operationalized this vision through key choices about the scope and sequence of the year. We conclude with a brief summary of accomplishments, next steps, and implications for teacher-educators.

### **Vision: Critical Youth-Centered Professional Development**

The ESPD project was a collaboration between three faculty co-leads from the same College of Education (Green, Nygreen, and Valdiviezo), the ES Program Director in a partnering school district,<sup>1</sup> and a graduate research assistant who had worked closely with the ES program for two years prior (Arce). The partner school district offers a unique and valuable site for research on ES because it offers a sequence of ES courses spanning grades 7–11, as opposed to one or two standalone courses. Located in a medium-size town (population around 40,000) on the outskirts of a mid-sized metropolitan area (population around 650,000), the school district is under-resourced, high-poverty, and predominantly comprised of students of color (of which approximately 80% are Latinx,<sup>2</sup> and within that group, a majority identify as Puerto Rican). In 2015, the district came under state receivership due to a history of academic underperformance.

Growing from a grassroots effort by activist-teachers, the ES program was introduced in 2014 in 8th grade and has since expanded to encompass grades 7–11. The district-wide ES curriculum embodies a critical, community-responsive approach that centers an examination of power and oppression through an intersectional lens with a focus on the Puerto Rican diaspora. It uses the “ARC of Ethnic Studies” framework as articulated by Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2014, p. 107),

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<sup>1</sup>Not able to coauthor due to confidentiality measures stated in our IRB protocol.

<sup>2</sup>We utilize the term “Latinx” rather than Latino, Latino/a, or Latin@ in an effort to acknowledge non-binary, gender non-conforming people within the community, particularly since the ES program at our research site is intentional about integrating queer histories and experiences into the curriculum.

which one of its founding teachers learned in their previous work with the San Francisco Unified School District’s ES initiative. The ARC framework seeks to provide students Access to higher education through college readiness; culturally Relevant pedagogy that centers, affirms, and builds from students’ cultural and racial identities and funds-of-knowledge; and Community-responsive pedagogy that bridges classroom and community learning to support students’ agency to effect social change. The ES teachers, who are majority white, are licensed in either English or social studies, and bring a wide range of experience with and expertise in ES content and pedagogy.

The ESPD project responded to a program need, as articulated by the ES Program Director, for *critical* ES-specific professional development, grounded in tenets of critical pedagogy and youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Toward this end, Arce visited two upper-level ES classes to recruit students who would be interested in developing and facilitating their own professional development sessions for ES teachers. Seven 11th and 12th grade students initially formed what would be called the Ethnic Studies Youth Council (ESYC), and five of these youth went on to design and facilitate two professional development sessions for ES teachers in the second part of the school year. The purpose of the ESYC was to support ES students in an after-school space where they could reflect on their experiences in school, interact with ES teachers and a local activist and oral historian outside of the classroom, plan workshops, and envision what role youth could play within the broader ES program. Guided by the principles of praxis, the after-school meetings ultimately paved the way for students to identify major issues of concern they wanted to address with ES teachers: countering stereotypes of their community, student–teacher relationships, teacher engagement in the community, and the need for teachers to listen to student feedback in the classroom. With the support of Arce, students designed and analyzed surveys of the ES teachers as well as their peers in ES classes. These surveys, along with their own experiential knowledge, informed the interactive professional development sessions they facilitated.

Over the course of the 2018–2019 school year, our team collaborated to envision, design, and facilitate a total of 44 h of professional development for ES teachers. We began in August 2018 with a full-day session, continuing with monthly after-school sessions from September through June, and

three full-day sessions in November, January, and March. Thirteen teachers participated in the sessions; they taught ES to grades 7–11 in five middle schools and two high schools. The ES Program Director, who has also taught ES courses in the program, participated as well. A group of five 11th and 12th grade ES students led two of the professional development sessions (4 h total). This *critical youth-centered approach* attempted to operationalize a key tenet of Ethnic Studies: that youth who experience institutional discrimination possess legitimate experiential knowledge, and this knowledge must be centered in any conversation about how to serve them.

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Our vision for a critical youth-centered teacher professional development was inspired by scholarship about critical professional development (Kohli et al., 2015), effective ES pedagogy for K-12 settings (Cauhtin et al., 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014), and the historical movement for ES (Kelley, 2016; Pulido, 2006). We wanted to create a professional development experience that had integrity to the historical roots and anti-racist aims of the ES field. Building on Kohli et al.'s (2015) critical professional development framework, we hoped to create space for “dialogical action” with an emphasis on teacher identity reflection (particularly racial identity), pedagogy, and cross-school collaboration in order to foster a sense of collective commitment to ES within the district and beyond. Building on the work of Tintiangco-Cubales and

colleagues (2014) on effective ES teachers in K-12 settings, we hoped to create an intellectually rigorous and loving professional learning community in which teachers could reflect on their experiences/identities, be vulnerable, but also challenged to grow. And building from our knowledge of the historical and contemporary movement for ES in higher education and K-12 settings, we hoped participants would come to view themselves not just as teachers who happen to teach ES, but also as part of a national *movement* to promote ES in public schools—a movement that aims to make schools more humanizing, youth-centered, culturally-affirming, and just (Buenavista, 2016; Cauhtin et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2011). We reasoned that one can only imagine what one has experienced, so providing a first-hand experience of embodied, critical, community-responsive, and liberatory education was important to us. These were grand aspirations and we did not fully live up to them, but it was this vision that informed our choices over the year.

