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The Devil is in the Details

Does the Latest Quantitative Study on Ethnic Studies Justify A Large-Scale Educational Reform?
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Introduction

On September 7, 2021, California's premium education news platform EdSource published [an article](#) titled "Research finds ethnic studies in San Francisco had enduring impact," following [the publication](#) of the first quantitative study on longer-term academic benefits of ethnic studies. The new study is co-authored by Sade Bonilla, Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, and published by the National Academy of Sciences. A day later, on September 8, 2021, the California Legislature passed [AB-101](#), which would make ethnic studies as a high school graduation requirement. As the bill awaits its final approval from the Governor, California is on the cusp of becoming the first state to mandate public high schools to teach ethnic studies. Academic research demonstrating the efficacy of ethnic studies from authors including Bonilla, Dee and Penner has greatly legitimized the actual policy movement to promote the subject matter.

However, the three authors of this latest study have explicitly cautioned against the wider application of ethnic studies (ES). In conclusion, they argue:

Mandating the wide-scale availability of ES through policy without thoughtful curricular development and teacher training may not reproduce the educational gains we document here.¹

The following report is intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the study and discern between falsifiable scientific inquiries and consequential policy reforms.

Summary of the Bonilla, Dee and Penner Study

Following the same research design of a preregistered RD design in a previous academic paper on short-term benefits of ES in 2017², this study analyzes the causal relationship between participation at a high-school ES course and longer-run academic benefits captured by higher high school graduation and higher postsecondary enrollment. The researchers focus on a sample of 1,405 9th graders with grade 8 GPAs less than 2.0, from "five cohorts who attended three (San Francisco) district high schools beginning in the 2011 to 2012, 2012 to 2013, and 2014 to 2015 school years."³ All the sample cohorts were taught by four ethnic studies teachers.

¹ Sade Bonilla, Thomas S. Dee, Emily K. Penner, "Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment," Proceedings of *the National Academy of Sciences* Sep 2021, 118 (37) e2026386118; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2026386118.

² Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, "The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum," *American Educational Research Journal*, 2017, 10, 7-39.

³ Bonilla, Dee, and Penner, "Ethnic studies increases," 3.



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After analyzing the statistical effects of the RD model and comparing the sample's performances on dependent variables with those of 424 students who just passed the 2.0 GPA threshold, the study finds positive effects of attending an ES course on school attendance (8% difference), high school graduation (16-19% gain), and college enrollment (10-16% gain). The first two causal effects are statistically significant, while the third one is not.

Avid reformers would be itching to use these confirmatory research findings to push for progressive policy measures to promote ES in public education. But even the three researchers admit a number of limitations and caveats with their latest work. Coupled with concerns regarding the investigators' ideological predispositions, these limitations and caveats must be highlighted, not to discredit the study's validity, but to urge necessary prudence in our public policy landscape.

Inherent Limitations of the Bonilla, Dee and Penner Study

Just like the 2017 quantitative study, this newest project draws from a narrow sample size with an overrepresentation of certain demographic groups, such as male (58.3%) and Asian (60.1%) students who fell below the 2.0 GPA threshold and came from three San Francisco high schools. Consequently, the generalizability of its research result is low, considering California's public education system includes 1,322 high schools and enrolled 1,744,104 high school students in 2020,⁴ with a wide range of inter-district variations in achievement and demographics.

In addition to this general limitation, the authors make these important observations:

Our results do not necessarily speak to the impact of the ES course for students who had a high grade 8 GPA... The academic benefits of the course to be larger for "compliers" than for "always takers..." ES may be less effective for students who would decline (i.e., never takers) or insist (i.e., always takes) on enrolling in ES.⁵

To clarify, "compliers" are students who were mandated to take ES because their GPAs were below the 2.0 cutoff line, whereas "always takers" are those who would have always enrolled in ES. "Never takers," by the same token, are students who requested to be transferred from ES to other remedial or intervention courses.

Another area of caution lies in the scholars' acknowledgement of endogeneity on benefits of ES on "credits earned." In other words, if taking an ES course in itself generates six additional credits, the credit gains argument is moot and can potentially impact the effect on high school graduation, which is contingent upon a successful accumulation of course credits.

⁴ California Department of Education, "Fingertip Facts on Education in California," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp>.

⁵ Bonilla, Dee, and Penner, "Ethnic studies increases," 5-8.



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Last but not least, the limited generalizability of this study is further hampered by subgroup variations and heterogeneous treatment effects. The original 2017 study identified larger short-term benefits of ES for male and Latino students, compared with other subgroups. However, the 2021 study can't validate this preliminary finding, simply because of the small sample size and the underrepresentation of Latino students within the sample.

Some Final Thoughts on Presumptions and Falsifiability

By and large, any social-scientific inquiry is subject to falsification and repetitive empirical testing. Quantitative, large-N research, while rigorous in its formal modeling research design, gives weak insights into the causal mechanism of any observed relationship. Quasi-experimental research models, like the one employed in the 2021 study, are often skewed by extreme outlier cases and generally fail to capture the complexity of social behavior.⁶

Notably, information on the type of ES pilot course referenced in this study is not readily accessible since the authors have a “no-data-sharing” agreement with the school district. However, it is highly plausible that the course has roots in critical pedagogy and critical race theory due to the authors’ self-admitted conceptual frameworks of anti-racism, critical social justice and more. It is important to note the investigators’ ontological starting point and ideological predispositions. Situating ES in a framework of “anti-racist education,” the three authors trace its conceptual basis to culturally relevant pedagogy, social psychology, social identity studies, critical consciousness theory, and empowerment theory. In other words, the investigators are not value-neutral and gravitate toward a critically engaged ethnic studies course to combat “racism and other forms of oppression,” while increasing “student commitment to social justice.”⁷ These action-civics-specific goals are narrower and much more ideologically driven than the original state-mandated purpose of ethnic studies as an interdisciplinary study of difference with a focus on the history of people of different minority ethnicity in the United States to prepare “pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures.” A big ontological question we all need to ask is:

Does an ethnic studies course need to be anti-racist?

In summary, the Bonilla, Dee and Penner study features a robust research design and contributes to the scientific inquiry on ethnic studies. But policy makers and education practitioners must pay thorough attention to the study’s internal caveats and its ideological presumptions before devising far-reaching policies on this topic. At least, the research design must be reiterated and expanded to form a significantly larger body of literature capable of informing the public and our governance apparatus on such a contentious and under-studied area of scholarly investigation.

⁶ John Gerring, “The case study: what it is and what it does,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* Edited by Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (2009).

⁷ Bonilla, Dee, and Penner, “Ethnic studies increases,” 2.