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## **Educational Outcomes of Multicultural Curriculum**

**By**

**Megan Imai**

### **ABSTRACT.**

Under the context of political tension over restrictions on diversity curriculum in K-12 schools, this paper aims to answer the question: “Does the level of exposure to multiculturally representative curriculum in high school U.S. history courses correlate with educational engagement, especially for students of color?” Quantitative data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress 2010 12th grade U.S. history assessment and questionnaires is used to assess the correlation between the level of emphasis on people from various cultures in course curriculum and three measures of student engagement: NAEP test score, interest in course material, and their educational goals. While the literature suggests a more culturally competent and diverse curriculum would provide benefits for students, especially those from minority backgrounds, I could not conclude that there is a correlation between the level of exposure to many cultures in curriculum and any of these learning outcomes based on my data and analysis. Findings suggest that inclusion of different cultures in curriculum alone may not be enough to make a difference in achievement gaps along race and class lines. This study provides motivation for further research on the topic of diversity studies and multicultural curriculum in high schools, and discussion of the limitations of the study give insight into how this might be done.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last few years, issues surrounding diversity and social justice in the U.S. have come to the forefront of the national conversation, capturing the attention of people and news media across the country. The prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, voting rights campaigns, and the increase of Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives across many industries demonstrate how many people have been alerted to the problems of structural racism and homophobia in our society and want to do something about it. However, there has also been huge backlash against these social movements, evidence of and fuel for the severe political polarization we are experiencing.

One battleground where the backlash against diversity initiatives is particularly prominent is in K-12 education. Fears about what will happen if we give kids knowledge about race, gender, and sexual orientation have resulted in bathroom bills, “Don’t Say Gay” laws, and the uproar and legislative action against Critical Race Theory. While it has been highly publicized recently, resistance to curriculum that represents ethnic minority groups in the U.S. is not new. Though it

was repealed in 2017 after a federal district court found it unconstitutional, Arizona passed a law banning Mexican American studies in K-12 schools in 2010, even though such programs in Tucson showed signs of increasing test scores and engagement and decreasing dropout rates (Stephenson 2021). On the other hand, California became the first state to require ethnic studies to graduate high school starting in 2030 (Hong 2021). This year, the College Board is piloting an A.P. African American studies course in sixty high schools, another promising recognition of the legitimacy and importance of Ethnic Studies (Hartocollis 2022). Ethnic studies courses becoming more widely offered would make these fields of study available to students without needing to go to college to even be exposed to them. However, the A.P. course has met criticism and resistance from some conservatives including Governor DeSantis of Florida, who argues that it is a form of “woke indoctrination” (Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023). There have been back and forth discussions and decisions about what theories and topics should and should not be included, including intersectionality, Black queer theories, and the Black Lives Matter movement (Hartocollis, Goldstein, and Saul 2023). I have been alarmed by the strong and politicized reactions to efforts to create more opportunities for students to learn about the histories of minority groups and systemic inequities in our society. This drove my interest in researching this topic.

In addition to increasing access to Ethnic Studies for high schoolers, many scholars have investigated ways for schools to create a more holistic education system that enforces learning about and supporting people from many different backgrounds, cultures, and identities. One such approach is multicultural education. The National Association for Multicultural Education (n.d.) defines multicultural education as follows:

Multicultural education is a process that permeates all aspects of school practices, policies and organization as a means to ensure the highest levels of academic achievement for all students. It helps students develop a positive self-concept by providing knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups. It prepares all students to work actively toward structural equality in organizations and institutions by providing the knowledge, dispositions, and skills for the redistribution of power and income among diverse groups. Thus, school curriculum must directly address issues of racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia.

Multicultural education advocates the belief that students and their life histories and experiences should be placed at the center of the teaching and learning process and that pedagogy should occur in a context that is familiar to students and that addresses multiple ways of thinking. In addition, teachers and students must critically analyze oppression and power relations in their communities, society and the world.

Multicultural education is a holistic and comprehensive effort to teach students about diversity issues that face our society and to improve their sense of self and academic achievement through this. This approach and its impacts on students have not been ignored by scholars, but it is not widely realized in the education of our young citizens. Political messaging and mainstream media has also obscured the nuances of it to the public.

While there is much debate over what is appropriate and valuable to teach children in our society, the arguments about introducing diversity studies courses that are publicized in the

media are largely based on conjecture and political buzzwords. We need to take a step back from culture wars to revisit the purposes and goals of education and how to center these in the discussion and decision making process. There needs to be more clarity on the outcomes of adding to or restricting curriculum that teaches students about diversity and inequality for K-12 students.

In higher education, affirmative action policies, while also facing controversy, work to improve representation of marginalized groups in higher education institutions. Ethnic Studies departments are now widespread. Universities have student groups and resources for students from different racial and cultural backgrounds. For example, Santa Clara University has a core requirement that students take a class that teaches them about diversity issues, and the Multicultural Center and Office of Multicultural Learning provide spaces where students of color and LGBTQ+ students can foster community and advocate for themselves and others. While even this is limited, public K-12 schools suffer from a larger lack of formal resources like these to ensure their students feel supported with respect to their racial or ethnic backgrounds or sexual orientation. K-12 schools touch the lives of all kids, whereas the college enrollment rate (18-24 year olds in undergraduate or graduate programs at 2 or 4 year institutions) in 2020 was only 40 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics 2022). People who don't go to college should still have an opportunity to understand systems of inequality and learn about people and issues that resonate with them. I think if we were to improve the ability of students to see themselves and their families reflected in what they learn in school, they would feel more connected to their studies, more supported by their schools, and more likely to want to pursue their education further. Combating racial and socioeconomic inequality is linked to this idea since higher education is considered an important (though imperfect) avenue for upward socioeconomic mobility (Torche 2011; Kelly 2014).

I believe a positive outcome of introducing multicultural education and specific topics such as Ethnic Studies, intersectional feminism, LGBTQ+ studies, etc., especially in high schools, is providing a way for students to connect to their curriculum, coursework, and education. In turn, this could lead to higher achievement rates and college attendance for traditionally underrepresented students. In this research project, I aim to empirically investigate whether these assumptions are supported by trends in students' learning outcomes. To limit the scope of my research and because it is less common to find a lot of data about LGBTQ identifying students, my research questions will focus on race and culture of students and in curriculum. I chose to study high schoolers because I think this is when students are old enough to really grasp some of the more theoretical ideas and connections between history and the present. This study aims to answer the question: Does the level of exposure to multiculturally representative curriculum in high school U.S. history courses correlate with educational engagement, especially for students of color? It is important to assess this in order to find out whether to pursue multicultural curricula as a strategy to improve educational achievement especially for students of color. This research can provide insight for policymakers, educators, and the general public and could inform policy reform for high school curriculum development that would benefit students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is an achievement gap in education along race and class lines (Potter and Morris 2017; Noguera 2012). At a time when college degrees are a main avenue for upward socioeconomic mobility, it is important to understand how students, especially lower class students of color, can

be motivated to continue their education. One of the criticisms of the K-12 education system in the U.S. is that it lacks sensitivity to the diverse cultures that make up its student body and its country. While the idea of multicultural education is not new, a lot of research on it has been done especially in the last few years in light of scholars', students', and the public's heightened attention to social justice issues, especially with regards to race. Some areas of research include effects of a lack of culturally responsive support in schools, strategies to improve this support, specific pedagogical strategies for multicultural education, and outcomes of these. This literature review aims to summarize key questions and findings in these areas to better understand the landscape of multicultural education research, especially regarding curriculum in high schools.

First, the literature points to inadequate support of diverse social groups in K-12 education and curriculum, including racial groups (Brown 2011) and LGBTQ communities (Beck 2020). Brown (2011) argues that the existing K-12 curriculum develops a very narrow understanding of race and racism. Beck (2020) looks at LGBTQ college students' perceptions of their K-12 teachers to investigate teacher behaviors that support or fail to support students and their identities. To correct these shortcomings, multicultural education is an approach that has been suggested, implemented, and studied as a way to improve schools' support of minority students. Based on their own observations, urban teachers have expressed great satisfaction, support, and optimism surrounding their own use of culturally responsive teaching methods. They believe that when culturally diverse needs are met in their classrooms, this would result in higher educational achievement, greater acceptance, tolerance, and respect, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, higher motivation, better futures for students, as well as societal benefits (Bonner, Warren, and Jiang 2018). This study helps considerably in understanding the perceived benefits of multicultural education, but a more concrete analysis to test these outcomes for students would be useful.

