
CRITICAL RACE EDUCATION:

ETHNIC STUDIES AS A PAYMENT TO THE NATIONAL
EDUCATION DEBT

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Introduction

The United States has increasingly become a more diverse nation in terms of race and ethnicity. In 2001, 39% of students in the country were of color, whereas in 2011, 48% of students in schools across the country were of color;¹ in mathematical terms, in 10 years, there was almost a 10% increase in the number of students of color enrolled in public schools, or a 1% growth each year. In addition to their growing numbers, these students also hail from homes that are culturally and linguistically diverse.² However, even though the nation's student body is increasingly more diverse, the teaching profession remains overwhelmingly white. In 2012, researchers noted that 83% of full-time public school teachers were white, whereas only 7% were Black, 7% Latinx,³ and 1% Asian.⁴ In addition to the overwhelming number of white teachers and the severe shortage of teachers of color, the pervasive culture of public schools tends to only reflect white middle-class norms.⁵ In fact, these white middle-class values and expectations are often prioritized while the values and community backgrounds that belong to students of color are often ignored and even devalued in schools across the country.⁶ Therefore, students of color tend to see schooling as something that harms their cultures and identities.⁷

This harmful impact that schooling has on students of color is only one part of the broader damage that racism has inflicted upon students of color since the founding of the United States. In fact, racism has fueled the significant "achievement gap" between students of color and their white counterparts, inhibited schools in predominately neighborhoods of color from receiving adequate funding, and as a result, also prevented students of color from receiving a

¹ Vavrus, M. "Culturally responsive teaching."

² Ibid

³ Please refer to the "Paper Terminology" section for the definition of "Latinx"

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ware, Franita. "Warm Demander Pedagogy."

⁶ Vavrus, M. "Culturally responsive teaching."

⁷ Ibid

high quality education. Ironically enough, however, previous and current education reforms that have attempted to “close the racial achievement gap” have largely omitted combatting racial discrimination from their agenda. The charter school reform clearly illustrates this pattern. Not only has this particular reform ignored the ways racial oppression has produced a failing education system for students of color, but it has actually perpetuated racial inequality itself by pushing out students who are, for instance, deemed “undesirable,” who might bring down schools’ average test scores, and/or whose first language is not English. Not coincidentally, students who belong to these groups also tend to be students of color. Given that racism, as I will argue throughout this paper, is the primary driver of the profound inequities currently plaguing schools, previous and current education reforms have failed—and will continue to fail—because they do not place contesting racial violence at the top of their priority list.

On the other hand, reforms that have attempted to challenge racism, or some aspect of racial marginalization, have faced significant backlash, which has rendered them largely unsuccessful. For example, in 1996, Oakland Unified School District passed an Ebonics Resolution, which declared Ebonics to be a language in its own right and mandated that Ebonics be the primary language of African-American students in the district’s schools.⁸ In implementing these specific mandates, this resolution aimed to weave Black culture into schools as official and legitimate knowledge. Scholars have articulated that the Oakland School Board turned to Ebonics not necessarily because of linguistic reasons, but rather, because of a desire to address the severe educational disparities African American students experience. In the School Board’s view, including Ebonics in Oakland schools addressed these disparities by validating and taking

⁸ Baron, Dennis. “What happened in Oakland: The Ebonics controversy of 1996-97”

into account Black children's vernacular in schools.⁹ Oakland was especially motivated to draft this resolution given that research—although limited—indicates that teachers who effectively build Black children's vernacular into their instruction and then shift to “standard English” have significantly improved the academic achievement of Black students.¹⁰ Shortly after its passage, however, this resolution faced very strong opposition on both local and national levels, which eventually forced Oakland to omit the word “Ebonics” from its following implementation proposals.¹¹ Part of this opposition came from Black parents and leaders who demanded that the district taught “standard English” to Black children.¹² As part of their logic, Black parents and leaders believed that Ebonics rested upon a stereotypical representation of Black vernacular,¹³ even though linguists have indicated that Ebonics actually has African roots and a long presence in African American history.¹⁴ Partly because of the disagreement on the effects and origins of Ebonics, the mainstream deemed this education reform to be deeply problematic and as a result, the reform eventually dwindled. As this example suggests, education reforms that challenge some aspect of racial oppression tend to fail because they are seen as too “problematic” and/or because they do not adhere to mainstream respectability politics.

There have also been other reforms that have attempted to tackle some aspect of racism but have been ineffective given that they have failed to address the roots of the problem. The persisting school integration reform serves as an example. This reform in particular has been overly focused on the mere racial integration of schools instead of concentrating on gaining real

⁹ Rickford, John R. "The Ebonics controversy in my backyard: A sociolinguist's experiences and reflections."

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Rickford, John R. "The Ebonics controversy in my backyard: A sociolinguist's experiences and reflection"

¹² Baron, Dennis. "What happened in Oakland: Ebonics and the Politics of English."

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

educational effectiveness for students of color. The reform views desegregation as a means of securing the same educational resources and opportunities for Black students that white students have always received. However, even though this reform challenges the material consequences of racial marginalization as it relates to the racial makeup of schools, this reform has largely been unsuccessful because its main goal has been integration when in reality, its primary aim should be the development of effective schools that provide a quality education to students of color.

Given these unsuccessful education reforms, this paper will attempt to address head on the real problem that has led many of these reforms to be ineffective—racism in the context of white supremacy. More specifically, this paper will shed light on the specific ways racism operates in schools to maintain white supremacy and the status quo. In order to conduct such examination, this paper will engage with topics including Critical Race Theory, Ethnic Studies, the Education Debt, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. In particular, this paper will seek to answer the following primary questions: How have race and racism permeated the American education system to form the country's education debt? How should we understand Ethnic Studies as a field of study and how can it serve as an initial payment to this national debt? How can we understand the Ethnic Studies Movement in California, and, in particular its recent passage of Assembly Bill 2016 Ethnic Studies, as it relates to paying the education debt?

Given the particular focus of this paper, I do recognize that there are other elements that I did not include because they fall outside the scope of my focus. For example, although I do delve deeply into the ways white people—as the dominant group in the United States—have effectively wielded racism to maintain an education system that fails students of color, I do want to note that I primarily focus on middle-class to upper-class white people. Of course, in terms of education specifically, the more powerful, wealthier group has also contributed to the

marginalization of poor white people. I also want to note that although I do not specifically focus on the ways poor white people have also been underserved in education, my overarching analysis suggests that Ethnic Studies helps all marginalized groups, including poor white people, by helping them identify similarities they share with people of color and mobilizing those similarities to foster solidarity and fight for a brighter tomorrow together.

That said, and bearing my primary research questions in mind, this paper will use the analytical frameworks of Critical Race Theory to argue that Ethnic Studies—if implemented with culturally responsive pedagogy—can serve as an initial payment to this national debt. Based on the scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings’ work, I define the education debt as the sum of all previously incurred annual federal deficits in education that the country owes to communities of color for historically barring students of color from accessing public education, for providing an extremely low-quality education to them, and for actively excluding them and their families from the civic process.¹⁵ After examining the education debt, the paper will then use the Ethnic Studies Movement in California, and in particular, the state’s recent passage of Assembly Bill 2016 Ethnic Studies, as case studies to encourage other states and districts to adopt similar movements and pass comparable legislation. In doing so, I argue, these policy-making institutions will help pay the mounting education debt, and therefore, actually begin closing the achievement gap by empowering students of color who have been marginalized throughout American history.

Paying the education debt becomes especially urgent given the rising numbers of students of color in the United States. If the country fails to do so, and quickly, the education debt will continue to increase, and even at a faster rate now that students of color comprise more than half

¹⁵ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "From the achievement gap to the education debt"

of the student body in public schools. Lastly, I would also like to highlight that everything that I discuss and analyze in this paper is profoundly complex; extensive bodies of literature have been produced and will continue to be written about each topic. However, the goal of this paper is to join this highly complicated—and at times controversial—conversation by offering my own perspective and contributions. Indeed, race and racism are topics that can cause great discomfort and produce tension, yet, as this paper will depict, it is impossible to examine the country's failing education system without centering race and racism in the conversation. It is on this note that I invite you to lean into your discomfort and critically engage with the paper's ideas, critiques, and assertions.

Methodology

Given the nature of my project, I exclusively employed qualitative research methods. For the most part, I conducted an extensive literature review on my focus of inquiry. I delved deeply into newspaper articles that reported on issues relating to Ethnic Studies in California and Arizona, as well as closely examined both Critical Race Theory scholarship and Education Studies scholarship. In terms of Critical Race Theory, although I specifically focus on Ladson-Billings' work on the Critical Race Theory of education, the education debt, and culturally responsive pedagogy, I also incorporate additional Critical Race Theory frameworks that other scholars—including Cheryl Harris, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado—have contributed to the field. In addition to this literature review, I also analyzed all of the Ethnic Studies policies that Assemblyman Luis Alejo attempted to pass in California, with a focus on Assembly Bill 2016 Ethnic Studies. Additionally, I also closely examined videos that shed light on the issues concerning the shortage of teachers of color, the emerging scholarship on culturally responsive pedagogy, and the ways racism is entrenched within the American education system.

Paper Terminology

Before delving into the meat of the paper, I want to first provide definitions to terms, phrases, and modifiers that are not necessarily intuitive. I would like to note that all of these terms are highly complex and dynamic, but for the purposes of this paper, I will attach particular meanings to each of them. Because I use the modifier “of color” ubiquitously throughout the paper, I want to provide the definition of this phrase first. “Of color” refers to people who have Black, Latinx, Asian American, and/or Native American backgrounds. The scholars Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso concisely define “people of color” as people who are “non-white.”¹⁶ Along the same vein, I use the term “Latinx” instead of “Latino” to be inclusive of all gender identities. The modifier “queer” refers to people who identify as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender). I also want to note that each of these groups is not static or monolithic; not only are these groups ever evolving but there also exists a wide range of diversity within each group. However, I will use these umbrella modifiers in order to give the essay structure and flow.

Moreover, adjectives such as “marginalized,” “oppressed,” and “vulnerable” attempt to describe people who have been historically excluded from economic, social, educational and political structures in the United States. Furthermore, in this paper, I use the term “racism” to refer to the active exploitation and marginalization of people of color as a result of their racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. Alternatively, this paper also employs the same definition of racism that the scholar Richard Schaefer puts forth in his scholarship. He concisely defines racism as “...a doctrine of racial supremacy, that one race is superior.”¹⁷ Along the same lines, “institutional racism” refers to the racism that has been deeply engrained within every American

¹⁶ Solorzano, Daniel, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso. "Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate," pp. 61

¹⁷ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation," pp. 465

system since the founding of the United States. Additionally in my paper, the phrase “white supremacy” refers to “attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over ‘nonwhite’ populations...making invidious distinctions or a social crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry...white supremacy means ‘color bars,’ ‘racial segregation,’ and the restriction of meaningful rights to a privileged group characterized by its light pigmentation.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the term “violence” refers to the suffering experienced by those who do not belong to the dominant group(s). In the same line of inquiry, “structural violence” refers to the violence that structures (e.g. patriarchy, misogyny) inflict upon marginalized people. Lastly, I also want to note that I employ the term “justice” instead of “social justice” because justice should not only be social, but also economic, political, educational, and legal. It is the objective that with these terms defined and clarified, the arguments I set forth in the paper will be easier to understand and to engage with critically.

