

# Chapter 2: Still Fighting for Ethnic Studies: The Origins, Practices, and Potential of Community Responsive Pedagogy

ALLYSON TINTIANGCO-CUBALES

*San Francisco State University*

JEFF DUNCAN-ANDRADE

*San Francisco State University*

**Background/Context:** *As the debate on what content should be included in Ethnic Studies continues, there has also been an exploration of what effective pedagogy in Ethnic Studies looks like. Community responsive pedagogy advances the work of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy by centralizing a community's context in the education of children and youth. We use community to refer to the cultural, political, social, and economic spaces and places that shape student and family realities.*

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** *This chapter begins by drawing from the scholarship written about Ethnic Studies and the development of a pedagogy that is both responsive to students and centers their wellness. Building off the research on Ethnic Studies pedagogies, we offer a conceptualization of community responsive pedagogy (CRP). Community responsive leaders and educators transform climates, cultures, and curriculum to prioritize youth wellness (innerself, interpersonal, interconnectedness) through a focus on three domains of pedagogical practice: relationships, relevance, and responsibility.*

**Research Design:** *We begin with historicizing the origins of CRP in Ethnic Studies and then provide examples of how CRP can be applied. The chapter explores the three domains of CRP and provides examples from our previous studies to show how educators practice those domains to reveal the potential benefits for all students.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *Ethnic Studies as a movement is community responsive. CRP has the potential to go beyond the Ethnic Studies classroom and reshape the way we understand education and its purpose. Ethnic Studies, and the community responsive teaching that sits at its pedagogical core, centers youth wellness. In this chapter, we reveal that (1) the protective nature of caring adult relationships acts as armor against future threats to a child's wellness, which is particularly important for youth living in the chronically stressful environments created by structural inequalities; (2) centering students, their families, their communities, and their ancestors, a relevant pedagogy acknowledges their*

*stories as assets that provide cultural wisdom and medicine, along with pathways to freedom and justice—advancing Maslow’s individualistic frame toward one that allows children to use their learning to develop a sense of concentric circles of interconnectedness (peers, school community, local community, larger society, and the world); and (3) schools and educators also have the responsibility to acknowledge and leverage student strengths to develop and maintain their well-being and overall achievement.*

In the late 1960s, the longest student strike in the nation, led by the Black Student Union and The Third World Liberation Front, resulted in the development of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University.<sup>1</sup> Some 50 years later, we still find ourselves fighting for Ethnic Studies. After some of the first high school Ethnic Studies courses were established in Union City, California, at James Logan High School in the late 1970s, we found ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies. After Tucson, Arizona, established an effective Ethnic Studies program in the late 1990s, we found ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies. In the early 2000s, after vicious attacks on Ethnic Studies that attempted to shut down the movement in Arizona—claiming its unconstitutionality—we found ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies. After establishing Ethnic Studies in San Francisco Public Schools in 2010, we found ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies. Although the numbers of Ethnic Studies programs, curriculum, and courses have been growing throughout the nation, we find ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers at Stanford University conducted a study (Dee & Penner, 2017) that revealed that Ethnic Studies classes at three San Francisco high schools benefited “at-risk” ninth graders. The students who enrolled in the classes had substantially better outcomes than those who did not. Attendance improved by 21%, grade-point averages jumped 1.4 points, and credits earned increased by 23 for those who participated in the course (Dee & Penner, 2017). This study gave communities across the state of California and the United States even more evidence to fight for Ethnic Studies in their schools and districts. But as we see new policies throughout the nation to establish Ethnic Studies courses and requirements—both K-12 and at the college level—we find ourselves still fighting for Ethnic Studies while we gain greater insights about its impact and its importance.

There clearly have been major wins for Ethnic Studies over the last 50 years, and especially in the last decade, but the fight, as many have begun to realize, has not ended with policies and institutionalization of classes, departments, and positions. Some would argue that the fight has just begun. The year 2020 brought us an unprecedented pandemic that quarantined the world, exacerbating and magnifying the racial inequities and

violence that have existed for generations. With a president who initiated blame for the current health crisis on Chinese people—calling the virus “kung flu”—we saw a rapidly growing surge of anti-Asian racism. Only a few months into the quarantine, the video of George Floyd being violently murdered by a police officer went viral, and a nation made dormant by a health pandemic was once again forced to confront its most persistent and pernicious pandemic: white supremacy.

As more people began to fight for Black lives and Black liberation, people have deployed different methods, from protesting to policy-making. Some policies are targeting the defunding and divestment of the police, and other policies are institutionalizing Ethnic Studies curriculum and support. Regardless, the current events have made it even more evident why we need Ethnic Studies and districts are organizing their investments to make sure it is more accessible to more students. As the fight continues to get more districts and schools to establish requirements that start and stabilize Ethnic Studies courses and curriculum, a discussion is emerging around what should be included in Ethnic Studies.

