

Research Article

FOSTERING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN POSTSECONDARY SCHOOL: THE ROLES OF ETHNIC STUDIES AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

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Ethnic studies has been found to foster students' school engagement and social support in schools. However, to date, there has been no study that has specifically examined the relationships of ethnic studies with the three psychosocial dimensions of students' school engagement (i.e., emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) and their social support, as well as the potential factors that mediate these relationships. We conducted 17 in-depth interviews with university students with varying exposures to ethnic studies to examine how ethnic studies fostered their school engagement and social support, and how sense of community and sense of belonging mediated these positive effects of ethnic studies. From our thematic analysis of our interview data, we identified two main themes: (1) opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and (2) barriers to learning from ethnic studies. In-class, teacher-facilitated, student-led class discussions in ethnic studies and active participation in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered registered student organizations provided underrepresented students considerable opportunities to promote their peer-to-peer learning and gain greater sense of community and sense of belonging in postsecondary school, which in turn, fostered their emotional and behavioral school engagement and social support. Future research could focus on strategies to address barriers to learning from ethnic studies.

Keywords: ethnic studies, school engagement, sense of community, sense of belonging, social support

1. Introduction

Research has documented that students' school engagement and social support in schools are strongly associated with positive academic outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004; Mishra, 2020; Schnitzler et al., 2021; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). These positive academic outcomes not

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only include student success in terms of improved grades and the prevention of school dropout (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Kortering & Christenson, 2009), but also involve the promotion of student retention (McDaniel et al., 2024; Thomas, 2013), persistence (Janosz et al., 2008; Smith & Tinto, 2024), and completion (Archambault et al., 2019; Kortering & Christenson, 2009; Reschly, 2020).

1.1 *The Psychosocial Dimensions of School Engagement*

Researchers have defined school engagement as a multifaceted concept in order to capture three psychosocial dimensions related to such engagement: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). Since the debut of these psychological dimensions in the 1980s (Natriello, 1984), researchers have explored strategies to diminish risks of student disengagement, foster school engagement, and prevent school dropout (Li, 2011). Although early studies on school engagement have distinctively focused on student disengagement and deficiencies that exacerbate unsuccessful school outcomes (Finn, 1989), subsequent studies have emphasized a new focus that highlight strategies for fostering school engagement among at-risk students (Wagonlander, 1997).

This approach of fostering school engagement has been used to identify environmental antecedents and the outcomes that are contingent upon varying levels and psychosocial dimensions of school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). These psychosocial dimensions have defined how well students can manage and regulate the feelings they experience in the classroom (i.e., emotional engagement), their adherence to school-related activities (i.e., behavioral engagement), and their personal motivations to learn (i.e., cognitive engagement).

Academic literature on school engagement in the 21st century has grown from the field's pioneer studies that investigated student deficiencies to recent strengths-based research. Such strengths-based research has highlighted inclusive work prioritizing the lived experiences of marginalized groups (Kornbluh et al., 2022), celebrating cultural differences (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013), and empowering youth voices in the assessment and transformation of classroom experiences (i.e., youth participatory approaches) (Ozer, 2017).

Scholars studying school engagement have applied methods used in community based participatory research (CBPR) to address and combat social injustices that adversely influence school engagement (Kornbluh et al., 2015; Krauss et al., 2017; O'Toole & Due, 2015). These social justice-centered initiatives that have been implemented to improve upon scholarly understanding of school engagement through a CBPR approach have been observed across the three psychosocial dimensions of school engagement, as well as utilized to promote student retention, persistence, and completion in school systems.

There has been marked research interest in school engagement in the last two decades and this interest has been growing among scholars and educators around the globe (Kortering & Christenson, 2009; Reschly, 2020). In particular, strategies to improve school engagement have increasingly involved students' active participation in these strategies, predominantly to provide them more opportunities to control their destiny in classroom activities as well as facilitate their engagement in the non-academic aspects of school (Kortering & Christenson, 2009).

The key role of educators has also been investigated and noted, especially in terms of inculcating positive classroom settings and incorporating culturally relevant material to facilitate

stimulating class discussions (Thomas, 2013). The primary objective of these strategies has been to create classroom settings where all students regardless of race, ethnicity, and social background are respected, have equal rights to raise questions, and are able to participate in discussions that enhance their perceived social support (Mishra, 2020).

1.2 Social Support in Schools

Similarly, research in the last two decades on social support in schools has also focused on how social support from peers, faculty, ethnoracial and religious affiliations, and administrators could mitigate risks, compensate for deficiencies, and eventually, promote student retention, persistence, and completion (Bass et al., 2016; Hansen et al., 2022; Kember et al., 2023; Mishra, 2020; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Thus, social support in schools has been found to come from a variety of sources.

By and large, literature has emphasized the relationship between social support and associated research topics such as emotional regulation (Wei et al., 2016, Woods-Jaeger et al., 2016); behaviors in response to stigma and racism (Seawell et al., 2014); cognitive functioning (Seeman et al., 2001); protective factors during stressful events (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009); and school engagement (Daly et al., 2009). These psychosocial contextual factors have been observed across academic networks, namely with classmates, peers, and professors, to gauge student success (Mishra, 2020).