1. How have race and racism permeated the American education system to form the country’s education debt?

1A. Critical Race Theory and Education

Before examining the intersections between Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the field of education, I will first describe Critical Race Theory as a field of inquiry and its major components. CRT originated as a legal theory in the 1990’s.¹⁹ However, as the study of race expanded, scholars adopted it to be a more expansive analytical framework that encompasses a broad cluster of historical and contemporary theories rooted in the idea that racism in the United

¹⁸ Almaguer, Tomas. *Racial fault lines*, pp. 19

¹⁹ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ”Toward A critical race theory of education.”

States is not aberrant and dead, but rather, it is pervasive and thriving.²⁰ CRT contends that racism is a powerful and violent force that has been deeply and systemically engrained in American society.²¹ According to CRT, race matters and materializes in new ways in the present day than it did in the past—a re-organization that makes it increasingly difficult to fix race in the same ways as we did before.²²

This idea can be clearly observed in the ramifications of the 2008 Presidential Election. After the victory of President Obama in 2008, mainstream American society began to adopt a “colorblind” and “post-racial” approach to racial discrimination in the United States. In other words, many Americans believed that since the “country”²³ had elected a Black man to be the President of the United States, the nation had finally overcome its racial sins of the past; to them, the victory of Barack Obama signified that racial inequality had finally ceased to exist. However, CRT argues that even after the election of Obama, racism continues to be as alive and healthy as it had been in the past. Although the ways race materializes are different than before, one aspect of race remains the same: it is a conceptual and material tool that the more powerful group has employed to advance its political, economic, cultural, and social agendas.²⁴ In fact, the 2016 Presidential Election revealed that racism is as wholesome as it has been before. The fact that Donald Trump won the presidential election on an overtly racist platform signifies that “post-racial America” and “colorblindness” are no longer credible.

²⁰ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “Toward A critical race theory of education.”

²¹ Ibid

²² American Educational Research Association. “Social Justice in Education Award (2015) Lecture: Gloria J. Ladson-Billings”

²³ 53% of votes gave Obama the Presidency in 2008. The racial breakdown of that number is the following: 95% of Black voters casted their ballot for Obama, 67% of Latino voters, 62% of Asian voters, but only 43% of white voters casted their ballot for Obama. As this number reveals, the majority of white voters did not want Obama to be President (ROPER Center at Cornell University)

²⁴ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists*

Critical Race Theory also sets forth the idea of interest convergence. This notion contends that legislation—and essentially any legal amendments on a structural level—only survives if it can advantage both people of color and white people.²⁵ In other terms, any structural changes enacted to benefit people of color must also converge with the interests of white people in order for the change to endure. A premier example of this phenomenon is the well-known *Brown v the Board of Education* case. Critical Race scholars have argued that the Supreme Court decided to desegregate schools primarily because of international politics.²⁶ More specifically, they claim that *Brown* was a product of the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for the loyalties of countries in the Global South during the Cold War.²⁷ Since the Soviet Union portrayed the U.S. as being characterized by pervasive racial inequities, the United States saw the *Brown* decision as an opportunity to challenge that depiction.²⁸ In the government's view, by having a Supreme Court decision that appeared to alleviate the country's racial tensions to the international gaze, the United States would then be able to gain the loyalties of additional countries in the Global South.²⁹ However, as history has proven, the *Brown* decision did not achieve school integration. In fact, schools remain as racially segregated as before the *Brown* decision. Therefore, the *Brown* decision was a failed education policy, but on the other hand, however, the *Brown* decision was a successful foreign policy. This example perfectly illustrates how interest convergence operates—the interest of Black people to desegregate schools converged with the interest of white people in power because of their desire to depict, to the international community, a United States free of great racial strife. And this convergence, in turn, led to the decision in *Brown*. However, the fact that schools remain racially

²⁵ Bell, Derrick. “Brown v Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma”

²⁶ Delgado, Richard. “Liberal McCarthyism and the Origins of Critical Race Theory”

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

segregated in the present day reveals that *Brown's* decision was simply an empty legal promise; indeed, nothing has significantly changed as a result of *Brown*.

Furthermore, CRT also focuses on the notion of whiteness. I define whiteness as the ideological and physical process of adopting the dominant and oppressive cultural practices of white America to gain capital and power. CRT claims that whiteness is inherently a political project;³⁰ it is a decision to be white, whether it is one that is hyperconscious or oblivious. In other terms, it is a decision to assimilate into mainstream white America in order to be accepted by those in control and to therefore, gain a form of political and cultural power.³¹ However, that decision is deeply informed by broader structures that make up the fabric of America. The country's education system is one of these structures. Given that school attendance is mandatory for the vast majority of children, the education system has an incredible amount of influence on how Americans develop, think, and behave. Because of its power, the education system is one of the key drivers of whiteness.

The current organization of schools is one that privileges the affluent, white, and male segments of society.³² As mentioned previously, the pervasive culture of public schools often reflects white middle-class norms. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the current education system is failing students of color and in the process, perpetuating whiteness and institutional racism. The intersection between Critical Race Theory and education in America illustrates this phenomenon. The fact that the majority of wealthy white America is perfectly fine with segregated schools inundated with unequal funding and poor conditions is a product of racial discrimination. The well-funded, well-staffed, and well-resourced schools of middle-class white

³⁰ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*

³¹ Ibid

³² Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. "Preparing culturally responsive teachers rethinking the curriculum."

America also point to the institutional racism that continues to be entrenched within the education system. The fact that middle-class white people intentionally left urban centers to the suburbs, partly with the motivation to send their kids to homogenous schools free of children of color³³ is also a reflection of the racial inequality deeply embedded within the current education system. The statistic revealing that 72% of white people do not support government intervention to address school segregation³⁴ also uncovers the institutional racism that plagues our schools. This structural racial inequality is also observed in that the vast majority of teachers are white while most of our students are of color. And all of these facets together collectively make up our current education system—one that, as it stands now, upholds white supremacy and perpetuates racial inequality. As Critical Race theorists of education contend throughout their scholarship, and as I also contend here, racial marginalization is one of the driving factors that uphold school inequity, contribute to our current failing education system, and continue to advance the longstanding “achievement gap.”

Ironically enough, however, in our “colorblind” and “post-racial” America, the dominant discourse often omits racism from its analysis of education in the United States. Yet this pattern is not particularly striking, since white America has consistently preferred to avoid talking about race and racism and has instead embraced colorblindness with the hope that doing so would “absolve them of the nation’s deepest sin—racism, in the context of white supremacy.”³⁵ While white America continues to embrace the notions of colorblindness and of a post-racial United States, poor Black Americans continue to lack the same opportunities and life experiences as

³³ Nathan Bowling. “The Conversation I’m Tired of Not Having.”

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ American Educational Research Association. “Social Justice in Education Award (2015) Lecture: Gloria J. Ladson-Billings,” 30:29min

poor white Americans;³⁶ factors like race and class continue to be strong predictors of academic achievement even though gender disparities have significantly shrunk.³⁷ Therefore, in order to address this issue, we need to carefully incorporate Critical Race Theory into conversations about education and social inequality as well as move past a “colorblind,” “post-racial” mindset.

In addition to moving past this mindset, it is equally important to uncover the ways property and race interact with education. Critical Race Theory asserts that property is intrinsically tied to race.³⁸ The scholar Cheryl Harris is one of the first Critical Race theorists who first set forth the argument that the “origins of property rights in the United States are rooted in racial domination.”³⁹ In particular, she claims that the subjugation of Black people as slaves commodified their status strictly as property.⁴⁰ Since the founding of the country, one of the government’s main priorities has been to protect the rights of property owners, resulting in further denying the humanity of Black slaves in the early stages of the country’s history.⁴¹ In other terms, since the beginning of American history, the human rights of African Americans have been denied for the sake of “protecting” the rights of property owners.

In the case of Native Americans, white Europeans conquered, removed, and exterminated entire Native American communities from their tribal lands.⁴² After doing so, they mandated that only white inhabitants were to be allowed to own and reside in the conquered lands.⁴³ Thus, being white meant having the ability to own property, and being nonwhite meant existing either as property or as displaced peoples. In addition to Harris’ claims, Ladson-Billings also contends

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*

³⁸ Harris, Cheryl. “Whiteness as Property”

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 1716

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

that race and property have been, and continue to be, intimately connected. Building on Harris' analysis, Ladson-Billings further contends that although she deeply appreciates the efforts of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement, she gently critiques the movement for its focus on human rights instead of property rights.⁴⁴ Because of the movement's failure to focus on property rights, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's did not produce its desired outcomes, such as the end of anti-blackness and all other forms of racial discrimination, which are intimately tied to the severe economic conditions of Black Americans. With this analysis, the ways race continues to be directly connected to property in the United States become even clearer.

In this context, property also refers to the amount of material wealth a group has been able to accrue. As the numbers reveal, white families continue to have greater access to property than families of color. For example, in 1986, white workers with a high school diploma earned \$3,000 per year more than African Americans with an equal level of education.⁴⁵ Fast-forward to the present day, a typical Black family earns fifty-nine cents for every dollar a typical white family earns. The significant devaluing of Black labor in comparison to white labor contributes to the drastic difference in net worth between Black families and their white counterparts—a typical Black family's net worth is \$8,000 in comparison to \$81,000 for the typical white family.⁴⁶ In other numerical terms, the typical white family's net worth is 10 times more than that of a typical Black family. As these numbers clearly reveal, Black people, as well as other people of color, remain deprived of property and other forms of economic wealth.

⁴⁴ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a critical race theory of education."

⁴⁵ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*

⁴⁶ Ibid

In terms of education, Ladson-Billings believes that those with ‘better’ property are entitled to ‘better’ schools.”⁴⁷ Given that white America continues to enjoy the capital gained from slavery and the present day forms of racial labor, this group overwhelmingly has better funded and resourced schools than those located in Black, Latinx, and American Indian communities. Thus it comes as no surprise that school funding based on property tax assessments in most local districts offer better educational opportunities to white children than to children from communities of color.⁴⁸ Inadequate funding for inner-city schools, which are overwhelmingly populated by students of color, means that youth and children of color have many inexperienced teachers and fewer counselors, are placed in larger classes, and encounter school facilities that are in very poor conditions.⁴⁹ It is these same schools that also fail to foster critical thinking, have abandoned a student-centered education, and discourage students from becoming life-long learners.⁵⁰ However, the fact that these schools operate in this inadequate manner is not entirely their fault but instead, the fault of neoliberal economic forces that have pressured many low-income schools into becoming sites of profitable investment for companies that design and sell standardized tests and curricula.⁵¹ As this example depicts, race and property largely determine the quality education a child receives.

1B. The Education Debt

The historical deprivation of property from communities of color has contributed to the “education debt.” In this section, I will attempt to describe the education debt using Ladson Billing’s scholarship as a point of departure. For the past couple of decades, the phrase

⁴⁷ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ”Toward A critical race theory of education.”, pp. 54

⁴⁸ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

“Achievement Gap” has dominated mainstream conversation about education. This phrase generally refers to the numbers noting the significant underperformance of students of color in comparison to their white counterparts. However, as Ladson-Billings argues, the conversation needs to shift from focusing on the “achievement gap” to addressing the education debt the United States has accrued since its founding. According to Ladson-Billings, heavily focusing on the achievement gap only produces short-term solutions that have historically failed to acknowledge, let alone resolve, the roots of the problem—“the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society [that] have created an education debt.”⁵² Because of the long-lasting effects that each of these decisions and policies have produced, the issue at hand is not merely a deficit; it is, by definition, a national debt. A deficit is “the amount by which a government’s, company’s, or individual’s spending exceeds income over a particular period of time,” whereas a debt is “the sum of all previously incurred annual federal deficits.”⁵³ As I will more thoroughly discuss below, each year since the country’s founding, the United States has incurred additional education deficits that have produced an enormous national education debt.