Introduced by Assemblyman Luis Alejo, the state of California passed Assembly Bill 2016 to develop an Ethnic Studies model curriculum to support teachers who will be teaching Ethnic Studies across the state. The first draft of the curriculum—although based on the original intent of Ethnic Studies in 1969 and inspired by the curriculum that garnered the results in the Stanford study—became the center of controversy. Dissenters of the model curriculum challenged the sole focus of Ethnic Studies on people of color and the inclusion of Arab American studies (Maira & Shihade, 2006). Criticism was also raised about the overly radical and academic language used to describe certain foundational concepts. Opponents of the curriculum described the language as too complex, insinuating that the experiences of people of color are not complex and therefore do not need a lexicon that describes their frameworks and narratives. These critiques are both dangerous and undermine the original intent of Ethnic Studies, which is described in San Francisco State University College of Ethnic Studies mission:

Ethnic Studies provides “safe” academic spaces for all to learn the histories, cultures, and intellectual traditions of Native peoples and communities of color in the U.S. in the first-person and also practice theories of resistance and liberation to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression. (San Francisco State College of Ethnic Studies, personal communication, 2018)

As the fight to define what content should be included in Ethnic Studies continues, there has also been an exploration of what effective pedagogy

in Ethnic Studies looks like. There has been expansive thinking about what can be learned from Ethnic Studies that transcends the field. This thinking should have greater influence on how other subjects and courses centralize the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This chapter begins by drawing from the scholarship written about Ethnic Studies and the development of a pedagogy that both is responsive to students and centers their wellness (Cuauhtin et al., 2019a; de los Rios et al., 2016; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2016; Valdez, 2020). In this chapter, we build off the research base focused on Ethnic Studies pedagogies to offer a conceptualization of community responsive pedagogy (CRP). We begin with historicizing the origins of CRP in Ethnic Studies and then provide examples of how CRP can be applied in Ethnic Studies classrooms and beyond.

#### FROM ETHNIC STUDIES TO COMMUNITY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy is the art of teaching and learning. It is rooted in one's philosophy of education and informed by one's epistemologies, positionalities, ideologies, and standpoints. To fully understand pedagogy, it is essential to explore the following elements:

[Pedagogy] takes into account the critical relationships between the PURPOSE of education, the CONTEXT of education, the CONTENT of what is being taught, and the METHODS of how it is taught. It also includes who is being taught, who is teaching, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to structure and power. One of the major problems with pedagogy is that pedagogues who study the theories of pedagogy are oftentimes divorced from the teaching practice, particularly what occurs in public school settings. And teachers sometimes do not see themselves as intellectual contributors to the theoretical frameworks associated with pedagogy. Pedagogy has mistakenly been reduced to teaching method and critical pedagogy is sometimes seen as just theory. (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2010, p. ix)

Ethnic Studies takes into account the alignment between purpose, context, content, and method and centers these core values: respect, solidarity and unity, self-determination and critical consciousness, community actualization, and hope (San Francisco Unified School District Ethnic Studies Committee, personal communication, 2013). Before the development of what scholars now call "cultural relevance," "cultural responsiveness," and even "critical hope," Ethnic Studies activists, students, teachers,

and scholars had been practicing these values for decades. Indigenous communities and communities of color have practiced these values for generations, long before the institutionalization of Ethnic Studies.

What follows is an outline of the application of the four core pedagogical elements using the framework and sensibilities of Ethnic Studies:

*Purpose:* The purpose of Ethnic Studies is to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression. Ethnic Studies centralizes the first-person narratives of Black, Indigenous Peoples, and communities of color—within a critical discussion about power, systems, identity formation, self-reflection, agency, and action. The purpose, or “ARC,” of Ethnic Studies from its onset was centered on three major concepts: **A**ccess, **R**elevance, and **C**ommunity. *Access* means for educational institutions to open their doors to more students of color and to provide them with a quality education. A quality education is one that is *relevant* and includes the marginalized experiences of students of color. To connect these experiences, Ethnic Studies’ purpose was to serve as a bridge from formal educational spaces to *community* involvement, advocacy, organizing, and activism. The goal was for students in Ethnic Studies to leverage their education toward the betterment of their communities (Beckham & Concordia, 2019; Collier & Gonzales, 2009; Gonzales et al., 2009; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014, 2016).

*Context:* It is essential for Ethnic Studies to be responsive to students and their families and communities. The context is shaped by the narratives of both those doing the learning and those doing the teaching. The context also includes the historical and contemporary racialized experiences where the learning is taking place. The context values the cultures and livelihoods of the communities represented in the content. Dr. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon provides three essential questions that should be answered in an Ethnic Studies course to fulfill the purpose: (1) Who am I? (2) Who is my family and community? (3) What can I do to bring social justice to my community and the world? (Mabalon, 2016).

*Content:* It is essential that Ethnic Studies centralize the histories, cultures, and intellectual traditions of Black, Indigenous peoples, and Communities of Color in the United States and that their stories be told in the first person. The content also fosters the development of all students’ identities, critical consciousness, self-determination, and agency. Ethnic Studies also provides

transformative opportunities for the growth of community, collectivity, and connection both inside and outside the classroom. The content should provide examples of social movements and resistance to oppressive systems that have impacted the lives of people of color.

*Method:* Ethnic Studies courses are interdisciplinary and include multiple methods. The methods should model the ways in which students can use the content in Ethnic Studies to create positive change in their communities, in their other classes, and in their personal and familial lives; examples include community participatory action research, media literacy, critical thinking/problem solving, Socratic seminar, oral histories, civic and community engagement and organizing, critical leadership development, critical performance pedagogy, praxis story plot development, and personal narrative/auto-ethnography.<sup>3</sup>

An examination of the ways that Ethnic Studies aligns its purpose, context, content, and method indicates that it is evident that a pedagogy has emerged from the Ethnic Studies movement. The elements of pedagogy, while helpful for someone who is planning on creating an Ethnic Studies curriculum, may or may not explain the academic outcomes found in Dee and Penner's (2016) study documenting the efficacy of the program. We still need further exploration of the conditions, resources, and contexts that make a teacher most effective at implementing Ethnic Studies.