While its potential for students is promising, multicultural education is not widely established. Many scholars have suggested ways to improve cultural literacy and multicultural education strategies in K-12 schools. One of these recommendations is through changes in the education of teachers who will then apply what they learn in their K-12 classrooms (Brown 2011; Gorski and Parekh 2020; Sanders, Haselden, and Moss 2014; Beck 2020). As a solution to the plentiful and persistent shortcomings of lessons on race and racism in K-12 classrooms, Brown (2011) advocates for increasing and improving teaching about cultural diversity, race, and racism in universities, particularly in teacher training programs. Teacher education is an important area because in studies that have examined the lived experiences of high school students in minority groups, relationships with adults on campus seemed to have significant impact on them. African American male high school students relied on the support of teachers and especially counselors while they worked to complete a college preparatory program on an urban campus (Huff 2016). LGBTQ students felt less safe at school when their teachers were unsupportive of them and their sexual orientation, but more self-secure when they did receive support (Beck 2020). Improvement in the higher education of teachers is clearly still needed to support multicultural education; teacher educators who teach more liberal and critical approaches to multicultural pedagogy feel less supported by their institutions than those who take a more conservative approach (Gorski and Parekh 2020). While teacher education is imperative to the development of more nurturing classroom environments for K-12 students, it does not fully address changes that should occur in K-12 schools themselves.

A more direct way K-12 schools can improve support for students from minority groups is by including role models from and topics pertaining to these groups in the curriculum. The lack of a critical multicultural curriculum is actively detrimental to minority students. In South Africa, Teeger (2015) found that curriculum that play downplayed structural racism limited the scope of students' learning: "By decoupling the racialized coding of victims and perpetrators, and sidelining discussions of beneficiaries, teachers hindered students' abilities to make connections to the present" (1175). This demonstrates the need for more comprehensive teaching about the history of race if we want students to understand how race plays a role in their communities today. In the U.S., a lack of holistic multicultural representation in advanced courses creates barriers to students' feelings of belonging and engagement in the course. A.P. U.S. History students of color in a qualitative study:

felt little connection to the curriculum and noted feelings of disengagement with the course despite initial interest in the subject matter. Their discussions revealed the following commonalities: curriculum bias towards a White, Eurocentric idealism; the singular and negative narrative surrounding people of color; and marginalization and otherness in the presentation of racially/culturally diverse subject matter. (Campbell-Cunefare 2020: 79-80)

This study on advanced courses is important because students of color should be encouraged to participate in these courses as much as anyone, and it suggests improvements to encourage this. However, students outside of A.P. courses (in regular placement courses and/or special education) and their relationships to their courses' curriculum should also be studied.

So what are the effects when a multicultural curriculum is implemented? Many scholars are working to find the benefits of developing curriculum and pedagogical exercises that are inclusive of minority groups in the U.S. and of students in the classroom. White elementary school students who were exposed to information about racism against African Americans in their history lesson expressed more positive attitudes and less negative attitudes toward African Americans than those who did not receive this part of the lesson (Hughes, Bigler, and Levy 2007). There is a correlation between race-related curriculum and high school students' increased intervention behaviors in anti-LGBTQ harassment incidents (Wernick et al. 2021). Having a multicultural curriculum "helps students develop 'self-knowledge,' meaning a personal awareness of their race and identity. Participants describe how self-knowledge provides corrective history, a response to negative media portrayals of minorities, and helps students understand current events" (Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver 2019). Students' understanding of themselves, their experiences, and larger patterns in the world around them improved with antiracist curriculum in this qualitative study. Positive effects of multicultural curricula in general are demonstrated in these studies.

The successes of specific pedagogical strategies that support multicultural learning have also been analyzed. Ethnic studies courses were praised for helping students engage with history and current events and navigate their own identity within them (Langdon 2020; de los Ríos 2020). Specifically, reflective writing and creative arts have fostered empowerment for Native American and Mexican-American students (Cisneros 2019; de los Ríos 2020; Langdon 2020). Cisneros found that in an indigenous college preparatory program in California, writing workshops helped students "in cultivating their college readiness, in bolstering their educational

aspirations, and, most saliently, in affirming their intersectional identities as Indigenous students” (2019:120). A photovoice project in a Latinx ethnic studies class helped link social justice to education and students’ own experiences (de los Ríos 2020). Langdon similarly investigated a play written and performed by Latinx students, which allowed students to connect their experiences, challenges, culture, and political context. Interestingly, this project featured a partnership between a university ethnic studies department and a high school arts program, providing a practical idea for how to bring ethnic studies to high schools (2020). Similarly to Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019), these studies demonstrate that a multicultural curriculum helps students to develop an ability to place themselves in their academic and larger environment, which may have implications for keeping kids in school and their overall confidence and wellbeing. In addition to understanding their own identity and the histories of their cultures, students involved in multicultural educational exercises were able to connect across cultures. For example, in de los Ríos, Seltzer, and Molina (2021), a “critical translingual” assignment was used:

where students—both Latinx and African American—collaborated through the cowriting of corridos (Mexican ballads) about their lived experiences with in/justice. The findings demonstrate the ways that this unit invited students to write across racial, ethnic, and linguistic borders and fostered language and cultural sharing, political consciousness, and solidarity. (1070)

These studies show various ways educators have implemented multicultural learning in their classrooms and how students have responded and benefitted from them. These projects are amazing examples but have been explored on a small scale, largely addressing groups of students from one (or two) ethnic group(s). It would be wonderful to be able to apply the knowledge gained from these studies to develop a standardized curriculum that could be tailored to every classroom. Studying a larger sample has not been done in this area, and could be beneficial as well.

Most of these studies on multicultural learning strategies emphasized social-psychological impacts for students, though Cisneros also looked at college readiness (2019). Others have touched on impacts on students’ learning and educational achievement. For example, in the study on student and teacher perceptions of the school and curriculum at a “high-performing urban school that utilizes critical antiracism education”, the high achieving status of the school suggests academic benefits of multicultural education (Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver 2019). In many cases, these claims have been more exploratory and correlation seems not to have been studied directly. In one exception, cohorts of students in San Francisco Unified School District with low 8th grade GPAs were found to have increased rates of high school graduation, probability of graduating college, and other measures of engagement after completing an ethnic studies course in 9th grade (Bonilla, Dee, and Penner 2021). While this study’s sample overrepresented Asian Americans and underrepresented African Americans, its findings provide strong support for ethnic studies curriculum as a tool to improve students’ achievement, especially those who had less educational engagement before. In my own study, I aim to similarly explicitly investigate a correlation between multiculturally representative curriculum and student educational outcomes.

To summarize the review of relevant literature, educational strategies and curriculum that represent and engage the multitude of cultures and identities that make up our student body in the U.S. are not widely adopted, and this can be detrimental for minority students. Reforms,

including teacher training and K-12 curriculum (re)development have been explored, providing us with ideas for how and why to support the learning and wellbeing of minority students. While there is an increasingly robust body of knowledge on the importance of multicultural education and strategies teachers can use in classrooms, quantitative data on educational outcomes for high school students who receive a multicultural education has not been analyzed enough. This study will use quantitative methods and a large, nationally representative sample to help build research in this area, which may also help provide convincing evidence for policy reform in high school curriculum development.

## **METHODS**

### *Design and data source*

In order to address my research question, I did a quantitative analysis of secondary source data. Quantitative data analysis is a strong approach in this scenario for a number of reasons. First, there are far fewer quantitative studies in the literature on this topic than qualitative ones. It also provides a broad understanding of trends because samples are representative of the population, and results are consequently generalizable (Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Queirós, Faria, and Almeida 2017). This is useful in looking at the educational outcomes I am curious about as it pertains to multicultural curricula. Quantitative data can illustrate inter-group comparisons well, allowing me to evaluate whether the trends differ between racial groups. To influence curriculum reform on a large scale, statistics and a large representative sample can provide more persuasive evidence to policymakers, helping maximize the impact of my study.