In various points in American history, education was prohibited from communities of color. In the case of African Americans, education was entirely forbidden during slavery.⁵⁴ After emancipation, schools known as “freedmen’s schools” were established to maintain the status of African Americans as servants.⁵⁵ During the long period of legal apartheid in the United States, Black students were forced to attend segregated schools that were extremely under-resourced, underfunded and, therefore, dependent on the dilapidated textbooks and materials from white

⁵² Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “From the achievement gap to the education debt,” pp. 5

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 4

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

schools.⁵⁶ For rural Black students during this time, farm labor allowed them to only attend school for four months in the entire year.⁵⁷ Similar to Black students, Native American, Latinx, and Asian American students have also been barred from accessing a formal education throughout American history.

Native American students, in particular, have not only been barred from accessing education but have also suffered from forced assimilation during the instances in which they did have access to formal schooling. Since the founding of the country, the federal government has taken primary responsibility for the education of Native Americans.⁵⁸ From the 1800s through the 1920s, federal laws and policies dispossessed tribes of agency in their education and reassigned the control of Indian education to the federal government.⁵⁹ Many of the laws and policies the federal government enacted during the 1800s and early 1900s aimed to “civilize” American Indians.⁶⁰ Numerous scholars assert that from the formation of the United States up until very recently, education in Indigenous communities had been intimately connected to a project of control and assimilation of Native Americans.⁶¹ Hence, during that time in American history, the federal government used educational systems to eradicate Native cultures, languages, and traditions. As these various moments in Native American and African American histories reveal, communities of color in the United States have far too often been barred from accessing formal education systems and in other instances, have also been forced to assimilate into white America. Therefore, on historical grounds, the United States owes communities of color for all

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ “Tribalizing Indian Education.”

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ McCardle, Peggy, and Virginia Berninger. *Narrowing the Achievement Gap for Native American Students: Paying the Educational Debt*

the times it has prohibited students from obtaining an education and for forcing assimilation upon students of color.

Socio-political decisions and policies have also contributed to the mounting education debt. Because of these decisions, communities of color have been legally excluded from engaging with the civic process.⁶² The only piece of legislation that has attempted to address this branch of the debt has been the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting. As a result of their active exclusion from the civic process, families of color have also been excluded from the decision-making tables—including parent-teacher organizations and school site councils—that have the power to improve the quality of education their children receive.⁶³ Although parents of color have been excluded from these policy-making tables, they have, nevertheless, attempted to advocate for the improvement of their children's schooling.⁶⁴ Yet because they, for the most part, do not have seats on any of these tables, their advocacy has largely been ignored and silenced.⁶⁵ And without access to lawyers and legislators, families of color have not been able to garner the same political capital that middle-class white families have accumulated throughout generations.⁶⁶ As the evidence indicates, the country's socio-political actions have also significantly increased the national education debt.

There is also, of course, an economic component to the education debt. This component also began accumulating since the founding of the country. In the case of African American students, not only did the United States refuse to invest any amount of money in the education of African Americans when they were slaves, but their enslaved labor also generated an immense

⁶² Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "From the achievement gap to the education debt"

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

amount of wealth for both white southerners and northerners. Therefore, the country owes a considerable amount of money to African Americans for robbing them of an education while simultaneously exploiting their labor so that white middle-and upper-middle-class Americans themselves could obtain an education. Fast-forward to the present day and we can still notice that African American students, as well as other students of color, remain without access to a quality education and without financial reparations. In fact, the schools and districts that are primarily comprised of students of color are overwhelmingly underfunded. The numbers do not lie—the amount of funding each school and district receives rises with an increase in the number of white students. Schools across the United States spend \$334 more on every white student than on every student of color.⁶⁷ Public school districts in both Chicago and New York further illustrate this point. Chicago public schools—which are overwhelmingly comprised of students of color—spend about \$8, 482 annually per pupil, while the nearby Highland Park public schools—a white-majority district—spend \$17, 291.⁶⁸ In addition, the New York City public schools that primarily serve Black and Latinx students spend \$11, 627 per student while Manhasset, a suburb in the state of New York that serves an almost all white student population, spends \$22, 311 per student.⁶⁹ Clearly, there is an extreme imbalance in the distribution of economic resources in districts. Indeed, race continues to determine which student groups receive funding and which remain in poverty. Therefore, in order to address the economic component of the education debt, the country not only needs to significantly increase the amount of funding given to districts and schools that primarily serve students of color, but it also needs to pay communities of color for exploiting their labor and at the same time, refusing to educate them.

⁶⁷ “Students of Color Still Receiving Unequal Education.” Center for American Progress

⁶⁸ Kozol, J. *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America.*

⁶⁹ Ibid

2. How should we understand Ethnic Studies as a field of study and how can it serve as an initial payment to this national debt?

2A. The Importance of Ethnic Studies

Since its formation, Ethnic Studies has served as a vehicle for justice. In particular, Ethnic Studies has sought to amplify the histories and voices of those communities that have been historically marginalized in the United States. As the academic text, “Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy,” asserts, “Ethnic Studies recovers and reconstructs the counter narratives, perspectives, epistemologies, and cultures of those who have been historically neglected and denied citizenship of full participation within traditional discourse and institutions, particularly highlighting the contributions people of color have made in shaping US culture and society.”⁷⁰ As this definition reveals, Ethnic Studies aims to articulate and institutionalize the narratives that the dominant account of American history has largely omitted. In doing so, Ethnic Studies serves as a vehicle for re-articulating American history, re-claiming space in the U.S., and re-imagining the country and the world more broadly as more just, safe, and equitable for all.

Because of the field’s origins and goals, Ethnic Studies can be healing for students of color. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the literal definition of the verb “to heal” is “to cause (an undesirable condition) to be overcome.” In this paper, the verb “to heal” also connotes a similar meaning. The term addresses the fact that teaching students of color to believe that everyone in the United States lives in harmony and is equal regardless of the color of their skin causes psychological harm since their daily experience of racism communicates to them the

⁷⁰ Tintiangco-Cubales, Allyson. "Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research," pp. 107

exact opposite.⁷¹ Therefore, healing refers to the ameliorating of the psychological damage this type of instruction causes by equipping students with the understandings to articulate how the injustices they experience on a daily basis are products of generations of violence and exploitation that their communities have suffered. Having these understandings also allows students of color to fight to overcome their oppressive conditions as well as strive to improve the lives of their communities. Hence, similar to the literal definition of the verb “to heal,” healing in this context also means that students are able to overcome “an undesirable condition” by fighting for and imagining a better future. Healing also means being able to recognize and engage with one’s own humanity. Fortunately, Ethnic Studies provides marginalized students with the opportunity to do exactly this.⁷² Without a deep recognition of their humanity, marginalized students struggle to develop a critical consciousness, rendering them more susceptible to falling for the most powerful predators, especially capitalism.⁷³ In engaging with their humanity, however, students of color gain the opportunity to heal from colonial trauma, “including the trauma of having learned to see oneself as academically incapable.”⁷⁴ Therefore, in this context, healing is also when historically underserved students are able to overcome academic obstacles and perform at high academic levels.

Although there are other fields of study that also allow marginalized students to engage with their humanity—such as Gender and LGBT Studies—Ethnic Studies, I argue, is the most fundamental for students of color who tend to embody an array of marginalized identities. Thus, given the strong intersectional and interdisciplinary nature of the field, Ethnic Studies also helps students of color heal from the present-day trauma they experience daily as marginalized people

⁷¹ Choi, Young W. “Ethnic Studies provide vital context for school students.”

⁷² Gutierrez, Ramon A. “Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities.”

⁷³ Romero, Augustine. “At War with the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children.”

⁷⁴ Tintiangco-Cubales, Allyson. “Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research.”

in the world. Without the critical lenses that Ethnic Studies equips students with to challenge the politics of citizenship and examine the construction of the border as an imaginary, how can school personnel expect for a child with deported parents to focus in school? Without the historical analysis that Ethnic Studies provides of the ways LGBT communities of color have survived and thrived throughout American history even in the face of severe hostility, how can a queer student of color succeed academically when their safety and survival are constantly endangered? Without Ethnic Studies' close examination of the ways class, gender, and race intersect, how can we expect for a low-income female student of color to perform well in school if her family expects her to care for her three younger siblings? In order for the learning to occur, the healing must happen first.

In cases like these—which are ubiquitous in low-income communities of color across America—Ethnic Studies provides vulnerable students with the language and frameworks to understand, articulate, and address their daily oppression. In doing so, they are able to move past their struggles and academically engage in school. The successful outcomes of Tucson's former Mexican American Studies program prove that Ethnic Studies has the power to do all of this for students.⁷⁵ In a time span of seven academic years, this program served thousands of Mexican American students. Throughout this time period, the administration conducted more than 1,900 pre- and post-course surveys.⁷⁶ These surveys demonstrated the powerful outcomes of a well-implemented, well-taught Ethnic Studies curriculum.⁷⁷ 96 percent of the students who took the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they talked to their parents and other community members

⁷⁵ Romero Augustine F. "At War With the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children"

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

about what they learned in their Ethnic Studies classes.⁷⁸ In addition, 95 percent of the students who took the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they were more motivated and willing to do homework to ensure participation in their classes.⁷⁹ Additionally, 97 percent of the students also agreed or strongly agreed that their Ethnic Studies classes better prepared them for college. Lastly, 98 percent of students also indicated that taking the Mexican American studies class awakened in them the desire to positively contribute to society and their communities.⁸⁰ As these numbers demonstrate, Ethnic Studies helps students heal, equips them with the language to understand and articulate their struggles, and in the process, stimulates them to become more academically engaged.

Therefore it comes as no surprise that research has consistently proven that Ethnic Studies courses prompt significant growth in the literacy skills of students of color.⁸¹ A recent Stanford study reveals the academic benefits of Ethnic Studies for students of color. This particular study traced the academic achievement of students “at risk for dropping out” who took a high school Ethnic Studies course.⁸² The study’s findings reveal that unlike those students who did not take such courses, these “at risk” students improved their academic performance as a direct result of undertaking an Ethnic Studies class. More specifically, researchers found that the attendance of these students increased by 21 percent and their GPA also increased by 1.4 grade points.⁸³ The study also concludes that there were positive effects across gender and racial/ethnic groups, but the group that benefitted the most from this exposure were Latino males.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Sleeter, Christine E. “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies.”

⁸² Donald, Brooke. “Stanford study suggests academic benefits to ethnic studies course.”

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

Students who undertook the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona (before the state of Arizona banned the program) also significantly improved their academic performance as a direct result of delving into Ethnic Studies. In fact, during the seven years of the program's existence, its students—who were all primarily Mexican American—outperformed all other students on the standardized graduation exam.⁸⁵ In comparison to other students who shared similar backgrounds as them, these students were more than three times as likely to pass the Reading component of this exam, four times more likely to pass the Writing section, and two-and-a-half times more likely to pass the Math unit.⁸⁶ In addition, the students who were exposed to Mexican American Studies graduated from high school at a higher rate than any other student group. More precisely, 97.5% of these students graduated from high school.⁸⁷ Lastly, because of their exposure to Ethnic Studies, these students also matriculated to college at a higher rate than the national average for Mexican American students—82.5% enrolled in post-secondary education after graduating from high school, which is 179% times greater than the national average of 24% for Mexican American students.⁸⁸ Thus, as these numbers suggest, Ethnic Studies has the power to significantly improve the academic achievement of students of color, and therefore, help pay the national education debt.