This chapter begins to close that gap in the literature. We assert that, along with curricular alignment (purpose, context, content, and method), teachers need to be community responsive in their practice for Ethnic Studies to really matter in their classroom. Politically and culturally rooted in Ethnic Studies, CRP centers the wellness of students by providing them an education where they feel valued, cared for, and humanized. The intention of this chapter is to illuminate the domains and practices of CRP as an organic pedagogical outgrowth of the history and impact of the Ethnic Studies movement.

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY?

CRP advances the work of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy by centralizing a community's context in the education of children and youth. We use "community" to refer to the cultural, political, social, and economic spaces and places that shape student and family realities. Thus, CRP is an equity-centered approach to education that is responsive to the material conditions particular to a student's lived

experience in their local community and the histories that created that experience. The goal of CRP is to use education as a vehicle for liberation through the awakening of students' critical consciousness, which leads to actions that promote wellness through racial and social justice in their personal lives, families, communities, and our world. Community responsive leaders and educators transform climates, cultures, and curriculum to prioritize youth wellness (innerself, interpersonal, interconnectedness) through a focus on three domains of pedagogical practice: *relationships, relevance, and responsibility*.

An increasing number of studies focusing on the benefits of Ethnic Studies, specifically around learning about one's identity and history, have shown the approach to have a positive impact on a student's wellness. Studies reveal that curriculum and pedagogy that are responsive to students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic background, identity, and experiences and context improve not only student outcomes, but also self-esteem, self-concept, self-determination, and civic and community engagement (Beckham & Concordia, 2019; Daus-Magbual et al., 2018; David et al., 2017). In combination, these outcomes strengthen commitment to community actualization and cultural perpetuity (Milne, 2016). The following sections provide brief descriptions of the three domains of CRP, along with examples from our previous studies, to show how educators practice those domains to reveal the potential benefits for all students.

#### DOMAIN 1: RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships domain consists of qualities of community responsive schools and educators who are committed to building meaningful, caring relationships (Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Espinoza-Herold, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) with students and families, guided by the understanding that children "do not care what we know until they know that we care" (Kohl, 1995). These relationships are the foundation for teachers, students, and families to create solidarity with and among each other. The connectedness that comes from that solidarity is essential for the rigorous and sustainable growth and development of children (Blackstock, 2011; Burke-Harris, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Syme, 2004; Tello, 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). Relationships in the community responsive classroom are rooted in humanization, empathy, and love. These types of relationships begin with daily acknowledgment and centering of the ancestral and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that students and families bring with them to school. They promote intraconnected and interconnected relationships where all students, especially those who have been marginalized, feel valued and part of something bigger than themselves.

If you have taught for a day, you know that at the end of the day, teaching and learning always boil down to one thing—relationships. Despite our widespread and constant investment in curriculum as the antidote for poor engagement and achievement, there is simply no evidence to suggest that curriculum will save us. You can have the dopest curriculum ever known to humanity, but if you do not have strong relationships, children will blow it up. On the flipside, you can have the wackest curriculum ever, and if you have strong relationships, the children will tolerate you long enough for you to get your act together. Across both time and place, study after study has concluded that all successful roads are paved with caring relationships (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohl, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009; Noddings, 2013; Tintiangco-Cubales & Curammeng, 2018; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Of course, curriculum, assessment, structure, resources, and a host of other factors also matter. However, each of these other factors either impinges on or supports the connected and caring relationships that sit in the divide between the unlimited potential of our children, and how they actually experience school.

#### *Why Do Relationships Matter?*

Numerous researchers (Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Darder, 1991; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2015; Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009; Menakem, 2017; Snyder et al., 2002; Syme, 2004) have shown that one of the most important protective factors for young people is hope, and the most significant contributing factor in a young person's hope level is the number of caring adult relationships they have in their life. S. Leonard Syme (2004), a social epidemiologist and professor emeritus at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health, wrote that we should think of hope as young people having "a sense of control of destiny" (p. 3). Caring adult relationships, then, develop young people with an active sense of agency, allowing them to manage the immediate stressors in their daily life. Syme (2004) argued that recent research into the importance of hope for life outcomes is a "major breakthrough in thinking" (p. 3) for scholars in public health and epidemiology. He attributes the genesis of this breakthrough to the groundbreaking Whitehall studies, which led to revelations that the distribution of "virtually every disease in every industrialized country in the world" (p. 3) is remarkably well correlated with social class. For many scholars, the most likely explanation for the unequal distribution of health is the unequal distribution of hope along the social gradient. The big reveal here is that many of the health problems plaguing communities of color and communities in poverty have "unnatural causes" (California Newsreel, 2008) that are the

direct result of structural inequalities in our society. This confirms what we have known intuitively for years: Inequality is making us sick.

This is why caring relationships matter so much for youth. They quite literally play two complementary roles in the lives of children: They are medicine and armor. The medicine of a caring adult relationship helps children deescalate and heal their woundedness (Burke-Harris, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Tello, 2019). The protective nature of caring adult relationships acts as armor against future threats to a child's wellness, which is particularly important for youth living in the chronically stressful environments created by structural inequalities (Burke-Harris, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Tatum, 1997; Tello, 2019).

