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TEACHER SENSEMAKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE TEACHING OF HIGH SCHOOL ETHNIC STUDIES CLASSES  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS

by

Kirsten A. Flewelling

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2021

Dissertation Committee

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Robert Donmoyer, PhD  
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University of San Diego

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**University of San Diego**

**School of Leadership and Education Sciences**

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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: TEACHER SENSEMAKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF THE TEACHING OF HIGH SCHOOL ETHNIC STUDIES CLASSES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS

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## ABSTRACT

This is a study about secondary ethnic studies classes within the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, a novel coronavirus caused dramatic changes in society, and social protests erupted in the United States in response to violence against people of color. This period of dual crises created a collective period of turbulence for educators in the United States as schooling moved to emergency virtual environments. Though the impact of this time is not yet understood, early indicators suggest that existing educational inequalities for students of color will be exacerbated. This study explored ethnic studies teacher sensemaking to understand how teachers adapted their pedagogy during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Ethnic studies classes provided an important case, because ethnic studies tends to adopt culturally relevant and community responsive pedagogies through the study of historically marginalized groups and the deconstruction of race and systems of oppression, which was particularly relevant in the context of the concurrent crises.

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the sensemaking strategies of nine high school ethnic studies teachers. This study posed the question, *How did ethnic studies teachers make sense of teaching and learning in virtual environments for high school students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests?* Qualitative interviews formed the primary data collection strategy. Data were analyzed through two cycles of coding. The findings suggest that ethnic studies teachers adjusted their teaching during this time by prioritizing student well-being. The critical dialogic approach privileged in ethnic studies classes meant that teachers were well-positioned to incorporate culturally responsive content, and utilize digital technology in innovative, humanizing ways. The teachers' beliefs about teaching and the nature of ethnic studies pedagogy helped them engage in actions

that directly addressed students' social and emotional needs in this novel context. Implications for educators and school leaders are addressed, along with suggestions for future research on critical pedagogy in the virtual environment.

## DEDICATION

For Calvin.

You have been with me through this entire process although I did not always know it. Your existence has taught me so much about what it means to live life with openness, curiosity, and full, embodied presence. May the journeys you walk in this world be full of beauty, community, and wonder. May the world you inherit be made greater because of the love in my heart for you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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First, I want to thank my parents. Mom, you were my first and most important teacher, for better or worse through the many years that we studied together. You taught me about writing in a way that insisted upon excellence, and your endless curiosity and love of learning has truly shaped my entire life. I am so grateful for the ways in which I am like you. Dad, my commitment to being of service to the world is in large part because of what you have taught me about caring for others, even when it is difficult and unnoticed. Thank you for teaching me how to move in the world with confidence and humility.

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much from you about what it means to do research, and I am so incredibly grateful for the mentorship that you have provided in the past four years and the ways that I have been able to work alongside you to advance ethnic studies research. You have always had an uncanny ability to act as both a mentor and a colleague, which has been so helpful for me to understand my role and positionality in academia. Thank you for believing in me as a scholar and as a person.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

While the expansion of online environments for learning has increased substantially in the past twenty years (Boyd, 2016), no one could have predicted the rapid adoption of digital technologies for learning that occurred in 2020. When a novel coronavirus began to rapidly spread across the United States at the end of 2019, and schools abruptly closed their doors to in-person learning in Spring 2020, millions of students and teachers abruptly moved their classrooms into the virtual environment almost in an instant with little to no support or training. In the years to come, online education is likely to grow in popularity as the coronavirus continues to threaten public health and communities and because of the growing familiarity with it as an option for schooling (Bombardieri, 2021). Although the virtual schooling options is on the rise, we know little about the experiences of teachers in these environments or what kinds of impacts their pedagogical choices have on shaping environments for learning. Much of the discourse about educational technology centers on the technologies themselves, rather than on educators and students engaged with the technology, making complicated and nuanced pedagogical choices about learning (Hayes, 2015).

This is a study, therefore, that focuses on what can be learned in a moment. Although we are living through a singular moment all of the time, it is rare that a moment can transcend the various spaces and contexts in which we usually operate. Even cataclysmic events usually have uneven impacts. Storms happen locally. The effects of war and conflict are concentrated amongst particular populations. But the COVID-19 pandemic, a novel coronavirus that began to silently spread across the world at the end of 2019, began to define our contexts and restructure our beliefs and assumptions of schooling practices in a way that provided a prime opportunity to explore teacher sensemaking as educators grappled with abrupt and ambiguous change.

While the pandemic forced schools to move into the virtual environment, the United States also experienced a social movement to protest racism and police brutality that peaked on June 6, when 500,000 people showed up in 550 places across the nation (Buchanan et al., 2020). The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 were a response to the murder of George Floyd, a man who had allegedly used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Mr. Floyd laid prone on his chest on the sidewalk struggling to breathe as a police officer held him there with his knee on Mr. Floyd's back for eight minutes and 46 seconds. For two months, Americans had kept to their homes, and after this excessive display of violence, it was like an explosion. People burst out onto the streets. Not just for Mr. Floyd, but for the numerous other African Americans who had lost their lives due to negligence and violence against them.

Public health experts recognized the two incidences as “syndemic,” that is, an aggregation of two or more epidemics which occur in a population, which exacerbate the prognosis and burden of disease (Haelle, 2020). In spite of public health advice to avoid crowds, experts recognized systemic racism as a threat to the lives of Black and Brown bodies and encouraged harm reduction. The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 may have been the largest protest movement in the history of the United States with an estimated 15-26 million people in attendance in the weeks following Floyd's murder (Buchanan et al., 2020). Both the pandemic and the social unrest that occurred in response to systemic racism held important implications for learning during this time and formed the context for this study.

### **Teacher Sensemaking of Virtual Education in a Time of Crisis**

“What is learning? What *is* learning in a pandemic?” Ms. Towne, an ethnic studies teacher at a high school in southern California and an educator for 21 years, voiced this question in our interview for this study. She, like millions of other educators across the world whose

classes and schedules and roles dramatically shifted as schools moved into the virtual realm, wrestled with this question daily and sought to make sense of the moment, what it meant for teaching, what it meant for learning, and what their role was in the midst of the upheaval (Reich et al., 2020).

The pandemic complicated the role of the educator in ways that both expanded and complicated teachers' sense of autonomy and creativity. The shift to the virtual environment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is not an educational reform in the traditional sense, as the school closures were unplanned and abruptly imposed upon educators across the United States. However, the shift did constitute a significant educational change. In a moment, schools moved from in-person teaching, with grades and attendance serving as external motivators for students to show up and participate in their schooling, with teachers able to rely on structures and routines that they had put into practice over their entire careers, to school taking place entirely in a virtual realm. The educational change felt especially significant in the earliest days of the pandemic when little to no support was provided for teachers to make a monumental adjustment to both the context and method of how they taught (Hamilton et al., 2020). Educators wrestled with how to motivate students in this context, how to provide equitable and supportive scaffolds for all of their students, and how to negotiate feelings of loss and strain on their professional identity (Reich et al., 2020).

Although several pioneering scholars have articulated theories of learning for online environments (Feenberg, 2009; Hamilton & Feenberg, 2005; Stommel, 2014; Vander Valk, 2008), few examples exist of this theory in practice, and the scholarship on adapting pedagogy for the virtual environment is particularly nascent in K-12 settings. The existing literature on online spaces often deemphasizes the pedagogical choices that teachers make as they integrate

digital technologies in their K-12 classrooms and advance a style of education that situates educators on the sidelines, relying on automated feedback loops to “personalize” learning, in spite of little evidence that demonstrates that personalized learning technology actually supports learning (Herold, 2017).

Some scholars have critiqued virtual education environments and educational technology by arguing that they advance a “banking” style of education (Boyd, 2016; Stommel, 2017). Freire (1970) described “banking education” as one that positions the teacher as the authority figure who possesses all of the important knowledge and positions the students as “receptacles” to be filled (p. 72). This approach to schooling diminishes the importance of dialogic relationships between teachers and students and also advances a curriculum where some kinds of knowledge has inherently more value than other kinds of knowledge. Yosso (2005) articulated a concept known as “cultural wealth,” which identified the many forms of “capital” that students of color possess and use to understand their world. As an example, students possess linguistic capital when they are able to communicate in more than one language or style. Other forms of capital include aspirational, social, familial, navigational, and resistant, which all work in concert to support students of color to understand their world and participate in the construction of new knowledge. Studies have shown that education that is situated in students’ cultural ways of knowing and that reflects students’ racial and ethnic histories have a positive impact of student learning (Sleeter, 2011). However, little is known about how teachers enact critical, culturally relevant pedagogy in the virtual environment.

### **The Unequal Ramifications of the Pandemic**

Although we lived through the same pandemic and social movement, and the same crisis in education, depending on where you lived and who you were, this moment took on a different

shape and feeling (Arango, 2021; Arellano, 2021). As the pandemic spread throughout the United States in the spring of 2020, patterns began to emerge in the data about the disproportionate health impact of the pandemic on African American, Native American, and Latino populations, with these groups experiencing higher rates of death and poor outcomes when infected (CDC, 2020). Research connected the unequal impact to both biomedical and social determinant factors, recognizing that these groups were more likely to have chronic illness, live in resource-deprived communities, and work in essential industries during the pandemic where they would be more exposed to the virus (Haelle, 2020; Tai et al., 2021).

The pandemic took a highlighter to these social inequalities, and especially when it came to how these inequities affected students (Reich et al., 2020). Although more than two decades of research documented a “digital divide” (Hoffman et al., 2000), where students who lived in rural or low-income houses had less access to Internet and technology, little has been done on a policy level to correct for this (Ali, 2020). When the pandemic shuttered school buildings and mandated a shift to online environments, those students who did not possess devices or have access to the Internet were at the greatest loss (Dorn et al., 2020; Reilly, 2020; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). The digital divide was significant between majority white and majority non-white schools where 81% of students in white-majority schools had access to technology for remote education compared with only 66% in Black-majority schools (Kraft & Simon, 2020). Although some districts rallied to get devices and hotspots to students with the greatest needs, even this could not truly make up for the inequalities. Slow and spotty Internet connections and gaps in tech literacy made the virtual classes less accessible to already marginalized student groups (Dorn et al., 2020).

Although we do not yet fully know the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning experiences, studies suggest that the digital divide, along with other factors such as income and food insecurity, trauma related to family sickness and death, and other associated outcomes of the pandemic will disproportionately negatively impact students of color and low-income students in the United States (Barnum & Bryan, 2020; Chetty et al., 2020; Domingue et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Malkus, 2020; Reich et al., 2020). Throughout the history of US public schooling, students from historically marginalized populations have routinely been denied access to well-funded, well-resourced education spaces. This opportunity gap has occurred across several layers of the educational system from the material to the philosophical. I briefly outline some of the factors that contribute to unequal treatment of students in public schooling below.