Furthermore, studies have also proven Ethnic Studies courses as having a greater positive impact on white students than on students of color.⁸⁹ Since racial systems of dominance do not inflict violence upon white students—unlike students of color who daily experience the material consequences of racism—they tend to immensely benefit from being exposed to a systemic

⁸⁵ Romero Augustine F. “At War With the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children”

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid

analysis of power.⁹⁰ In this context, the verb “to benefit” refers to white students developing an understanding of the ways power and racial inequalities operate in America and the world at large. Doing so encourages them to recognize their own privilege, challenge systems of oppression in their daily lives, and join the fight for a better future. Given this outcome, Ethnic Studies helps students bridge differences that exist in their diverse set of viewpoints and experiences;⁹¹ Young Whan Choi, a strong Ethnic Studies advocate, shares, “As students explore the experiences of people of different backgrounds, they learn not to treat their identities as boxes that separate them from one another but rather as threads that are interwoven into the fabric of our shared humanity.”⁹² As Choi’s comment suggests, Ethnic Studies helps students pinpoint their similarities and mobilize those similarities for social, political, and economic good. In other terms, Ethnic Studies not only benefits students of color, it benefits all students, and in doing so, it helps create a better world.

Yet even with this published research, those who oppose Ethnic Studies continue to voice opinions that research has repeatedly disproven. For example, Arizona State decided to ban the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson with the reasoning that these classes “promoted resentment toward a race or class of people,”⁹³ along with other fundamentally flawed reasons. However, as the National Education Association (NAE) has both argued and proven, Ethnic Studies does not create resentment towards a group of people but instead, it encourages the fostering of rapport between distinct groups and bridges their existing differences—⁹⁴indeed, although Ethnic Studies does specifically empower students of color and improves their

⁹⁰ Sleeter, Christine E. “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies.”

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Choi, Young W. “Ethnic Studies provide vital context for school students.”

⁹³ Barr, Andy. “Arizona Bans Ethnic Studies”

⁹⁴ Refer to Sleeter, Christine E. “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies” for additional data

academic performance, this field of study also profoundly benefits white students as well as creates links between all groups of people.

2B. Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory, and the Education Debt

However, in order to have Ethnic Studies curriculum and pedagogy reach their highest potential and become a substantial payment to the education debt, Critical Race Theory must be at the core of Ethnic Studies. In particular, Ethnic Studies must have at its basis the following three components of Critical Race Theory that Ladson-Billings sets forth: “(1) Race continues to be significant in the United States; (2) Stories or counter-narratives are useful in explaining how racism operates; and (3) it employs critical social science.”⁹⁵ By using this framework, in this section I hope to illustrate how these three components of Critical Race Theory—as well as other facets of CRT— intersect with Ethnic Studies in such a way that can help pay the national education debt.

The first pillar of CRT argues that racial oppression continues to be fundamentally pervasive in American society. Likewise, the very basis of Ethnic Studies is that historically, power has been unequally distributed among different groups in the United States. In fact, Ethnic Studies reveals that forms of structural violence, such as homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny, are clear indicators of the vast power inequities entrenched within the fabric of American society. As these bases suggests, Ethnic Studies also places race and racism in the forefront of discourse and action, the way Critical Race Theory does. Ethnic Studies has achieved what Critical Race Theory has strongly promoted since its founding in the 1990’s— combatting racial marginalization, alleviating racial tensions, and bridging differences between different racial groups. Given that the education system has done the opposite and perpetuated

⁹⁵ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ”Toward A critical race theory of education.” pp. 47

racial inequality, having a curriculum that aims to contest racism is in itself a first payment to the education debt.

The second pillar of CRT claims that transgressing the single narrative helps depict how racial oppression functions on both individual and systemic levels. Ethnic Studies transgresses that single narrative by providing the rich and complex stories of marginalized communities in the United States. By weaving the histories, lives, and cultures of marginalized students as part of official school curriculum, Ethnic Studies not only validates the existence of students of color, but in doing so, it also exposes racism. Through storytelling, empowerment, and resistance, Ethnic Studies aims to dismantle racist structures. With the goals of depicting the ways racism operates in the United States and advancing justice and peace, Ethnic Studies uses Critical Race Theory by providing counter-narratives to the dominant account of American history to both students of color and white students. And through the usage of these counter-narratives, Ethnic Studies gives a voice to the voiceless. In strengthening the voice of students who have been historically silenced, Ethnic Studies, in turn, pays the education debt because finally, students of color are able to develop a better sense of their histories and have the understandings to imagine a better future for themselves and their families.

The third pillar of Critical Race Theory, as Ladson-Billings asserts, is that it actively engages with critical social science. In other terms, CRT is not limited to a single social science arena but rather, it draws upon various bodies of knowledge within the realm of social science. Ethnic Studies takes on a similar approach. As mentioned earlier, Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study. It not only incorporates social science but also economics, political science, history, and other fields of inquiry. In doing so, Ethnic Studies employs a variety of analytical lenses to understand and challenge hegemonic structures of power both

domestically and internationally. Since both CRT and Ethnic Studies have similar approaches, having the two fields interact more closely in a K-12 context would provide a high quality education to students—an education I coin here as a Critical Race Education. This high quality education, in turn, would equip students with the critical thinking skills, knowledge, and tools to uplift themselves and their communities even in the face of extremely oppressive conditions, with racism being one of the most oppressive. Since the United States has historically deprived students of color from a quality education, finally providing them with a Critical Race Education would also reduce the education debt the country continues to accrue.

In addition to these benefits, Ethnic Studies in a K-12 level also carries the possibility of radically transforming our current education system into one that promotes justice and challenges institutional oppression. However, this is only possible if policymakers believe in the transformative power of Ethnic Studies as a field of study that can offer students a Critical Race Education. If policymakers are truly committed to improving the national education system, they must develop and implement policies that make a Critical Race Education more accessible to students. However, educating students is not enough. In addition to improving education, policymakers must also develop policies that aim to actively challenge racism in schools. Indeed, providing an anti-racist education is insufficient, especially since the education system is one of the driving forces that has perpetuated racism by instilling racist ideologies in students at an early age and reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. Therefore, there is no way that the education debt can be paid without first acknowledging and addressing the ways policymakers and schools themselves have played pivotal roles in the accumulation of such a massive debt.

Along the same vein, it is absolutely important to note that the education debt is not simply a product of the general American public who believed in the inherent inferiority of

people of color.⁹⁶ Instead, all the major leaders who endorsed racist and xenophobic ideas about people of color and turned those “beliefs” into national, state, and local policies were the principal actors who drove the formation of the education debt.⁹⁷ It is these same leaders who have also consistently refused to pay the education debt by neglecting to provide a higher quality education to students of color. The 1973 *San Antonio Independent School District v Rodriguez* case perfectly illustrates this refusal and neglect. In this case, the Supreme Court recognized that the Mexican American students in San Antonio were receiving a second-rate education in comparison to the city’s white students.⁹⁸ However, the court nevertheless ruled that since education is “not so fundamentally a right” to the extent that it requires constitutional protection, the lower courts did not have the power to order an equalization of resources to Mexican American students.⁹⁹ The outcomes of this case depict that even when those in power are offered an opportunity to pay the education debt, they often refuse to do so.

However, it is not too late to address these longstanding injustices. In fact, when politicians and policymakers decide to pay the education debt, significant positive results will immediately yield. However, the question then becomes—what would the payments to this national debt actually look like? In addition to providing a high quality education, paying the education debt also means allocating school resources and funding to primarily low-income students, many of who are also students of color. Doing so would prevent a deficit, which often leads to a wide array of social problems including, crime, low productivity, low wages, and low labor force participation.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, in order to properly address these issues and close the

⁹⁶ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “Toward A critical race theory of education.”

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “Toward A critical race theory of education.”

achievement gap, the country first needs to pay the education debt. Additionally, scholarship and mainstream conversation need to shift from viewing students of color in a “deficit” lens to acknowledging the structural inequalities that have led them to severely underperform in school. In having this shift, the conversation must also begin brainstorming creative solutions that can potentially serve as additional payments to the debt.

As I have argued, including Ethnic Studies in K-12 curriculum can serve as an initial payment to the mounting education debt. Unlike the very poor education that schools have historically offered communities of color, Ethnic Studies, on the other hand, provides students of color with a Critical Race Education. Providing this kind of high caliber education to marginalized students would begin to more systemically address the historical neglect that they have experienced in the education system. Furthermore, by validating and cultivating the voices of students of color, Ethnic Studies encourages them—and their families—to become more actively engaged in the civic process. Since Ethnic Studies also reminds students of their power to change existing political and social structures, Ethnic Studies further awakens their political consciousness. In other words, Ethnic Studies can serve as a vehicle to get more students of color to become more politically engaged. By having students become more politically active, communities of color would then be able to begin garnering the political capital they have been deprived of throughout American history. Indeed, Ethnic Studies would be a significant payment to the political, historical, and economic components of the education debt.

3. How can we understand the Ethnic Studies Movement in California, and, in particular, its recent passage of AB-2016 Ethnic Studies, as it relates to paying the education debt?

The teaching of Ethnic Studies in the K-12 level has faced both strong support and opposition in Arizona, Texas, and California. Although some schools and teachers achieved some progress in the development of Ethnic Studies courses in Tucson, Arizona during the early 2000s, on April 29, 2010, Arizona State Legislature passed HB 2281 which abolished the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American/Raza Studies program.¹⁰¹ In Texas, there has been a constant struggle to include Mexican American Studies within official K-12 curricula. Most recently in Texas, grassroots activism forced state legislators to reject a book that perpetuated harmful stereotypes of Mexican Americans, contained an array of factual errors, and overall, promoted racism.¹⁰² On the other end of the spectrum, California has made long strides in its Ethnic Studies movement. Although some schools in California have been teaching Ethnic Studies since the 1960's, the state has now begun to officially embed Ethnic Studies within its public school curricula.¹⁰³ Given that California, in comparison to Arizona and Texas, has achieved the most success in this area, this section will focus on the California Ethnic Studies movement, highlighting its most recent development—the passage of Assembly Bill 2016 Ethnic Studies in September 2016.

Before specifying the ways this paper will examine the bill, it is fundamental to place AB-2016 in the context of a series of overtly discriminatory policies passed in California during the late 20th century. The particular policies were Propositions 187, 209, and 227. Proposition 187 aimed to make undocumented immigrants residing in California ineligible for public social services, public health care services, and public education at all levels.¹⁰⁴ Although it passed with

¹⁰¹ Romero, Augustine. "At War with the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children."

¹⁰² Isensee, Laura. "Texas Textbook Called Out As 'Racist' Against Mexican-Americans"

¹⁰³ Janofksy, Michael. "Ethnic Studies gaining momentum after slow growth in California"

¹⁰⁴ "California Proposition 187, Illegal Aliens Ineligible for Public Benefits (1994)"

a 59% vote in 1994, the federal courts ruled it to be unconstitutional.¹⁰⁵ In 1996, Proposition 209 ended affirmative action at all governmental institutions¹⁰⁶ and in 1998, Proposition 227 limited bilingual education in public schools.¹⁰⁷ Data indicates that these racially charged propositions reversed the trend among Latinx and some white voters in California from identifying as Republican to classifying as Democrat.¹⁰⁸ In addition, these propositions also mobilized Latinx communities in California to exercise their voting rights more frequently, and now, there is more Latinx representation in California's Legislature.¹⁰⁹ These changes in California's political landscape laid the foundational political ground that allowed for the passage of AB-2016. Without a more progressive political climate than the one in the late 1990's, California would have never been able to pass such a progressive bill. Indeed, AB-2016 may very well be a response to the educational discrimination that has been legally intact in California since the late 20th century.