The secondary data source I used is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. According to their website, "NAEP is a congressionally mandated program that is overseen and administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences" (n.d.a). It carries out surveys to "provide a common measure of student achievement across the country" and "informs education policy and practice"(n.d.b). I chose to analyze data from NAEP because it has a large body of nationally representative data available for public use, making it accessible to me as a student researcher. It is a reputable and important source because it is already involved in influencing educational policy and is linked to our federal government.

### *Sample*

NAEP administers tests and surveys every few years in various K-12 subjects, surveying students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Students take the standardized test in a given subject, and also fill out a background questionnaire that asks about students' demographic information, homes, and education in that subject. The selected schools (administrators) and sometimes teachers also fill out questionnaires about their schools and classes. In my data analysis, I used the most recent survey data they have available for 12th grade U.S. history, which is from 2010. I used the student background questionnaires, assessment scores, and school background questionnaires. Ideally I would have used a more recent survey, but they have only surveyed 8th graders since 2010, and the question that I used to approximate a measure for multicultural curriculum is not included in the school survey in these. I chose U.S. history as a subject because it is easier (and therefore more common) to implement and recognize multiculturally representative curriculum



in social studies courses since they focus on people. U.S. history discusses how the country was shaped, and it is important for kids to know about the contributions of people they can relate to. Systemic racism is also rooted in the past, so history is a course where teaching about this can be included.

NAEP (2016) describes their sampling method as a:

three stage sample design: selection of primary sampling units (PSUs); selection of schools within strata; and selection of students within schools. The samples of schools were selected with probability proportional to a measure of size based on the estimated fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade enrollment in the schools.

For 2010 U.S. history, NAEP (2016) targeted a sample of 9,000 12th graders from public schools and 1,000 from private schools. I was unable to find the precise number of responses they received that year, but their typical response rate estimate for 12th graders is 85 percent (NAEP n.d.c). Fifty percent of students surveyed were male and fifty percent were female. When asked to check all races that applied to them, 69 percent of students selected white and 31 percent did not. Table 1 shows the mutually exclusive racial/ethnic breakdown of participants. The percentage of white students is lower than the 69 percent of “white” responses because some white students are represented in the Hispanic category here instead.

Table 1: Sample race/ethnicity demographics.

Race	White (non-Hispanic)	Black (non-Hispanic)	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native	More than one
Percent	58	12	20	6	1	3

Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

## Variables

Once I chose a data set, I had to identify survey questions that measured and operationalized multicultural curriculum and educational outcomes. For multicultural curriculum, one question in the school (administration) survey asked: “To what extent have you emphasized [Gatherings and interactions of people from various cultures] in your twelfth-grade U.S. history curriculum?” Respondents were instructed to choose one of the following: “Not at all”, “Small extent”, “Moderate extent”, “Large extent”, and “This topic is not offered in my school” (NAEP 2010a:15)<sup>1</sup>. Table 2 shows the distribution of answers to this question.

<sup>1</sup> To view the full survey and question format, see [https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/bgq/sch-sdlep/BQ10\\_School\\_Grade12.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/bgq/sch-sdlep/BQ10_School_Grade12.pdf).

Table 2: Response distribution (school administrators) for extent of emphasis on people from various cultures in grade 12 history curriculum.

Emphasis on people from various cultures	Not offered	Not at all	Small extent	Moderate extent	Large extent
Percent	11	7	16	40	25

Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

This is the closest thing to multicultural education that is assessed in these surveys, but it is not an ideal measure by any means because it relies on school reporting and represents a narrow view of what a multicultural curriculum can and should be. “Gatherings and interactions” does not necessarily include discussion of power, privilege, and oppression, which is crucial to the definition of multicultural education (National Association for Multicultural Education n.d.). I will examine this limitation further later on. I deliberated on whether to combine the categories of not offered and not at all, but ended up keeping them separate because while “Not at all” may be interpreted to mean that the gatherings and interactions of people from various cultures is included in the curriculum but not emphasized, “Not offered” implies the topic is not covered at all. There is room for some interpretation of the response options by the survey participant, but I believe this choice represents the most consistent distinction between the categories.

I ended up analyzing three different measures for students’ educational outcomes: scores on the NAEP U.S. history assessment, interest in their history class, and their expectations for their educational achievement. Test score is a measure of educational achievement that is tested by NAEP, so I included it. Scores were out of 300. I chose to use interest and educational achievement goals as well because they were asked about in the background questionnaire. Interest in course material is informative of student engagement and enjoyment and how much they get out of their courses, and educational attainment levels are important because of the literature on getting students of color into higher education. To gauge student interest, the questionnaire asked: “When you study social studies or history, how often do you agree with the following statement(s)?: The social studies or history work is interesting”. Respondents chose one answer on the scale “Never or hardly ever”, “Sometimes”, “Often”, or “Always or almost always” (NAEP 2010b: Section 4, page 4)<sup>2</sup>. I combined the categories of “always or almost always” and “often” into one, and “sometimes” and “never or hardly ever” into another to make the data visualizations and pattern recognition easier to digest.

To find out students’ educational goals, the survey asked:

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<sup>2</sup> To view the full survey and question format, see [https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/bgq/student/BQ10\\_Student\\_USHist\\_Grade12.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/bgq/student/BQ10_Student_USHist_Grade12.pdf).

QK070697

12. How much education do you think you will complete?

- Ⓐ I will not finish high school.
- Ⓑ I will graduate from high school.
- Ⓒ I will have some education after high school.
- Ⓓ I will graduate from college.
- Ⓔ I will go to graduate school.
- Ⓕ I don't know.

(NAEP 2010b: Section 4, page 5)

The categories “I will not finish high school” and “I don't know” made up less than three percent of responses. When evaluating the statistical significance, I combined the variable categories into two groups: those who said they would graduate college or go to graduate school, and those who said they would get less than a college degree. I chose this split because for people with low income backgrounds, graduating with a bachelor's degree is the education level that is significant for climbing the socioeconomic ladder (Torche 2011; Kelly 2014).

The other criteria I used in my analysis was student race. I compared white students to non-white students by selecting the variable “Student is White (choose one or more)” in the NAEP data tool. Students were put in the “White” or “No response” category based on whether they filled in bubble A in the following question:

VB331331

2. Which of the following best describes you? Fill in **one or more ovals**.

- Ⓐ White
- Ⓑ Black or African American
- Ⓒ Asian
- Ⓓ American Indian or Alaska Native
- Ⓔ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

(NAEP 2010b: Section 1, page 1).

In my data I describe “No response” as “Non-white”. This does mean that the white category includes students who are mixed race, including white, who may have similar experiences as students solely belonging to a single racial/ethnic minority group. However, only three percent of students chose more than one race, so this should not interfere with the results. One hundred percent of respondents answered this question, so there are no white students who accidentally

got grouped into non-white by default. One potential criticism of the way I grouped racial groups is that I chose to include Asian Americans in the non-white category even though they have the highest college enrollment rates of any racial group (National Center for Educational Statistics 2022). However, since the aspect of curriculum I am assessing is about diverse minority cultural representation, I thought it would be more appropriate to group them with other non-white minorities. Educational engagement can still improve within a racial group even if it is good to begin with.

### *Research questions*

I ended up with six research questions to test whether the level of exposure to multicultural topics in history curriculum correlated with the different measures of student learning outcomes and whether there was a difference between racial groups:

1. a) Does the level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlate with students' achievement on NAEP's standardized U.S. history test? b) Does this correlation differ between white and non-white students?
2. a) Does the level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlate with students' interest in the course material? b) Does this correlation differ between white and non-white students?
3. a) Does the level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlate with students' educational attainment goals? b) Does this correlation differ between white and non-white students?

To analyze the data, I used the Data Explorer tool on the NAEP website that allows you to select variables to create "reports". I exported the data charts from the website to Microsoft Excel and used pivot tables to reorganize and visualize the data. The NAEP website also allows you to generate significance tests (dependent t-test) for the difference between the scores and percentages of data that fall into the different categories. They calculate p-values and evaluate the statistical significance of the differences between values in the comparison. In these tests, the NAEP data tool adjusts for multiple comparisons, and it indicates whether the results of each individual t-test are significant based on the color of the box in the comparison chart they provide. For all three educational outcomes, I looked at statistical significance between adjacent<sup>3</sup> categories of emphasis on people from various cultures for all students and within each racial group. I also looked at whether the difference was significant between white and non-white students within each category of emphasis. I was limited in my ability to conduct more traditional statistical tests because I did not have access to the raw data, but I was still able to use quantitative methods to look for patterns in the data.