### ***Structural Factors that Contribute to Educational Inequality***

Structural factors for school create a disproportionate lack of funding and resources for schools servicing students of color and lower-income youth. Funding models for school rely on local taxes, which concentrates wealth in already well-off neighborhoods (Banks et al., 2004). The ways in which districts are drawn, along with decades of redlining and discriminatory housing practices, have led to a concentration of families of color in school districts with less access to wealth. The wealth gap is enormous; per pupil funding varies dramatically between districts and state, with students from high-poverty districts receiving on average \$966 less per student (Anyon, 2005). Underfunded schools also have less qualified teachers and higher teacher turnover, reflecting a variety of factors that contribute to teacher dissatisfaction including poorer facilities, less administrative support, and less access to resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Papay et al., 2018). The literature reflects the critical importance of highly qualified

educators and documents that a single year with a less qualified teacher can result in years of miseducation (Banks et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Haycock, 1998).

### ***Curricular Factors that Contribute to Educational Inequality***

Beyond unequal access to material resources, students are also subjected to a hidden curriculum, which reflects the norms, attitudes and behaviors that bias certain cultures over others (Apple, 2004). Heath (1982) documented disparities with regard to teaching practices that favored certain styles of communication over others. San Pedro's (2015) study of participation practice in an ethnic studies class described how silence has frequently been viewed as deficiency, but actually can be demonstrative of engagement, identity construction, and agency, which is particularly important to recognize for students whose cultural backgrounds emphasize more silent styles of participation (San Pedro, 2015). Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept of social capital to reflect how certain types of ways of being act as currency, and that these can contribute to educational inequalities. More scholars are recognizing the need for curriculum that more accurately reflect increasingly diverse classrooms to close achievement gaps and honor the backgrounds of all of the youth (Banks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1996; Sleeter, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

Standard curricula also privilege the history and experiences of white, European figures. Numerous studies have analyzed textbooks to reveal huge disparity in the representation of minority populations (Aldridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; Eraqi, 2015; Gollnick et al., 1976; Li, 2015; Sleeter, 2011). Outside of History/Social Science classes, students are also less likely to learn about the contributions of non-white figures, mathematicians, scientists, and authors in their other required courses. Some educators argue that the current curriculum is race-neutral, but neglect to acknowledge the ways in which it is biased towards a particular version of American

history which favors certain stories over others (Ladson-Billings, 2008; Saathoff, 2017). The lack of representation has been shown to have a tangible impact on student engagement and student achievement, which further exacerbates the inequalities already embedded in the system on multiple levels (Wiggin, 2007).

Both the structural and curricular factors may contribute to persistent inequalities for academic performance for students. For example, National Assessment of Educational Progress has assessed student performance in math and reading since the 1970s, and has identified a persistent gap between the performance of white students and Hispanic or Black students (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2010). Although the performance gaps have narrowed since the 1970s, the narrowing is inconsistent across different states and the gaps remain large, ranging from 0.6-0.8 standard deviations and represent around one-and-a-half years of academic progress (Hansen et al., 2018).

### **Ethnic Studies Teacher Sensemaking as Site for Understanding**

As educational and social inequalities widen in the aftermath of the pandemic, scholars are calling for restorative practices that support students to accelerate learning and respond to students' needs in creative ways (Hough, 2021; Love, 2020). Literature has identified that if reforms are to be successful, they must take teacher agency and identity into consideration (Hall & McGinty, 1997; Lasky, 2005), along with the structural and cultural elements with which they must contend such as the available resources, the culture and norms of their school setting, and the external policies governing their choices (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Hubbard, Mehan, Datnow, in press; Lasky, 2005). The success of future educational environments, and particularly those in the virtual realm, requires understanding how teachers might enact pedagogy that incorporates and emphasizes students' ethnic and cultural identities.

The study of teacher beliefs and dispositions arose in part to understand how to change them, and make reform agendas all the more effective (Levin, 2015; Skott, 2014). Levin argued: Understanding the content and sources of teachers' beliefs is essential... because teachers' beliefs guide decisions they made and influence their subsequent judgments and actions in classrooms. For example, educators and researchers often wonder why reform initiatives are not taken up or enacted with fidelity by every teacher. One reason may be that beliefs held by teachers influence how and why they may or may not change their practice to incorporate new curriculum, adopt new instructional strategies, or take up new initiatives (p. 50).

There is a need for research about teacher beliefs and identity that positions teachers not as people who reforms happen to, but as critical partners in shaping ideas about the direction of education and the direction of change. This is particularly true when we consider the pandemic where teachers had to rapidly adapt their pedagogy to accommodate changing needs and contexts (Reich et al., 2020).

To better understand the enactment of critical pedagogies in the virtual environment, this study takes as its unit of analysis the sensemaking strategies, perspectives, and experiences of ethnic studies teachers who were teaching during Spring 2020 when the novel coronavirus forced scholars to abruptly transition their classes into the virtual environment. This study focuses on sensemaking, a concept from organizational studies that scholars have identified as important for the implementation process because it provides valuable information about how teachers make decisions (Datnow et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002). Sensemaking is a well-named concept, as it is literally defined as “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4), and is a way that actors strive to “structure the unknown” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Teaching environments are particularly complex,

involving numerous variables and unpredictable circumstances, but the abrupt transition to the virtual environment in the midst of concurrent health and social crises created a rich occasion for sensemaking.

Ethnic studies teacher sensemaking was selected as the context for this study due to the unique pedagogy of ethnic studies classes. Scholars have identified ethnic studies classes as a model for pedagogy that emphasizes culturally relevant and community responsive pedagogies, teacher racial and ethnic identity development, decolonization and the elimination of racism (de los Ríos et al., 2015; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Ethnic studies courses are also designed to make history more relevant to and reflective of the experiences of students of color through the study of historically marginalized groups and the deconstruction of race and systems of oppression (Buena Vista, 2016; de Los Ríos et al., 2015).

While the existing literature on ethnic studies in high school is limited, research has so far demonstrated that these classes tend to adopt a more interactive, discussion-based pedagogy with the goal of supporting students to better understand their own racial and ethnic identity, as well as develop cultural knowledge through an exploration of the history, culture, beliefs, and experiences of the four racialized groups: African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Indigenous peoples. Studies have shown that students who take ethnic studies classes have higher graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011), higher grades in other classes (Dee & Penner, 2017), improved critical thinking and writing skills (de los Ríos, 2013) and score higher on standardized tests (Cabrera et al., 2012; Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Psychosocial outcomes include greater respect for self and others (de los Ríos, 2013), self-efficacy (Lewis et al., 2006; San Pedro, 2015), and deeper understanding of others (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008). Since ethnic studies classes provide

opportunity for more inclusive education, it is important to understand how teachers enact this course and perceive its opportunities and challenges during a time when a pandemic increasingly challenged inequity and inclusivity for student populations that have been historically marginalized.

The current K-12 ethnic studies movement, which has advocated for ethnic studies courses in high school, has grown as a strategy to provide a more holistic perspective of American history (de los Ríos et al., 2015) and opportunities for students to meaningfully understand their cultural identities (Banks, 2003). While in the 2013-2014 school year less than 1% of students in California had access to ethnic studies courses in high school, there is a growing trend toward greater access to culturally relevant and critical pedagogy and content for an increasingly diverse youth population with a number of districts in California passing resolutions to support ethnic studies as a graduation requirement for high school students (Alejo, 2018).

What is learning in a pandemic? Ms. Towne's question continues to resonate. What could a moment of social and educational crisis reveal about what is essential in teaching and learning? How could this moment clarify or confound goals for teaching and learning, particularly for the most vulnerable students? How could this moment clarify our understanding about priorities in education? How did teachers begin to make sense of this moment? These are the questions that drove this study.

## **Problem**

The problem this research addresses is the lack of knowledge about how high school teachers enact critical pedagogy in the virtual environment. Although online education and the integration of educational technology in high school classrooms has grown exponentially as

technologies have become more accessible, much of the literature and training on how to best utilize these technologies deemphasizes the role of the educator and their pedagogical sensemaking in shaping these environments to best support and engage students with learning (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018; Hayes, 2015; Selwyn, 2015). In fact, virtual education environments frequently advance “personalized” environments for student learning that automate learning through student interactions with software in a way that almost entirely displaces the role of the educator (Herold, 2017).

The abrupt school closures and shift of education to the virtual environment will likely have ramifications for educators and students extending far into the future (Bombardieri, 2021; Kuhfeld et al, 2020). Already it is clear that the pandemic is exacerbating structural inequalities for students across a range of areas, but especially in education due to a multiplicity of factors, including the digital divide (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020; Reilly, 2020). The success of future virtual environments of school requires understanding how teachers might enact pedagogy that prioritizes problem-posing and affirms students ethnic and cultural identities. Right now, there are no studies that explore how secondary teachers are teaching critical pedagogy in the virtual environment. As this format for education expands as an option for schooling, there is an urgent need to understand how teachers are navigating the tension between virtuality and education (McLaren & Jandrić, 2015) to adapt critical pedagogy for the virtual environment.

Ethnic studies was selected to serve as the context for exploring the implementation of inclusive, democratic education in this context as existing literature indicates that ethnic studies pedagogy prioritizes community responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy, though less is known about how these courses are being enacted in the virtual environment. Additionally, less

is known in virtual education about how educators are making complex choices about educational technology to support their students' learning (Hayes, 2015), and particularly how this is being done in the midst of social upheaval and ambiguous circumstances.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of how teachers make sense of critical or dialogic pedagogies in virtual educational environments. This study sought to understand the experiences and pedagogical sensemaking strategies of ethnic studies teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic as they abruptly shifted their courses to a virtual environment. The emergency environment created a prime occasion for studying sensemaking in a way that transcended different districts and states as the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent social crisis forced teachers to grapple with ambiguous and evolving contexts daily. Examining this moment can therefore provide insights into the decisions that teachers adapt and adjust their pedagogy, and more importantly, how they reflect on and make sense of those adaptations.

### **Research Questions**

In recognition of the ways that teacher decision-making and professional judgment is vital for understanding educational change processes and to better understand the ways that teachers adapt their pedagogy for virtual environments, this case study used a purposive sample (Stake, 2005) of nine ethnic studies teachers. This study posed the following research question: How did ethnic studies teachers make sense of teaching and learning in virtual environments for high school students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests? To further explore this overarching question, I posed the following sub-questions:

1. In what ways do teachers describe the challenges and opportunities of teaching during this time?

2. How did teachers adjust their pedagogy, content, and practice during this time?

### **Significance of Study**

Focusing on ethnic studies teacher sensemaking helps us understand the enactment of critical pedagogy in virtual environments and provides insight into how curriculum and school change is navigated through the interaction of teacher beliefs and actions. At a time when the integration and adoption of educational technology became nearly ubiquitous, this study investigates the pedagogical sensemaking strategies of teachers whose classes privilege discursive methods and the exploration of students' ethnic identities within historical contexts through the study of historically marginalized groups. Ethnic studies classes have vital relevance for all students, and particularly those that have been marginalized by hidden curriculum and discriminatory schooling practices. As virtual educational environments gain momentum in the years that follow the COVID-19 pandemic, and as ethnic studies classes continue to expand in K-12 contexts throughout the United States, this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of how teachers made sense of adapting critical pedagogies into online spaces.