This context allows us to better understand and question AB-2016. Since this bill mandates the development of an Ethnic Studies model curriculum for California's public schools, this section will seek to answer the following sub-questions: What is Ethnic Studies and why is this topic of study immensely beneficial not only for students of color but for all students? What were the specific factors that motivated California to pass this bill? What are the limitations of AB-2016 Ethnic Studies? How can the state improve the bill's objectives and address its potential limitations before they materialize? While fleshing out answers to these questions, this section will argue that Ethnic Studies has profoundly benefited all students

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ "California Affirmative Action, Proposition 209 (1996)"

¹⁰⁷ "California Proposition 227, the 'English in Public Schools' Initiative (1998) "

¹⁰⁸ Bowler, Shaun, Nicholson, Stephen P., Segura, Gary M. "Earthquakes and Aftershocks: Race, Direct Democracy, and Partisan Change."

¹⁰⁹ Mason, Melanie. "Report shows Latinos are underrepresented in state, local government"

because of its roots in the study of power and the liberation of all marginalized peoples; however, since AB-2016 defines Ethnic Studies as the appreciation of cultures and groups of people, the bill's version of "Ethnic Studies" will fail to improve the academic performance of students of color in California. Yet if the bill changes its definition of Ethnic Studies and strives to also encourage educators to teach Ethnic Studies with culturally responsive pedagogy, the bill can serve as a substantial payment to the national education debt.

3A. The Battle for Ethnic Studies in California

Ethnic Studies as a critical field of inquiry and scholarship was a product of student activism in the late 1960's in California. This activism, in particular, rejected mainstream assimilation and demanded for more representation, self-determination, and safe spaces for students of color at institutions of higher learning.¹¹⁰ The activism began as a direct result of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement in the United States that allowed unprecedented numbers of students of color to enroll and attend higher education institutions.¹¹¹ Due to this dramatic growth, students of color began to wield more power on American college campuses and began demanding for programs of study—among other important requests—devoted to the study of Black, Asian American, Native American, and Mexican culture and history.¹¹² After long and intense protests, universities across California began to develop curriculum, programs, and centers devoted to the study of race and power inequalities more broadly, with the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University leading the movement.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Guitierrez, Ramon A. "Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities"

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Ibid

On the K-12 level, Ethnic Studies has been taught in California public schools since the late 1960s.¹¹⁴ However, this subject of study has only recently been officially embedded within California's public school curriculum. In 2014, El Rancho Unified School District became the first school district in California—and in the United States—to mandate Ethnic Studies to be a high school requirement.¹¹⁵ In Northern California, San Francisco Unified School District began offering Ethnic Studies as an elective course as part of a 2010 pilot program in five high schools.¹¹⁶ Given the program's success, in December 2014, the school board unanimously voted to expand the program to the city's 18 public high schools during the 2014-2015 academic year.¹¹⁷ Oakland Unified, Los Angeles, San Diego, and over 25 other local districts in California have also begun to offer Ethnic Studies courses within their respective high schools. In 2015, Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution that requires all of its public high schools to offer Ethnic Studies within three years.¹¹⁸ This resolution also mandates a team of teachers to develop a comprehensive framework for the district's Ethnic Studies Program.¹¹⁹ In Los Angeles, a school board resolution passed in November 2014 mandated that an Ethnic Studies course be a requirement for graduation, beginning with the graduating class of 2019.¹²⁰ However, although this resolution was passed two years ago, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is only now taking tangible steps to accomplish their goal of making Ethnic Studies be a graduation requirement in every high school in LA.¹²¹ Down south in San Diego in 2015, the Board of Education of the San Diego Unified School District mandated a resolution for the

¹¹⁴ Janofksy, Michael. "Ethnic Studies gaining momentum after slow growth in California"

¹¹⁵ MySPNN. "Jose Lara-Morning Keynote Address-MnEEP- 2016 Conference."

¹¹⁶ Janofksy, Michael. "Ethnic Studies gaining momentum after slow growth in California"

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Wang, Francis K. "Oakland Schools Join Others in CA in requiring Ethnic Studies"

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Janofksy, Michael. "Ethnic Studies gaining momentum after slow growth in California"

¹²¹ Szymanski, Mike. "Ethnic Studies Classes Get Renewed After Stalling."

creation of an Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee.¹²² Of course, the kinds of Ethnic Studies that have been implemented are based on the particular needs of the student demographics of each respective school district. However, even though the classes may be slightly different depending on each school and district, according to the limited data available, these Ethnic Studies classes all have roots in the study of structural inequality.¹²³ Hence, as these advancements clearly indicate, many school districts in California are committed to implementing Ethnic Studies at the local level with the end goal of helping their students succeed.

Of course, in all of these districts, none of these different resolutions would have been possible without the activism of grassroots actors. Advocacy organizations such as “Ethnic Studies Now!” have exerted pressure on all of these school districts by mobilizing student activists, drafting and circulating petitions, meeting with school administrators, among other tactics. In Los Angeles, when school educators observed Arizona dismantle Tucson’s Mexican American Studies Program in 2010, they figured that the best way to show solidarity to their colleagues in Arizona was to draft letters and fundraise for them.¹²⁴ After completing these tasks, however, they then learned that the best form of expressing solidarity was to develop their own Ethnic Studies curriculum in Los Angeles.¹²⁵ Before delving into action, however, these educators examined the state of Ethnic Studies in California. In conducting this research, they learned that only 0.26% of students in California were enrolled in an Ethnic Studies course, 11.5% of school districts in the state offered Ethnic Studies courses, and more specific to Los Angeles, only 0.001% of students were enrolled in an Ethnic Studies course in LAUSD.¹²⁶ After gathering the data, these educators met with local policymakers, voiced their demands to develop

¹²² Chapman, Thandeka. “Ethnic Studies courses benefit all students”

¹²³ Szymanski, Mike. “Ethnic Studies Classes Get Renewed After Stalling.”

¹²⁴ MySPNN. “Jose Lara-Morning Keynote Address-MnEEP- 2016 Conference.”

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Ibid

an Ethnic Studies curriculum, and then mobilized the community to exert pressure on the School Board.¹²⁷ Because of this activism, in 2014, LAUSD passed a piece of legislation in favor of making Ethnic Studies a high school requirement.¹²⁸ When this policy passed, many school districts across California began to join the movement, increasing the demand for Ethnic Studies in the state's public schools.

Prominent teacher leaders such as Mr. José Lara and Jorge Lopez played—and continue to play—critical roles in advancing the Ethnic Studies movement not only in Los Angeles but also in California in general.¹²⁹ For instance, as a way to make the educators' Ethnic Studies agenda a reality, Mr. Lara ran for school board in El Rancho Unified; his political platform advocated for the inclusion of an Ethnic Studies curriculum within the district's public schools.¹³⁰ With the support of community members, Mr. Lara was able to secure a seat at the School Board. Once he began this role, Mr. Lara quickly began to develop Ethnic Studies legislation. In drafting the policy, Mr. Lara strategized ways he could work with community partnerships—including universities, advocacy organizations, and community members—to develop the best piece of legislation possible and to, therefore, strengthen the proposed Ethnic Studies curriculum.¹³¹ Other teachers in El Rancho Unified also took the initiative to advance the movement by developing Ethnic Studies classes from scratch.¹³² For example, one educator developed a course that specifically examined the issues that women of color encounter.¹³³ In addition to employing these strategies and empowering their students by effectively teaching

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Planas, Roque. "California Bill Would Require High Schools to Offer Ethnic Studies."

¹³⁰ MySPNN. "Jose Lara-Morning Keynote Address-MnEEP- 2016 Conference."

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

Ethnic Studies, these teacher leaders have also voiced their strong support of Ethnic Studies through a variety of other channels, ranging from presentations in formal educational spaces to op-eds in multiple newspaper outlets. All in all, these teachers were the driving forces that began the Ethnic Studies movement in California—they were the agents who created, expanded, and continue to lead this very important movement.

Partly because of this activism and as a direct response to the shut down of the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona, Assemblyman Luis Alejo (D-Salinas) has emerged as a leader of the Ethnic Studies movement in California. In an interview, Assemblyman Alejo admits that he developed an unwavering commitment to weaving Ethnic Studies into California's statewide curriculum as a "direct response to what was happening in Tucson... We're not talking about banning courses.... Ethnic Studies are important and should be available at earlier grades."¹³⁴ Through this testimony, Alejo not only recognizes the importance of Ethnic Studies, but he also publicly presents himself as a strong advocate for the teaching of Ethnic Studies in California. As a Chicano Studies and Political Science double major graduate from UC Berkeley, Assemblyman Alejo has firsthand benefited from the exposure to Ethnic Studies.

Given his educational background and commitment to Ethnic Studies, Assemblyman Alejo has proposed a handful of Ethnic Studies bills in the past few years, even though he recognized from the outset that passing these bills would be very challenging given the high costs it would take to develop and implement an Ethnic Studies curriculum. In 2014, Assemblyman Alejo introduced Assembly Bill 1750. This particular bill would have required California's Instructional Quality Commission to identify model programs, standards, and

¹³⁴ Ibid

curricula relating to Ethnic Studies at the high school level.¹³⁵ However, the significant advancements that local districts achieved in their respective Ethnic Studies ventures in 2015 urged Assemblyman Alejo to propose a more comprehensive bill in September 2015. The new Ethnic Studies bill, AB-101, would have required the Superintendent of Public Instruction to oversee the development of a model curriculum in Ethnic Studies, the adoption of that model by the state board, and the establishment of an Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee.¹³⁶ Lastly, the bill would have authorized each school district to adopt its model of curriculum.

Unfortunately, Governor Jerry Brown vetoed the bill with the reasoning that creating another advisory body specific to Ethnic Studies would have been redundant since the Instructional Quality Commission had already begun revising state standards to include Ethnic Studies.¹³⁷ Not only did this veto greatly disappoint Assemblyman Alejo, but it also signified a blow to California's Ethnic Studies movement. Along with Alejo, teachers, advocacy organizations, and other grassroots actors expressed disappointment towards the decision. However, this setback did not prevent them from continuing to demand for a statewide curriculum in Ethnic Studies. Organizations like "Ethnic Studies Now!" and even Assemblyman Alejo himself continued their work on this cause immediately after the veto. In fact, in 2016, Alejo proposed yet another Ethnic Studies bill, which was named strategically to pressure policymakers to pass it the same year it was introduced.¹³⁸ As a result, on February 16, 2016, Assemblyman Alejo introduced AB-2016 Ethnic Studies to the California State Assembly.

3B. Assembly Bill 2016 Ethnic Studies

¹³⁵ "Assembly Bill 1750"

¹³⁶ "Assembly Bill 101"

¹³⁷ Cesar, Stephen. "California Gov. Jerry Brown vetoes ethnic studies bill"

¹³⁸ MySPNN. "Jose Lara-Morning Keynote Address-MnEEP- 2016 Conference."

