The Quiet Before the Storm: Preparing Ethnic Studies High School Teachers to Implement AB101

Update for the Latino Social Science Pipeline Initiative

Juan G. Berumen, PhD
University of California, Berkeley
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Purpose

This qualitative research study will examine the implementation of AB 101 amidst these challenges and climate. Specifically, this study will delve into measures taken by individual school districts, as well as statewide and local initiatives, to prepare high school teachers for the imminent introduction of Ethnic Studies courses as early as the 2026-27 academic year for some school districts and to support the success of Latine students. Examining the steps taken in anticipation of this landmark shift in the high school curriculum and delving into the intricacies of the preparatory measures taken by educational institutions will be the following research questions:
1. What resources and support mechanisms are available at local, district, and statewide levels to assist ethnic studies teachers to implement AB101 and continue its effectiveness to enhance student achievement, specifically for Latine students?
2. How are ethnic studies teachers experiencing and perceiving the effectiveness of current efforts aimed at supporting their instructional practices and the implementation of AB 101?
3. To what extent is the current political climate impacting ethnic studies teachers' access to these resources and their ability to implement AB 101?

These research questions will be imperative to bridge implementation gaps of AB101 and thoroughly prepare high school Ethnic Studies teachers for the impending challenges.

Significance and Expected Contributions To The Field

This research addresses a critical gap by focusing on the specific challenges high school teachers face in implementing Ethnic Studies under AB101, a subject largely overlooked in prior studies. By directly engaging with teachers, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into their needs, offering practical solutions to enhance the successful implementation of the bill and support Latine achievement. The findings will serve as a key resource for policymakers, educational institutions, and teacher training programs, aiming to align strategies with the unique demands of Ethnic Studies, ultimately benefiting Latine students and ensuring a smooth integration of the curriculum into high schools.

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Context
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Ethnic Studies centers the experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized communities, exploring their resilience in overcoming systemic inequities and advocating for a more equitable society. Unlike similar disciplines such as multiculturalism, Ethnic Studies focuses on how race, racism, and related social forces like gender, class, and legal status shape societies. By highlighting these dynamics, Ethnic Studies not only affirms the racial and ethnic identities of students of color but also raises awareness of systemic inequities, fostering allyship and civic engagement. California's passage of AB 101 marks a major step in requiring Ethnic Studies as part of the high school curriculum, reflecting a broader trend across other states that have introduced similar legislation.

However, implementing AB 101 presents challenges, especially given California's shortage of qualified high school teachers, particularly in schools serving Latine students. Ethnic Studies is not widely included in teacher credential programs, heightening the need for trained educators. To support this, California allocated $50 million in 2021 to help develop Ethnic Studies curricula across schools. Yet, resistance to Ethnic Studies has grown, with local opposition in some school districts and increased scrutiny on teachers, complicating the rollout of the mandate. In this environment, research plays a critical role in supporting these efforts by providing strategic insights and guidance.

Literature Review

Conventional policy implementation, often framed as a linear and procedural process, is inadequate for understanding the complexities of contested policies like AB101. Research (Sabatier, 1991, 2007; Mueller, 2020; Yurkofsky, et al., 2020) critique the traditional stage-based heuristic for lacking a causal theory and oversimplifying the interactive nature of policy implementation. These models fail to capture the dynamic, political nature of implementation, where various stakeholders selectively influence which aspects of a policy get applied. Particularly in the case of AB101, where full institutional support is still forming, a linear approach neglects the power dynamics and contextual factors at play.

In complex environments like California, where teachers are both policy consumers and shapers, conventional models fail to account for the active roles that different educational stakeholders play. Research (Anderson & Holloway, 2018, Honig, 2006; Porter & Hicks, 1995 highlights that multiple stakeholders influence policy outcomes, emphasizing the need for a process-oriented view of implementation rather than treating it as a discrete political act. This approach aligns with decades of research showing that policy implementation is deeply influenced by interrelated factors such as specific policies, local contexts, and stakeholder actions. A socio-cultural lens, as suggested by scholars like Sutton and Levinson (2001), better captures this complexity, positioning stakeholders as active agents who appropriate, adapt, or resist policies.