This investigation identified that, although teachers often expressed constraints related to the structural realities that they faced in their districts and communities, their beliefs helped to shape their decision-making in the novel context in ways that brought clarity to their purpose and responded to the needs of their students. Their stories revealed a variety of specific challenges and opportunities related to building community, supporting well-being, and utilizing technology in innovative, humanizing ways. Their sensemaking illustrates the ways they adapted critical pedagogy for a virtual environment through content and methods that were 1) responsive to students' structural, historical, and cultural realities; 2) informed by problems and issues that had

relevance in students' lives; and 3) adopted through flexible and accessible integrations of technologies.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter Two, I review literature from three bodies of scholarship to provide context for understanding the problem and case that this study addresses. I begin by examining the limited body of scholarship on critical pedagogy in virtual environments and articulate the trends in scholarship about online education and digital technology. This chapter then introduces literature related to the case: teacher sensemaking in ethnic studies. I first review the growing body of scholarship around ethnic studies, paying particular attention to the literature on ethnic studies in secondary school contexts, and then turn to the literature related to teacher beliefs and sensemaking generally.

In Chapter Three, I describe the approach that this study took to investigate the problem through the epistemologies it adopts, the theories it enacts, and the methodological choices I made. I first introduce myself as the researcher and describe how my background and epistemology informed the research design. I then outline the theoretical frameworks that guided this study and describe how the theoretical framework was applied in the selection of data collection and analysis strategies that I employed. I introduce the nine teachers whose perspectives, experiences, and sensemaking strategies experiences informed the questions this study posed and conclude with acknowledging the limitations of this study.

Chapter Four and Five describe the findings and implications from this work to articulate how ethnic studies teacher sensemaking informs our thinking about the enactment of critical pedagogy in virtual environments. Chapter Four present themes that emerged from the data as pertains to the research questions. I present selected narratives of sensemaking events that

illustrate the complex challenges, opportunities, and decisions that ethnic studies teachers made while adapting their pedagogy for the virtual environment. In Chapter Five, I summarize the study, discuss the findings within the context of the growth of virtual education spaces, share implications from this work for educators seeking to enact critical pedagogy in the virtual environment or through the integration of digital technology in their classrooms. I conclude by providing suggestions for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The focus of this literature review is to provide a more detailed analysis of the bodies of scholarship related to teacher sensemaking in the enactment of ethnic studies in the K-12 emergency virtual environment during a period of dual health and social crises. While the digitization of education spaces has grown significantly in the past twenty years, the almost universal adoption of virtual education environments for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic created an enormous shift in public acceptance of these platforms as a space for learning. However, the literature on effective digital pedagogy for K-12 students is nascent and tends to focus on the technologies themselves, rather than on the educators whose pedagogical decisions most directly influence the way technologies are implemented and how they are used to sustain learning in this environment. Furthermore, online education spaces have traditionally relied on “banking” strategies, which reify problematic assumptions about knowledge and learning that have a deleterious impact on students from historically marginalized spaces.

To better understand how critical pedagogies can be enacted in the virtual environment, I selected ethnic studies teachers to explore their sensemaking strategies during this unique pandemic era. Ethnic studies is a new course of study in K-12 that focuses on the perspectives, experiences, and histories of the four racialized groups: African Americans, Latino/a Americans, Asian Americans and Indigenous Peoples. Ethnic studies has a rich history at the collegiate level, however its emergence in K-12 schooling is relatively new and unstudied. Current literature on K-12 ethnic studies classes explores the theoretical perspectives of pedagogy and teacher preparation (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015), as well as the emergent evidence on academic and psychosocial outcomes for students (Cabrera et al., 2012; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Cabrera et al., 2014; de los Ríos, 2013; Dee & Penner, 2017; San Pedro, 2015; Sleeter, 2011). Less is

known about how teachers are describing and enacting the pedagogy of these courses with high school students.

The groundswell of ethnic studies courses occurring across the United States provides a unique opportunity to study teacher sensemaking in virtual environments spaces because of the critical nature of the subject matter and pedagogical strategies typically associated with the topic. This literature review is organized around three tasks. First, I distill the literature on critical pedagogy and ethnic studies to illustrate how these characteristics show up in the existing scholarship. Next, I review the existent literature on virtual educational environments to illustrate the numerous gaps on teacher sensemaking. Finally, I bring these bodies of scholarship together to support the central argument in this thesis: research regarding teacher sensemaking and the enactment of ethnic studies pedagogy is needed to better understand the way that teachers make decisions for the curriculum, and how they wrestle with diverse priorities and purposes of this course within the specific context of their schools and virtual classrooms and, more generally, the shared context of the pandemic and social unrest.

## **Theory and Practice of Critical Pedagogy**

### ***Critical Theory***

Before turning to the literature related to the enactment of critical pedagogy in the virtual environment, I first expound on the background of critical pedagogy itself. Critical pedagogy is rooted in critical theory, which emerged from the thinking of the “Frankfurt School,” a group of mostly Jewish educators, researchers and philosophers associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. The works and thinking of individuals such as Marx Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas are most associated with the Frankfurt school of thought (Kirylo, 2011). Their writing and thinking

critiqued capitalism for reproducing ideological, social, political, and educational interests and perpetuating the marginalization of less dominant groups.

Critical theorists are not united in their thinking, however some common themes associated with critical theory are the examination of multiple forms of privilege, the distribution of power in material, social, and cultural ways, and includes an aim to promote actions that improve society and the individual through education (Scorza et al., 2017). McLaren (1998) articulates that the role of a critical educator is dialectical, recognizing the individual as someone who exists in relationship to society, and therefore problems are located not with the individual, but with systems (p. 171). To this end, the examination of problems either with individual or with society must see an interactive context.

### ***Critical Pedagogy and Paulo Freire***

This thesis explores the application of critical theory within the virtual environment through the lens of critical pedagogy, an approach to education that was developed by Brazilian educator, activist, and writer Paulo Freire in his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). As previously mentioned in the introduction of this study, Freire (1970) posited that traditional educational practices frequently function as “banking education” where content is fixed, “detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (p. 71). Students are treated as empty receptacles to be filled with this knowledge (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In this context, the teacher’s role is seen as an authority figure with particular expertise. Students are viewed as passive and lacking authority to construct knowledge. Scholars have noted that virtual environments for learning tend to reify the banking concept through relying on static content delivered by pre-recorded lectures, repositories of resources, and automated quizzes (Boyd, 2016; Stommel, 2017).

Freire (1970) presented an alternative view of “problem-posing” education (p. 79), where students are viewed as active agents and critical co-investigators in the process of creating new knowledge and meanings (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1988). In this view, efforts for education are “imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power” (Freire, 1970, p. 75) and require acts of cognition, as opposed to mere transfers of information. Scholars of critical pedagogy in the virtual environment have argued for an elimination of learning management systems that orient around banking strategies or consciously rethinking traditional educational practices in service of critical pedagogy through increasing dialogue or opportunities for problem-posing in virtual community (Boyd, 2016; Green & Chewing, 2020; Stommel, 2017).

Critical pedagogy relies the establishment of dialogical relationships between the teacher and students, in which teacher and students cooperate on viewing the same objects, sharing responsibility for an educational process in which everyone can grow, and which are based on “intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create” (Freire, 1970, p 90). Authentic dialogue is an important aspect the enactment of critical pedagogy because of its emphasis on reflection and the co-creation of ideas. Dialogic practice incorporates opportunities for reflection, both private and discursive, and recognizes the interaction of the individual with the subject under study, using the “here and now” (Freire, 1970, p. 85) as the first point of departure. The critical and liberating dialogue that Freire (1970) described presupposes action, and relies on “a praxis: the action and reflection of men and woman upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Education is done for the development of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness. Its articulation in practice includes other concepts that Freire describes such as the students’ awareness of their situation or their “self-in-history,”

an understanding of systems and how they perpetuate oppression, and knowledge of tools for transforming those systems.

Critical pedagogy has been interpreted by scholars and practitioners in the last fifty years with some variance in its implementation in physical classroom and schooling contexts (Darder, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Kirylo, 2011; Scorza et al., 2013, 2017; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2016; Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), Scorza et al. (2013, 2017), and Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2016) utilized Youth Participatory Action Research as a strategy for enacting critical pedagogy with youth. This approach provided students with opportunities to determine and direct their own inquiries, act collaborative to build their knowledge and skills, and take actions within their local communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Scorza et al., 2013, 2017). Darder (2017) and Vasquez and Altshuler (2017) placed an emphasis on approaching the study of history through the lens of students' life stories, so that they could understand history through deepening an understanding of themselves in history, and the engagement of diverse readings of historical accounts to understand that multiple perspectives persist in every moment in history. In higher education, professors designed their classrooms around dialogue and reflection with explicit attention to the theories of critical pedagogy (Kirylo, 2011; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011). Less is known about the application of critical pedagogy in virtual educational environments.

### ***Influence of Critical Pedagogy in Ethnic Studies***

As I will expound more upon later when I examine to the literature related to ethnic studies in K-12 contexts, the pedagogy of ethnic studies is still emergent. Ethnic studies has a long history as a discipline in higher education, but its emergence in K-12 settings is still relatively new. Ethnic studies scholars have articulated a pedagogy of ethnic studies that adopts

aspects of critical pedagogy, such as the awareness of self-in-history, understanding of systems, and active tools for transforming systems towards social justice (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). The literature on ethnic studies in K-12 frequently identifies critical consciousness as an explicit goal of the curriculum (Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2016; Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017). Pedagogical practices often include an emphasis on personal reflection, dialogue about ideas and with texts, and projects that provide structure for students to enact changes in their local environments (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Ramirez, 2008; San Pedro, 2015).

However, critical pedagogy and ethnic studies pedagogy have significant differences as well. Ethnic studies pedagogy also draws on culturally relevant and community responsive pedagogy (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Ladson-Billings (1995) conceptualized culturally relevant teaching as supporting students academically, fostering cultural competence, and supporting the critical awareness and analysis of systems. Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) is similar in its emphasis on validating, facilitating, liberating, and empowering ethnically diverse students “by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success” (p. 44). Other scholars have advanced ethnic studies pedagogies that draw on these approaches while additionally emphasizing social justice approaches that apply positive youth development models to curriculum (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Cammarota and Romero, 2006). Crucially, ethnic studies also adopts an interdisciplinary focus on the history of historically marginalized and racialized groups: Latino American, African American, Asian American, and Indigenous People (Hu-DeHart, 1993). Some scholars have critiqued critical pedagogy for an overemphasis on class struggles which deprioritizes ethnic and cultural histories

that frequently intersect and interact with these issues (Kincheloe, 2008), while other scholars posit that critical pedagogy intrinsically focuses on cultural issues due to its privileging students' funds of knowledge, cultural heritage and development of critical consciousness (Scorza et al., 2013, p. 18). Regardless of the interpretation and application of critical pedagogy, ethnic studies as a discipline has a separate and distinct background from critical pedagogy, emerging from local student activism in the United States, where critical pedagogy spoke directly to the class and laborer struggles for self-determination in Brazil. While both pedagogies are influenced by critical theory and the political struggle for self-determination and decolonization, they have distinct origins that speak to local contexts. In spite of the important differences, the influence of critical pedagogy in the practical implementation of ethnic studies in K-12 settings makes ethnic studies classes an important context for exploring the enactment of critical pedagogy in the virtual environment.