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. between "Not offered" and "Not at all" emphasized, between "Not at all" and "Small extent", etc. I did not look across non-adjacent emphasis categories because unless there was a visible pattern (which there was not), this would not help to answer my research question.

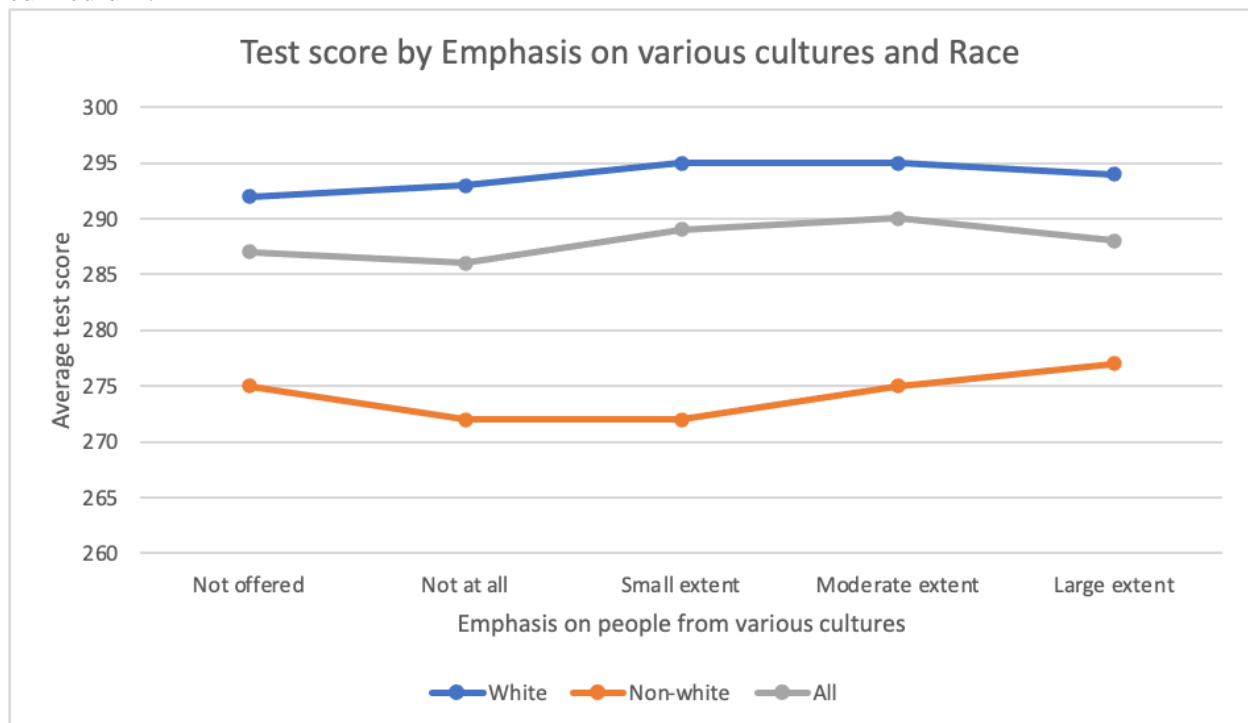
## Results

In this section, I will walk through the results answering each of my research sub-questions. The overall results of my data analysis are that I cannot conclude that there is a correlation between exposure to many cultures in the classroom and NAEP test score, interest in course material, or educational goals.

### Test Score

The first set of questions I tested was: Does the level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlate with students' achievement on NAEP's standardized U.S. history test? Does this correlation differ between white and non-white students? Table 3 shows the average test score on NAEP's U.S. History assessment for all students and broken down into white and non-white student groups. Scores are reported on a scale of 0-300.

Table 3: Average NAEP U.S. History test scores by emphasis on various cultures in history class curriculum.



Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

There is no statistically significant difference in average test scores between any levels of emphasis on people from various cultures for students in general or within either racial group. However, there is a statistically significant difference in average score between white and non-white students within each category of emphasis. Because the gap between white and non-white student achievement on the assessment is significant for all exposure levels, the gap is not closing as exposure to various cultures in the classroom increases.

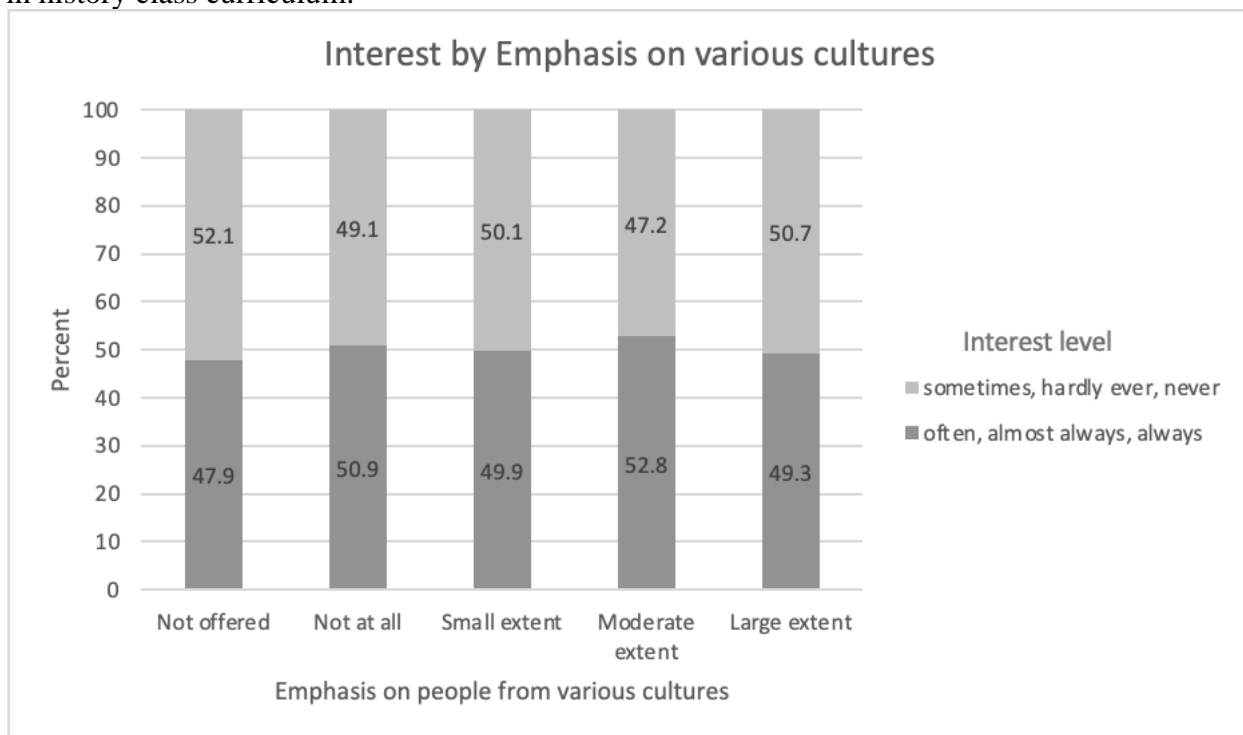
Hence, I cannot conclude that students' level of exposure to various cultures correlates with their achievement on NAEP's assessment. I also cannot conclude that there is any difference in

correlation between levels of exposure to various cultures for non-white versus white students. However, there is a statistically significant difference in average test score between white and non-white students.

*Interest*

For my second measure of achievement, I asked whether students’ level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlates with their level of interest in the course material, and whether this correlation differs between white and non-white students. Table 4 illustrates the degree of interest in history courses reported by students overall, grouped by level of exposure to various cultures in the classroom.

Table 4: Interest in history/social science courses for all students by emphasis on various cultures in history class curriculum.