1.3 Ethnic Studies: More Than Just Including Culturally Relevant Material

In order to challenge the earlier deficits-based approaches that have been typically used to address gaps in academic achievement, recent research has examined the impact of adapting curricula to include culturally relevant material for historically marginalized students as a critical approach (Hall & Martin, 2013). Prominent themes of this latter approach have examined the relationships between culturally relevant material, school engagement, social support, and class performance.

Using a critical race theoretical framework, Hall and Martin (2013) had found that culturally relevant material encouraged university students to participate in classroom discussions on racism and sexism. Conversely, they had also found that university students would not necessarily feel safe to engage in similar conversations in spaces that did not incorporate such culturally relevant material.

Ethnic studies has been described as an interdisciplinary field that examines the culture, history, and experiences of different racial and ethnic groups in the US, particularly people of color (Kowarski, 2022). Beyond examining multiple aspects of culturally relevant material, race, ethnicity, and history, ethnic studies has analyzed power structures and the intersections of culture with gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, utilizing a critical race theoretical framework.

Ethnic studies in education have also been described as a pedagogy that celebrates the history of marginalized groups, critiques systems of oppression, reflects on systems of power within classroom spaces, and is culturally responsive (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). The primary purpose of this pedagogy is to promote access to education, relevant classroom material that

includes marginalized perspectives, and community involvement (ARC) in order to work towards bettering the lives of underserved populations and igniting social change (Tintiangco-Cubales & Duncan-Andrade, 2021).

Agarwal and Sen (2022) have highlighted the need for ethnic studies that would include a review of the history and lived experiences of multiple ethnoracial groups. Additional support for ethnic studies in educational policy has been evident as more scholars have underscored the positive relationships between enrollment in ethnic studies in high school and increased college enrollment, as well as reduced dropout rates (Bonilla et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2011).

For more than 50 years now, high school and college students, families, educators, and community activists have fought for ethnic studies since they have consistently shown positive outcomes including increased school engagement, student affirmation, and social support among students taking ethnic studies (Marrun, 2018). The long-standing rationale to offer and promote ethnic studies courses is that their emphasis on culturally relevant and critically engaged contents (e.g., social justice, anti-racism, contemporary social movements) has shown potent positive effects on school engagement, social support, and student outcomes (Bonilla et al., 2021; Perez, 2021). Ethnic studies' focus on exploring students' ethnoracial identities and critical analysis of racism has been documented to improve school engagement and academic achievement, particularly among underrepresented students (Gillespie et al., 2024).

1.4 *Sense of Community and Sense of Belonging*

Sense of community and sense of belonging are constructs that have been repeatedly examined in prior research studies as factors that promote student retention, persistence, and completion (Hansen et al., 2022; Kember et al., 2023; Mishra, 2020; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Although they have similar characteristics, these constructs are distinct factors that have been documented to positively influence academic achievement among students at different levels of education.

Sense of community has been described as the collective feeling an individual perceives based on their sense of personal relatedness or membership; sense of mattering or having an influence; integration and fulfillment of needs; and shared emotional connectedness in a particular group (McMillan, 1996). Related to this, sense of belonging, particularly in the context of higher education, has not only been described as one's sense of being included, valued, and held important in an academic setting (Hansen et al., 2022), but also as a construct that is measurable in terms of one's academic and social engagement, life satisfaction, life attitudes, identity, and personal interests (Ahn & Davis, 2019). Despite the distinct ways that these constructs have been described and previously operationalized, both sense of community and sense of belonging have proven to be associated factors that play important roles in students' school engagement and social support.

1.5 *Our Recent Study*

Although several studies have discussed the long-standing rationales for advocating for and preserving ethnic studies in high school (Bonilla et al. 2021; Gillespie et al. 2024; Hall & Martin, 2014; Marrun, 2018; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), there has been no study conducted to date that has

examined the relationships of ethnic studies with the psychosocial dimensions of school engagement and perceived social support among university students, as well as explored factors that potentially mediate these relationships. In this article, we briefly describe the quantitative study of our mixed-methods research project that focused on the relationships between ethnic studies and university students' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, as well as their perceived social support. We then explore and examine factors that mediate these relationships based on our participants' lived experiences and perspectives, which we derived during the subsequent qualitative study of our research project. Specifically, we examine sense of community and sense of belonging as factors that mediate the relationships between ethnic studies and our participants' school engagement and social support in university.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The qualitative study and findings we describe and discuss in this article are part of a larger research project that utilized a sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) to examine the relationships between taking ethnic studies in high school and university students' school engagement as well as their perceived social support in postsecondary school. For the initial phase of our larger research project, we conducted a quantitative study using a cross-sectional survey of university students through the SONA system of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) to collect data from the Fall 2022 to the Spring 2023 semesters.

Based on the ordinary least squares multiple regression models we utilized in our quantitative study to estimate the regression coefficients for school engagement and social support (while controlling for race, language spoken at home, and first-generation status), our survey findings revealed that students who had reported taking ethnic studies in high school were more likely to report higher levels of emotional engagement ($\beta = .092$, $SE_{ethcours} = 0.03$, $t = 3.04$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.032, .151]) and behavioral engagement ($\beta = .132$, $SE_{ethcours} = 0.25$, $t = 5.38$, $p < .000$, 95% CI [.084, .180]), but not cognitive engagement, in university. Additionally, based on the multiple regression analysis we conducted, our survey findings also revealed that students who had reported taking ethnic studies in high school were more likely to report higher levels of perceived social support, particularly from peers ($\beta = .175$, $SE_{ethcours} = 0.055$, $t = 3.156$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.066, .283]).