### **Online Educational Environments and Critical Pedagogy**

This study explores the way that ethnic studies teachers made sense of their pedagogies in the emergency virtual environment, so I continue by situating this discussion in the scholarship about critical pedagogy in online spaces. As other scholars have noted, the emergency remote environment cannot be fully understood through the lens of prior literature on educational technology and virtual environments (Al Lily et al., 2020). Typically, teachers and students in the virtual environment have opted into this scenario with full knowledge, preparation, and resources to do so effectively. In contrast, the crisis distance education setting was characterized by unreadiness, varying degrees of competence with educational technology for both teachers and students, and pandemic-related stress (Al Lily et al., 2020). Although the imposed virtual environments that I investigated is not comparable to chosen virtual environments, a review of

resources and research nevertheless revealed a paucity of studies related to critical pedagogy and pedagogical decision making in general within digital and online spaces.

In fact, scholars have critiqued the literature on educational technology as falling prey to the illusion of “learnification” (Biesta, 2009), where rhetorically digital technology in education takes for granted that learning happens in these spaces rather than investigating how, why, and whether learning happens (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018; Hayes, 2015; Selwyn, 2015). Hayes (2015) conducted a corpus-based critical discourse analysis on “technology-enhanced learning,” a term which suggests that “technology has now enhanced learning, and will continue to do so, closing further argument about how this actually happens (if at all)” (p. 15). Her study examined 2.2 million words of textual data written between 1997 and 2002 from the British National Corpus, and found that in policy documents, technology was treated as an external means to deploy efficient processes, and that social relations were discussed as things, obscuring human decision-making from view entirely.

Other scholars have noted that online education literature often does not focus on pedagogy at all (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018). In meta-analytic studies, scholars have identified that literature on educational technology and online environments tends to focus primarily on the technology itself, rather than on the choices made with the technology (Bartolomé et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2019). Furthermore, the focus of research tends to be in higher education primarily, elementary school, and then lastly, in high school (Xie et al., 2019). This is important in this study because the discipline of ethnic studies often utilizes a critical or liberatory pedagogy, but there are few examples or research on how to take up critical pedagogy in online educational environments.

While some literature on online educational environments has examined higher level thinking skills and how to facilitate collaboration in these contexts (de Leng et al., 2009; Williamson & DeSouza, 2002; Yang, 2008), only two studies were identified that explored how to introduce critical pedagogy or multicultural education in virtual environments (Brantmeier et al., 2011; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011). Both studies were case studies of multicultural education classes in graduate level higher education. Brantmeier et al. (2011) investigated the impact of collaborative learning modalities and found the discussion threads examined in the study provided more opportunities for reflection and deeper analysis of systems-level thinking. Enger & Lajimodiere (2011) used a mixed methods evaluation design to explore the impact of an online multicultural education class on a small population of doctoral students at a university in the Midwest. Their findings agreed with Brantmeier et al. (2011) and indicated that transformational learning is possible in an online environment, and that this environment opens new possibilities for learning including greater opportunities for reflection and vulnerability. Both studies' findings were highly context specific and reflective of adult learning, but are notable because they described relational ways to engage learners in reflection and discussion in online settings.

Some scholars have problematized online educational environments and learning management systems by looking at them through the lens of critical pedagogy. The earliest structures for moving education to online spaces relied on lecture formats either through uploading recorded courses, or through sharing podcasts, which simulate lectures (Rose, 2015). Boyd (2018) argued in an analytic essay based on his 15 years of experience teaching in higher education contexts that popular Learning Management Systems (LMS), function as a repository of resources for teaching and learning and takes a "banking" orientation, where teaching and

learning happens through the deposit of information into students, rather than through dialogic interactions. He argued,

Ultimately, a tension exists between the tendency of technology to supersede the learning process and the creativity of teachers and learners to subvert the very environment designed to pacify and subordinate them. Like it or not, critical educators find themselves in a world largely defined and shaped by telecommunication technologies. The challenge in our time is to turn those technologies toward the pursuit of social and political liberation, so they can become the tool for empowering engaged citizens committed to creating a more equitable and just world in which to live, work, and learn (p. 182).

Although Boyd acknowledged that online dialogues could be designed to facilitate opportunities for deeper inquiry and reflection not available in face-to-face, time bound classroom settings, he also argued that learning can become disembodied through the use of only text-based communications which are not holistic, relational, or action oriented. Furthermore, online education could provide greater access to diverse resources and databases, but only if both teachers and students possess critical digital literacy (Hamilton & Feenberg, 2005).

The trend in educational technology and virtual environments tends to be driven by market forces (Boyd, 2016; Hamilton & Feenberg, 2005; Rose, 2015). Online educational programs have expanded dramatically in the past twenty years, not because they were thought to provide better education, but because they provided greater access, and therefore, greater marketization (Boyd, 2016). Research focuses on automation, and personalization through educational programming that responds to users, rather than on how to utilize technology for developing relationships and building responsive pedagogy and functions to sell or market educational technologies to districts (Dawson et al., 2010; Klačnja-Milićević et al., 2010;

Brusiolosky & Peylo, 2003; Xie et al, 2019). In a systematic literature review of the trends and development of technology-enhanced personalized learning from 2007-2017, Xie et al. (2019) found themes related to student outcomes, attitudes, hardware and system support, but nearly no studies that explored the experiences and contexts that make students willing and able to learn. They also identified that few learning systems focused on the development of higher order thinking and communication skills, both of which are vital for the implementation of ethnic studies and critical pedagogy. Similarly, Bartolomé et al. (2018) conducted a systematized review of educational technology literature from 1960-2015 and found a lack of explicit pedagogical perspective.

Although few studies have explored how to approach critical subjects like race and ethnicity in the virtual environment, the literature on teaching race in college classrooms has found race an especially difficult topic to teach, one met with a great deal of resistance, particularly from white students, (Brunsma et al., 2012; Cherry et al., 2014; Closson et al., 2014; Khanna & Harris, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1996). Given the controversial nature of teaching race, scholars have advocated that this is a subject that requires a fundamentally different approach. Banks (1995) advised a “transformative teaching” approach which includes: personal, social, and civic participation; organization by powerful ideas rather than by chronology; interaction; and active student involvement. Martinez (1994) similarly argued for “confluent education” which links the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Lack of attention to pedagogy and educational technology, particularly for subjects that have more ambiguous domain knowledge and rely on critical thinking, create a complicated landscape in which for ethnic studies teachers to negotiate the adjustment of their courses to the online environment, notwithstanding the complicating variables of crisis distance education.

## Origins of Ethnic Studies

As previously described, ethnic studies was selected as the context for this study because of its unique scholarly origins, which are rooted in political engagement, consciousness raising, and the engagement of young people in community work (Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Hu-DeHart, 1993). I begin by articulating the history of the establishment of ethnic studies as an academic discipline because this provides important context for understanding ethnic studies pedagogy and its underlying epistemologies.

Prior to the establishment of the first college of ethnic studies in 1969, school curricula chiefly reflected Eurocentric histories and perspectives. In the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant perspective of ethnic relations was assimilation theory, which viewed ethnic groups as problematic and needing to be assimilated into the white Anglo-Saxon protestant culture (Yang, 2000). The erasure and marginalization of People of Color from college campuses and curriculum, in connection with social movements demanding greater inclusion and representation during the 1950s and 1960s, led to student groups from the Black Student Union, the El Renacimiento, a Mexican American student organization, the Latin American Students Organization, Asian American Political Alliance, Filipino American Collegiate Endeavor, and the Native American Students Union at San Francisco State University (then College) to organize together to demand self-determination on campus and transformation of the college climate to support greater representation (Ratcliff & Sandoval, 2016).

The inter-affinity group called themselves the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a name that signified their connection to philosophies of anti-colonialism and the global movement for anti-imperialism (Ryan, 2010). Third World was borrowed from Franz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and referred to the underdeveloped countries around the world that had

been colonized throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Mark, 2011). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, these nations were engaged in a protracted struggle for self-determination. In adopted this terminology, the students from the different organizations demonstrated not only solidarity as a coalition of nonwhite people, but also shared in the political struggle for decolonization (Ryan, 2020).

The five-months-long student strike at SFSU included demands for the establishment of a Black Studies Program, a School of Ethnic Studies, the hiring of more faculty of color, and greater outreach and admissions of students from low-income communities of color (Ratcliff & Sandoval, 2016). The student movement spread to colleges across California, and by the early 1980s, there were hundreds of ethnic studies programs and departments established at colleges throughout the country, a legacy which ethnic studies programs have maintained to this day (Hu-DeHart, 2004; Ratcliff & Sandoval, 2016).

Understanding the origins of ethnic studies is important not only to honor the long struggle for representation from students of color, but also to understand the way that it has grown as a discipline with a unique scholarly approach. Ethnic studies as a discipline is typified by the study of race and identity, and the experiences, perspectives, and history of traditionally marginalized groups, either through a comparative analysis of multiple groups or focused on the experiences of a particular group, including but not limited to American Indian/Indigenous peoples, Latinas/os, African Americans or Asian Americans (Yang, 2000). Within postsecondary contexts, the purpose of ethnic studies is, “to recover and reconstruct the lived historical experiences and memories of those Americans whom history has neglected, to identify and credit the contributions of these Americans to the making of U.S. society and culture, to chronicle protest and resistance, and, finally, to establish alternative values and visions, institutions, and

cultures” (Hu-DuHart, 2004, p. 875). Ethnic studies courses often use interdisciplinary perspectives and methods, such as classroom structures that promote collaboration, reciprocal relationships between teachers and students, and student-centered curricula that draws on students’ prior knowledge and personal experiences (Buenavista, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017).

Research on ethnic studies and diversity education in higher education spaces have found that these courses provide a space where students find affirmation, validation, and belonging within their collegiate and ethnic communities. Vasquez’s (2005) qualitative study on a Chicano Narrative senior seminar class found that Latino students identified with the course content, and the curriculum reinvested them with ethnic pride and personal legitimation. Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) found that Chicano Studies departments and ethnic studies curriculum provide a space for Latina/o students to expand their worldview, break down stereotypes, and become more aware of their cultural history and background. Marrun (2018) identified that courses which incorporate culturally relevant texts validate students’ lived experiences, connect them to current events and issues facing their Latino community, and help them create relationships on and off campus. In a study on the impact of a Filipino American and Philippine history curriculum for Filipino American students, Halagao (2010) found that students who were exposed to this curriculum reported a sense of empowerment, self-efficacy, and commitment to multicultural perspectives and civic engagement.

Ethnic studies classes have also been a place for the negotiation and development of students’ ethnic identities (Kibria, 1999; Trieu, 2018). Ethnic identity has its roots in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and identity theory as a central developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Ethnic identity is generally defined as “sense of belonging that an adolescent feels toward a racial or ethnic group as well as the significance and qualitative

meaning that the adolescent assigns to that group membership" (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, p. 148). For young people of color, who face a number of structural and cultural barriers, the development of a positive ethnic identity has associated with positive outcomes such as strengthened self-esteem, social competence, academic motivation, and positive affect (Alvarado & Ricardo, 2013; Bennett Jr, 2007; Hughes et al., 2015; Rivas-Drake et al., 2009; Smith & Silva, 2011; Tran & Lee, 2010; Wright, 2009). Scholars in the field of youth development have called for research that explores whether curriculum or programs can be developed and implemented in ways that support the development of ethnic identity amongst adolescents (Jones & Neblett, 2016; Neblett Jr. et al., 2012).