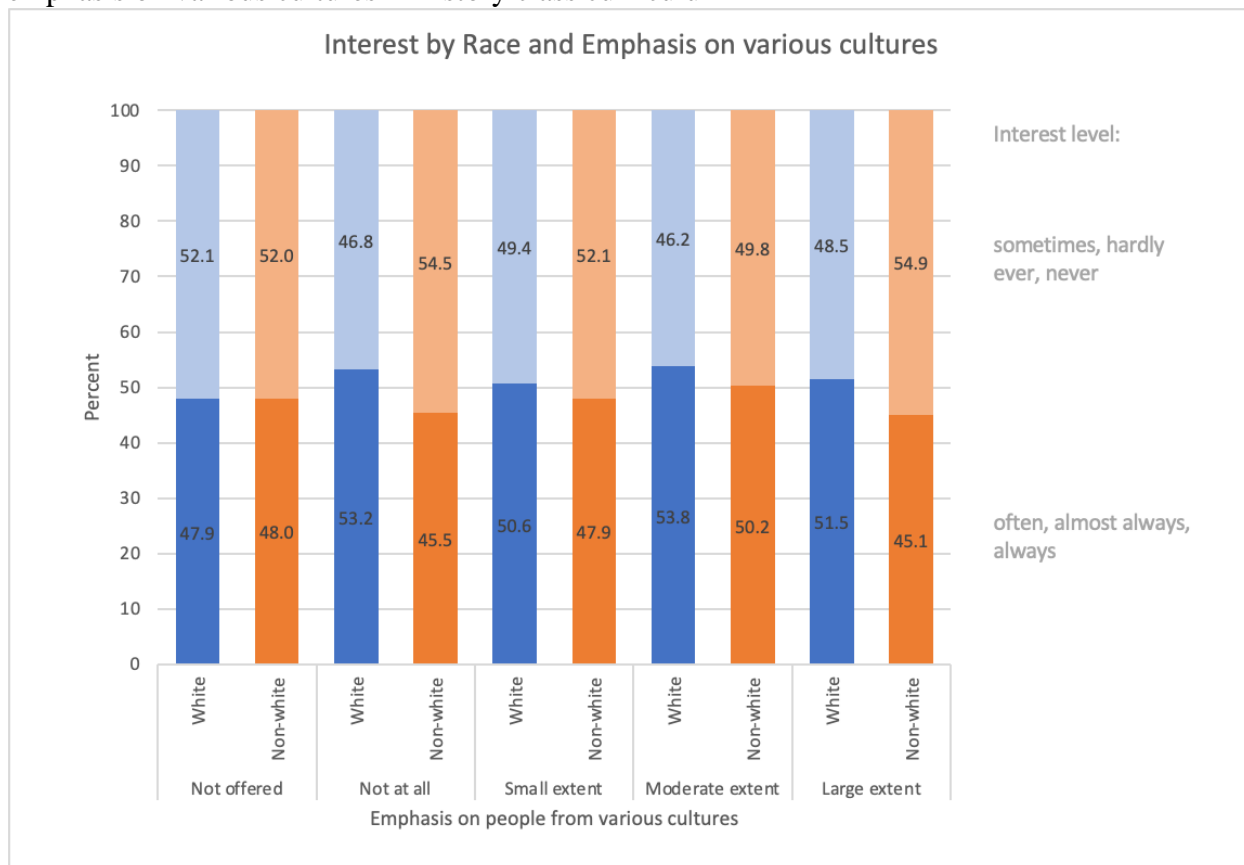
Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

Just by looking at this chart, we can see that the amount of interest stays relatively consistent throughout the level of exposure to various cultures in the classroom. In other words, students who had more emphasis on people from various cultures in their U.S. history courses did not report statistically significantly higher interest in the course material than those who had less exposure. In this data, the only statistically significant difference between two groups<sup>4</sup> is between interest levels within the category of moderate extent of emphasis on various cultures. There are no other significant differences between degrees of interest within multicultural emphasis levels. There are no significant differences between levels of emphasis. Students who

<sup>4</sup> To be in the same group in this case, I mean students who were in the same category for both multicultural emphasis and interest level.

had a moderate extent of emphasis on various cultures in their U.S. history class were more likely to report they were often, almost always, or always interested. Since this significant difference did not continue between interest levels for a large extent of emphasis, I cannot identify a relationship between the variables.

Table 5: Interest in history/social science courses between white and non-white students by emphasis on various cultures in history class curriculum



Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

When separated into white and non-white students, there is similarly a lack of correlation between interest and multicultural emphasis (Table 5). Across all exposure groups (except “Not offered”), slightly more white students reported being often, almost always, or always interested in their course material. However, for all categories of emphasis, there was no statistically significant difference between racial groups for the percentage of students who were more versus less often interested. Within each racial category, there was also no significant interest between any adjacent levels of emphasis on people from various cultures.

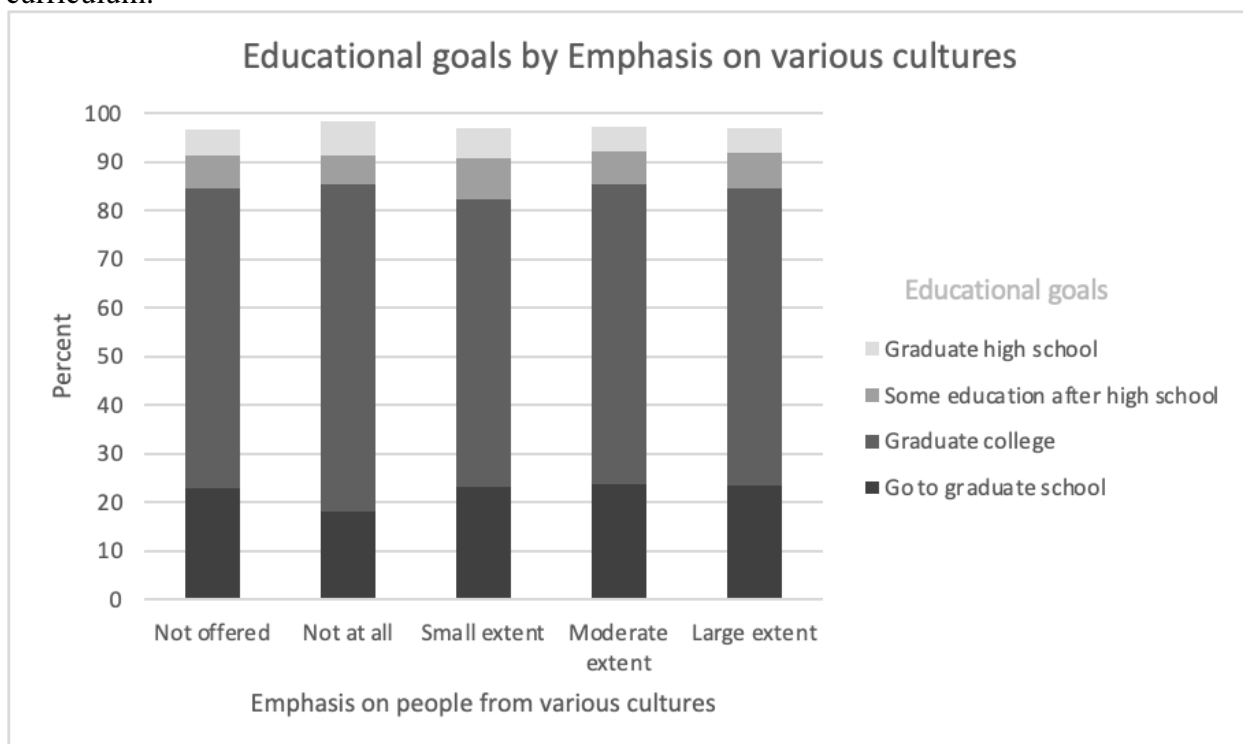
I cannot conclude that there is a correlation between the level of emphasis on people from different cultures in the curriculum and how interested students are in the class. There is no correlation for either white or non-white students. There is also no statistically significant difference between the proportion of white versus non-white students who reported being interested in their history coursework.

*Educational attainment goals*

Lastly, I investigated whether the level of exposure to various cultures in U.S. history class correlates with students’ educational attainment goals, and whether this correlation differs between white and non-white students.

The proportion of students who thought they would at least graduate college remained comparable across the level of exposure they had to various cultures in their curriculum, as can be seen in Table 6 below. There was no significant difference in the percentage of students who said they would at least graduate college between adjacent levels of emphasis on people from various cultures.

