

---

# Democracy & Education

---

## A call for a Third Wave of Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

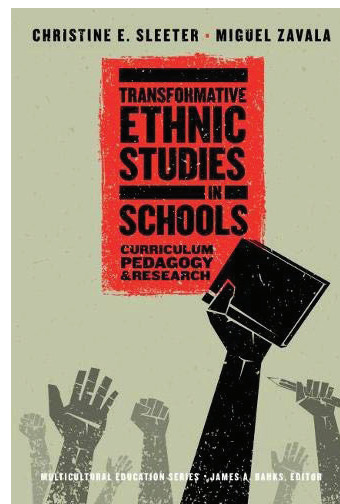
### A Book Review of *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research*

Robert G. Unzueta II (Lewis & Clark College)

---

**T**HE PUBLICATION OF *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research*, by Christine Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, comes at a critical juncture for our society. Multiple pandemics are raging in our community, making even more apparent inequities based on race, class, gender, gender identity, sexuality, ability, and other elements of social identity. With the public executions of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and the premature deaths of Breonna Taylor and Troy McDade, this pandemic of dehumanization has brought to light the systemic racism that has led these same communities to be the most vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 virus. Environmental racism, stress from daily microaggressions, inequitable access to health care, housing discrimination, and inadequately protected essential workers getting sick are examples of how systemic racism continues today. They are also the reason schools must become sites of inquiry as institutions that can perpetuate or disrupt this legacy of racism.

*Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research* calls on faculty, educators, community members, students, activists, and allies to usher a third wave of ethnic studies curriculum into the educational conversation. At the center of ethnic studies curriculum, according to the authors, is a push for the humanization of the most dehumanized students in our society. At a time when institutions are grappling with how to move forward in response to multiple national pandemics, this text offers practical, sustainable, and evidence-based research documenting



why we need ethnic studies curriculum in every classroom, including STEM. The authors demonstrate how ethnic studies curriculum, pedagogy, and research are engaging and critical for the academic achievement of all students, equipping all students but especially students of color with the tools to navigate our inequitable school system by centering their experiences, cultural identities, and allowing them a space to delink from colonial domination and to heal.

The importance of this text is that it offers a counter-narrative to standardized Eurocentric curriculum that is grounded in precolonial knowledge. It critically names racism as a systemic problem that impacts all of us. It does not consider racist actions as individual, isolated incidents or relics from a disturbing past but as the foundation of our current social injustices. The text demonstrates how ethnic studies can create spaces to help students reclaim cultural identities and validate their cultural experiences, and gives them tools to reclaim their space in history. Ethnic studies aims to disrupt our school's benchmarks and standards that are rooted in whiteness that historically and currently has been used as a form of dehumanization, cultural erasure, and assimilation. Ethnic studies is beneficial not only for students of color but for all students,

---

ROBERT G. UNZUETA II is assistant professor at Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education & Counseling, Teacher Education Department.

especially white students, which it calls for the intersectionality and multiplicity of our collective struggle to join forces across differences. The power of ethnic studies now is how it can help us to understand how racism works in maintaining oppression.

But as powerful as ethnic studies curriculum can be for students, it cannot stand alone, nor can it be just added as a new requirement by the state. The most critical component of the ethnic studies curriculum is that it needs to be facilitated by well-trained, well-intended, well-informed, and reflective educators. The authors understand that at the center of the ethnic studies curriculum is community engagement beyond the scope and sequence of a course, a classroom, or the physical location of the school. It is grounded in the community the educators serve, the students, who must be enlisted as co-constructors of knowledge, and in their research projects that aim at creating social action for change. Sleeter and Zavala offer educators a clear distinction between what ethnic studies curriculum is and what it is not and provide transparent pillars for how to engage in this work. They emphasize the need for educators to engage in pedagogy that is culturally responsive and place based and that disrupts the power structure of our current educational model by treating all students as intellectuals. In their view, students are not merely vessels to fill with knowledge but are knowledge holders who are experts in systemic racism and who can offer guidance to co-construct curriculum and activities with their teachers and peers. Creating research projects and assignments that are grounded in student voices and experiences gives way to lifelong learning outcomes that have tangible and real impacts on students' lives. Learning is no longer abstract but becomes an act of rehumanizing students by doing work that is important to them and their communities and aims to rectify many of the wrongs they contend with daily.

In my view, the most meaningful contribution from *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research* was also the most validating. As a scholar of color who has taught ethnic studies curriculum at multiple institutional settings and as a former student of ethnic studies, I can personally attest to the process of humanization that occurs. Connecting students' ethnic identities to the learning process is crucial to the academic success of our most marginalized students. Positive ethnic identity has been shown to support mental health, drive students to seek opportunities to actively create change in their communities, and give them the space to be academically engaged. Ethnic studies curriculum that is facilitated by critical educators has been proven to lead to improvements in student performance across disciplines and age groups. *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools:*

*Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research* uses case studies from schools across the country to illustrate how an ethnic studies curriculum has improved student attendance, GPA, and test scores. With an effective ethnic studies curriculum, learning becomes grounded in the students' lives and communities and, for many of our students of color, is the first time they are seen in the school contributors to the learning process.

*Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research* contributes significantly to the fields of teacher education, curriculum development, and ethnic studies. This text is a call for educators of all ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and abilities to critically reflect on why we are doing this work. *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, & Research* covers the need for educators to reflect critically on our identity, practice, pedagogy, and how to be in a convivial community with the students that we serve. First, we must engage what it means to be critically self-reflective of our place in the classroom and the social relations that come with our identities. From this, educators must understand why we are doing this work. We, as educators, must ground our practices in a named value of creating change while disrupting systemic racism. Lastly, we as educators must understand that teaching is a political act, and we must always be reflective of our identities and purpose for teaching ethnic studies curriculum because the root of ethnic studies curriculum is to create change based on the identified needs of the students. In doing ethnic studies work, there will be challenges that come from disrupting the various power structures in our schools and society. This text offers real examples of how these challenges arise and provides practical strategies for educators to continue to sustain the change our community desperately is seeking.

To usher an ethnic studies curriculum into the K–12 system is a collective effort, and something that is not to be taken lightly. This text ends with detailing the groundwork that was required to make ethnic studies a reality in a number of locations and highlights how, in communities across the country, students, educators, community activists, and college faculty came together to demand ethnic studies in their schools. This text contributes significantly to the field and is needed more than ever in our society as we are grappling with the systemic foundations of racism as it is embedded in our communities, nation, and schools.

## Reference

Sleeter, C., & Zavala, M. (2020). *Transformative ethnic studies in schools: Curriculum, pedagogy, & research*. Teachers College Press.