### **Ethnic Studies Emergence in High School**

Now that I have articulated the criticalist origins of ethnic studies as a discipline, I turn to the limited body of scholarship about the emergence of ethnic studies as a high school course. Although ethnic studies at the collegiate level is a distinct discipline with a long history, the translation of ethnic studies into high schools is still emergent, and is frequently contested and resisted ("Against California's," 2021; McKenna, 2020; Stephens, 2021). Schools change as behemoth institutions, with rare movement to the major subjects that are bureaucratic and institutional entities (Postman, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Nevertheless, ethnic studies courses in high school are rapidly expanding in different districts and states across the country.

Berkeley High School became one of the first high schools to offer an ethnic studies class in 1994. As of 2017, over 250 high schools in California offered an ethnic studies course representing 61 districts (DataQuest, 2018). In most of these districts, ethnic studies is offered as an elective class, but the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition has led advocacy efforts to have ethnic studies adopted as a graduation requirement (Pawel, 2021). El Rancho Unified School District

was the first district in California to make ethnic studies courses a graduation requirement in 2014, and Los Angeles Unified School District soon followed. In recent years, school districts in Sacramento, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Diego have also added ethnic studies as a high school requirement (Alejo, 2018). Additionally, the states of Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Washington, Virginia, and the District of Columbia recently moved to expand their ethnic studies course offerings (Mullis, 2018; Nguyen, 2021; Swaby, 2018; Wang, 2016), even as the teaching of US history in public schools that centers the experiences of people of color has come under new attack in 2021 (“CRT backlash,” 2021).

The movement towards including ethnic studies as part of standard curriculum in K-12 spaces confronts long standing political and cultural attitudes about the purpose of public education and History/Social Science curriculum in particular. Education “scientists” in the early 20th century advocated for a curricular program that prioritized math and English, and reforms related to easily assessed markers, such as getting more students to attend school for greater periods of time. Other educators viewed social justice and the transformation of unjust systems towards a better world as the primary purpose of schooling. Debates about the purpose of school commonly position four purposes: preparation for life, academic learning, human development and social justice (Hansen, 2008). Although these four aims are not necessarily in opposition, they pose critical questions about how teachers prioritize one over the other, particularly during times of crisis when all aims may not be able to be equally pursued.

Within the broader ideological debate about the purpose and function of education and history in particular, ethnic studies has emerged as a reform effort to promote a more inclusive cultural memory and strategies for critical reading of history. As the demographics of the students in the United States becomes all the more diverse, there has been an increasing call for

courses that reflect history, experiences, perspectives, and accomplishments of racialized groups that have been routinely dismissed in curriculum (Howard, 2004; Sleeter, 2011). Ethnic studies in K-12 as a movement comes alongside other ideologically similar efforts, such as multicultural education (Banks, 1991, 1999), culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), civic action (e.g. youth participatory action research) (Banks, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), and shifting reliance on textbooks to utilization of primary sources from multiple perspectives (Aldridge, 2006; Danker, 2003; Whelan, 2006). The focus of this study, however, is on ethnic studies and how ethnic studies teachers made sense of adapting ethnic studies pedagogy after they were forced to rapidly transition their courses to virtual environments in the midst of concurrent health and social crises.

Some of the earliest literature on the impact of ethnic studies was conducted on the Mexican American Studies courses in Tucson, Arizona after legislation was passed to ban ethnic studies programs in the district. Cabrera, Milem and Marx (2012) conducted a quantitative analysis of the relationship between participation in Mexican American Studies (MAS) courses and academic performance in the Tucson Unified School District reviewing data from four school years (2008-2011). Their study found that students in three of the four cohorts studied (2008, 2010, and 2011), MAS students who failed at least one Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test initially were significantly more likely to ultimately pass all three AIMS tests (Reading, Writing, and Math). In a program evaluation, Cammarota and Romero (2009) found that Latina/o students engaged in ethnic studies outperformed their white peers on statewide standardized tests.

In an effort to learn more about the academic and social value of ethnic studies, the National Education Association commissioned a review of the extant empirical work on ethnic

studies from K-12 (Sleeter, 2011). In the review, Sleeter identified published studies and reviews of research that systematically documented the impact of ethnic studies curricula from preschool to university settings and focused on academic engagement, academic achievement, and personal empowerment. Her review found that ethnic studies contributes to students developing a positive ethnic identity, which influences student retention (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Chavous et al., 2003) and resilience when faced with discrimination and racism (Carter, 2008; O'Connor, 1997). Sleeter concludes that a well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curriculum has positive academic and social benefits for students of color and white students alike.

In California, Dee and Penner (2017) examined academic outcomes associated with ethnic studies curriculum for students at risk of academic failure. Through a quantitative analysis with a regression discontinuity design, the study found that students engaged in ethnic studies coursework had higher attendance rates, higher grades in other classes, and earned more credits than students who were not enrolled in ethnic studies classes. Their study uniquely establishes a causal warrant because the study was conducted of ethnic studies in a district where enrollment is mandatory rather than voluntary, thus reducing sampling error based on hard-to-control variables. Like Sleeter (2011), the researchers highlighted that the study examines a mature model of ethnic studies with a high degree of fidelity to culturally relevant pedagogy, so they cautioned against generalizing to all ethnic studies coursework. Nevertheless, the study provided important data to suggest that ethnic studies courses can lead to significant academic achievement gains for students in a critical transition point and calls for further research into the outcomes of ethnic studies courses to understand how different types of courses are implemented and what outcomes are associated with student enrollment in these courses.

Qualitative case studies form much of the literature on what is known about ethnic studies courses in secondary classrooms and these studies provided some description of current courses and insights into teacher pedagogy, course structure and goals. These studies introduced rich descriptions of context and stories of student experiences to demonstrate several psychosocial benefits for high school students' participation in ethnic studies courses. The benefits included increased self-esteem (de los Ríos, 2013), self-efficacy (Lewis et al., 2006; San Pedro, 2015), understanding of others (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008), community engagement (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Ramirez, 2008; San Pedro, 2015), and feelings of belonging and connectedness within their communities (de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008).

### ***The Conceptualization of Ethnic Studies Pedagogy***

My study examines the ways that ethnic studies teachers made sense of their pedagogy in the emergency virtual environment during a time of crisis, so I turn now to the literature that begins to articulate what is meant by an “ethnic studies pedagogy.” Some researchers in the field of ethnic studies have articulated a pedagogy of ethnic studies through analyzing best practices from high school teachers (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015), and argue that ethnic studies pedagogy should be culturally relevant, community responsive, and attentive to the development of the teachers' racial identities. This argument extends prior literature which argues that ethnic studies courses need to do more than cover particular content areas, but they must do so in a way that empowers both teachers and students to challenge the Eurocentricity and oppressive practices that permeate the hidden curriculum of traditional classrooms.

There is currently some variation in both the structure and content of how ethnic studies courses are implemented in different high school districts, in part because there are no national or

state standards for ethnic studies, and in part because ethnic studies classes typically are designed to be community responsive (de los Ríos, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Typically, ethnic studies courses include content focused on the history of the four racialized groups, sometimes all or a focus on one (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008; San Pedro, 2015; Thomas, 2017), with explicit connection to students' community cultural wealth (Camarotta & Romero, 2011; Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos et al., 2015; de los Ríos, 2013; Morrell, 2008). Sleeter (2002) identified five themes related to the teaching of ethnic studies that distinguishes it from Euro-American mainstream school knowledge and connects it with the ethnic studies programs established in higher education spaces. These themes are: an examination of the point of view behind knowledge; an examination of U.S. colonial history and its impact on the present day; the historical construction of race and struggles for liberation; the collective and community identities that people hold; and the study of the creative and intellectual products of one's community.

With regard to instructional practices and as I previously discussed, ethnic studies classes frequently embody a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) that seeks to support students to develop critical consciousness through methods that invite students to reflect on themselves, to situate themselves in history, and to understand tools to transform injustice (Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008). For example, Curammeng et al. (2016) describe a six-week unit where students developed an autoethnography, explicitly connecting their lived experiences with their understanding of the world around them. Ethnic studies courses embed discussion structures to promote silence, reflection, and dialogue for students (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Curammeng et al., 2016; Ramirez, 2008; San Pedro, 2015), and emphasize the co-creation of knowledge based on the students' own experiences and identity (Camarotta & Romero, 2006;

Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos et al., 2015; San Pedro, 2015). Ethnic studies courses often include participatory or student-driven research, with an emphasis on research within communities driven by student-driven inquiries (Camarotta & Romero, 2011; de los Ríos et al., 2015; de los Ríos, 2013; Kwon & de los Ríos, 2019). While these are trends from what is known from current literature, most studies focus on one class in one district and, as there are no standards for ethnic studies classes, assessing ethnic studies programs demands contextualization. Goals and outcomes will vary based on how ethnic studies is being implemented in particular subjects or classes, and how the nature of the course is understood by those in charge of teaching it, which makes it important to understand the role of the educator in implementing educational change and enacting pedagogies in their classrooms.

### ***Examining the Role of the Educator in Enacting Educational Change***

Educational change efforts often take on a “top-down” approach, yet organizations are made up of individuals who are largely responsible for initiating and implementing innovative practices and cultures (Scott & Bruce, 1994). In the past 30 years, there’s been an increasing push towards standardization and high-stakes testing as performance drivers and accountability, leading to increasing control over teachers and a diminishment of their autonomy in the classroom (Olivant, 2015). Educators have a profound ability to affect change in the classroom. They are the “agents of education” in its entirety (Schwab, 1954/1978). Studies demonstrate that teachers are the single most important influence of student learning (Chetty et al., 2014; Haycock, 1998; Rivkin et al, 2005), and yet, teachers are frequently sidelined in discussions about educational practice and change. There’s a tension between seeing teachers as curriculum makers or as curriculum implementers (Craig, 2012; Giroux, 2012).

Ethnic studies as a class runs counter to the current educational movement towards increasing standardization, which has implications for its design and implementation. De los Ríos (2017) argued that educators should be cautious of “model” ethnic studies curricula “as concepts like self-determination and decolonization cannot be standardized, especially not across communities and school contexts” (p. 158). As previously noted, ethnic studies curriculum does not adhere to any national standards, and tends to be designed to be directly responsive to particular communities (de los Ríos, 2017; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015).

For this reason, it is vitally important to understand teacher beliefs in regards to the implementation of ethnic studies to understand how they make sense of themselves, their course, and their students. Ethnic studies classes cannot be understood apart from contextualization. Fives & Buehl (2011) recognize that beliefs function to filter, frame, and guide experiences into particular practices. Rubie-Davis (2014) argued, “Teachers will teach differently depending on their beliefs about how instruction should be delivered” (p. 266). Their beliefs influence their practices in the classroom, the interactions they have with students, and together, these forces shape the socio-emotional climate of the classroom, especially with the ways that teacher epistemology is adapted to instructional practice (Dolphin & Tillotson, 2015).