Table 6: Educational goals for all students by emphasis on various cultures in history class curriculum.<sup>5</sup>



Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

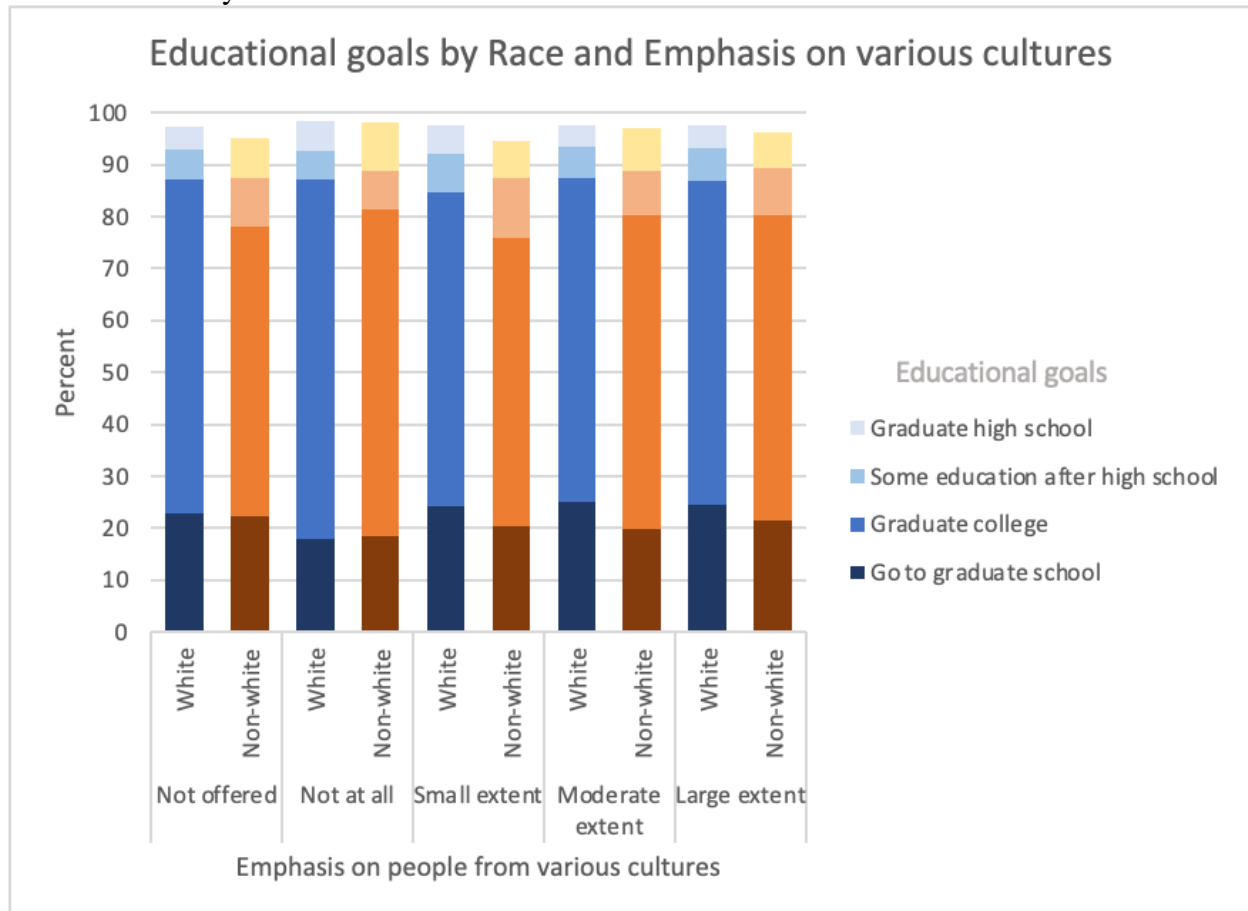
The comparison of educational goals between racial groups is represented in Table 7. More white than non-white students reported that they thought they would at least graduate college in all emphasis categories, but the difference was only statistically significant for the categories of moderate and large extent of emphasis on people from various cultures. This is actually the opposite of what I would expect, because I would have thought if anything that the gap would be less significant as emphasis on people from various cultures in the classroom increased. Between adjacent categories of level of emphasis on people from various cultures, there were no

<sup>5</sup> The remaining area to add to 100% is from responses of “I will not finish high school” and “I don’t know”.



statistically significant differences in educational aspirations for either white or non-white students.

Table 7: Educational goals between white and non-white students by emphasis on various cultures in history class curriculum.<sup>6</sup>



Data: NAEP 2010, grade 12.

I cannot conclude whether there is a correlation between multicultural exposure in curriculum and students' expectations or goals for their educational achievement. I did not find a correlation for either white or non-white students.

In summary, I cannot conclude whether the level of emphasis on various cultures in U.S. history course curriculum has any correlation with the learning outcomes of test score, interest, and educational attainment goals for students overall or students of color.

## DISCUSSION

While null results are disappointing, they can still provide important insight on the topic of study. They are also important to science because the file drawer problem causes bias against the

<sup>6</sup> The remaining area to add to 100% is from responses of "I will not finish high school" and "I don't know".

publication of negative results. Including them in the literature gives a more complete representation of results people have found, and it helps people design better studies and avoid replicating studies that have produced negative results (Weintraub 2016). While the lack of a significant finding in this study is not a limitation itself, the problem with this study is that it is uncertain why there is a null result. It could be that this reflects the real truth about my research question — that there is no correlation between cultural diversity in curriculum and student outcomes — or that there were problems in my study that prevented these particular data from showing outcomes that do exist in the real world. While I cannot conclude there is a positive correlation, which is what I hypothesized, I also cannot conclude there is not one or that there is a negative one. One implication of the lack of correlation between the extent of emphasis on people from various cultures and both white and non-white students is that white students are not adversely affected by the increased representation of minority cultures in the classroom, as some conservatives concerned about race-related curriculum believe. The results of my analysis depart from the literature, which suggests that improving curriculum to represent diverse student backgrounds does have positive social, psychological, and educational impacts, especially for minority students. Ultimately, more research needs to be done on multicultural education and learning outcomes on a systemic level to better understand how and why it should be implemented in more schools. Despite its negative findings and consequent inability to make a case for concrete widespread educational policy reform, this study has implications for the further study of the benefits of multicultural education and could help inform the NAEP of ways it can improve its questionnaires. This discussion will begin by addressing the limitations of this study, and explaining what this suggests about the relevance of my results. I will then explore what the implementation of multicultural education can and should look like based on an existing model and suggest ideas for future research.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to my study. Since I am dealing with secondary quantitative data, I get the benefits of having access to large volumes of data that I would not be able to collect on my own. However, I had to settle for what is there and make it fit my research question. The consequences are that the operationalization of the factors I wanted to look at is not perfect. Also, the data is from 2010 and thus a bit outdated. In terms of analyzing the data, I did not have access to the raw data set, which prevented me from being able to conduct a more rigorous and traditional statistical test (such as an ANOVA test). Comparing t-test p-values between each difference is not a very precise tool for analysis. If I had more time and a better statistical tool, I also should have done a comparison between different non-white racial/ethnic groups. There may be differences in the various outcomes for students based on their specific racial/ethnic background, not just on their minority status. Different racial groups might have different responses to curriculum because of how or to what extent people from their racial/ethnic background were included in curriculum. While we do not know what groups were included in “various cultures”, sources of discrepancies between ethnic groups is an area for further research. My study was not comprehensive in terms of the nuances between different racial and ethnic groups, which is ironic given its topic and critique. As can often be the case for quantitative work, the data is not robust enough to show the complexity of the issue at hand (Better Thesis n.d.). Nevertheless, it can be brought into conversation with the literature on multicultural curricula and education and produce fruitful recommendations for further research.