Case studies (Gonzalez, et al., 2021; Mantilla, 2001; Quiroz, 2001) further illustrate how teachers can both comply with and manipulate education policies to better serve their students. In some instances, they form support groups or resist policies they deem ineffective, knowing that unpopular policies may soon be replaced. This perspective on policy as appropriation rather than strict implementation will be crucial in studying how high school Ethnic Studies teachers navigate AB101. Given the still-developing institutional frameworks, these educators hold significant agency in shaping how the policy is practiced on the ground.

Decolonizing Community Engaged Research

When conducting research within marginalized communities, it is crucial to move beyond traditional methodologies by embracing decolonial approaches that prioritize the needs and perspectives of these communities. Academia has a problematic history of exploiting marginalized groups for research purposes, often causing harm and advancing the careers of researchers without benefiting the communities involved. This legacy necessitates a shift toward more equitable research practices that dismantle colonial frameworks. As researchers working with these communities, it is essential to adopt decolonial methods that prioritize the well-being and agency of participants, acknowledging and repairing the damage done by past research practices.

My Positionality

A key aspect of decolonizing research is acknowledging the researcher's positionality, which influences all stages of a study, from design to analysis. Reflexivity allows researchers to critically examine their own privileges and biases, fostering transparency and trust with participants. In the context of educational research, disclosing one's positionality can help mitigate the mistrust that educators often feel towards academic researchers. Drawing on my background as a former high school math teacher and current school board member, I aim to leverage these experiences to connect with participants and navigate anti-academic sentiments. Embracing my educational experiences strengthens my ability to engage with teachers and schools in a meaningful and respectful way.

Participatory Action Research

This study will employ Participatory Action Research (PAR), a qualitative approach that emphasizes collaboration and co-creation of knowledge with participants. Rooted in equity, PAR transforms traditional research by positioning participants as active contributors who shape both the design and outcomes of the study. In this research, PAR will empower high school Ethnic Studies teachers to become agents of change, providing them a platform to influence the implementation of AB101. By engaging teachers in a cyclical process of learning and action, the study ensures that their voices and experiences directly inform policy recommendations, fostering a dynamic and transformative approach to educational research.

Participants

The participants in this study are eleven Latine high school Ethnic Studies teachers from the San Francisco Bay Area, ranging from first-year teachers to veterans with over twenty years of experience. Participants were recruited through two methods: an email invitation sent to teachers involved in the CRESC and HSESI programs, and snowball sampling, where existing participants recommended others from their networks. This diverse group of educators brings a range of experiences that will contribute to understanding the challenges and successes of implementing Ethnic Studies under AB101.

Methods

To adhere to decolonial practices, this study will gather the testimonios of participants, a method that challenges academic objectivity by centering personal and collective experiences of marginalization, resistance, and solidarity (Flores Carmona, & Luschen, 2015). Teachers expressed a preference for workshops as a format for sharing their testimonios, rejecting traditional focus groups in favor of a space for mutual learning and support. The workshops will serve as both a means of data collection and a collaborative forum where teachers can engage in dialogue about their experiences with AB101. This process aligns with the principles of PAR by allowing teachers to shape the research process and ensuring that their voices are central to the study's recommendations.

Pláticas

The workshops will be structured as pláticas, a Chicane/Latine Feminist practice that fosters community and challenges the formalities of academic research (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Pláticas create supportive spaces for open, unfiltered conversations about difficult topics, breaking down barriers between researchers and participants. This format is especially important given the distrust many communities of color feel towards academic spaces. The workshops will follow a three-part process: La Entrada (entry), where participants build community through shared experiences; La Amistad (friendship), where they discuss their testimonios and collaboratively develop policy recommendations; and La Despedida (farewell), where participants reflect on their aspirations and continue building a supportive community.

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Next steps

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Coordinating these pláticas with teachers over the summer proved to be more challenging than anticipated. Many were understandably protective of their vacation time and preferred to delay participation until the start of the new academic year. Interestingly, when approached during the spring semester, many of these same teachers expressed a preference to wait until summer, once the school year had ended. Fortunately, I was able to schedule two pláticas, both set for November 2024. Nonetheless, this delay underscores the complexities of conducting research with participants, such as teachers, who may not fully recognize the immediate value of academic research—even when

approached with decolonial intentions and potential policy implications. This hesitancy often reflects the challenge of balancing delayed outcomes with the more immediate demands of their profession and lives.

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