We probed further into the significant relationships from our survey findings to determine the roles of sense of community and sense of belonging, constructs that have been documented in prior research as factors that promote student retention, persistence, and completion (Hansen et al., 2022; Kember et al., 2023; Mishra, 2020; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023), as possible mediators of these relationships. Our path of mediational analyses confirmed that not only did sense of community mediate the relationships of ethnic studies with emotional engagement ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), and perceived social support from peers ($\beta = .73$, $p < .001$), but sense of belonging also mediated the relationships of ethnic studies with students' emotional engagement ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$),

and perceived social support from peers ($\beta = .38, = p < .005$). We present the full description of our project's quantitative study, as well as a discussion of the implications of our survey findings in another manuscript under consideration for peer-reviewed publication.

In order to investigate further the roles of sense of community and sense of belonging as mediators of the relationships of ethnic studies with students' school engagement and their perceived social support, we subsequently conducted the qualitative study of our larger research project. In this article, we qualitatively explore the roles of sense of community and sense of belonging as significant mediators of the relationships of taking ethnic studies with students' school engagement and their perceived social support through our analysis of themes and codes we identified from the rich content of our participant interviews. Additionally, we also discuss in this article other relevant considerations that impact sense of community and sense of belonging as mediators based on our participants' lived experiences and perspectives.

2.2 Participants

A total of 306 university students between the ages of 18 to 42 years old ($M = 19.18, SD = 2.64$) completed our survey during the quantitative phase of our project. Among our survey participants, 57.8% ($n = 177$) identified as female, 39.6% ($n = 121$) as male, and 2.6% ($n = 8$) as nonbinary. Of the 306, 63% ($n = 192$) held first-generation student status and 23% ($n = 72$) did not primarily speak English at home. In terms of ethnoracial status, our participants identified as African American/Black (13.7%, $n = 42$), Asian (17.3%, $n = 53$), Indigenous/American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.7%, $n = 3$), Latina/o/é (27.1%, $n = 83$), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (3.6%, $n = 11$), White (25.5%, $n = 78$), bi-racial (6.5%, $n = 20$), and multi-racial (5.6%, $n = 16$). Prior to attending university, 122 of them took ethnic studies in high school.

For the qualitative phase, we employed a nested sampling method, which involved a subset of participants from our quantitative phase (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). In our survey, we included a question that asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a subsequent qualitative interview. Seventeen participants expressed willingness, all of whom we interviewed in our next phase. Our 17 interviewees were between the ages of 18 to 22 years old ($M = 18.71, SD = 1.12$). Over 82% ($n = 14$) of them identified as female and 17.6% ($n = 3$) as male. Slightly less than 53% ($n = 9$) of them held first-generation student status. We were unable to collect information about their primary language spoken at home during the interviews. In terms of ethnoracial status, interviewees identified as African American/Black (11.8%, $n = 2$), Asian (5.9%, $n = 1$), Latina/o/é (64.6%, $n = 11$), White (11.8%, $n = 2$), and bi-racial (5.9%, $n = 1$).

Among our 17 interviewees, 64.6% ($n = 11$) had prior exposure to ethnic studies or a similar course that employed a critical race theoretical framework in high school, and/or a similar course or a registered student organization (RSO) that employed a critical race theoretical framework in university, while 35.4% ($n = 6$) had no prior exposure to ethnic studies or a critical race theoretical framework in high school or university. Among the 11 interviewees with prior exposure to ethnic studies or a critical race theoretical framework, 63.6% ($n = 7$) took ethnic studies or a similar course that employed a critical race theoretical framework in high school, 36.4% ($n = 4$) took ethnic studies or a similar course that employed a critical race theoretical framework in university, and 36.4% ($n = 4$) participated in an RSO that employed a critical race theoretical framework in university (See Table 1 for the participant demographics).

Table 1. Interview Participants' Demographics

Participant Number	Gender	Age in Years	Ethnoracial background	First Gen Student	Sexual Orientation	Had Ethnic Studies or Related Course
1	Female	18	Latina	No	Straight	Yes, in high school
2	Female	18	African American/Black	Yes	Straight	Yes, in high school
3	Female	18	Latina	Yes	Straight	Yes + joined an RSO
4	Female	20	White/Caucasian	No	Straight	No
5	Female	18	Latina	Yes	Questioning	Yes, in high school
6	Male	20	Latino	No	Straight	No
7	Female	18	Bi-racial (unspecified)	No	Straight	Yes + joined an RSO
8	Female	18	African American/Black	Yes	Straight	Yes + joined an RSO
9	Female	18	Latina	No	Straight	No
10	Female	18	White/Caucasian	Yes	Queer	No
11	Female	18	Latina	No	Straight	Yes, in high school
12	Female	22	Latina/Native American	Yes	Straight	Yes, in high school
13	Female	19	Latina	Yes	Bisexual	Yes, in high school
14	Male	18	Latino	No	Straight	Yes + joined an RSO
15	Male	20	Latino	Yes	Gay	No
16	Female	18	Latina	No	Straight	No
17	Female	18	Asian/Native Hawaiian	Yes	Straight	Yes, in high school

2.3 Procedures

We conducted our study at UNLV during the 2022-2023 academic year using a research protocol that was approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB, approval # UNLV-2022-237). We recruited participants using IRB-approved announcements through UNLV's SONA system, campus listservs, and Psychology and first year student seminar classes. For our qualitative study, students provided their written informed consent prior to participating in our 60-minute, confidential, one-on-one interviews on Zoom, which were audio-recorded for the purposes of transcribing the interviews verbatim and reviewing them.

