

Stanford study suggests academic benefits to ethnic studies courses

New research shows gains in attendance, GPA of at-risk high school students from incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy.

By Brooke Donald January 12, 2016



Teacher David Ko instructs an ethnic studies class at Washington High School in San Francisco. A Stanford study found students benefit from such courses. Here, Ko is explaining an assignment about the role of advertising in reinforcing cultural stereotypes. *(Image credit: Marc Franklin)*

A high school ethnic studies course examining the roles of race, nationality and culture on identity and experience boosted attendance and academic performance of students at risk of dropping out, a new study by scholars at [Stanford Graduate School of Education](#) (GSE) found.

The study looked at ethnic studies classes in a pilot program in San Francisco high schools, and compared academic outcomes for students encouraged to

enroll in the courses with similar students who did not take them.

The researchers found that students not only made gains in attendance and grades, they also increased the number of course credits they earned to graduate.

“What’s so unique about this program is the degree to which it helped the students who took it,” said [Emily Penner](#), co-author of the paper and a postdoctoral researcher at the GSE. “Schools have tried a number of approaches to support struggling students, and few have been this effective. It’s a novel approach that suggests that making school relevant and engaging to struggling students can really pay off.”

[Thomas S. Dee](#), a professor at Stanford GSE and director at the [Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis](#), was the other author of the report, [which was posted Jan. 11](#) as a working paper on the website of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER).

District debate

The findings come as educators and policymakers in Arizona, California, Oregon and other states debate adding or taking away such curriculum from their schools. While ethnic studies proponents contend the courses can help address academic disparities by aligning individual student experiences with curriculum, opponents have argued they are anti-American, teach divisiveness and may displace opportunities for students to take electives of their choice.

Last year, California Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed legislation proposing to require ethnic studies courses statewide, and the Arizona legislature also balked at a similar measure.

Still, a number of California school districts – including Los Angeles, Pico Rivera and Oakland – require ethnic studies or are moving in that direction.

San Francisco voted to expand its program to all 19 high schools last year when early findings from this study indicated positive gains for students.

Significant gains

The study was conducted in collaboration with the San Francisco Unified School District as part of a [research-practice partnership](#) with the GSE.

Bill Sanderson, assistant superintendent at SFUSD, said the partnership “allows the district to validate promising practices and expand successes in multiple schools to have the greatest impact on students.”

The ethnic studies course offered in San Francisco focuses on the experiences and identities of racial and ethnic minorities, uses cultural references in teaching and aims to enhance social and political awareness. In one lesson, for example, teachers ask students to look at the role of advertising in reinforcing cultural stereotypes and the idea that some values and people are “normal” while others are not.

“Culturally relevant pedagogy embeds several features of interventions designed to reduce stereotype threat, such as explaining stereotypes and identifying external forces that contribute to academic challenges,” Dee said. “Ethnic studies may be effective because it is an unusually intensive and at-scale social-psychological intervention.”

For the study, Dee and Penner gathered data from three San Francisco high schools participating in the pilot ethnic studies program from 2010 to 2014.

Enrollment in ethnic studies was automatic for students who had eighth grade GPAs below 2.0 and voluntary for those with GPAs above 2.0. The scholars narrowed their observations to a population of 1,405 ninth graders, and compared attendance rates, GPA and grade credits earned for students who came in closest to each side of the 2.0 threshold. Looking at students near the cutoff allowed for the best analysis of the program because a student

with a 1.99 GPA, for example, was likely to be very similar to a student with a 2.01 – except that one student was encouraged to enroll in the course, while the other was not.

“It’s similar to a randomized trial where one group of people are assigned to a treatment and another similar group is asked to take a placebo,” explained Dee, a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research.

The researchers found that attendance for those encouraged to enroll in the class increased by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points and credits earned by 23.

Boys, Hispanic students stand out

There were positive effects across male, female, Asian and Hispanic groups of students, the study said, but the improved outcomes were particularly concentrated among boys and Hispanic students.

The study also found significant effects on GPA specific to math and science. Grade point grew in English language arts, as well, but less so. Sample sizes of white and black populations, specifically, were too small to reliably estimate separate effects.

“To be confident we were getting the effect of the course and not the fact that these kids were flagged as needing extra help because of their GPA, we looked for similar patterns in high schools that did not offer ethnic studies,” Dee said. “We found no evidence the early warning indicators were causing the effects.

“The results are highly encouraging,” he added. “This is the first causally credible evidence on the academic effects of culturally relevant pedagogy.”

Dee and Penner cautioned, however, that the study had the benefit of examining a well-implemented program whose enrollment formula enabled a research design that allowed for causal inference.

“The evidence for San Francisco is very strong,” said Dee. “Whether what works there would work in other school districts is not yet determined. But the magnitude of the effects in San Francisco merits enthusiasm.”

The paper was funded through the Stanford-SFUSD partnership and a Postdoctoral Training Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. The researchers presented their findings at the Association for Public Policy and Management conference in November 2015. The paper has not yet undergone peer review.