As a result of effective political mobilization and activism, on September 12, 2016, Governor Brown signed AB-2016 Ethnic Studies. When this bill was passed, there was much celebration across California. The teacher leader, Mr. Lara, expressed happiness and was optimistic that this bill would help spread Ethnic Studies across the country.¹³⁹ Nolan Cabrera, an education professor at the University of Arizona, also expressed similar sentiments as Mr. Lara when he admitted to thinking that this bill is the most important piece of Ethnic Studies legislation that has been passed in the United States.¹⁴⁰ Along the same sentiment, Cabrera also reported, “There’s a saying that ‘as California goes so goes the rest of the country.’ And this is looking very promising not just for students in California, but for those in the rest of the country as this becomes a more accepted educational practice.”¹⁴¹ Similar to Cabrera, Javier San Roman, a Los Angeles Unified administrator, also found the bill to be very encouraging and believed that with this bill, it will be much easier for other school districts that wish to offer Ethnic Studies to adopt the statewide standard version of these courses.¹⁴² This overwhelmingly positive reaction to the bill begs the following question—what are the particularities of AB-2016 that drew this level of celebration and optimism from all these actors?

Unlike AB-101, AB-2016 does not require the teaching of Ethnic Studies in schools. More specifically, AB-2016 articulates two decrees—to develop a model curriculum in Ethnic Studies as well as to encourage those schools that currently do not offer Ethnic Studies to adopt the proposed model. According to the bill, the Instructional Quality Commission will be the entity developing this model curriculum with the participation from a body of experts ranging from faculty of Ethnic Studies programs at universities to K-12 teachers who have relevant

¹³⁹ Planas, Roque. “California Passes Game-Changing Ethnic Studies Bill”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Simón, Yara. “California’s Push to Provide Ethnic Studies for all High Schools is a Model.”

¹⁴² Ibid

experience or educational background in the study and teaching of Ethnic Studies. The bill also expects the Instructional Quality Commission to submit a proposed model curriculum to the state board for approval on or before December 31, 2019. After this proposed curriculum is drafted, the state will then open the model curriculum for public commentary during a 45-day window. Once all of these steps are taken, the state board will adopt a revised model curriculum on or before March 31, 2020, enabling schools to adopt the model for the 2020-2021 school year.

Given that this curriculum will serve as the official Ethnic Studies curriculum in California and also as a potential model for other states, it is critical to identify its potential limitations. Most fundamentally, AB-2016 treats Ethnic Studies as multiculturalist studies by proposing a curriculum that will sugarcoat the histories and existences of marginalized peoples in the United States. In Section 1 part j, the bill reads, “The implementation of various ethnic studies courses within California’s curriculum...with the objective of preparing pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures...” By using words such as “appreciation,” “contributions,” and “cultures” to describe the bill’s objective, the policy suggests that the model curriculum’s focus will not be the study of power. Rather, the curriculum will package the histories of people of color in the United States in a “contributions” fashion; in such a way that it emphasizes the “cultures” of communities of color and thus ignores the oppression, marginalization, and violence they have suffered throughout American history.

Unlike the way the bill defines the field, Ethnic Studies is not the same as multicultural studies. Unlike Ethnic Studies, multiculturalism is rooted in pluralism—an idea that asserts that American culture is a “democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by

recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion.”¹⁴³ As this definition suggests, pluralism portrays the United States as the promise land in which inequality is minimal and everyone—regardless of background—has equal access and opportunity. By having these ideas at its core, multiculturalism also masks the existence of exclusions by focusing on “culture” and “diversity” instead of systematically analyzing the ways different constituencies in the United States have suffered and continue to suffer from severe inequalities. Instead, multiculturalism simply highlights the “appreciation” of people and focuses on what their “diverse” cultures have to offer American life and culture. In more simple terms, multiculturalism fails to come to grips with power inequities that have permeated American history and structures.

Ethnic Studies, on the other hand, is not an “appreciation” of a group of people. On the contrary, Ethnic Studies examines and dismantles systems of power. As a product of student civil disobedience against white hegemony in the late 1960’s,¹⁴⁴ Ethnic Studies is inherently a contestation of dominance. As the scholar Ramon Gutierrez describes the field, “...[Ethnic Studies] looks at social relations from the bottom up, from the vantage point of those who are powerless or marginalized, and are rooted in the lived historical memories of slavery, racism, and victimization, and physical and psychological damage.”¹⁴⁵ Here, Gutierrez indicates that Ethnic Studies is a critical examination of the world through the eyes of the marginalized, from “the bottom up”; it is a field that articulates the lived historical memories of violence that communities of color have experienced in the United States and beyond. Thus, unlike the way AB-2016 defines this field of study, Ethnic Studies is not an appreciation of the contributions of cultures; it is, instead, a field rooted in justice and the liberation of all marginalized peoples.

¹⁴³ Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, pp. 101

¹⁴⁴ Gutierrez, Ramon. “Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities”

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 7

Therefore—and as I have argued previously—due to the fruitful exposures that Ethnic Studies offers, students of color who have undertaken such courses have experienced increased levels in their academic achievement.¹⁴⁶ The bill itself recognizes the benefits of having students of color engage academically with this subject of study. For example, on Section 1 part e, the bill lists all the rich benefits that Ethnic Studies has on “pupils” of color, such as helping them become more academically engaged and helping them develop a sense of self-efficacy and personal empowerment. However, these benefits are products of the critical theory and pedagogy that accompany Ethnic Studies as a field rooted in the study of power. Hence, if the bill packages Ethnic Studies as an “appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures,” students of color will continue to see their histories and existence in the United States and world more broadly as merely contributions. The National Education Association argues that one of the main reasons why students of color continue to lag behind academically is precisely due to the fact that they are consistently added in a “contributions” fashion to the predominately Euro-American narrative of textbooks.¹⁴⁷ Bearing this idea in mind and given that most of California’s student body is of color, improving AB-2016 becomes even more critical. Below is an ethnic/racial breakdown of the students enrolled in California’s public schools.

California	Percent
African American/Black	5.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.6%
Asian/Asian American	8.9%
Filipino	2.5%
Hispanic/Latino	54.0%

¹⁴⁶ “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

California	Percent
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5%
White	24.1%
Multiracial	3.1%

Figure 1. “Public School Enrollment, by Race/Ethnicity.” *Kidsdata.org*. Accessed February 12, 2017. Published in 2016.

This graph reveals that more than 75% of students enrolled in California’s public schools are students of color. Given these numbers, if AB-2016 Ethnic Studies aims to close the “achievement gap” and empower students of color, it must reframe its definition of Ethnic Studies from a contributions fashion to a systemic analysis of power in American society and the world at large. In making these changes, the bill would inherently become one of California’s weighty payments to the country’s education debt.

3C Curricular and Pedagogical Challenges

In addition to reframing its definition of Ethnic Studies, AB-2016 must also address the curricular and pedagogical challenges that will surely arise with its implementation. Doing so will be particularly important in ensuring that the bill does become a substantial payment to the education debt. In order to accomplish this goal and guarantee that Ethnic Studies continues to yield positive outcomes, the courses must be well implemented as well as based on a “decolonizing curriculum.” A body of scholars has several recommendations for schools and administrators in their development of an effective “decolonizing curriculum.” They first define an effective Ethnic Studies curriculum as one that strongly encourages students to practice deep, critical thinking of their history and culture.¹⁴⁸ Secondly, they recommend that the curriculum

¹⁴⁸ Tintiango-Cubales, Allyson. "Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research"

should also allow students to fully experience all the emotions—such as mourning, confusion, excitement, and passion—that inherently come with learning about violence, oppression, and hope.¹⁴⁹ In addition, the curriculum must also foster a safe space for marginalized students to come together to create a positive learning community.¹⁵⁰ Their fourth recommendation is that this curriculum should also equip students with skills that have the potential to serve them both personally and professionally.¹⁵¹ Lastly, the scholars further define an effective Ethnic Studies curriculum as one that encourages students to become involved with activism and other forms of social action.¹⁵² Only if AB-2016 develops Ethnic Studies courses that meet these requirements as well as decolonizes and teaches students to challenge all forms of oppression will the students—both white and of color—reap the benefits that research has repeatedly documented. Having a strong “decolonizing” curriculum, in turn, would make AB-2016 Ethnic Studies a more substantial payment to the education debt.

However, a strong curriculum can only do so much in improving the academic achievement of students. For example, even though a great curriculum can be available for educators, if an educator fails to teach its content correctly and effectively, then the curriculum itself loses all of its potential. As this example suggests, teachers cannot solely depend on a curriculum to provide a high quality education to students; in addition to having a well implemented, decolonizing curriculum, educators must also use other tools. In particular, Ethnic Studies teachers should also incorporate effective pedagogical strategies. Research indicates that in order to successfully teach Ethnic Studies, the concepts of access, relevance, and community,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² ibid

or better known as “ARC,” must be carefully embedded within the teacher’s pedagogy.¹⁵³ The access component of ARC refers to offering educational opportunities that are of high quality to students of color as well as demanding educational institutions to admit a larger number of students of color.¹⁵⁴ The relevance component frames these educational opportunities as being directly relevant to the lives of students of color.¹⁵⁵ Lastly, the community section of ARC aims to have Ethnic Studies help formal educational spaces facilitate students’ involvement with their communities and encourage them to participate in social action.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, AB-2016 needs to develop Ethnic Studies courses that are responsive to the diverse communities that make up the fabric of California. If AB-2016 fails to develop a statewide Ethnic Studies model curriculum that is malleable enough for each district and school to mold to fit their particular community needs, then the bill will not yield its proposed outcomes.

In addition to ARC and in order for the bill to achieve its proposed goals, the bill must also ensure that Ethnic Studies teachers carefully weave culturally responsive pedagogy into their classrooms. Cultural Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is an educational approach that aims to increase the engagement and academic achievement of students of color by carefully incorporating the diverse cultures of students of color into lesson planning and teaching. In addition to increasing student engagement and achievement, CRP also seeks to empower historically underserved students “socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”¹⁵⁷ As this excerpt reveals, CRP rigorously incorporates students’ cultures into teaching in order to benefit marginalized students not only

¹⁵³ Tintiangco-Cubales, Allyson. "Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research"

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Simmons, D. (2016) *Emotional Intelligence*

for the mere sake of their intellectual development but rather, with the end goal of helping facilitate their entire development as people. In order to accomplish this goal, CRP encourages teachers to view pedagogy as a “two-way communicative process” in which students are in the center of teaching and learning while the only functions of teachers are to facilitate and support student learning.¹⁵⁸ In other words, CRP shies away from the traditional pedagogical model of having the teacher “impart” knowledge to the students. Instead, CRP provides a framework in which teachers encourage students to take ownership of their learning by asking them questions that provoke critical conversations, implementing creative and culturally relevant learning activities, and allowing students to use community circumstances as official knowledge. Indeed, culturally responsive pedagogy engages students in the classroom not as consumers but as producers of knowledge¹⁵⁹ and as drivers of their own learning. Thus, the more AB-2016 encourages teachers to actively incorporate CRP, the more substantial of a payment it becomes.

Including CRP into classrooms is especially important for the most vulnerable student groups. Research indicates that the students of color who refuse to assimilate into the dominant white culture are much more likely to underperform in school.¹⁶⁰ This pattern can be attributed to the current organization of schools. This organization only allows students of color to succeed academically if they adopt the cultural practices of white middle-class students.¹⁶¹ Through culturally responsive pedagogy, however, teachers are able to challenge this malpractice by inculcating in students a deep appreciation of their own culture. More specifically, through CRP, teachers do not force students of color to adopt white cultural practices, but instead, they encourage them to embrace their own particular cultures. African Americans are an example of a

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy."

