



Engagement and attainment: The longer-term causal effects of ethnic studies

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RESEARCH SNAPSHOT | OCTOBER 2021

Anti-racist curricula and teaching methods represent a way for schools to better promote a just society and improve educational outcomes for low-income students and students of color. A prominent example of culturally relevant and critically engaged content is the growing adoption of Ethnic Studies courses in K-12 schools.

Proponents tout the benefits of Ethnic Studies for increasing student engagement and academic outcomes, yet there is little causal evidence supporting these claims. Ethnic Studies emerged in the 1960s and uses critical race theory to focus on themes of social justice, stereotypes and contemporary social movements. Ethnic Studies foregrounds the histories of traditionally marginalized communities by emphasizing their important contributions to history and contemporary society, develops students' critical awareness of systems of oppression, and spurs self-advocacy and broader community involvement.

In previous research, members of the research team found that students who enrolled in San Francisco Unified School District's (SFUSD) pilot 9th grade Ethnic Studies course had better attendance, had higher grades, and passed more classes during the 9th grade year than students who did not enroll.¹ The current study was designed to test for the enduring impact of Ethnic Studies by examining outcomes at the end of high school among the same group of students.

Key Findings

- Participating in Ethnic Studies in 9th grade increased student instructional time (i.e., reduced unexcused absences) and increased the number of credits students earned in the remaining years of high school.
- Assignment to Ethnic Studies increased 5-year high school graduation by 15.7 percentage points (i.e., from 75 percent to over 90 percent). It also increased postsecondary enrollment 5 and 6 years later by 13.4 and 14.9 percentage points respectively.

RESEARCH TEAM

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Areas of Expertise: Economics, education, and public policy

Sample

Our sample consists of five cohorts of students who were in 9th grade in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) between AY2011-2012 and AY2013-2014 (N=1,405). Just over 60 percent of our sample identify as Asian, Hispanic/Latino students comprise 23.1 percent of our sample, and Black students comprise 6.3 percent of the sample. Female students comprise 41.7 percent of the sample. We obtained longitudinal data for students in the sample from SFUSD's administrative files, the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, and the National Student Clearinghouse.

Understanding the longer-term causal effects of enrolling in Ethnic Studies on key student outcomes is critical for educational policy and practice, particularly given the current political climate and calls for a focus on anti-racist education. In this pre-registered, regression discontinuity study, we present new evidence on the longer-run effects of taking an Ethnic Studies course.

Study Design

Our research design leverages the fact that, for five 9th grade cohorts in three SFUSD high schools (Balboa High School, fall 2011 to fall 2013, and Lincoln High School and Washington High School, fall 2011), entering 9th graders were assigned to the Ethnic Studies course if their 8th grade GPA was below 2.0 (an Early Warning Indicator for high school failure). We use the assignment rule to estimate the causal effects of Ethnic Studies participation through a regression discontinuity design that effectively compares outcomes among students whose 8th grade GPA placed them just below (i.e., “treatment”) versus just above (i.e., “control”) the 2.0 GPA threshold.

We analyzed how student participation in this course influenced longer-term high school persistence (i.e., enrollment, attendance, credits earned) and educational attainment (i.e., high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment).

Key Findings

Participating in Ethnic Studies in 9th grade increased student instructional time (i.e., reduced unexcused absences) and increased the number of credits students earned in the remaining years of high school.

Students' instructional time in grades 10, 11, and 12 increased by 5 to 7 percentage points. Their credits earned increased by 16.7, 24.7, and 31.5 respectively during these years. This is equivalent to the completion of 6 additional semester-long courses by the end of high school.

Ethnic Studies participation increased 5-year high school graduation by 15.7 percentage points (i.e., from 75 percent to over 90 percent). It also increased postsecondary enrollment 5 and 6 years later by 13.4 and 14.9 percentage points respectively.

These findings have particular importance because causal claims based on a regression discontinuity design are widely understood to have the same reliability as those based on random assignment for those students close to the assignment threshold (i.e., 8th grade GPA close to 2.0). Many educational interventions experience “fade out,” whereby immediate impacts decrease over time. Our findings are noteworthy because the positive findings endure and grow over time.

Insights & Future Directions

Two points are important to note about our study and the context of the Ethnic Studies course in SFUSD:

1. Our findings are defined for 9th grade students who enrolled in Ethnic Studies due to having a low 8th grade GPA (i.e., less than 2.0). Whether a broad expansion of Ethnic Studies among SFUSD would have similar effects is unknown.
2. We suspect that a high degree of implementation fidelity among a small and dedicated group of teachers (e.g., several years of development, piloting, peer and outside support) characterized these results. An increase in the scale of Ethnic Studies offerings that lack these antecedents may not achieve similar results.

In December 2014, the San Francisco Board of Education approved and supported the expansion of Ethnic Studies to all SFUSD high schools. SFUSD leaders used the original research study on 9th grade impacts of the pilot Ethnic Studies course as evidence when advising the board to support the policy and to expand the course offerings. The original findings helped drive district efforts to build from the strong foundation laid by the pilot curriculum and founding teachers, while formalizing content that can be utilized at school sites that were not part of the original pilot.

Currently, the district is considering integrating components of the pilot Ethnic Studies curriculum in a revamped English sequence that would shift World Literature to 9th grade to give more SFUSD students access to culturally relevant pedagogy. SFUSD is also considering whether to prioritize the enrollment of 9th graders in Ethnic Studies or offer it as an elective to older students.

Ethnic Studies is a powerful example of *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP). The definition of CRP stresses the importance of promoting academic success while simultaneously providing opportunities for students to “maintain their cultural integrity.”² Additionally, CRP emphasizes cultivating students' critical abilities to “to recognize, understand, and critique current and historical social inequities.” Ethnic Studies, and CRP by extension, has strong parallels with interventions studied by social psychologists. Ethnic Studies includes

forewarning students about stereotypes, affirming students' personal values, promoting social belongingness in school, emphasizing their capacity to learn, and external attribution for their life challenges. In contrast to the brief student-level interventions in the social psychology research, Ethnic Studies is an intensive, year-long intervention that takes place at the classroom level. The sustained, year-long nature and supportive environment that occurred in this Ethnic Studies intervention is important to consider.

References

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