**Discourse and Narrative to Understand Teacher Beliefs.** Discourse and narrative emerge as major themes in the literature on teacher identity as many conceptions of beliefs emphasize their active construction and reconstruction through language (Craig, 2012; Smit et al., 2010). The word itself is considered an action, and storytelling a critical way of making sense of one’s self and one’s situation (Freire, 1970; Weick, 1995). Smit et. al. (2010) conducted an ethnographic case study with three teachers in South Africa and found teacher identity to be a lived experience that could be observed through expressions of the discourse, by close-

examination of metaphors, and by situating those within political, structural, and community contexts. The metaphors utilized by teachers, such as an octopus with still not enough legs for all of the things that needed held and doing, revealed a consistent theme of a “struggling voice in the educational space of complexity point[ing] to culture and identity in flux, characteristic to when teachers are confronted with reform” (p. 104), even if they agree that the reform is useful or necessary. Craig (2012) conducted a longitudinal case study of a school implementing a literacy reform and created a composite character made up of the six teachers involved in the study. The study similarly utilized teacher metaphors to understand how teachers understood themselves and their identity in the context of educational change. The examination of discourse reveals the necessity of autonomy, agency, and self-direction for reform implementation, and the danger of turning teachers into “curriculum implementers” rather than recognizing them as curriculum makers.

**Teacher Agency Within Sociocultural Context.** The examination of teacher identity within the context of school reform can also be framed by the sociocultural analysis of structure and agency. Structure, culture, and agency can be a useful way to think about dimensions of educational change and innovation (Datnow et al., 2005), because it recognizes the interaction between forces in all levels of the change process. Agency is defined as “the capacity to change the existing state of affairs – a capacity which all people have regardless of how they choose to exercise it” (Datnow et al., 2005, p. 62) and the literature recognizes the importance of centering teacher agency within social, historical, and cultural contexts to understand how and whether educational reforms are taken up. Lasky (2005) argued:

[P]olicy mandates are adapted, adopted, or ignored. Each decision teachers make, each action they take, is simultaneously a consequence of past action and present context and a

condition shaping the context for further action (Hall & McGinty, 1997). While it is true that teachers are not simply pawns in the reform process—they are active agents, whether they act passively or actively their actions are mediated by the structural elements of their setting such as the resources available to them, the norms of their school, and externally mandated policies (p. 900-901).

In a literature review on data-driven reform processes and teacher beliefs, Datnow and Hubbard (2016) recognized the dearth of literature that directly explores the relationship between teacher beliefs and this reform. The review identified the multiplicity of factors relating to the connection between teacher beliefs and data-driven practices, which ranged from personal mental models around the utility of data, to feelings of trust in their school around how data would be used, to feelings of self-efficacy based on training. They concluded that teacher beliefs need to be at the center of reform conversations, because “unless reforms address the core processes of teaching and learning in the classroom, school improvement is unlikely” (p. 24).

Studies on teacher agency found that agency cannot be separated or understood apart from wider sociocultural networks. Zheng (2013) and Muofhe (2008) both explored teacher agency in the context of educational change, and found that mandates that did not include adequate attention to teacher identity and beliefs led to teachers making sense of the reform through their own identity and beliefs, often with “token adoption.” Zheng (2013) uses complexity theory to examine the dynamic, unpredictable nature of teachers’ beliefs as they arise through complex systems. The study found that educational change cannot occur linearly, as a “cause-effect” and needs to take a more nuanced approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid imposition of an enormous educational change confounds the way scholars often theorize educational change as driven by strong educational

leadership. Fullan (2001), for example, articulates a theory of leading educational change that begins with moral purpose, understanding change, developing relationships, knowledge building, and coherence making – all to lay the groundwork for effective educational changes to occur sometime in the future. Similarly, studies have demonstrated that organizational innovations are more likely to be sustained with professional development that provides opportunities for teachers to deeply learn about an organizational innovation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2007), as well as when the emphasis is not merely on the introduction of the innovation, but on its implementation (Joyce & Showers, 2002). While theories of educational innovation and change driven through effective leadership and sustained professional development are important, the educational change that I investigate in this study happened in an instant and left little room for skilled leadership or training to support educators. This study therefore focuses on an opportunity to understand the ways that teachers make sense of educational changes through their own beliefs and heuristics, and can potentially provide insight into our understanding of teacher sensemaking for planned educational reforms.

### **Summary**

Ethnic studies is an emergent course in secondary school contexts, with origins in student activism and criticalism in higher education. Existing literature on ethnic studies illustrate that these courses emphasize reflection and action to support ethnic identity development and the transformation of systems for social justice. Previous studies on ethnic studies have provided rich descriptive cases of how ethnic studies is taken up in particular contexts as well as focused on the positive academic and developmental outcomes for students enrolled in these courses. Due to the lack of standardization for these courses, it is important to understand how context influences the ways in which teachers design and implement ethnic studies. Literature on teacher beliefs

recognizes the role of teacher sensemaking within contexts. Currently, no studies have explored the ways in which critical pedagogy or ethnic studies can be adapted in secondary classrooms in virtual environments, which is particularly important to understand as educational inequalities and social justice issues become increasingly challenged in the aftermath and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps in the literature provide the rationale for this study.

### Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

Using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 1996; Charmaz, 2016) and qualitative interviewing informed by critical feminist traditions (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Lather, 1986; Laura, 2016), this study investigated the sensemaking strategies that ethnic studies teachers employed to adapt their pedagogy for the virtual environment in a turbulent time fraught with concurrent health and social crises. This inquiry was designed to better understand the role of the educator in navigating a complex educational terrain, a perspective that is often neglected by policymakers and is distorted by educational research that is preoccupied with determining success as defined by performance on standardized testing.

Qualitative research aims to explore people's beliefs, attitudes, and experiences in a way that can provide nuanced explanations of the complex processes that contribute to the human condition (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of qualitative inquiry is to produce in-depth understanding of a social situation with "knowledge from the 'inside'" (Charmaz, 1996) and to prioritize the lives and voices of the experiencing person, and the meaning they make, rather than seeking to generalize experiences to a wider population (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The pursuit of knowledge from the inside has particular salience in the context of this study, because so much of the discourse about virtual education environments centers on the technologies themselves, rather than on educators engaged with the technology, making complicated and nuanced pedagogical choices about learning (Hayes, 2015). I utilized the qualitative methods of analytic memos, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Seidman, 2019), and virtual classroom observations (Fawns, 2012; Sinclair & Macleod, 2015) to gather data that addressed the research question: How did ethnic studies teachers make sense of teaching and learning in

virtual environments for high school students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests? Research sub-questions included:

1. In what ways do teachers describe the challenges and opportunities of teaching during this time?
2. How did teachers adjust their pedagogy, content, and practice during this time?

To answer these questions, I interviewed nine high school ethnic studies teachers from July 2020 until January 2021 and employed a variety of data collection techniques to capture teacher perspectives and pedagogical decisions. I used sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016) to analyze and triangulate the data through coding to identify categories, patterns, and themes.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the epistemological and theoretical influences that informed the way I designed the study and sought to capture the perspectives of educators in a way that better informs our understanding of the enactment of critical pedagogies in the virtual environment. In this chapter, I begin introducing my epistemological standpoint and how my own identity influenced my research design. Secondly, I articulate the theoretical framework and guiding assumptions that I used to inform my research design. Thirdly, I provide a detailed description of the data collection and analysis methods that I employed. Finally, I address the limitations of this study.

### **Epistemological Considerations**

I begin by articulating some assumptions that I have about knowledge and creation of knowledge. This work emerges from critical research, which rejects the idea that knowledge building and the act of knowing can be neutral (Lather, 1986). Rather, it is openly ideological. Harding (1987) articulates the important difference between method and methodology: method

refers to strategies employed to gather evidence, and methodology refers to the interpretive frameworks that inform and guide research project design. For this project, I want to articulate both.

The methodology for this project is chiefly informed by Freire (1970) and Lather (1986), who both advocate for blurring the usual lines of authority based on a critical theory perspective, albeit in different contexts. Freire's argument is anchored in education, where he advocated for a problem-posing education that transforms teacher into student, and student into teacher, in the pursuit of true knowledge generated through co-investigation. Lather extended a Freirean practice to the field of academic research, identifying the ideological goal of "empowering research" as blurring "the distinctions between research, learning, and action" (p. 73) in service of participants' self-determination in the struggle toward social justice. She argued that the chief methodological task of such research is to proceed in "reciprocal, dialogic manner," empowering subjects by turning them into co-researchers. While my research did not achieve the task of including participants in planning or dissemination of the work, these ideals informed my thinking as I designed the methods for this study.

This study also utilized constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016). Charmaz (2016) describes constructivist grounded theory as building from traditional grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is fundamentally inductive in its approach to data collection and analysis, building theory through an examination of individual cases or experiences, rather than starting with a priori assumptions in mind (Charmaz, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constructivist grounded theory builds from this premise, but additionally situates the experiences of both the researcher and participants within their broader social, historical, and structural contexts (Charmaz, 2016). To achieve this, Charmaz (2016) advocated for developing methodological

self-consciousness, which she described as “examining ourselves in the research process, the meanings we make and the actions we take each step along the way... [and] becoming aware of our unearned privileges as well as taken-for-granted privileges accompanying our positions and roles” (p. 5).

### *Joining the Conversation*

The inquiry guiding this study emerged out of community engagement with the ethnic studies movement in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). I worked alongside Dr. James Fabionar to participate in and observe the district’s Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee (ESAC), and spent two years listening and collaborating with this community to design a program evaluation project to support an ongoing effort to implement ethnic studies courses in SDUSD. Through this work, I became acquainted with the landscape of ethnic studies in San Diego particularly, and also more broadly as the discipline has emerged at the high school level in different regions around the nation.

This study pursued questions related to the lives of groups of teachers and students that have been historically marginalized and discriminated against in society. The purpose of research is to provide the sort of understanding that will lead to the creation of better conditions and advance the cause of social justice (Charmaz, 2017; Lather, 1986). Achieving this goal is something that I have grappled with throughout this study as I was growing into in my role as a novice researcher. My career in education began in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities classroom in a small school located close to the US-Mexico border. In this space, I had my own way of knowing and assessing the impact of my work and came to feel comfortable with my role. In research, the assessment for success with critical inquiry felt different and less familiar.

As a white woman, I recognize the deleterious and exploitative relationship of researchers in the past, particularly of white researchers entering into spaces traditionally held by people of color (Smith, 1999; Tuck, 2009). This is complicated by my own “mission” driven perspective, which was part of my religious upbringing and family culture. I questioned, if this research is emancipatory, what are the ways in which I am viewing myself as someone to be doing the saving? In what ways am I utilizing other people’s stories to advance my own agenda? Therefore, I strove to employ a research design that included opportunities for reflection on the part of myself, as well as the study participants who engaged in dialogues with me to reflect on their lives and their work in particular contexts.

Laura (2016) describes a methodology known as “intimate inquiry,” which is organized around “witnessing, engaging, and laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape” (p. 219). She describes the intimate inquirer as someone who works “under the assumption that the process and product of her scholarship has real consequences for the lives of three-dimensional human beings, the researcher herself included, not for imagined ‘others’ somewhere out there” (p. 218). The idea of intimate inquiry informed the ways that I related to the participants in my work in how witnessed their lives as a means of validating their experience, by engaging them in dialogues about the mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of their lives during this time, and using writing as a labor of love for myself and the participants in this study.