*What Do These Relationships Look Like in Practice?*

For years, the two of us have been studying the practices of effective teachers. One of these studies involved spending three years examining the practices of five successful teachers in Los Angeles, all of whom were community responsive in their pedagogy. A central tenet of the deep and caring relationships that these teachers built with their students was trust. That trust is important in a teacher–student relationship should not be surprising to anyone. However, it was the unique way that these teachers talked about trust that was strikingly aligned with CRP. During interviews for the research, each described trust similarly to this explanation, given by one of them:

Many of the teachers I have been around can't understand why students don't trust them. They think of trust as something that is automatic for teachers, like students are just going to trust them because they are in the position of teacher. But it doesn't work like that. You have to earn it [trust] every day out here. Just because you have a bond with a student today doesn't guarantee that that bond will be there tomorrow if you don't keep working on it. That's just a-historical. Let's be real here. I represent an institution that represents the state that represents a history of colonialism and repression. Why would students trust me? Every day I have to fight against that history. Sure, I'm mad about that, but it's not the students' fault, and it's not my fault, so I don't take it personally. But I do recognize that trust is easier to lose than to get.

These teachers understood that government institutions, such as schools, have a negative history in vulnerable and disregarded communities. No matter how good their intentions, these teachers were aware that as ambassadors of the institution of school, they were connected to that

history. This acknowledgment allowed them to be aware of this obstacle for building trusting relationships with students and the community and also helped them to understand the importance of standing in opposition to school policies that were oppressive, racist, and colonialist and that perpetuated cycles of inequity.

Evidence of their commitment to earn the trust of their students was clear in every aspect of their teaching, but it is probably best explained through the relationships that they built with their students. Their activities were driven by a long-haul commitment to their students and the community, one that did not permit them to give up on a student when their transformation was not as rapid as the teacher might like. Their perspective might best be described using one of Lisa Delpit's (1995) book titles; they saw their students as their children, not "other people's children."

Darnell, a student of one of these teachers for two years, explained that this type of relationship was the result of pedagogy that prioritized the humanization of students above all else:

I want to refer to a text [that Mr. Lapu had us read], Paulo Freire. I got the book in there [nods toward his bedroom]. I read it all the time. It's basically telling me how you have to educate yourself. A lot of teachers in the school system right now, they practice social reproduction. They catch you off guard because you trust them to teach you. So, I started teaching myself by reading texts and things like that. In [Mr. Lapu's] class we were bonded because we all gave each other a chance to humanize ourselves and let us know each other's stories. We were bonded because after that we looked at each other different.

[Frowning] When somebody looks at me, they say, "oh, he's a gang-banger." But, after I told my narrative, I humanized myself and then they looked at me like, "Oh, he's more than a gang-banger. [Darnell], yeah 'Cuz smart on hood, but he's smart." They stopped looking at me as just a gang-banger, and they started looking at me as a smart Black man. Which is how I always wanted you to look at me. I don't want you to acknowledge me as a gang-banger, which happened. I want you to acknowledge me as [Darnell].

He [Mr. Lapu] helped us humanize each other, and that's how it was. It was beautiful just knowing that my classmate that's sitting right next to me is fighting the same fight that I'm fighting. So, I got his back. That was beautiful, just knowing that we're going through the same shit. From the 'hood to school. When we walk

to school, we gotta dodge a bullet like every day. Oh, that's your struggle? Oh, well that's my struggle too. Well let's just handle this right here, so we don't gotta go through this four years from now. We did this because we felt comfortable that he [Mr. Lapu] had our back, and that's just all it is.

The construction of a classroom culture that fostered this type of trust among the students, and between the teacher and the students, was the result of many nuanced parts of their practice. However, in their own ways, they all demonstrated and articulated concrete understandings of two key factors that allowed trusting relationships to develop. First, they understood the distinction between being liked and being loved by their students. They did not coddle students, particularly those with whom they had built strong relationships. Ms. Truth, another one of the teachers in the study, explained,

Many of these teachers are so afraid that students won't like them if they discipline them that they end up letting students do things that they would never permit from their own children. They lower their standards and will take any old excuse from students for why they did not do their homework, or why they cannot sit still in class or do their work. Not me. You gotta work in my class. I can be unrelenting at times, probably even overbearing. Oh, I might give a student slack here or there, but most of the time I'm like, "Go tell it to someone else because I'm not trying to hear that from you right now. We've got work to do."

The line between high expectations and unreasonable demands can be a slippery slope for teachers—but so is the line between people we love and people we like. The people we love can demand levels of commitment from us that defy even our own notions of what we are capable of. People we like, but do not love, typically are not able to push the limits of our abilities. Nothing more clearly divides these two groups of people in our life than the level of trust we have in them.

In the case of the teacher employing CRP, the move from being liked to being loved does not happen because of the demands they make of students. It happens because of the love and support that accompany those raised expectations. Sometimes this comes in the form of simple encouragement, but many times it means amplifying the personal support given to students. This support takes many forms: after-school and weekend tutoring, countless meals, rides home, phone/text messaging/email, and endless prodding, cajoling, and all-around positive harassment that is deeply rooted in care and a genuine belief in the intellectual and cultural

capacity of the student. These additional investments clarified for students that these expectations come with the teacher's recognition that everyone needs help along the way. And when that help is from someone who loves you, in spite of your shortcomings, you learn to trust that person.

The development of these trusting relationships also results in these teachers being indignant about student failure. This is largely because they see the failure of a student as their own failure. At the same time, they never excuse students from their responsibility. This seems to me to be much like the approach successful parents take with their children, and although the relationships will never quite measure up to those of strong parent-child bonds, they are remarkably similar.