We developed our interview guide questions so that they would be open-ended, to allow participants to elaborate more freely with their responses. We constructed our guide questions to broadly explore the relationships of ethnic studies with students' school engagement and perceived social support in university (See Table 2 for examples of interview guide questions). We also customized our follow-up questions to build on our quantitative findings, especially to elucidate the roles of sense of community and sense of belonging in mediating the relationships of ethnic studies with students' school engagement and social support, which were demonstrated by the path models we used to examine our survey data. For instance, to further investigate these mediating roles of sense of community and sense of belonging, we asked a smaller subset of participants (i.e., those who took ethnic studies in high school or university) to share their insights on how they perceived sense of community or sense of belonging in classes that discussed race or social injustice. We recognized that the insights of this smaller subset were particularly useful to examining the roles of sense of community and sense of belonging as mediators of the relationships of ethnic studies with students' school engagement and social support.

We continued to conduct our participant interviews until we achieved theoretical saturation of our research questions. Our 17 interviews were conducted from the middle of the Fall 2022 semester to the end of the Spring 2023 semester. After completing their interviews, participants

were compensated for their time and efforts with \$50 gift cards using the UNLV-approved Advarra payments system.

Table 2. Examples of Interview Guide Questions

Questions	
1	First, could you describe what your experience has been like during your first year of university? Probe: Please tell me more about your classroom experiences.
2	If you had to pick one class you learned from the most about culture, equity, and diversity during high school/university, could you tell me about what it was like when you first started that course? Probe: How did you decide to choose/take that course?
3	How was your experience like when (1: interacting with the instructor and/or classmates; and 2: learning) in this course during high school/university?
4	How do you think these (1: interacting with the instructor and/or classmates; 2: learning) experiences during high school/university impact your overall university experience? Follow up: How do you think these can be improved? Follow up: Are there any challenges that are/were present when trying to participate or communicate in other classes during university? Any supports from others?
5	What did you learn about inequality, inequity, and injustice in this course that you did not know before or during university?

2.4 Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis to examine our qualitative data utilizing the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, our lead researcher familiarized themselves with our data set by conducting all the interviews, transcribing recordings, and quality checking transcriptions. The rest of our research team also familiarized themselves with our data set by transcribing recordings and quality cross-checking transcriptions. Second, each team member generated initial codes from eight of our 17 interview transcriptions. These first eight transcriptions were carefully chosen by our lead researcher as representative of our data set based on the sociodemographic information of all 17 interviewees. Our team used an inductive approach to conduct open coding in which each member independently coded the eight transcriptions without trying to fit the data into an expected coding frame. Following the open coding, our team members met to conduct axial coding using Google Jamboard (Stafford, 2022). Google Jamboard is a digital whiteboard that allowed our team to brainstorm in a virtual interactive space and visually organize the wealth of codes they initially generated. Team members took turns to facilitate axial coding sessions and organize codes while openly identifying themes and constructing an initial codebook. Our team named subthemes and themes, and reviewed the initial codebook before coding the remaining transcriptions. A second step to develop new codes, subthemes, and themes was implemented by our lead researcher. This step was done using a deductive approach in which themes were generated to align with the critical race theoretical framework of ethnic studies. This step allowed for our data set to be further analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, our final codebook included codes, subthemes, and themes that were developed from inductive and deductive approaches. All team members participated in the open and axial coding, and met weekly to discuss findings and discrepancies to build a consensus and create a final report.

3. Results

From our thematic analysis of our 17 interviews, we identified two main themes: (1) opportunities to promote peer-to-peer learning, and (2) barriers to learning from ethnic studies. For each of these main themes, we also identified two to three subthemes. Below, we describe these themes and subthemes with accompanying relevant quotes to highlight the lived experiences and perspectives of our participants.

3.1 Opportunities to Promote Peer-To-Peer Learning

The first theme that we identified was opportunities to promote peer-to-peer learning related to ethnic studies, sense of community, and/or sense of belonging. This theme appeared across most of our interviews when students discussed their experiences with ethnic studies and included subthemes such as (1) in-class, teacher-facilitated, student-led learning, and (2) university-sanctioned, RSOs.

In-Class, Teacher-Facilitated, Student-Led Learning. Students who had taken ethnic studies in high school reported feeling heard and respected when they engaged in class discussions reflective of their identity and racial background. Students described how supportive environments, emotional connections, help seeking behaviors, and feelings of vulnerability were possible in classes that encouraged students to take the lead or participate in discussions about racial injustice and systems of oppression. For some students, classes on both ethnic studies and LGBTQ+ literature were offered in their high schools. These classes were described as beneficial for their peer relationships and supporting their friends even outside of the classroom. Students recognized the controversies related to discussing race and sexual orientation in education, and thus, appreciated the efforts teachers made in class to facilitate social environments where students can be open and vulnerable with peers.