Another limitation of my study that needs to be analyzed is the variable operationalization of the three measures of educational outcomes. First, NAEP's achievement test as a measure for academic achievement is not a great measure of how engaged students are in their learning. Increased emphasis on multiple cultures in course curriculum appears not to have an effect on how students digest the material they are learning that is represented on the NAEP assessment. However, the test may not ask many questions that pertain to knowledge about diverse cultures in our society, in which case the increased focus on this in the classroom would not directly influence test scores. Even if diverse cultures were well represented in the test, higher scores could be more about general exposure to the content than the overall engagement of students., so a different measure would need to be used to avoid this confound. Additionally, standardized tests (including the SAT) have been found to be biased against students of color because they more accurately correlate with students' wealth, ethnicity, and their parents' education level (Stewart and Haynes 2016). This could contribute to the difference in scores between white and non-white students here. In true multicultural education, "pedagogy should occur in a context that is familiar to students and that addresses multiple ways of thinking" (National Association for Multicultural Education n.d.). This should apply to all aspects of the learning process, including assessment of it. If the Department of Education decides to place value on multicultural education or ethnic studies, it would need to adjust what kind of knowledge is reflected in its assessments.

For interest in course material, the measure itself is fine because the survey questions directly ask about what I wanted to know — whether students are interested in their class. For educational goals, the survey asked what educational level students *think* they will complete. The wording of this survey question asks students to be practical rather than aspirational, and since I did not control for economic status or parental educational achievement, students who may want to graduate college or go to graduate school but believe it is not realistic for them and their families may answer according to what is realistic for them, not what they would want in a perfect world. Their uninhibited desires for their educational attainment would give better insight into how engaged they are in their learning, but the measure as it is gives a better understanding of their expectations, which may be closer to the actual achievement rates. Still, student-reported expectations for their educational achievement are usually overestimates, so a longitudinal measure would be more ideal (Castleman and Page 2014). In future research it will be important to take the nuances of factors that drive student college attendance into account so that it is clearer whether multicultural education can improve these rates and what programs or requirements it should use to do so. This is not a huge limitation in my study — it still tells me whether the two factors are correlated — but it is good to be mindful of.

Across my study, the measure I used for culturally diverse curricula poses a limitation. This survey question was part of a questionnaire that was given to school administrators. The first issue is that the reporting may be biased or inaccurate if administrators want to present their school in a positive light or simply do not regularly conduct thorough observation and assessment of class curriculum on the topics surveyed by the NAEP survey. The closed question survey style does not give us any insight to the pedagogical strategies used, what cultures are included in the curriculum, or how they are represented. Even if this measure were more reliable (i.e. completed by teachers and accompanied by a list of units or lesson plans that emphasized a minority culture), it still would not necessarily represent a holistic approach to a multicultural curriculum. Just because diverse cultures are included in the curriculum does not guarantee that

the teaching surrounding these topics meets the standards of multicultural education or is culturally sensitive and empowering for students of color and other minority groups. In addition to helping “students develop a positive self-concept by providing knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups... teachers and students must critically analyze oppression and power relations in their communities, society, and the world” in multicultural curricula (National Association for Multicultural Education n.d.). Societal critique and social justice are central concepts for students to learn in multicultural curricula that were not measured in my study. Inclusion itself is not enough. One change NAEP could make is to have a question specifically about multicultural education, such as “Does your school practice critical multicultural education?” Because true multicultural education includes multicultural curricula across all subjects including math and science, this question would need to be included across all subjects, not just U.S. history and other social studies. While reporting bias may still occur, it would more accurately screen for an active multicultural approach.

At a broader level, there is much more to multicultural education than curriculum. In order to understand more fully the potential impact of multicultural education, it is important to ensure we have a more holistic understanding of what it encompasses. According to The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) (n.d.), “Multicultural education is a process that permeates all aspects of school practices, policies and organization as a means to ensure the highest levels of academic achievement for all students... It prepares all students to work actively toward structural equality in organizations and institutions by providing the knowledge, dispositions, and skills for the redistribution of power and income among diverse groups”.

The results of my study support the importance of all parts of multicultural education reinforcing one another to be effective. The lack of correlation between exposure to knowledge about various cultures in the classroom and student outcomes suggests that cultural inclusion in curriculum itself is not sufficient to enact systemic change in the support of all students and close gaps for minority groups. In future research, a measure that takes the full scope of multicultural education into account would be more informative for policy decisions and educators seeking strategies to support diverse student bodies.

#### *Best Practice - Existing models for multicultural education*

It is helpful here to highlight an example of a program that does exemplify multicultural education in order to understand what it is and more carefully consider what would need to be assessed in a future study. June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE) is a public high school in San Francisco whose entire mission and pedagogy is rooted in promoting social justice and equity:

As a school for social justice serving a largely working-class, Latino and African-American student population, the mission of June Jordan School for Equity is not just to prepare students for college, but also to prepare our graduates to be agents of positive change in the world.

Consequently, our pedagogy is expressly designed to help our students understand the forces of marginalization they have experienced growing up, and thus to begin the process of freeing themselves from oppression, including especially the internalized oppression (or self-imposed limits) which we see preventing so many students from meeting their potential.

We are in the process of clearly defining the JJSE pedagogy, in order to support JJSE teachers on their path to becoming masters at the art of teaching for social justice, which in turn will provide all JJSE students the opportunity to develop the self-confidence and self-discipline they need to become not just authentic intellectuals, but also leaders who will work on behalf of their communities and create a more just and humane world.

They reject “test-based accountability” and list the following guidelines for their pedagogical practice: warm demeanor, safe classroom community, knowledge of students, students as intellectuals, students as intellectuals, teacher as coach, and social justice curriculum (JJSE n.d.). More detailed description of what these entail can be found on their website.<sup>7</sup>

The language on its mission and values webpage (excerpt above) echoes the description for multicultural education that NAME (n.d.) provides because it aims to promote student achievement, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds, develop a “positive self-concept” for students by teaching knowledge about oppression and social justice in its curriculum, and foster leadership skills that will help students help themselves and their communities. June Jordan School for Equity is an excellent example of multicultural education for many reasons. It both enacts and teaches about social justice by promoting the success of its students, who are largely from traditionally underserved backgrounds, and by actively teaching them about systemic oppression so they can understand how to resist it. It takes the interpersonal dynamics between teacher and student and between peers into account by encouraging teachers and students to recognize the contributions of students’ own knowledge, meet them where they are, and do a variety of activities including teamwork. Activities include those that allow student’s voices and interests to come through. In terms of its curriculum, JJSE says it is “relevant”, “helps explain the real world & oppression” across subjects and “is grounded in justice, fairness, dignity, & cultural strengths”. Outside of the classroom, the school has a wellness center that has culturally competent services and resources, advisories that group students and teachers together for academic and other support, and some extracurricular activities and electives despite being a small institution.

Although I have not done extensive research on what this program looks like in practice or evaluated its effectiveness, the goals and approach of JJSE are very strong. According to the U.S. News and World Report, it is a small school serving under 250 students (97% minority and 64% economically disadvantaged, 55% Hispanic and 24% Black). They have an 81% graduation rate and their test scores for both math and reading are well below average. The low test scores do demonstrate a weakness in the traditional sense used to evaluate students and a potential barrier for its students to move on to higher education. Again, however, standardized tests exhibit racial bias and other metrics are needed to evaluate student well-being as a whole. It would be important to study the school in more detail to evaluate its curriculum, structure, and the educational outcomes of its students to see whether its mission is doing what it purports to.

This program represents a multilayered example of applied sociology. It uses the body of research including studies similar to my own and especially the theory of multicultural education to develop and implement a school structure and culture that aims to make a difference in the lives of its students and community. It also exemplifies the sociological imagination because it

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jjse.org/our-mission-and-values>

treats individual students and their needs with consideration of historically developed systemic barriers. Multicultural education encourages educators to remember every student is different in terms of their learning style, while also emphasizing that this is in part due to all aspects of their background, including their race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, family, etc. Additionally, students are seen as a source of legitimate knowledge in their classrooms, and collaboration between students of varying backgrounds is valued as a source of learning. Valuing student experiences as a learning tool is significant because it encourages them to develop a sociological imagination of their own.

The above analysis illuminates some of the strengths of a multicultural education approach. While there is no one-size fits all curriculum or policy that would fit the needs of schools in every community, multicultural education provides a framework each school can tweak to make it fit their needs. Particularly, the emphasis on centering students' knowledge and backgrounds in learning and structural resources to prioritize are designed to be adaptable based on school demographics. These are aspects that were reflected in the literature on experimental multicultural programs (Cisneros 2019; de los Ríos 2020; Langdon 2020; de los Ríos, Seltzer, and Molina 2021). As a "process that permeates all aspects of school practices, policies and organization as a means to ensure the highest levels of academic achievement for all students" (NAME n.d.), multicultural education argues that the best way to ensure success in schools is to cover all the bases.