I am a member of the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee (ESAC) in SDUSD as a community partner and this work is fundamentally grounded in my work with the ethnic studies community and my relationships with practitioners, district leaders, and community advocates. It is also important to note that I approached the study with assumptions about the centrality and

importance of social justice education that actively seeks to dismantle systems of oppression that have long influenced the design of mainstream educational institutions. I did not enter into this research to be a silent or objective observer, but rather, to be someone who studies for and with a community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Having articulated some of the epistemological assumptions that guided this work, I now turn to articulating the specific theories and scholarship that informed the methodological decisions for this project. Table 1 highlights the theories that I employed to guide this study on teacher sensemaking during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Sensemaking is a concept that emerges from the broader field of organizational studies and is well-named because it is literally the process of “making sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking occurs when there is an incongruence between expectations and reality, and actors strive to bring alignment to the disparity. The central phenomenon of interest was teacher sensemaking of ethnic studies pedagogy as a result of the sudden shift in their classrooms to the emergency virtual environment. I conceptualized the COVID-19 pandemic, and related social crises, as an occasion for sensemaking for teachers. Weick (1995) highlights three properties of occasions for sensemaking that include: information load, an increase in complexity, and turbulence (p. 86). When these properties occur in a single event, it leads actors to rely on their intuition and heuristics. Although the data collected in this study does not reflect the usual parameters of teaching in the virtual environment, the rapid shift from teaching in-person to translating that practice to virtual environments acts as a meaningful moment in time to develop a deeper understanding of the purpose and priorities of critical pedagogy by providing a

“disruptive influence of a new way of looking at things--making the familiar strange and even uncomfortable” (Sinclair & Macleod, 2015).

Studying sensemaking requires “the enlargement of small cues” and “a search for contexts [or frames] within which small details fit together and make sense” (p. 133). As Weick (1995) states,

Frames tend to be past moments of socialization and cues tend to be present moments of experience. If a person can construct a relation between these two moments, meaning is created. This means that the content of sensemaking is to be found in the frames and categories that summarize past experience, in the cues and labels that snare specifics of present experience, and in the ways that these two settings of experience are connected (p. 111).

Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process that is ongoing, retrospective, social, and grounded in identity construction. Therefore, words matter when it comes to understanding how actors create sense, so Weick describes the substance of sensemaking through different vocabularies that actors employ to make sense. These vocabularies helped frame my understanding of teacher sensemaking during the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent social crises.

As previously mentioned, I also approached and designed my study by applying constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016). Rather than presuming that certain events would occur by following an educational change theory, I posed a broad, overarching question related to sensemaking and analyzed the data across all the participants in a way that cases emerged from the patterns and themes inductively. Constructivist grounded theory is useful because of its emphasis on understanding the collective and communal aspects of experiences,

and offers tools for studying temporality. This study sought to understand individuals within a particular space and time, believing that “truth changes as we gain knowledge through subjecting our experience to tests in the empirical world” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 10).

**Table 1**

*Theoretical Lens with Select Key Constructs and Guiding Assumptions*

Theory	Key Constructs	Guiding Assumptions
Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995)	Occasions for Sensemaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Events which are characterized by information load, an increase in complexity, and turbulence.</li> </ul>
	Frames and Cues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actors create sense through bracketing and punctuating ongoing events to impose categories and interpret events.</li> </ul>
	Vocabularies of Sensemaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discursive events such as ideologies, paradigms, theories of action, and stories that illuminate meaning making strategies for actors.</li> </ul>
Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2016)	Inductive Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build understanding of a phenomenon through an inductive investigation, rather than leading with a priori assumptions.</li> </ul>
	Sociohistorical Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding any phenomenon requires a recognition of the social, historical, and structural realities that introduce critical context for meaning making.</li> </ul>

## Methods

As already noted, I used qualitative methods and the case study approach to address the proposed research questions and, more generally, to understand how ethnic studies high school teachers made sense of their pedagogy within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneous social unrest. The study is about the teaching of ethnic studies in high school, a course which focuses on the experiences, perspectives, and history of people of color and utilizes critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and community responsive pedagogies (de los Ríos et al, 2016; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). While other high school courses may employ the same or similar pedagogies, this study focuses on exploring ethnic studies as a case of

teacher sensemaking to provide a more nuanced understanding of how teachers shifted to the emergency virtual environments and adapted their ethnic studies pedagogy and content in the midst of concurrent crises. Additionally, the case study strategy enables researchers to create a link between the micro and macro level, that is between the actions of individuals, on the one hand, and the large-scale structures or processes (Neuman, 2006) that influence individual's actions. It does this by capturing the complexity of multi-factor situations and perspectives (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Case studies also can have heuristic impact, meaning they help with the construction of new theories and the discovery of new knowledge (Neuman, 2006), which is important as few studies have explored teacher pedagogy in the virtual environment, and no studies have explored how high school teachers have adapted critical pedagogies for online educational environments.

Case studies often create boundaries around organizations or individuals, but this case is unique because this is a study of how ethnic studies teachers made sense of a collective moment. While teachers frequently employ sensemaking strategies when there is a perceived gap between the way things are and the way teachers want them to be (Smith, 1988), the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism epidemic also created a moment of collective sensemaking that is comparatively rare. This unfolding historical situation created evolving sets of circumstances for public health measures, job security, and environments for living and schooling with which teachers were required to grapple with daily, both in and outside of their classrooms. This occasion of sensemaking created a prime opportunity to investigate the enactment of ethnic studies pedagogy in the virtual environment.

Figure 1 illustrates the way that I conceptualized the “case” in this study. As previously mentioned, the inductive approach of grounded theory meant that I did not come to the data with

a priori assumptions about what constituted a case. Rather, I selected ethnic studies teacher sensemaking as the context for my research and approached casing through reading the data to explore common moments where sensemaking was especially pronounced for ethnic studies teachers. The way I analyzed sensemaking events was often by identifying the goal or belief teachers expressed about teaching ethnic studies, then by examining the decisions, outcomes, or reflections that they expressed related to their goals, and then exploring the interaction of challenges and opportunities they expressed about teaching during this time. The cases formed around pedagogical events: designing instruction, which often included an assessment of resources and needs (pre-implementation); implementing instruction; and assessing instruction. While there was some variation in how teachers emphasized different sensemaking events based on the timing of their interview, all of the interviews captured these three pedagogical events in different ways. The purpose of casing in this way was to gain insight into teacher sensemaking strategies around complex educational change, and, more specifically, to investigate sensemaking on the enactment of ethnic studies pedagogy in the virtual environment.

### Figure 1

*Conceptualization of the sensemaking events that formed the “cases” in this study*

<u>Beliefs/Goals</u>	<u>Challenges and/or Opportunities</u>	<u>Actions/Reflection</u>
Articulated beliefs about teaching or teaching ethnic studies	The central phenomenon of sensemaking was the teaching conditions created by the virtual environment and/or the concurrent health and social crises.	Decisions regarding instructional design, implementation, or assessment
Desired goals or purposes for instruction	Teachers conceptualized these conditions as both challenges and opportunities.	Reflection or evaluation of the decision

The case study strategy helped to create boundaries around the diverse experiences that teachers shared about sensemaking during a chaotic time. Within the context of the pandemic

and concurrent Black Lives Matter protests, high school ethnic studies teachers had to translate a course that frequently relies on dialogic pedagogy while using digital technology and remote learning strategies. How teachers strove to adapt their course in a way that hopefully remained true to its goals, the challenges and opportunities that this moment engendered, and the practices they had to adopt or dismiss, is the focus of this research.

### **Recruitment**

As ethnic studies is an emergent course at the high school level and there are no standards or official curriculum, I sought to purposely sample (Stake, 2005) teachers who had some experience teaching an ethnic studies class in high school and were teaching a class in March 2020 when schools abruptly transitioned instruction to the virtual environment. I maximized variability by recruiting participants from a range of different backgrounds and districts who served different populations of students to better understand the structural and cultural factors that contributed to the ways that teachers made sense of this moment. Ultimately, I invited 18 people to participate in this research. Three of the people who I emailed did not fit the criteria, and, of the remaining 15, nine agreed to share their perspectives and virtual classrooms in this study.

Thus, this research focused on the experiences and perspectives of nine experienced ethnic studies teachers. The participants represented seven school districts across three states -- California, New Mexico, and Indiana -- and had between 6 to 23 years of teaching experience. They were African American, Latino American, and European American. Although all of the teachers were engaged in teaching an ethnic studies class, the nature of their classes had a huge degree of variation, which reflected the landscape of ethnic studies in high school at the time of

this study. Some of the teachers taught mandatory classes that fulfilled an A-G requirement<sup>1</sup> for a particular grade level, where other teachers taught elective courses. Table 2 illustrates a few characteristics of each of these teachers. As you can see in Table 2, all of the teachers had experience teaching either Social Studies or English Language Arts (ELA) and had taught ethnic studies classes in high school for at least two years.

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<sup>1</sup> In California, the A-G requirements are also known as college entrance requirements and are a sequence of high school courses that students must pass with a grade of C or better to be eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU).

**Table 2***Participants' Backgrounds, Courses, and Locations*

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Background	Course	Length/Grade Level	Location
Mr. Johnson	African American	17 years of teaching Social Studies; 4 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies	9th Grade Required Semester	Large City in Northern California
Mr. Sal	Latino American / White	17 years of teaching Social Studies; 4 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies	9th Grade Required Semester	Large City in Northern California
Ms. Navarro	Latina American / White	21 years teaching ELA; 6 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies English Language Arts	11th/12th Grade Full Year Required	Large Suburb in Southern California
Mr. Gonzales	Latino American	23 years teaching experience in Social Studies; 4 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies U.S. History	11th Grade Full Year Required	Large City in Southern California
Ms. Cardona	Latina American	21 years teaching ELA and ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies	Full Year 9th-12th Grade Elective	Large City in Southern California
Ms. Towne	White	20 years Social Studies; 4 years teaching ethnic studies.	Ethnic Studies	9th-12th Grade Full Year Elective	Large City in Southern California
Ms. Wright	African American	20 years teaching ELA; 7 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies African American Literature	11th Grade Full Year Mandatory	Large City in Southern California
Mr. Harper	African American	6 years teaching Social Studies; 2 years teaching ethnic studies.	Ethnic Studies	9th-12th Grade Semester Elective	Small City in Indiana
Ms. Braden	White	12 year teaching Social Studies; 4 years teaching ethnic studies	Ethnic Studies	9th-12th Grade Full Year Elective	Large City in New Mexico

### *Participant Portraits*

Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995, p. 18), as making sense begins with a sensemaker. While Table 2 introduced some general facts about each of the participants in this study, it is important to also capture some aspects of the participants' self-concepts that they expressed; therefore, I introduce each of the participants below with a few details about their background and the experiences that led them to become ethnic studies teachers. Each portrait begins with a quotation from our interview that illustrates an aspect of their philosophy for teaching ethnic studies.