I think it's good to kind of pause for a second and get to know yourself... Some teachers didn't encourage you to get to know yourself, some did. I'm really thankful that I had teachers who encouraged it...it was really nice and comforting knowing that there were people who would support me no matter who I was. It really benefited a lot of students who weren't as comfortable with themselves or who they really are... I think it improved our relationships overall because it made us more comfortable telling each other things about ourselves no matter what. (Female, 18, Latina, Straight)

In addition to feeling comfortable discussing diverse topics, students also stressed the importance of building a sense of community through peer-to-peer learning in student-led discussions. Notably, class discussions on racism were often from the perspectives of students and their lived experiences, and classes often became spaces for students to be heard and validated. Opportunities for students to lead discussions in class contributed to their emotional satisfaction, sense of belonging, and connection with peers in their ethnic studies classes in high school..

We connected over our opinions on how racism was not okay. Listening to Black students about having negative experiences in their lives, I understood more about what not to say,

what to say, how to be compassionate, and how to educate myself and others who may not have connected with students of other races. (Female, 19, Latina, First-Generation Student, Bisexual)

Students who were not offered ethnic studies in high school and have since enrolled in ethnic studies in university have also described the importance of student-led class discussions in order to learn about historical perspectives that aren't typically covered in classes and develop supportive relationships with their peers. These shared experiences of being vulnerable, without the professor interrupting the conversations, were also critical to their motivation to participate in class discussions where they could feel a sense of community and belonging.

We had that initial connection between us and how we all would talk as a closer community. We were given the opportunity in every single class to just talk amongst ourselves, and the professor would listen and intervene [only] when needed...Over time, it was more work as a community rather than just solo work or having lecture after lecture. (Male, 18, Latino, Straight)

Lastly, some students expressed interest in engaging in action-related topics that they discussed in their high school ethnic studies classes. They recognized how their discussions in high school could apply to their experiences in university when exploring how they can contribute to social justice on their campus.

With education comes self-awareness and where you're at on your own knowledge and understanding of things, "Okay, I've learned this already. I'm aware of my own stance and how I can show up for others and do better in these spaces". (Female, 22, Latina, First-Generation Student, Straight).

University-Sanctioned, RSOs. Students who had not taken ethnic studies in high school described how university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs have contributed to their development of sense of community and belonging, social networks, and supportive relationships, as well as fostered their peer-to-peer learning. These organizations have provided students who did not have opportunities to enroll in ethnic studies during high school spaces to engage and lead in discussions, access appropriate resources, and challenge racism in classrooms.

Our organization holds different activities for kids who are African American. It's really helpful to hear their perspective and it helps with college just having that older mentor. One of the things that we really talk about is how it feels to go to a predominantly White institution, and how it feels good sharing our own stories. That's kind of a safe place that you could go to if you're ever feeling isolated, and they will advocate for you as well. It's nice just because in high school, I didn't have that. Here, it's like...the senior students are trying to make sure you don't go through the same situations they went through. They use their voice when you don't really have one, if that makes sense. (Female, 18, African American, First-Generation Student, Straight)

Interest in the content of ethnic studies and overcoming barriers related to racial injustice was also described by students who have only participated in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs when they reached a university setting. Students have recognized the importance of acknowledging their racial background and exploring the relevant resources that

contribute to their success as students. University-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs have offered students safe spaces to connect with peers and navigate the systemic barriers that exist for students from marginalized backgrounds outside of classroom settings.

I have been active as a member of Future Latinos in Medicine...we're all planning to go into medicine. I think all of us are first-generation. We have so many things in common. We agreed how few Latinos are in medicine, and how Latinos are perceived in the field of medicine. It just gives me more motivation to address inequalities that are in the field because I think right now there is only 2% of Latinos in medicine, and then, even fewer are female. (Female, 18, Latina, First-Generation Student, Straight)

Several students who have not taken ethnic studies until they reached university and have actively participated in ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs in university have discussed how these spaces have offered them the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of their community, share resources, and spread awareness of social injustices. Students reported emotional satisfaction from the ability to participate in RSOs that addressed social issues related to their ethnoracial identity.

I do feel like I belong here, especially because there's just so many groups to choose from. I think there's something for everybody. I found the Muslim Student Association and it's been a good experience so far. For women who don't want to wear hijabs, there's a special foundation to help them. The association also educates people about Islam to correct typical misconceptions. (Female, 18, Bi-racial, Straight)

3.2 Barriers to Learning from Ethnic Studies

Our second identified theme was barriers to learning from ethnic studies or within the ethnic studies classes that exist for students in Nevada. Both groups of students, those who have taken ethnic studies prior to university and those who have not, reported these salient barriers in their interviews.

Lack of Institutional Support. A commonly mentioned barrier was the lack of institutional support in high schools for promoting ethnic studies. These institutional practices that eliminated or withheld ethnic studies despite the reported benefits from taking them were interpreted by our participants as untrustworthy and unsupportive of underrepresented students.