We began with the recognition that ES, while a contested field, always aims to critique and transform institutionalized racism and other systems of oppression. As such, taking the content of ES seriously calls on educators to challenge racism and other forms of oppression in our own schools and classrooms. Educators who heed this call must constantly question our taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and practices. We understood that this hard work is filled with contradictions. While ES aims to critique and transform structures of oppression, including the institution of schooling, ES teachers work inside these same schools and occupy positions of authority (relative to students) in them. We wanted teachers to wrestle with this inherent contradiction and reflect on how they might navigate it in ways that have integrity to the transformative aims of ES, but also uphold their responsibilities as educators. There are no simple answers; this tension is at the very heart of ES as it is institutionalized in formal educational spaces (Cauhtin et al., 2019; Hu-DeHart, 1993). We wanted to support ES teachers in the ongoing, necessary work of reflecting on their identities and biases, clarifying values and aims, and supporting each other in their attempts to live these values in the imperfect contexts of their schools.

We also wanted to center youth and community funds-of-knowledge in meaningful ways. We knew we could not just lecture about the importance of community-responsive pedagogy; we had to model it. Modeling it was not simply demonstrating a best practice; it was the method for reaching the

pedagogical goals articulated above. We held full-day sessions off-site, and invited community activists, elders, and service providers in community-based organizations to lead them. Holding sessions in a community space was symbolic of our desire to center community knowledge—physically as well as intellectually—and to disrupt, challenge, and re-imagine what teaching and learning can look and feel like. We wanted teachers to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the community—its history, challenges, resilience, and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). From a practical perspective, we wanted to connect them to out-of-school resources they could use in their classrooms. In our view, youth- and community-led sessions were not simply meant to provide “others” with an empowering leadership experience; we hoped, instead, that they would give *teachers* a different kind of learning experience.

Lastly, although we envisioned ESPD sessions primarily as a space of dialogue and reflection, we also strived to integrate foundational content that we believe ES teachers should know and understand. This included:

- A historicized understanding of ES as a field that is: transdisciplinary, intersectional, counter-hegemonic, and liberatory, including knowledge of current ES scholarship, movements, and programs;
- Knowledge of institutionalized oppression, implicit bias, and white supremacy, along with knowledge of research about how these affect children, families, communities, teaching, learning, schooling, achievement, and well-being;
- Understanding that ES teaching is not just about delivering a body of content but also about embodying a critical stance *alongside* their students and the communities they constitute;
- Practical tools for putting these concepts into practice in middle and high school classrooms.

#### **Operationalizing Our Vision: Arc of the School Year**

We organized the year around two Essential Questions: *What is Ethnic Studies? What does it call on us to do?* These questions do not have definitive answers but are important for ES teachers to grapple with. We did not expect or desire everyone to arrive at similar answers. We noted that ES scholars actively debate these questions, and we thought it worthwhile to identify areas of difference and solidarity within the cohort. Instead of seeking

consensus, we facilitated a discussion that aimed to reveal where each person was coming from, what they were invested in, and what their personal stakes in the ES program were. To support and provide context for this conversation, we created a handout summarizing key arguments from articles by ES scholars, selecting two of these (Sleeter, 2011; Winkler-Morey, 2010) as a shared reading for deeper discussion.

We then shifted from abstract definitions of ES to practical implications. From a survey we distributed before school started, we knew that discipline and classroom management were topics of concern. However, we did not want to frame these as separate from curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Following Au (2016), we viewed these as components of pedagogy that work together. We posed the question: If we could fully operationalize the tenets of ES, what would our classrooms look like? More specifically, in considering *what ES calls on us to do*, we probed: How does ES call on us to rethink our approach to teaching, building relationships with students, building classroom community, and addressing conflict *with* or *among* students? We challenged the group to resist focusing on structural barriers to humanizing pedagogy, and instead, try to envision the classrooms and schools they wanted to build. Without dismissing their real (and accurate in our view) critiques of the oppressive conditions of schooling, we wanted to focus on *visioning* with teachers because, we believe, it is our visions that sustain and propel us in this work. We cannot build more humanizing, just, youth-affirming educational spaces if we are only fighting *against* what is wrong, and never fighting *for* what we want.