## DOMAIN 2: RELEVANCE

The relevance domain consists of qualities of community responsive schools and educators who are committed to developing curriculum and pedagogy that center students' daily lives, their communities, and their families, and their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic histories (Buenavista et al., 2019; Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; Love, 2019; Milne, 2016; Solorzano & Yosso 2000; Tello, 2019; Tintiango-Cubales & Curammeng, 2018). This connection must avoid the trap of multiculturalism and the reduction of culture to "trivial examples and artifacts of cultures such as eating ethnic or cultural foods, singing or dancing, reading folktales, and other less than scholarly pursuits of the fundamentally different conceptions of knowledge or quests for social justice" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 61). A relevant pedagogy rigorously tunes instructional climate and curriculum to work across whatever tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs apply to a child on any given day, with the express purpose of supporting that individual child's growth in the interest of community actualization and cultural perpetuity, rather than just individual achievement.

Via the centering of students, their families, their communities, and their ancestors, a relevant pedagogy acknowledges their stories as assets that provide cultural wisdom and medicine along with pathways to freedom and justice, advancing Maslow's individualistic frame toward one that allows children to use their learning to develop a sense of concentric circles of interconnectedness (peers, school community, local community, larger society, and the world). The relevance domain focuses on ensuring that the education students receive is "culturally rooted." To be culturally rooted means to place high value on indigenous cultures and the cultures of communities of color. To be culturally rooted, both teachers and students are in conversation about the perpetuity of cultural practices that

provide decolonial medicine while critiquing systems that have created toxicity in our lives. Both teachers and students explore their cultural *past*, develop their identities through engaging cultural *production*, and restore *power* to cultures that have been marginalized or silenced. This rootedness resists overessentialization, reduces appropriation, and acknowledges and prevents further genocide.

### *Why Does Relevance Matter?*

A clear and measurable shift in experience, engagement, and outcomes occurs when children find relevance in what is being taught. Research across fields (Dee & Penner, 2017; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Maslow, 1943; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 2003; Steele, 2011) helps us understand the reason for this shift and the clear developmental logic sequence that unfolds for children when this connection happens. Culturally and community affirming schools and classrooms increase knowledge of self and self-esteem. As Maslow (1943) and so many others have established, self-esteem is the window into self-actualization, which has long been held up as a defining characteristic of school (and life) success. Affirmation of self for any child, but particularly for children whose social and cultural identities locate them on the margins of society, triggers what psychologists call the “Pygmalion effect” (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 2003), a recurring cycle of affirming self-talk that increases self-confidence, resilience, and positive outcomes.

More recent research on children who successfully navigate toxic stress in their lives reveals a clear correlation between their self-esteem (regarded as “agency”) and what social epidemiologists (Syme, 2004) and psychologists (Snyder et al., 2002) are measuring as children’s hope levels (see also Duncan-Andrade, 2009). As cultural relevance elevates a child’s hope level, research reveals that this is a powerful antidote to what psychologist Claude Steele (2011) called “stereotype threat.” Steele’s work serves as one of the most compelling analyses we have to explain why children of color, regardless of social class, continue to underperform in school in comparison to their white peers. The responses to this research that we see in Ethnic Studies and CRP hold great promise for changing those patterns.

### *Why Do Ethnic Studies and Relevance Matter?*

From its inception, Ethnic Studies took on the challenge of making curriculum and classrooms relevant for our most disconnected students. It became an entire discipline committed to interrupting the cycle of stereotype threat before this phenomenon was even identified in the literature. As Ethnic Studies has expanded into K–12, this trend has continued.

We can see the relevance domain of CRP deeply embedded in the 2019 California drafting of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. The following essential principles for Ethnic Studies teaching and learning were rooted in the values of humanization and critical consciousness that are central to CRP:

1. **CULTIVATE** empathy, community actualization, cultural perpetuity, self-worth, self-determination, and the holistic well-being of all participants, especially Native peoples and people of color.
2. **CELEBRATE** and honor Native peoples of the land and communities of color by providing a space to share their stories of struggle and resistance, along with their cultural wealth.
3. **CENTER** and place high value on pre-colonial, ancestral, indigenous, diasporic, familial, and marginalized knowledge.
4. **CRITIQUE** empire and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, and cis-heteropatriarchy.
5. **CHALLENGE** imperialist/colonial hegemonic beliefs and practices on the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels.
6. **CONNECT** ourselves to past and contemporary resistance movements that struggle for social justice on the global and local levels.
7. **CONCEPTUALIZE**, imagine, and build new possibilities for post-imperial life that promotes transformative resistance, critical hope, and radical healing. (Cuauhtin, 2019a; Tintiangco-Cubales & Curammeng, 2018)

The call to uphold these principles in Ethnic Studies not only allows students to learn about who they are, but also provides them guidance on how to use their education to reimagine a world that values the experiences and lives of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. In these principles, you can see that relevance is not only about ethnic or cultural representation in curriculum, but also about how education can be used to, as Freire (1970) would describe as reading the world to transform the world. It is essential for a teacher, whether they are teaching Ethnic Studies or not, to apply these principles.

#### *What Does Relevance Look Like in Practice?*

One of the studies that we conducted on Ethnic Studies classrooms that exemplifies and upholds these principles is focused on the pedagogy and practices of Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP). In 2001, PEP

was created to serve Filipina/x/o American youth in San Francisco. PEP emerged to address the lack of resources, outreach, and services to this specific population in the Excelsior neighborhood, which represents the largest community of Filipina/x/o Americans in the city. Students faced high dropout rates, gang violence, domestic violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, gentrification/displacement, mental health, and identity issues. To serve these students, PEP was founded by Tintiangco-Cubales and a team of undergraduate and graduate students from SFSU. It started with a participatory action research project that led to lunchtime programming at Balboa High School, focusing on mentorship and teaching of Filipina/x/o American studies. The success of this program led to a yearlong course at Balboa High School and expansion to Phillip and Sala Burton High School, Longfellow Elementary School, James Denman Middle School, and Skyline College. PEP has grown into an Ethnic Studies pathway from kindergarten to college.