One class specifically, the cultural studies class, was taught by a Hispanic woman, and she was very connected with her students of all races. She was amazing! When they fired her and took away her specific course, it was weird, considering she had been positively impacting the students and leaving such a big mark on all of them. It did make me question what the school's priorities were since we had other programs that they were putting money towards that students didn't find useful. (Female, 18, Latina, Straight)

Students had also described how the lack of institutional support for ethnic studies was apparent in classes that remained committed to teaching about counternarratives critiquing systems of ethnoracial oppression. For instance, a few students had described how some high schools offered health-centered courses for those interested in pursuing healthcare careers.

These courses were taught with the intention of also emphasizing the ethnoracially diverse population of Nevada. However, the lack of support from school administrators and the larger educational system was highlighted by students who critiqued the quality of the materials available to them in these classes that were designed to discuss race.

It was hard because a lot of times textbooks really wouldn't have different skin colors. So, our teacher would have to refer to resources other than what was available to us. We looked at references and sources other than the ones that our school gave us. The teacher tried her best. Most of the time, we'd talk about issues and provided material would only be about White people. (Female, 18, African American, First-Generation Student, Straight)

Lastly, participants recognized the political climate of Nevada and the tensions across the state. They discussed how their classes provided students a space to explore opportunities for civic engagement in their community and how the wider school board was unsupportive of youths' engagement. Students have described how their interest in political action was mostly maintained through personal friendships outside of the classroom or in social media spaces where educators were not present.

It started on social media. People posted about a walkout [to support teachers]. Some teachers encouraged us, but the school was weird about it. We didn't get detention. It was more like, "we're not responsible for anybody who gets hurt". They sent an email to parents saying they're not part of it. My science teacher was big on advocacy. She said, "There'll be a walkout. I'm not saying you should join it. But if you're inclined, then go ahead". (Female, 18, Asian and Native Hawaiian, First-Generation Student, Straight)

Need For Better Teacher Leadership and Training. Although many participants who had been exposed to ethnic studies or a course that utilized a critical race theoretical framework in high school or university reported on the positive impacts of their experience, a few participants said that they did not always gain the same positive impacts from their experience. According to these participants, another barrier to learning from ethnic studies that they noted was the lack of safe spaces where students could comfortably voice their experiences and be heard by those who don't share similar experiences. This barrier to having a safe space to be vulnerable and recognized in ethnic studies classes was specifically related to teachers talking over students, being dismissive of students' identities, or not advocating for them. Students voiced how their decisions to participate in class or seek help from a teacher was influenced by perspectives their teacher held in regard to racism, sexual orientation, and women's rights.

When the Black Lives Matter stories started popping up, we would talk a lot about racial injustice in class. We had to stop one time because one of my teachers, he was white, and had very strong and different opinions from ours. Things got pretty bad. He got pretty bad. He kept saying, that the police have the right to shoot a Black student [during a protest]. A lot of people, especially the Black students, were really upset about that. So was I, but of course, they had more of a right to argue. The teacher eventually kicked one of the students who was arguing with him out of the meeting. We no longer talked about topics like that because of that incident. The teacher was known to be really opinionated, and there was no room for students to express their own opinions. (Female, 19, Latina, First-Generation Student, Bisexual)

Other participants shared similar stories of having had teachers who did not really do a good job at teaching ethnic studies, or probably shouldn't be teaching ethnic studies. At least, not without more educator training on the purposes and conduct of teaching ethnic studies. Some students made a case for school boards investing in professional development courses for and periodic evaluations of ethnic studies teachers.

Lack of Role Models. In addition to the vital role teachers played in class discussions related to ethnic studies, students have also reported how they were still learning how to navigate difficult conversations about race with their peers. While most students have expressed interest in learning from their peers in class discussions, students have also shared how these conversations could be challenging for youth who may not have role models who successfully demonstrate civil conversations, particularly youth who have not discussed these topics at home or those who may feel anxious about critiques of privilege.

Ethnic studies and racial injustice topics aren't at all schools. I've noticed that they weren't really encouraged in my high school. But our teacher was the one who encouraged it. There were times when some of us didn't really want to learn about these things. One of my classmates, he was white and very sweet. However, he really didn't like certain discussions. He felt like they were an attack on him. Sometimes, with how we lead the discussions, it can sort of feel that way. He was able to get over it and talk about his feelings. It would really help if we had older kids with more experience during these difficult discussions. (Female, 18, Latina, First-Generation, Questioning)

Some participants suggested that students could learn a lot more from having difficult conversations that were facilitated by people who could serve as role models. These role models could come in the form of well-informed, civil, and respectful peers, former students, teachers, staff, and administrators that students could resonate with and emulate. There was still a lack of role models both when students were in high school and in university.

4. Discussion

Through our thematic analysis of the lived experiences and perspectives of our interview participants, we were able to explore and critically examine how and why ethnic studies (taken in secondary or post-secondary school) were able to foster the behavioral and emotional dimensions of the students' school engagement, as well as social support, in university. We were able to recognize and better understand how ethnic studies was able to accomplish these tasks with sense of community and sense of belonging as mediating factors. The mediating effects of sense of community and belonging were cultivated not only by incorporating culturally relevant material and topics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, first generation status, and social justice in the courses' curricula, but more so by promoting in-class, teacher-facilitated, student-led class discussions, which provided significant opportunities to promote not only the peer-to-peer learning of our participants, but also their sense of community and sense of belonging.