¹⁶⁰ Ware, Franita. "Warm Demander Pedagogy: Culturally Responsive Teaching that Supports a Culture of Achievement for African American Students."

¹⁶¹ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy."

student group that constantly experiences these patterns. In schools across the country, many African-American students are forced to negotiate scholastic demands while also exhibiting cultural competence.¹⁶² Since academic achievement has been linked to adhering to white cultural norms, many African-American students fear being labeled “white” by their peers if they perform well academically, are able to articulate themselves in complex manners, and/or if they are invested in their learning.¹⁶³ However, CRP allows, and even encourages, African-American students to express themselves in their own cultural dress, language style, and interaction styles while also succeeding academically.¹⁶⁴ In other terms, teachers who implement CRP do not force African-American students to abandon their cultural practices in order to be deemed academically capable or high achieving. As this example suggests, culturally responsive pedagogy does not equate performing white culture to being academically competent; instead, it encourages students to embrace their own cultural forms of expression and behavior to reach their highest academic potential.

In addition to these strategies, CRP also encourages teachers to implement other educational practices in their classrooms to ensure student success. In particular, CRP urges teachers to prevent students from choosing failure in their classrooms.¹⁶⁵ By implementing CRP, teachers should strongly believe that every student is more than capable of succeeding. Additionally, CRP encourages educators to focus their teaching on mastery instead of coverage;¹⁶⁶ teaching should not be about how much a teacher covers, but rather, it should focus on how well a student learns about each topic covered. Moreover, culturally responsive

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Loyola University. “Getting Serious about Education: Culturally Relevant Teaching for New Century Students.”

teachers should reject competition and individualism in their classrooms and instead actively nurture a community of learners.¹⁶⁷ Implementing all of the practices engages students and keeps them in the classroom and off the streets. As research indicates, teaching that disregards student modes of behavior and verbal expression provokes student resistance.¹⁶⁸ Yet with CRP, teachers have the opportunity to prevent that resistance, and in doing so, they dramatically increase student engagement and academic performance by expressing a deep appreciation of the wide range of cultures their students bring to the classroom. If AB-2016's aim is to reap these sorts of benefits for California's students, its model curriculum must be developed in such a way that it encourages teachers to actively incorporate CRP. Of course, the aim of curriculum is not to improve an educator's teaching, but rather, to solely improve the content that is delivered in the classroom. However, it is my hope that having a well-implemented curriculum will flag the need for high quality professional development that equips Ethnic Studies educators with the tools necessary to successfully translate a promising curriculum into effective, culturally competent teaching.

Certainly, carefully implementing culturally responsive pedagogy into the classroom is incredibly difficult. In fact, developing effective teaching practices is in itself very challenging. Requiring a teacher to be both highly effective and culturally competent is a very ambitious expectation, given that many teacher education programs in the United States have long been criticized for being ineffective, unresponsive to new demands, too focused on theory, and failing to attract bright, talented college graduates.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, what I propose here is much more complicated than it appears, and it may take many steps and years before it becomes a reality.

¹⁶⁷ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy."

¹⁶⁸ Wlodkowski, R. J., & Ginsberg, M. B.. "A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching."

¹⁶⁹ Darling-Hammond, "How Teacher Education Matters"

However, as it stands now, having an Ethnic Studies curriculum will not be enough. As a result, I remain hopeful that one of the indirect effects of AB-2016 will be to prompt the development of high caliber teacher education programs that specifically cater to prospective Ethnic Studies teachers. By having Ethnic Studies teacher education programs that are of high quality, prospective educators will be much better prepared to deliver Ethnic Studies courses that are rigorous, community and culturally responsive, and directly relevant to the lives of students.

Additionally, Ethnic Studies pedagogy must also accomplish its promise of decolonization as well as challenge systems of oppression in order for marginalized students to fully reap its benefits. In the words of Mr. Lara, “You can’t have a great Ethnic Studies curriculum and still teach in an oppressive manner that dehumanizes [students].”¹⁷⁰ With culturally responsive pedagogy, however, Ethnic Studies teachers can teach in effective, engaging, creative, and impactful ways that instill in students the idea that education can help alleviate and solve the structural problems they encounter on a daily basis. All in all, in order to achieve the promises of decolonization and student empowerment, effective teaching must accompany an effective Ethnic Studies curriculum. By encouraging culturally responsive pedagogy to be weaved into the delivery of a promising Ethnic Studies curriculum, AB-2016 will immensely benefit historically underserved students, and when marginalized students benefit, another payment is given to the education debt.

3D. Teacher Challenges

As Mr. Lara suggests, having a well implemented, decolonizing curriculum is not enough. The execution of the curriculum is as equally, if not more important than the curriculum itself. Since it is very rare for a teacher to be well-trained, very effective, and highly culturally

¹⁷⁰ MySPNN. “Jose Lara-Morning Keynote Address-MnEEP- 2016 Conference,” 21:11 min

competent, there will definitely also be teacher challenges with the bill's implementation. The question then becomes, who on earth will be able to do this kind of teaching? Although there is not a definite answer to this question, what is known is that in order for Ethnic Studies to be as successful as it has been thus far, effective teachers with very particular trainings and backgrounds need to be the ones leading the courses. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of teachers with Ethnic Studies backgrounds, which means that well-equipped Ethnic Studies teachers are even scarcer.¹⁷¹ Additionally, there only exists a limited number of teacher development programs that have proven to improve the teaching of Ethnic Studies.

Furthermore, teachers of color are an extreme minority in the teaching force and are underrepresented in the teacher education pipeline.¹⁷² There is an array of different factors that have contributed to the creation of this problem. For starters, fewer people of color graduate from college than their white counterparts, reducing the pool of prospective teachers of color.¹⁷³ In addition, since many college students of color are the first in their families to graduate from college, they tend to accrue high amounts of debt and thus, have high expectations for future salaries in order to pay their debt.¹⁷⁴ Precisely because of these financial reasons, many college graduates of color pursue careers other than education.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, the required examinations to become a teacher in the United States disproportionately affect teacher candidates of color.¹⁷⁶ Due to all of these various obstacles, teachers of color remain overwhelmingly underrepresented in the teaching profession although students of color now make up more than half of the entire student population in the country.

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Rich, Motoko. "Where Are the Teachers of Color?"

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

However, research has repeatedly indicated that students of color benefit from having highly effective teachers of color. For example, high achieving teachers can serve as real-life models of professional and academic success to students who share the teacher's racial, ethnic, and/or cultural background.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, when students of color see someone at the front of the classroom who looks like them, it helps them reconceive of what is possible for them.

Furthermore, students who have a teacher whom they can personally relate to are more likely to be engaged in school.¹⁷⁸ Research indicates that student performance on math and reading increases by three to four percentage points just by having a teacher of the student's racial group.¹⁷⁹ As this research suggests, schools across the United States need additional teachers of color who are leading classrooms, educating and empowering the most vulnerable student groups. For the field of Ethnic Studies in particular, having educators of color as Ethnic Studies teachers is particularly important because they are more likely to bring life experiences that are absolutely critical for effective Ethnic Studies pedagogy. Due to this occurrence, for Ethnic Studies and other fields of inquiry, having highly effective teachers of color can be fruitful not only for students of color but for all students.

However, since there are many students of color but only a small number of teachers of color in schools across the country, the few teachers of color are overwhelmingly given additional responsibilities that white teachers do not have to undertake. One of these additional responsibilities—whether forcefully assigned to or willingly taken—is the obligation of caring for all the students of color in their respective schools.¹⁸⁰ In addition to this responsibility, since far too many white teachers tend to deem the behavior of students of color as disruptive, the few

¹⁷⁷ Ahmad, Farah Z and Boser, Ulrich. "America's Leaky Pipeline for Teachers of Color."

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

¹⁸⁰ HarvardEducation. "Where Are All the Teachers of Color?"

teachers of color in schools are also given the additional burden of classroom management, especially if the teacher of color is well liked among the students of color.¹⁸¹ All of these additional responsibilities, of course, lead to burnout. Therefore, the leading challenge is not the recruitment of teachers of color, but rather, it is the retention of teachers of color.

There is a wide range of factors that fuel this burnout. Often times, when teachers of color begin to voice their concerns and challenge those in power, principals tend to dismiss those thoughts and ideas, partly because they already have too much on their plate.¹⁸² In addition to constantly being dismissed, teachers of color—as well as white teachers—have to face the declining prestige of the teaching profession. In fact, the feeling of having a low status profession tends to be intensified when teachers work in schools that are located in low-income areas.¹⁸³ Ironically enough, the students who need the most support and who need the best teachers attend low-income schools that have the least experienced teachers and are burnout factories for those teachers who remain.¹⁸⁴ Teachers of color consistently cite frustrations with management and lack of autonomy as the leading reasons they quit.¹⁸⁵ Thus in order to help prevent them from experiencing the ubiquitous burnout, teachers of color must feel supported as well as feel like they are making a difference. Additionally, when principals and other school administrators identify a teacher leader that is of color, they must invest time, energy, and resources into that teacher to cultivate strong leadership in the classroom and beyond. Given that nonwhite teachers are more likely to resign than their white counterparts,¹⁸⁶ the following questions arise: How can schools—and the education system more broadly—support teachers of

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy."

¹⁸⁴ Nathan Bowling. "The Conversation I'm Tired of Not Having."

¹⁸⁵ Rich, Motoko. "Where Are the Teachers of Color?"

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

color, especially those who are talented and effective? How can the system ensure that it identifies, cultivates, and supports teacher leaders who are of color?

Answering these questions become even more critical with the passage of AB-2016. Of course, effectively training and supporting all Ethnic Studies teachers, including white Ethnic Studies teachers, should be one of the goals of AB-2016. Doing so is particularly complicated given that many white teachers do not even realize that they themselves can be oppressive to their students of color.¹⁸⁷ In addition to the challenges described above, this particular bill must also recognize that in order for the teaching of Ethnic Studies to be successful, teachers must also relate to students as well as love and care for them;¹⁸⁸ teachers must also demonstrate risk taking to their students, offer them trust, and instill in them a strong sense of identity, purpose, and hope.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, if AB-2016 wants to prompt a successful school reform with the development of an Ethnic Studies model curriculum, it must also address how teachers, and other school actors, can begin fostering trust in the schools they teach. Although AB-2016 would not be able to solve all the structural problems previously described, policymakers must nevertheless carefully take them into account in the bill's implementation. Indeed, an effective Ethnic Studies curriculum is not enough. In order for it to be truly successful, both the teacher and the teaching itself must also be effective and of high quality.

3E. Moving Forward with the Bill

Addressing the foreseeable teacher, curricular, and pedagogical challenges are not the only obstacles AB-2016 will face. In order to improve the academic achievement of students of color, help pay the education debt, and be a model for other states and districts, the bill must change its definition of the field. The bill must also seriously consider the foreseeable challenges

¹⁸⁷ Elie, Maya. "Author's Advice to White Teachers in Urban Schools"

¹⁸⁸ Romero, Augustine. "At War with the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children."

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

that will accompany the bill's implementation. For example, will there be sufficient funding to make this model curriculum a reality or will funding be a challenge? Are there enough qualified teachers who can successfully teach Ethnic Studies? How will teachers who lack exposure to the field or who do not have any experience with the teaching of this field be able to effectively teach Ethnic Studies?