PEP practices relevance through the use of participatory action research (PAR), a growing methodology in social justice education (Akom et al., 2016; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Desai, 2018; Morrell, 2008; Poon & Cohen, 2012). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) “provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems” (Cammarota & Fine 2008, p. 2). Inspired by the framework and methods of PAR/YPAR, PEP developed leadership participatory action research (LPAR). LPAR involves having directors and coordinators do research focused on former leaders in PEP while also studying the school site they are serving. LPAR serves as a research, teaching, and learning activity for our leaders to understand their relationships with themselves and their community. LPAR also prepares directors and coordinators in PEP to support the PAR projects of teachers and students.

PEP has also developed teacher participatory action research (TPAR) projects in which teachers deepen their understanding of students, families, and the communities they serve. The application of TPAR has three aims: (1) to understand the issues and experiences of their students to become responsive in their pedagogical approach; (2) to develop PEP researchers’ research skills and model for students how to conduct their YPARs; and (3) to become more than just a research project for their students, but rather to become a means to build relationships with their students and with each other. LPAR and TPAR projects prepare the leaders and teachers in PEP to support the students’ YPAR projects.

YPAR allows for a way to apply what students are learning directly in their lives and in their communities. YPAR can contribute to the development of a youth’s critical lens, through which they have a social critique of

the systems and structures that oppress them, leading to the motivation to take action toward social justice. YPAR, therefore, positions youth to have the most potential to create social change and transform the oppressive systems in which they exist. Through a very focused inquiry project, youth build on the following mindsets: *sense of purpose, self-direction, curiosity, agency, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, relevance, social awareness, and self-awareness* (Daus-Magbual et al., 2018). Both teachers and students saw the relevance and value of participating in PEP's YPAR projects. One of the PEP high school students described her YPAR research experience:

When a student is taught to see truth and interact with other people inside or outside the(ir) circle, their perspective changes. YPAR is great for young starters who don't know what's happening around them and don't know themselves. It impacts the youth who want to help make a change.

A middle school teacher in PEP talked about what he saw students gain from YPAR:

Students who may not have had an experience in which they felt like their own research and/or creativity mattered can have a chance to see how the work that they do can be transformative—if not for their community, they can at least see the transformation in themselves.

In PEP, we can see not only the impact that Ethnic Studies has on student development, but also the positive impact that Ethnic Studies can have on teacher development. Research suggests that training in Ethnic Studies can support teachers' critical consciousness, empathy, and community responsiveness (Curammeng, 2020; Sacramento, 2019). The relevance domain in community responsiveness starts with focusing on the strengths of the students, rather than viewing students from a place of deficit thinking. Community responsive Ethnic Studies teachers do not just teach notions of solidarity to the students; they model it. Those who create teacher education pathways and credential programs can learn a great deal from the field of Ethnic Studies on how to prepare their preservice teachers to be more responsive to their students (Curammeng & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017; Reyes-McGovern & Buenavista, 2016). Teacher and professional development programs in districts across the nation can also benefit from including support for teachers to engage growth models that are rooted in Ethnic Studies and that emphasize the applications of CRP.

### DOMAIN 3: RESPONSIBILITY

The responsibility domain consists of qualities of schools and educators that are committed to understanding and responding to the wide range of needs (social, emotional, and technical) that impact a student's capacity to be at their best. This requires us to be critically hopeful, even in the face of crisis and trauma. This responsiveness involves keeping in mind that attentiveness to the well-being of the student is simultaneously about the individual student *and* the wellness of the community. This moves us beyond Maslow's individualistic framework to its Blackfoot origins, where meeting the needs of the individual student are connected to the larger purpose of community actualization. The community responsive educator can hold these two otherwise distinctive goals in the same developmental space as they consider their curriculum and pedagogical interventions. They can do this because they do not consider individual achievement to be separate from community achievement. An individual student cannot succeed if the student next to them is failing. All boats must rise, because it is all of us or none of us—and the classroom and school shall be built accordingly.

#### *Why Does Responsibility Matter?*

Hurt people tend to hurt people, and people who are well tend to heal people. So, the wounds of an individual student are treated as the wounds of the entire classroom and school community because this fact is inescapable if we are truly interconnected (the rash of school shootings this nation has been experiencing is a painful reminder of this). Ergo, healing a student's wounds heals the classroom, the school, and the entire community. This is to say that the responsibility domain reflects an approach to education that treats the classroom space as a micro-ecosystem of the micro-ecosystem of the school, both of which reflect the meta-ecosystems of the community and the broader society. The forces of each layer of these social ecosystems impinge on one another in both directions—smaller systems pushing out to alter the larger systems, and the larger systems pushing back and impacting the smaller ecosystems. This interconnectedness shows up every day in every school and every classroom. It requires schools and individual educators to find effective ways to identify what students need and when they need it, and to measure the degree to which those needs are being met. Schools and educators also have the responsibility to acknowledge and leverage student strengths to develop and maintain their well-being and overall achievement.

*Our Context and Our Responsibility in These Times*

Between us, we have more than 50 years of Ethnic Studies teaching experience. Both of us teach in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University, and we have both been in PreK–12 schools for more than two decades, teaching, providing teacher development, and serving on boards for schools and youth-serving organizations locally in the San Francisco Bay Area and across the nation. For decades now, our work and our practice as Ethnic Studies educators have argued for our responsibility as educators to be critically hopeful and to develop that same capacity in our students. This needs to happen in all classrooms, kindergarten through college.