Research studies that have focused on ethnic studies and involved diverse ethnoracial identities have shown that culturally relevant pedagogy has been considerably important in the building of a shared sense of community and sense of belonging among ethnoracial minority students (Cabrera et al., 2014; Halagao, 2010; Hall & Martin, 2014). From a multicultural perspective, ethnic studies has enhanced students' academic networks with fellow underrepresented students and peers, where they have worked together to dismantle stereotypes and broaden their sense of community.

This finding was quite apparent in many of our participants' experiences, especially when it came to their emotional and behavioral engagement. An emphasis on building their sense of community and belonging had resulted in our participants' heightened feelings of solidarity (emotional engagement) and wanting to give back (behavioral engagement), and consequently, developing a resolute community on campus where students of similar backgrounds and origins advise and mentor each other to foster school engagement and social support (Carson, 2009).

Sense of community and belonging have been most effectively nurtured through activities with an overt academic purpose in which all students, especially underrepresented students, can fully participate (Thomas, 2013). In the case of our participants, the overt academic purpose of their ethnic studies courses was to highlight and examine material, concerns, and issues relevant and important to them as ethnoracial and other minority students. Evidence from across different research projects has firmly identified the importance of students having a strong sense of community and sense of belonging in higher education (Thomas, 2013; Jacobs & Archie, 2008), and our study has reaffirmed their crucial roles in mediating the impacts of ethnic studies on students' school engagement and social support. Case in point, several of our participants reported that having their in-class, teacher-facilitated, student-led learning together with their supportive peers in their ethnic studies classes had considerably raised their confidence to not only fully engage during class discussions (emotional engagement), but also speak up and assert their perspectives and concerns, knowing that their input would be acknowledged, respected, and valued in a safe space (behavioral engagement).

Our analysis of our interviews also revealed that in the absence of opportunities to take ethnic studies in high school, students of color have been able to obtain comparable positive benefits that ethnic studies have to offer by taking ethnic studies in university, as well as by participating in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs, which utilized critical race theoretical frameworks in the work they did to support underrepresented students. Among our 11 interview participants who had exposure to pedagogy incorporating culturally relevant material in the classroom setting, seven students took ethnic studies in high school while four students not only took ethnic studies in university but also joined university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs that employed critical race theoretical frameworks in their programs, services, and activities.

To be clear, as an interdisciplinary field that examines the culture, history, and experiences of different racial and ethnic groups in the US (Kowarski, 2022), ethnic studies is conceptually distinct from university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs since it adapts curricula in a classroom setting to include culturally relevant material for historically marginalized students as a critical approach, which encourages ethnoracial minority students to participate in discussions on racism, sexism, heterosexism, and issues important to them (Hall & Martin, 2013). Outside of

the classroom setting, students have been found to not necessarily feel safe to engage in similar discussions in spaces that did not incorporate culturally relevant material.

Our findings revealed that university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs have been important spaces outside of the classroom setting (and without adapted curricula to implement) that incorporated culturally relevant material in the work they did with their use of critical race theoretical frameworks in their programs, services, and activities. Membership in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered organizations has been documented to assist in facilitating students' school engagement, social support, retention and completion in schools, and thriving in a learning community (Tinto, 2012), and has been found to be most beneficial to ethnoracial and other minority students (Fischer, 2007).

Several studies have documented that minority students have relied on ethnoracial minority-centered groups on campus to achieve academic success (Bailon, 2012; Harper, 2015; Palmer et al., 2011; Perez, 2014). Similar to the impact of ethnic studies in classroom settings, research has shown that membership in these groups have historically provided students of color spaces outside of the classroom to share their feelings, have their voices heard, sustain a strong sense of belonging and group identity, and gain much needed guidance and social support (Brooms, 2018; Palmer et al., 2011). In our interviews, participants expressed that their sense of community and belonging were intrinsically tied to their opportunities in RSOs to contribute to the wellbeing of their community, share resources, spread awareness of social injustices, and ability to participate in work that addressed issues related to their minority identities.

Interestingly, the aims of these RSOs have often overlapped with the fundamental goals of ethnic studies, which are to provide culturally relevant material for critical discourse, encourage youth-led discussions on inequalities, and promote action from critical reflections of such systemic inequalities (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Underrepresented students have derived support from peers with similar backgrounds in these organizations, especially after discovering their shared negative experiences related to stereotypes and discrimination, which have not only bonded them together but also allowed them to learn how to cope with challenges collectively (Putnam, 2000).

According to our participants, the ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs they joined have been spaces where they experienced a strong sense of community and sense of belonging, which have given them compelling reasons (i.e., having institutionally sanctioned assistance and access to scarce role models) to continue to obtain social support and increase their school engagement inside and outside of classrooms. It is important to note that in the absence of opportunities to take ethnic studies in high school or university, membership in a university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSO could potentially be a sufficient alternative for students of color to consider so that they could foster their sense of community, sense of belonging, school engagement, and social support, particularly with the help of strategies that utilize social media and digital technologies as described by other scholars (Bell et al., 2023), and as underscored by our participants.