**We cannot build more humanizing, just, youth-affirming educational spaces if we are only fighting *against* what is wrong, and never fighting *for* what we want.**

These initial discussions reflect our decision to prioritize relationship-building and community-building in the ESPD space, while critically reflecting on the meaning, aims, and imperatives of ES. Upon this foundation, we integrated youth into the space as early as possible; members of the ESYC attended the first h of some ESPD sessions as participants starting in November. When youth were

present, we facilitated discussion activities aimed at strengthening relationships and understanding between the students and teachers. For example, in one session, small groups of teachers and youth shared stories about their personal experiences as students and their beliefs about the purpose, goals, and value of ES. In another, we stood in a circle as the facilitator read a series of statements about linguistic racism, asking us to step into the circle if a statement described our experience. We then discussed what we observed during the exercise, and why we did (or did not) step forward in particular cases. As such, young people were part of the sessions for much of the year.

The ARC of the year was punctuated by three full-day sessions (November, January, and March), led by youth/community activists. The first one met in the high school's Restorative Justice (RJ) program room. This room is inside the school building but distinct from the classroom where sessions normally met. Unlike a classroom, the RJ room is an inviting space with plush couches, soft lighting, colorful area rugs, a cozy reading corner, potted plants, and vibrant artwork. For our session, youth peer-leaders from the RJ program facilitated a 2.5-h community-building circle. The circle provided an introduction to RJ for some teachers who were unfamiliar with it, and for all of us, an embodied experience of learning and relating to each other in a new and more humanizing way. In our post-circle debrief, we re-visited previous conversations about classroom community-building, managing conflict, and addressing "classroom management" concerns—illuminating synergies between the aims and values of RJ, and those of ES (e.g. Au, 2016; Rethinking Schools, 2016).

Our second full-day session was held in a historic mansion previously owned by a prominent white family, which is now a museum run by the city. We discussed how institutions like museums often contribute to the erasure of the histories of People of Color, as the artifacts preserved and displayed represent a particular past. The current museum leaders are committed to dismantling the museum's legacy of accumulating wealth and reinforcing dominant culture and hierarchies. In recent years, museum staff has worked alongside local youth, teachers, oral historians, and activists to curate exhibitions as well as develop accessible resource guides and materials that draw on community cultural knowledge from the surrounding area. Given the aims of ES to recover erased histories of oppressed people, we recruited a local historian (also a woman of color) to present about who has

been absent in the historical narrative of the city, what history has been recovered, and how she and others have turned to the community to reclaim the lost histories. Museum staff gave a presentation about teaching resources and youth programming available through the museum, and teachers brainstormed ideas for using the museum's resources in their curricular planning.

Our third full-day session was held at a nonprofit community-based organization in the heart of the city's downtown, which provides a variety of services to low-income families. Although the organization's work was not the focus of the session, meeting there allowed teachers to learn about its work and experience being there. We recruited a local activist and oral historian (also a woman of color) to lead a community tour in which we learned about key places, activists, and elders in the city's present and past. In the tour we visited a section of the city which has been stigmatized as dangerous, and where white and middle-class residents do not typically go. The activist talked about the community cultural wealth and funds-of-knowledge in the community (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005), and invited teachers to view the area through the perspective of residents who love and care about it—even as they experience discrimination and economic distress—thereby challenging the prevailing "deficit" lens.

During the monthly after-school ESPD sessions, we continued to prioritize relationship- and community-building in the space while responding to teachers' shifting needs and interests. ESPD topics included: the national movement for ES, defining and identifying the hidden curriculum, teachers as warm demanders, linguistic racism, backwards design lesson planning, academic literacy development, and code-switching. Additionally, we provided space, time, and support for teachers to collaboratively workshop ideas for ES curricular content. While the year brought many twists and turns, we always circled back to our essential questions: *What is ES, and what does it call on us to do?* These were the threads that sewed the year together—broad enough to hold the ideas we engaged, and focused enough to give the sessions direction and shape.

## Conclusion

At the time of this writing, we are beginning our second year of collaboration with the ES program. In addition to providing ongoing teacher professional development, we have each become involved with local organizing efforts to advocate for the

continued existence of the ES program. This includes engaging with district leadership around issues related to equity, teacher recruitment, and retention of teachers of color, as well as supporting the formation of a Community Advisory Board that will guide and advocate for the program. The foundation for a multi-layered, long-term, sustained, school-university-community partnership is being formed through this work.

## When we consider the role of teacher-educators in this movement, we think it is important not just to publish research about ES but also to work and learn alongside the educators, youth, and community activists who are at the forefront of building ES programs locally.

We are beginning to reflect upon what we learned in the project's first year. In our second year, we plan to publish findings that contribute to the empirical research base on ES in K-12 settings and emerging scholarship on ES professional development (Fernández, 2019; Sacramento, 2019). However, our most urgent goal has been, and remains, supporting and strengthening the ES program of our partner district so it might serve as an exemplar for what ES in public schools can be. We believe in the program and the work that its teachers, students, and Director have accomplished. In this way, we position ourselves in solidarity with our school district partner and with the movement for ES in public schools. When we consider the role of teacher-educators in this movement, we think it is important not just to publish research about ES but also to work and learn alongside the educators, youth, and community activists who are at the forefront of building ES programs locally. As teacher-educators, this is one way to model the youth-centered, culturally-sustaining, community-responsive pedagogy we seek to inspire in all teachers.

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