We are in a moment in our history when our nation has made concerted efforts to create pockets of privilege in which entire segments of our society are emboldened to avoid what Carl Jung referred to as “legitimate suffering,” or the pain of the human experience. We see that the accepted inequities of stockpiling of resources among privileged portions of the population so that they may be “immune” to suffering, while isolating the unnatural causes of socially toxic environments onto others, create undeserved suffering while simultaneously delegitimizing it. In the face of these conditions, to maintain critical hope requires audacity. It insists that we stand boldly in solidarity with our communities, sharing the burden of their undeserved suffering as a humanizing hope in our collective capacity for healing. It also demands that we defy the dominant ideology of defense, entitlement, and preservation of privileged bodies at the expense of the policing, disposal, and dispossession of marginalized “others.” We cannot treat our students as “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995)—their pain *is* our pain. Critical hope demands that we reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside one another, sharing in the victories *and* the pain. This solidarity is the essential ingredient for “radical healing” (Ginwright, 2009), and healing is an often overlooked factor for improving education.

This is the inescapable challenge before us as educators—from pre-K to college—and it is often misunderstood. Too many of us try to create classroom spaces that are safe from righteous rage, or worse, we design plans to weed out students who display it. The question we should be grappling with is not how to manage students with these emotions, but how we will help students channel them. The way the two of us take on this challenge is by thinking about our classrooms as a micro-ecosystem. Ecologists would tell us that to build a healthy micro-ecosystem, we need to understand the principle of interdependency—in short, both pain and healing are transferable from person to person inside the classroom.

The classroom is not a closed micro-ecosystem; we should be aware of external toxins that will be carried into it. We have virtually no control over the array of social toxins that our students are exposed to in the meta-ecosystem of our society, but we can control how we respond to them in our classroom, and this gives us, and our students, the audacity to be critically hopeful (Wright, 1992). It is our responsibility to hope. This is central to our community actualization.

The pain that our students carry manifests in our classroom in a variety of ways. Sometimes it takes an obvious form, like such as outpouring of emotion that might even be directed at us or another student. Usually, the signs are more subtle, manifesting in classic signs of depression (fatigue, sadness, self-deprecation). In these moments, when a student can no longer contain the pain they feel, our response has the potential to add to it or to begin the healing process. We may think that if we send the “disobedient” student out of our classroom or ignore their lack of motivation, we are removing the pain from our system. It simply does not work that way. Rather, when we exclude a student, we introduce another social stressor into the micro-ecosystem. We rationalize the exclusion by telling ourselves that we have pulled a weed from the garden, allowing for a healthier environment for the other students to grow. This ignores the fact that every student in our classroom is part of a delicate balance built on interdependency. K. Wayne Yang, who was an urban science and math teacher for more than 17 years, and one of the finest educators we have known in our careers, put it this way: “All my students are indigenous to my classroom, and therefore, there are no weeds in my classroom.” From this perspective, the decision to remove a student, rather than to heal them, is not only bad for the student, but also destructive to the social ecosystem of the classroom.

We have been teaching long enough to know the enormity of this challenge, particularly because these moments almost always happen when we are convinced we are doing something of the utmost importance in the classroom. But, then we think to ourselves, how did we allow our schools to get to a place where we prioritize satisfying standards and covering content over healing a student in pain? How did we get to a place where we value students’ grades and test scores over their wellness? This not only ignores our most basic sensibilities as educators, but also disregards years of research documenting the importance of self-esteem, trust, and hope as preconditions for positive educational outcomes. As educators, we also tend to seriously underestimate the impact that our response has on the other students in the class. They are watching us when we interact with their peers. When we become frustrated and punish students who manifest symptoms of righteous rage or social misery, we give way to legitimate

doubts among other students about our capacity to meet their needs if they are ever in pain.

To provide the kind of love and care that students require as a precondition for learning from us, we must connect our indignation over all forms of oppression with an audacious hope that we can act to change them. Some would have us believe that this change will not cost us anything. This kind of false hope is mendacious; it never acknowledges pain. Critical hope stares down the painful path, and despite the overwhelming odds against us making it down that path to change, we make the journey, again and again. Going down this path collectively is our responsibility—there is no other choice. Acceptance of this allows us to find the courage and the commitment to cajole our students to join us on that journey. This makes us better people as it makes us better teachers, and it models for our students that the painful path *is* the hopeful path.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

### ETHNIC STUDIES IS CRIMINAL?

Imagining Ethnic Studies and CRP as the hopeful path must not be done naively as more and more moderate voices lean into these spaces during this time of crisis and contempt. The banning of Ethnic Studies in places like Tucson, Arizona, is criminal, and it should be instructive for our long-term visioning about the kinds of resistance this movement will continue to face. The greater crime, however, is that we are still having to make the argument that we need Ethnic Studies programs at all. It suggests that we have made virtually no progress in the 50 years since the student strikes at San Francisco State University that fought for classes that taught the history of people of color. Indeed, the case in Arizona suggests that we have been going backward in our commitment to serving students of color in our public schools. Given that schools are a social mirror, this reflects poorly on our society's commitment to becoming the multiracial, pluralistic democracy it has promised to become and that it touts itself as all around the world.

In a society as ethnically diverse as ours, there is simply no reason that every course students take should be anything less than an Ethnic Studies course. Let us also point out that people of various European descents have ethnic cultures, and many of those cultures are taught matter-of-factly, every day in schools as a normal part of the curriculum—they don't call it "ethnic studies," but it is. That students and families whose origins fall outside Europe are forced to ask for separate courses so they can learn about their ancestors and the ways in which they have shaped the history

of the U.S. and the world is absurd—it's also racist. The need for Ethnic Studies courses puts us in a legal time warp, running us all the way back to the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that separate and equal was acceptable.