However, even though this bill does have some limitations and there are some challenges that lie ahead, this bill is the first of its kind, and it will surely be a model that other states can aim to replicate. By setting this radical educational shift, AB-2016 Ethnic Studies has the potential of creating ripple effects throughout the country; if it yields successful and promising results, this bill would have the legitimacy needed to encourage additional states and school districts to pass similar legislation. Hopefully this bill signifies the beginning of many more successes in the Ethnic Studies movement not only in California but also across the United States. Yet all of this is at stake with the Trump Administration in power. By winning the presidency on the basis of hate, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and other forms of structural violence, Trump has further disenfranchised and ostracized vulnerable communities in the United States. With the recent passage of various discriminatory executive orders, Trump has proven that he will do everything in his power to maintain white supremacy. Now more than ever, students need to be able to access a Critical Race Education. Thus, it is with these national challenges that AB-2016 has to contend with. If AB-2016 re-defines its understanding of Ethnic Studies and properly addresses its shortcomings before its full implementation, the bill carries the possibility of offering a powerful, radical education to all students in California. In doing so, AB-2016 Ethnic Studies can help pay the education debt and make this country a better place even under a Trump Administration.

Conclusion

Although every proposal, critique, and idea presented in this paper is remarkably complicated, using the frameworks of Critical Race Theory, I hope to have depicted the powerful role race and racism have played in forming the challenges the current education system faces. Although race is a social construct, it is nevertheless one that has very deadly social and material consequences. Indeed, racism has been the primary force that has created a broken education system that maintains the status quo, keeps white supremacy alive, and further marginalizes vulnerable populations. These challenges, as I have described, are part of the education debt that some education actors have attempted to address, but because they have not tackled the roots of the problem, the debt has only continued to increase. Therefore, the country must develop radical and creative reforms to actually begin paying the increasing education debt. As I have contended throughout this paper, one of these creative and radical reforms is the inclusion of Ethnic Studies courses within K-12 curriculum. However, as I have also contended here, curriculum is just one part of the solution and there are certainly other critical components, such as the quality of pedagogy and instruction, that also need to be centered in the conversation. In other words, although this paper focuses on the role of curriculum—primarily because AB-2016 itself also focuses on curriculum—I want to note that curriculum is only one way of engaging with the structural problems at hand, but it should certainly not be the only tool wielded. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Ethnic Studies movement can serve as the initial payment to the education debt. Fortunately, California has laid much of the groundwork for this reform, especially with its passage of AB-2016. Although our national education system may be very fragmented and diffused in terms of the noticeable differences in state curriculum, testing, education quality, and other educational practices and politics, California and AB-2016 can nevertheless serve as

models for other states and districts to follow if they also want to close the long lasting “achievement gap” and begin doing their part in paying the national education debt.

However, even though the Ethnic Studies movement seems very promising for both California and the nation as a whole, it is important to keep in mind that the movement, especially with the passage of AB-2016, will likely face strong opposition. In fact, Ethnic Studies courses and programs have always been forced to defend their existences. It is no coincidence that immediately after an Ethnic Studies program, curriculum, or department is established, outsiders begin to send attacks. The scholar George Lipsitz argues that the strategy the right-wing has employed to attack Ethnic Studies programs has been to suppress “any institutional site capable of generating a critique of racism’s role in winning political consent for an emerging economic order that harms the interests of the majority.”¹⁹⁰ As Lipsitz argues here, right-wing politicians have shut down any sort of creative initiative that aims to uncover the ways racism operates in maintaining the status quo and keeping the power at the hands of the dominant group. One does not have to look any further than Arizona to prove this unfortunate pattern. As previously described, even though the academic achievement of Mexican American students significantly increased as a direct result of their engagement with Ethnic Studies, Arizona’s policymakers nevertheless decided to dismantle Tucson’s Mexican American Studies Program. As this example reveals, Ethnic Studies will always carry a precarious status because of its very nature of challenging institutions and the status quo.

In addition to thinking about how Ethnic Studies and AB-2016 may face opposition, it is also absolutely fundamental to think about the role parents will play in the implementation of this bill and the advancement of the Ethnic Studies movement in general. Bearing this in mind,

¹⁹⁰ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, pp. 57

the following questions arise—how will parents fit in this conversation? Will they support or oppose the inclusion of Ethnic Studies? Will parents of color react differently than white parents? If so, how will they respond differently to their children’s exposure to Ethnic Studies? Even though there are no answers to these questions, it is still critical to grapple with them when thinking about the different possible challenges and opposition that Ethnic Studies may receive as it becomes more and more accessible to students across both California and the United States.

Regardless of whether parents oppose or support Ethnic Studies, historically, Ethnic Studies has faced strong opposition from a wide range of actors, a pattern that has led some scholars to believe that the fact that there is so much resistance to Ethnic Studies is indicative of its urgency. Now, more than ever, Ethnic Studies is necessary in combatting xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, racism, misogyny, and other forms of violence that have become more widespread in the United States with the election of Donald Trump. Therefore, educators, policymakers, activists, and other community members must be prepared to defend the existence of AB-2016 because as history reveals, attacks will surely arise, if they have not materialized already. Indeed, power concedes nothing without demand. Given that AB-2016 will definitely destabilize power by making Ethnic Studies much more accessible to students across California, the bill’s advocates must prepare to defend, resist, and make additional demands. Doing so would help prevent AB-2016 from becoming an empty legal measure, like the *Brown* decision.

Furthermore, it is also important to examine the limitations of both Ethnic Studies and education more broadly in making the country—and world—a better place. In the case of Ethnic Studies, some critics of the field assert that Ethnic Studies sometimes fails to meet the needs of Black students by not properly addressing the anti-blackness that is rampant in non-Black communities of color. Thus, if Ethnic Studies is truly committed to the liberation of all

marginalized peoples, it must critically reinforce the claim that once Black people are free, non-Black people of color will also be free. In addition, if Ethnic Studies is only conceptualized and delivered in English, how will English Language Learners (ELLs) be able to engage and benefit from Ethnic Studies? Given that almost 10 percent of public schools in the United States are English Language Learners—which translates to about 5 million students—¹⁹¹ it becomes absolutely critical to address the limitations of Ethnic Studies in educating this particular student group. In order to successfully cater to all vulnerable student groups in the United States, Ethnic Studies must also be both conceptualized and delivered in multiple languages. Of course, doing so is much more complicated and challenging than said; however, since many English Language Learners are overwhelmingly students of color, are twice more likely than other children to be living in poverty, and are overall, one of the most historically underserved student populations,¹⁹² these are precisely the students that would immensely benefit from delving into Ethnic Studies.

Similar to Ethnic Studies, education as a vehicle for justice also has limitations. Education's most fundamental limitation is that it cannot alone solve the longstanding race problem in the United States. Critical Race Theory argues that racism is permanent.¹⁹³ One of the founders of Critical Race Theory, Derrick Bell, urges those committed to challenging racial discrimination to come to terms with the idea that the United States is fundamentally bounded to racism; the country's wealth and success was built on—and continues to thrive on—the backs of Black and brown people.¹⁹⁴ The exploitation of Black slaves—and now the thousands of incarcerated Black people—has been the form of racial labor that has generated the most wealth

¹⁹¹ National Center for Education Statistics

¹⁹² National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

¹⁹³ Bell, Derrick. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

for the United States. In other words, without the wealth, power, and comfort that racism—and other forms of oppression—produces, the United States would cease to exist.¹⁹⁵

Although I am inclined to agree with Bell's claim that the United States cannot exist without racism, I also do think that education can nevertheless serve as a tool to empower vulnerable communities that suffer the most from structural violence. Indeed, education may not be able to completely demolish racial inequality but it can definitely equip oppressed people with the tools, frameworks, and understandings to more effectively protect themselves from racial oppression. In addition to equipping historically marginalized communities with these resources, it is also absolutely critical for these communities to be able to imagine a better future. Education allows marginalized folks to do exactly this. Perhaps they will not be able to experience a better future themselves, but imagining one is, in itself, such a powerful form of resistance. Indeed, education may not end racism—especially if it is based on white, middle-class standards—but it can certainly allow vulnerable people to dream, fight for that dream, and by simply participating in that battle, be liberated.

Although education can serve as a very powerful tool in combatting racial marginalization, it cannot be the only tool. Since racism also materializes in politics, law, medicine, science, the economy, and essentially in every sector of American society, all of these fields must work collectively—alongside education—to combat racial oppression. Education, therefore, can lay the foundational work in contesting racial marginalization effectively, but other tools must also be wielded to tackle racial marginalization in every possible direction. Sure, racial oppression is here to stay, but using a wide range of different tools can help mitigate the racial violence inflicted upon the most vulnerable communities of color.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

A Critical Race Education, in particular, can be a very powerful tool. However, more research must be conducted to learn additional ways this tool can be wielded to further pay the national education debt and, in doing so, make the country a better place for all. Even though there is existing research that reveals the ways Ethnic Studies also profoundly benefits white students, there should also be more research conducted that reveals the specific ways Ethnic Studies helps poor white people in particular. My expectation is that doing so would help them identify similarities with students of color and mobilize those similarities to foster solidarity and fight for a brighter tomorrow together. This research becomes even more critical when thinking about the possibility of the education debt increasing even more significantly with Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education; not only is she severely unqualified to lead the Department of Education, but she is also a strong advocate for school choice and the privatization of public schools. By turning these agenda items into actual policies, DeVos will further marginalize students of color, as well as other vulnerable student groups. In doing so, DeVos will not pay the education debt; on the contrary, she will further increase the debt.

Fortunately, however, states and local districts also have leverage in this battle. If more states and districts were to adopt similar policies such as AB-2016, a Critical Race Education would be accessible to even more students. Although the federal government may choose to refuse to pay the education debt, states and local governments do not have to take the same stance. With California setting the example and groundwork, it is now much easier for other states to follow suit. Drastic times call for radical and creative measures, and Ethnic Studies has repeatedly proven to engage, equip, and empower all students. Of course, preparing highly effective Ethnic Studies teachers, carefully weaving Culturally Responsive Pedagogy into Ethnic Studies classrooms, developing high quality Ethnic Studies curriculum, implementing the best

version of AB-2016, bridging the differences that exist in experience among all student groups, and successfully combatting racism are all very ambitious and optimistic goals. Undoubtedly, it will be extremely difficult to transform these ideas into a reality; both the structural problems and the solutions I propose in this paper are all very complicated and will require a great deal of time, planning, collaboration, as well as overcoming many battles, some of which I have examined here.

However, imagining a better future for all is the first step in creating a better future. The good news is that Ethnic Studies has repeatedly proven to properly equip everyone with the tools to imagine and create a better future. Ethnic Studies has also helped people take the important shift from claiming to being “nonracist” to becoming “antiracist;” and being antiracist, as the scholar Bonilla-Silva clearly articulates, “begins with understanding the institutional nature of racial matters and accepting that all actors in a racialized society are affected materially (receive benefits or disadvantages) and ideologically by the racial structure.”¹⁹⁶ Fortunately, Ethnic Studies courses that offer a Critical Race Education provides folks with the language, understandings, and criticality to become antiracist, and in doing so, fight for a brighter tomorrow.

¡La Lucha Sigue!¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists*, pp. 15

¹⁹⁷ Approximate English Translation: “The Struggle (Fight) Continues!”

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