Finally, we identified from our thematic analysis certain barriers to learning from ethnic studies. We learned that even when ethnic studies was available for students to take, limited institutional support, lackluster or poor teacher leadership and facilitation, and the lack of role models in class discussions presented as significant barriers to the maximal learning of students. Our participants' insights and input emphasized the need to provide stronger and more consistent

institutional support for ethnic studies (Bonilla et al., 2021), professional development and training for educators who teach ethnic studies (Green et al., 2020; Sacramento, 2019), and more accessible role models for students to emulate (Delhommer, 2022).

Institutional support could mainly come in the form of programs for ethnic studies curriculum development, faculty release time for course planning and preparation, and policies that mandate wide-scale availability of ethnic studies across different school levels (Bonilla et al., 2021). Professional development and training could come in the form of series offerings, include political education and critical race and consciousness dialogues, and be provided to educators who teach in middle and high schools (Green et al., 2020; Sacramento, 2019). To enhance the effectiveness of providing role models in ethnic studies classes, race-matching or assigning same-race peers, former students, and teachers to serve as role models in ethnic studies, or at the very least, making the ethnic studies teaching population more representative of the student body, has been found to be beneficial in the past (Delhommer, 2022). In order for students to fully reap the benefits that studying ethnic studies has to offer, it is critical to address head-on apparent barriers to learning from ethnic studies.

It is noteworthy to underscore that the findings of our study were undoubtedly influenced by the intersectional identities of a good number of our participants, particularly our participants who identified both as female and Latina/o/é, and comprised nearly half of our participant pool (i.e., 47%). Although we made considerable efforts to include a diverse set of interview participants in terms of ethnoracial background, it was reasonable to anticipate that we would likely gain the gender and ethnoracial characteristics of our participant pool considering that UNLV's total enrollment at the time of our study was 56% female and 35% Latina/o/é (Data USA, 2023; US News & World Report, n.d.). It would also be reasonable to expect that the findings of our study would most likely apply to student populations of campuses with similar gender and ethnoracial demographics similar to our university's student population.

4.1 *Limitations of the Study*

As we identified the specific lessons learned from our study and acknowledged their contributions to existing literature, it was important for us to also recognize the different limitations of our study. One limitation of our study that we needed to acknowledge is the potential selection effects related to our participant sample as students who choose to take ethnic studies courses may be inherently different from those who do not. Self-selection bias may have been a contributing factor to our results, and may have affected the overall generalizability of our findings, with some students not being required to take ethnic studies possibly enrolling in these courses and subsequently joining our cross-sectional study with pre-existing interests in and favorable attitudes towards ethnic studies. Future studies on this research focus would benefit more not only from implementing a longitudinal design to identify long-term trends, but also a randomized control trial to minimize self-selection bias.

Another limitation of our study is related to the sample representativeness of our interview participants. Since our sample was predominantly composed of female (82%) and Latina/o/é (64.6%) students, there are apparent concerns about the extent of the transferability of the qualitative findings of our study to male students and other non-Latina/o/é minority student populations. Nevertheless, the relevance of our findings still remains significant as not only have

female students consistently comprised nearly 60% of undergraduate students in the US since 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Nietzel, 2024), but also Latina/o/é students have increased in national student representation by over 400% in the last four decades (Nam, 2024) as well as continued to be the second largest ethnic group of university enrollees for the last several years (Nam, 2023; Nam, 2024).

A third limitation of our study was its lack of capacity to distinguish the differences between the experiences of students who took ethnic studies in high school from the experiences of students who enrolled in ethnic studies in university. It is possible that despite the overlapping similarities of their positive experiences from taking ethnic studies and the barriers from learning from ethnic studies they encountered, that there are nuanced variations that could be found among the overall experiences of these two groups of students that a larger sample size with greater sample representativeness would have uncovered.

5. Conclusion

In-class, teacher-facilitated, student-led class discussions in ethnic studies and active participation in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs provided underrepresented students considerable opportunities to promote their peer-to-peer learning and gain greater sense of community and sense of belonging in postsecondary school, which in turn, fostered their emotional and behavioral school engagement and social support. Recognizing the value of university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs supporting students of color in fostering their school engagement and social support from our study's findings, we would like to underscore the fact that membership in such RSOs should only be considered as an alternative to taking ethnic studies in the absence of opportunities to take ethnic studies in high school and/or university. We believe that the benefits of membership in such RSOs could be considered complementary to the benefits of taking ethnic studies since they both accomplish similar goals and have overlapping impacts in terms of increasing sense of community, sense of belonging, school engagement, and social support. However, like many proponents before us, we continue to staunchly advocate, argue, and agitate for sustaining and improving ethnic studies in schools because unlike membership in university-sanctioned, ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs, their positive effects impact not only students of color, but also non-minority students who could prospectively learn from culturally relevant material, grow to become valuable allies to minority students, and be part of a larger school community that supports students of all races, ethnicities, and cultures. Future research on ethnic studies and ethnoracial minority-centered RSOs in postsecondary schools could potentially look into investigating and finding new solutions to overcome the barriers to learning from culturally relevant material that we identified in our study in order to support future generations of underrepresented students in higher education.

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