As a nation, we cannot even meet a pathetically low social standard from the 19th century. Instead, every day in schools and communities all over this nation, we maintain a de facto position of separate and unequal. Despite the Supreme Court's 1954 promise of "all deliberate speed" to create racially integrated and equitable schools and institutional resources, it was clear that mainstream schooling institutions were not interested in a speedy pursuit of equity.<sup>5</sup> So, people committed to racial equity pursued Ethnic Studies in the 1960s, seeking some modicum of control over their education.

That students of European descent have never been required to learn the histories that are taught in Ethnic Studies while students of color are mandated to learn Anglo-European histories<sup>6</sup> is nothing short of a hegemonic project of cultural supremacy. The fact is, the curriculum and assessments used in the overwhelming majority of U.S. public schools are not reflective of the student population, the broader society, or the world. Behind all the rhetoric of a global market economy and training students for the 21st century workplace, very little is happening in schools that suggests any intention to do this for the majority of students. Rhetorically speaking, this is "un-American" in every way, shape, and form. In reality, it is quintessentially "American,"<sup>7</sup> because never in this country's history has it provided a high-quality education to all its citizens.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The education of poor and working people in this country has often been treated as a riddle wrapped in an enigma. For generations, we have rationalized why we haven't, why we won't, and why we can't serve "these" families. This is a choice that we make. It is not inevitable. We could, if we so desired, choose to see all children for their potential and invest in them accordingly. Were our nation to become serious about such an effort in education, we would need to accept that our responsibility is to fundamentally remake the purpose of our public education system by becoming community responsive.

This remaking would begin with an honest accounting of the fact that the status quo approach to educating our children is failing miserably. We are not even close to meeting the needs of our student population. If not Ethnic Studies, then what? What is it that anti-Ethnic Studies factions suggest we do in schools? Their methods have failed for decades.

All we hear is, Keep it the way it is. Well, the way it is doesn't work for the vast majority of working and poor children, regardless of their ethnicity. Everyone knows this to be true. Simply put, if you are not going to get down in the dirt with some new and creative ideas, then step aside. The same people who toiled and labored to build this country will be the ones who save it from itself, and on that path, they will humanize and value all people, regardless of their ethnic origins. That's not criminal. That's Ethnic Studies.

Ethnic Studies as a movement is community responsive. We still have a lot to learn from how Ethnic Studies educators employ CRP. We do know that CRP has the potential to go beyond the Ethnic Studies classroom and reshape the way we understand education and its purpose. Ethnic Studies, and the community responsive teaching that sits at its pedagogical core, centers youth wellness. But shouldn't all courses center youth wellness? Shouldn't wellness be the very purpose of education? Why hasn't a global pandemic that has cost the lives of so many people alerted us that wellness needs to be at the center of how we live, learn, and teach? Why hasn't the national uprising to prioritize Black humanity been seen as a fight for the freedom to be well? Right now is the time to rethink the purpose of education and all its possibilities. The fight for an education that is more responsive to students is not over. The fight for Ethnic Studies is not over. The fight for wellness is not over. These are the generational fights that our field must embrace and win if we are to build an educational system worthy of our ancestors and the children who will inherit it.

## NOTES

1. In 1969, San Francisco State was considered a college, and later, in 1972, it became San Francisco State University.
2. Please see *The Movement for Ethnic Studies: A Timeline* by Miguel Zavala, R. Tolteka Cuauhtin, Wayne Au, and Christine Sleeter for key events in the movement; also see *Golden Children: Legacy of Ethnic Studies, SF State: A Memoir* by Juanita Tamayo Lott.
3. For examples of these methods in lessons, please refer to Cuauhtin et al., 2019b; de los Ríos, 2018; Morales et al., 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2016. Also see *At 40: Asian American Studies at San Francisco State*, 2009.
4. This example draws from Duncan-Andrade's 2009 article, "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete."
5. Very little has changed since. In honor of the 50-year anniversary of the Brown decision, the Harvard Civil Rights Project (now the UCLA Civil Rights Project) released a report evaluating the nation's progress. Their

data revealed that schools in all regions outside the South are more racially segregated now than before the Brown decision. Nationally, Latinos and African Americans are more segregated now than they were in 1968.

6. The implementation of ninth-grade Ethnic Studies classes in San Francisco Unified Schools may change this fact in at least one city.
7. We put the word “American” in quotation marks because, as part of this project of white supremacy, the United States has claimed the title of America even though we are one of several countries that make up the Americas. So, in fact, Canadians, Mexicans, and every other group from North and South America are actually Americans.

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ALLYSON TINTIANGCO-CUBALES is professor of Asian American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Educational Leadership at San Francisco State University. She founded Pin@y Educational Partnerships, an Ethnic Studies program that supports the development of radical educators and Community Responsive Education, where she focuses on the nexus between Ethnic Studies and wellness. She has written four books and numerous articles and book chapters that are widely used to support the development of teachers throughout the nation.

JEFF DUNCAN-ANDRADE is professor of Latina/o Studies and Race and Resistance Studies at San Francisco State University and a founder of the Roses in Concrete Community School and Community Responsive Education. Along with authoring many articles, he's written two books, and his third with Harvard Press is due out spring 2021. As a classroom teacher and school leader in East Oakland for 29 years, his pedagogy produced uncommon levels of social and academic success for students.