Multicultural education seems best suited to be applied at the school or district level. Individual schools can play an active role in social mobility and inequality, argue Muller et al. (2010), who found that in racially diverse schools, minority (African American and Latinx) underrepresentation in sophomore advanced math courses predicted senior year grades and college enrollment, and schools differed in how much this underrepresentation occurred. This highlights the need for schools to recognize where inequality occurs in their own schools and tailor specific approaches to combat them. Curriculum reform may be one way, and more structural approaches such as ensuring representation of students in advanced courses may be another. While multicultural education in theory encompasses all of this, it is much easier said than done. One caveat to multicultural education is that because it is wide reaching in its aspirations and flexible to accommodate particular needs and ideas, implementing it requires a deep comprehension of its ideals, motivation on the level of individual schools and teachers, and creativity to find effective solutions. It would need to be broken down into smaller components to be implemented through state or federal legislation.

### *Directions for future research*

There are endless areas under multicultural education that should be studied in order to better understand its potential to improve the school experience and education outcomes for students. I will list a few here that came to my mind and go into more depth about how I would design a better study to answer my original research inquiry.

First, my research was focused on one aspect of multicultural education: curriculum. The lack of correlation I found between a more culturally diverse curriculum and student outcomes may indicate that on its own, reform within curriculum may not close student achievement gaps. This does contrast with the results of the study on implementing ninth grade ethnic studies to improve

outcomes for low achieving students, which suggests that perhaps ethnic studies is a more effective way to include learning about minority history rather than trying to incorporate it into U.S. history courses (Bonilla, Dee, and Penner 2021). One direction to take research from here to clarify the interaction of curriculum and structural reform would be to look at whether specific structural changes such as more consistent and attentive academic advising or diversifying staff effectively close gaps in achievement for low income students of color. The impacts of curriculum and structure on their own should also be compared with holistic multicultural education, which encompasses both, in order to understand whether combining the two makes them stronger. One specific way I imagine this could be tested is by comparing student outcomes for students who took an ethnic studies class specifically to those who went to a school that fits the description of multicultural education but did not specifically take an ethnic studies class. A comparison of their impacts would be useful to inform relevant policy decisions especially because of the relative difficulty implementing multicultural education compared with adding an ethnic studies requirement to state policy as California has just done.

Because of the difficulty in imagining how it would be implemented, clear guidelines on how to apply multicultural education are necessary. One area of study which would be helpful here is the strategic evaluation of different multicultural programs, resources, or specific activities that have been tried. While some examples of these are present in the literature, there are undoubtedly many more ideas that have been tested by schools and educators that could be shared to other educators looking at ways to improve their support of minority students.

In the interest of supporting as many students as possible and educating citizens to be respectful of all people, it would be fruitful to study the outcomes of a multicultural education for not only students of color, but also based on sexual orientation, gender, class, ability, etc. This is also an area that would be important in a comparison between the effectiveness of ethnic studies and multicultural education. A more general diversity studies course that covered forms of oppression across many identities could also be included as a comparison.

Because true multicultural education must encompass all aspects of a school, studying outcomes of multicultural education on a large scale is difficult because it is so hard to find schools that live up to the ideal standards. This suggests that a study with a smaller scale is a better way to assess true multicultural education. If I were to do a similar study again, perhaps a better study design to answer this question would compare similar measures of educational outcomes (standardized test scores, interest in their classes, and educational goals) between students at high schools that intentionally follow a model for multicultural education and those that do not develop their school culture and pedagogy around this issue specifically. This would have two test groups, a control group and one with the multicultural education in place, which would be a more definitive comparison than the more vague scalar measure of emphasis used in my study. This would also more accurately measure multicultural education. Quantitative or mixed methods would still be ideal to analyze outcomes correlationally, although the dataset would need to be accessible for a more traditional statistical analysis. While some form of standardized test would be important to evaluate students' learning, the test used would need to be evaluated for biases. I also would not use a test in social studies because scores on that would vary depending on the priorities in the curriculum I would be treating as the independent variable. Instead, I would evaluate skills in reading and math because that would measure whether students are more engaged overall in their education, not just in their social studies course. I

would rely on the interest measure for their engagement within the target curriculum of social studies, although I could also extend this to other subjects since a multicultural curriculum makes adjustments to those as well. In addition to achievement, interest, and goals, I would include a measure about sense of self, because multicultural education highlights a positive self-concept as one of its main goals. A longitudinal design would be stronger to look at students' actual educational outcomes, though of course they would need to control for economic status. Measures of interest and self-concept could be evaluated over time as well (at the beginning and end of high school and at age 25). I would also measure across all major racial/ethnic groups instead of just white and non-white students to acknowledge the diverse experiences of people from different backgrounds. Ideally I would also extend the study to other minority students based on gender and sexual orientation.

Teaching about systemic oppression and people with diverse identities and backgrounds in K-12 schools is a very timely topic based on social justice issues and political debates in the U.S. right now. Further study in this area that focuses on concrete student outcomes is crucial to understand how student wellbeing is related to curriculum content and structure at their schools and to make sure policy reform is in the best interest of our nation in terms of tolerance, respect, and socioeconomic opportunities for the next generation. There are many directions to take this research, and I hope the above suggestions and the limitations of my own study provide guidance for the growth of this body of knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the connections between multicultural representation in social studies curriculum and high school students' educational engagement, with the hopes of supporting policies that protect and improve access to knowledge about diversity and inequality in the society we live in. The literature points to the need for concrete change in not only cultural competence in schools, but the value they place on the diverse cultural knowledge its students possess. While my study was unable to provide convincing evidence to this point, it does help expose limitations in the national tracking of multicultural education, which I believe is problematic now that there is so much publicity around education of diversity and equity issues. The flaws of this study also help generate ideas for improvement in future studies with similar research questions.

I would like to conclude with a connection to theory. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said identifies the connection between knowledge, politics, and power:

What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that "true" knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. No one is helped in understanding this today when the adjective "political" is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of pretended suprapolitical objectivity. We may say, first, that civil society recognizes a gradation of political importance in the various fields of knowledge. To some extent the political importance given a field comes from the possibility of its direct translation into economic terms; but to a greater extent political importance comes



from the closeness of a field to ascertain-able sources of power in political society. (Said 1978:10).

In this project, I have produced knowledge about the dissemination of knowledge that is deeply relevant to the American political landscape. I like this excerpt as a way to tie together my paper because it pulls these ideas together and prompts us to critically reflect on the relationship between knowledge and power and what this means for education. Multicultural education makes knowledge across all subjects political by connecting even math to social justice and students' own lives. Critics of Critical Race Theory are not wrong to recognize that theories of structural inequality stem from and impact politics and the organization of our society. Indeed, the knowledge produced in this paper comes from the perspective of a young, liberal, mixed race, feminist Californian who set out to write this paper with an idea of how the results might impact public policy in the area of education. However, the accusation that diversity studies curriculum is indoctrination and untrue is wildly dramatic and obscures the reality that all information that has been present in curriculum for years is political in some way based on how and by whom it was produced, who is interpreting it, and how students engage with it. In a democratic society, the diversity of the origins of the knowledge we consume and engagement with ideas from many perspectives is critical. We should be teaching our students to recognize that knowledge is not apolitical, and to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate it based on this fact.

What Said observed 45 years ago remains true today: labeling knowledge as “political” has a discrediting effect. People on both sides of the education culture wars know this and use it to delegitimize the other. Said reminds us that this is not the important part of the debate. What is important is to develop empirically sound, if still political, research that emphasizes why curriculum is important and how it can be developed in a way that fosters educational success among all students. This leads to Said's connection of the politicization of knowledge to power. This is of course why education is a site for such vitriolic debate. Political parties fear what is taught or not taught in schools will impact their party's membership and therefore political power. People also fear that empowering people from certain identity groups will threaten the power of others. Education's relationship to economic power and emotional empowerment is also why it is so important to continue to study ways to engage students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. One way to challenge systemic inequality is to teach people about it and encourage those it disadvantages to continue their education so they can leverage the power that comes with it.

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