**“How Are You Going to Spend Your Life?”** This quotation by Ms. Towne summarized one of the main drivers of how she approached teaching ethnic studies. For Ms. Towne, ethnic studies was an intentional community where she strove to create an environment where students could freely engage with themselves and one another. Ms. Towne described herself as a middle aged, white woman who grew up in a “sundown town”<sup>2</sup> in Southern California. The racism that she grew up around pushed her to see the Eurocentricity of the standard curriculum from a young age. In 11th grade, she refused to take a regular US history course, and she, instead, developed her own class to understand the histories of many kinds of Americans, not just white men. She described the teaching of ethnic studies as occupying the same grounded space, looking within to intuit what is required for her students in this community. Just as she used her agency to lead her own learning in high school, she passed on this belief about her students and their agency, particularly during the pandemic. She trusted that the students would act in their best interest,

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<sup>2</sup> Sundown towns refers to all-white neighborhoods that practice racial segregation through intimidation or violence. The phrase came about from posted signage that said people of color had to leave town before sundown. Most were posted in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but some places had signs posted long after and the racial legacy persists to the present day (Carlson, 2006).

taking into account the situations in which they found themselves, the strange ambiguity of a moment in which the next day was not guaranteed.

**“We Want [the Curriculum] to Be Alive.”** Ms. Cardona articulated her own view of ethnic studies education as one that was predominantly experiential. Her father was part of the Chicano movement, so she attended protests with him as a young girl, but in school, she received no context for understanding the history of that movement. In college, when she learned about the movements that she was exposed to as a child, she understood her own experiences and family differently. For Ms. Cardona, ethnic studies is more than just a class that covers content, but is a way of helping students understand their identities and community through deepening their understanding of historical context. It also plays a role in disabling systems and transforming society. She used her role as an ethnic studies teacher to play an active role in her students’ lives, raising money to purchase computers for students who needed devices, making sure her students and their families had face masks or food to make it through until the delivery of the next EBT cards.

**“They Took Me to Water and Forced Me to Drink.”** Mr. Gonzales traced his career in education back to high school when he was required as a student to take an aptitude test. The college representatives insisted that he decide what sort of career he would want if he did go to college, although, at the time, he had no aspirations beyond continuing on with his well-paying job with the city. He ended up working with a counselor, taking political science courses to become a social science teacher, and student teaching. In remembering this pivotal moment for him in high school, he engaged this metaphor: they say you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink, but they did. They forced him to drink. This event changed his entire trajectory. When he started working as a teacher, he described feeling “humanized,” or treated

with dignity. It was a long journey to becoming a teacher who daily confronted different forms of colonialism that were embedded in so many classroom practices, and even in our interview, he continued to reflect on different ways that his teaching practices either contributed to liberation or oppression for his students. Later in our conversation, he brought the metaphor of being “forced to drink” as a way of making sense of the role he plays with his students. With remote learning, there were students that he knew he could have supported if they had been together, he could have made them stay in and finish their work. In the new environment, he struggled with this paradigm of how to encourage accountability and responsibility from a distance.

**“Celebrating the Differences.”** Ms. Navarro had always been interested in social justice issues growing up and wanted the students in her ethnic class to understand and celebrate the differences that make up each human being and ethnic group. In college, she took a lot of gender studies classes, as well as classes in Chicano Studies and African American studies. She described an important moment in taking an African American history class where students were instructed to introduce themselves with their “slave name” on the first day of class. As a half-Latina woman, she did not have a slave name, so she said some things about her background, but felt that she was not meant to be in that class. This experience helped her understand that she wanted her own classes to make space for all students, regardless of their ethnicity or background. She wanted her classes to help students connect with themselves, understand one another, and develop tools to make changes in their own communities, however they defined them. She helped to pioneer the ethnic studies program in her school district and supported other ethnic studies teachers as they developed and taught their courses.

**“I Refer to Myself as an Accidental Activist.”** Mr. Sal explained that his journey into becoming an ethnic studies teacher came as a result of many chance encounters, and he

understood his role as being an advocate for his students as they identified their own voices and agency. As a half-Mexican child, Mr. Sal experienced a lot of alienation in his school experiences. He described feeling that he was not dark enough to be Mexican and was not light enough to be white. In school, he quickly learned that no one in the administration or in authority would have his back, so he got into some fights and learned how to keep to himself to get through school days on his own. Mr. Sal continued to feel invisible in his classes until he got to college and took a government class with an influential professor who emphasized that his students needed to understand their own stories. In this class, Mr. Sal learned about the Chicano Revolution and began to feel politicized. As a teacher, he wanted to use his class to help students seize their agency by emphasizing student voice and collaboration, and by encouraging his students to speak up and to advocate for themselves in and out of his classroom.

**“I’m Not a Big Lecturer; I Would Rather Have Them Engaged in Thinking.”** Ms. Wright wanted her African American literature class to be more like her own college experience, where students were engaged in discussions about texts rather than having to memorize specific facts or read certain books. Ms. Wright began teaching African American literature through a series of fortunate events that led her back to a school located close to the neighborhood where she grew up. The course had originally been designed by another teacher who left mid-year, and she was able to step in to fill the position. She had a background teaching English and had studied comparative literature in graduate school, so the class was right in her areas of expertise. She described mixing up the class each year to appeal to the students, saying that there were no texts that had to be taught, but making curriculum design decisions based on a mixture of her own and her students’ interests. She used Socratic methods to engage students in critical thinking

about literature and hoped her class would expose them to important figures and time periods in African American history.

**“Try and Touch Every Single Student with a Story or a Topic That They Can Relate to.”** Mr. Johnson taught his ethnic studies classes with an eye to helping students express their own stories and learn about stories that reflected their own histories. He had a background teaching about racism and discrimination in criminal justice and was recruited to teach ethnic studies at the high school where he taught social studies. He had taken a few ethnic studies classes in college and described these as the first classes he had ever taken where he was actually able to express himself and for which he had prior knowledge of some of the content or could even be considered an expert based on his life experiences. He hoped that his ethnic studies class would support students to ask questions about why they do not see more perspectives reflected in their other required classes. Mr. Johnson wanted his class to be a place where students learned the main concepts of ethnic studies, but ultimately, he valued his students’ prior knowledge and cultural experience above all.

**“Your Voice Matters. You Are Valued.”** Ms. Braden’s approach to ethnic studies grew from the passion she had for teaching social justice and her firm belief that her students could begin making a difference in their world, even as young people. Ms. Braden grew up in a small town in the South and acknowledged that teaching ethnic studies where she came from would be considered blasphemous. Although she took no ethnic studies classes during her own high school experience, she took classes in gender studies and Chicano studies in her undergraduate and graduate school programs. She was inspired to teach ethnic studies based on learning about a colleague’s elective class on human rights, the teaching of which coincided with a big movement to offer ethnic studies in her school district. She took ethnic studies professional development

training offered by a local university and designed her own classes around the four domains from Learning for Justice<sup>3</sup>: identity, diversity, social justice, and activism.

**“Exposing Them with that History as the Foundation.”** Mr. Harper adopted an historical approach to teaching ethnic studies. He enjoyed learning about history as a young man and was always doing his own research and reading, although no ethnic studies courses were offered to him when he was going through high school. He recalled taking an ethnic studies class in college, but he felt excited to design and teach this course because of his personal interest in the subject and his comfort with self-education. His approach to ethnic studies was informed by history texts he was reading the summer that he designed the course. For Mr. Harper, it was important that his students were exposed to different parts of history that they may not have otherwise learned and that his class was designed for the particular students who attended his school in Indiana.

### **Data Collection**

This case study sought to deeply understand the ways that these nine ethnic studies teachers experienced and made sense of teaching their course in an abrupt new environment during an intensely tumultuous time. I acknowledged the strain that teachers were experiencing during this time and strove to design data collection strategies that would be minimally burdensome on teachers. I gathered data through two 60-minute semi-structured interviews, one of which also functioned as a classroom observation. Therefore, this study relied on the following sources of data: (a) interviews with ethnic studies teachers that focused on exploring

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<sup>3</sup> Learning for Justice (formerly “Teaching Tolerance”) is a website that was started by the Southern Poverty Law Center in the early 1990s with the mission of eradicating hate by fighting intolerance in schools. Its mission (and name) was updated in 2021 to reflect a goal of fighting systemic racism. The website provides educational support and resources for school administrators, librarians, and teachers.

the ways in which they made sense of their experience with teaching before and during the emergency context; (b) active interviews that focused on creating a dialogue around artifacts of teaching and learning, which utilized a technique of blended memory (Fawns, 2012; Sinclair & Macleod, 2015); (c) analysis of curriculum and course materials from the ethnic studies courses; (d) and finally, analysis of student work created while their course met in the virtual environment.

### *Interviews*

Qualitative interviewing was a foundational strategy for understanding the research questions. Berner-Rodoreda et al. (2020) offer a typology of interview styles that generalizes into two essential categories: doxastic and epistemic. In doxastic interviews, the aim of the interview is to capture the experience, beliefs, attitudes and/or feelings of the respondents, whereas in epistemic interviews, the interview is designed more as a social practice where knowledge is collaboratively produced by the research participant and the researcher. My research design incorporated both styles across two interviews with each participant. I had originally planned to conduct both interviews during the summer of 2020 but ultimately deferred to the scheduling preferences of each participant. As a result, the 18 interviews took place between June 2020 and January 2021 and, in most cases, captured elements of what participants experienced in both Spring 2020 and Fall 2020.

The first interview was 40-80 minutes long and semi-structured (see Appendix A). I focused primarily on capturing the teachers' perspectives and experiences related to four elements of their teaching experience within the context of emergency remote teaching: first, the teachers' backgrounds, attitudes, and beliefs about ethnic studies; second, their experience with the shift to the emergency virtual environment and the choices that they took to translate their

courses within that context; third, the interactive and social-cultural element of their teaching practice in this new context; and fourth, the structural realities that either assisted or impeded the teaching and learning that could occur in their particular contexts.

The second interview was 45-60 minutes long and also semi-structured, but was more epistemic in that it involved greater collaboration between me and the participants. During this interview, I introduced questions to build on the themes identified in the first interview, explicitly checked for understanding by engaging in member checking, and employed a strategy known as blended memory (Fawns, 2012; Sinclair & Macleod, 2015) to collaboratively create knowledge through the interview. Blended memory draws on external sources such as writing, digital artifacts and resources as well as the biological internal memory. In this interview, I used a set of questions that were more open-ended and focused on the collective examination of curriculum materials, teacher-student or student-student interactions as captured in their virtual classrooms as a way of capturing the process teachers used to crystallize their work and contribute to the dialogic nature of educational research and education itself (See Appendix B for the interview guide and Appendix C for two excerpts from these interviews that illustrate its nature).

Both interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guides were designed to promote interaction and negotiation of meaning between myself and the participants who were treated as co-researchers and participants (Seidman, 2006), rather than as research subjects. Reciprocity aims to create an interview environment that allows for give-and-take that is meaningful to all participants, and also best facilitates capturing authentic voices. It also recognizes the role of the researcher in constructing the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### ***Analysis of Curriculum and Course Materials***

The second interview included a “classroom observation” of the virtual environments that the participants utilized with their students in Spring 2020 and Fall 2020. The participants shared their screen and we navigated the platforms together. During this interview, teachers shared the organization and structure of their virtual classrooms, assignment prompts, survey or form questions, classroom announcements, syllabi, and other examples of course materials utilized during this time. I used the “screenshot” feature to capture images of these materials so that I could code and analyze these documents to understand my research questions.

### ***Analysis of Student Work***

As noted above, the second interview involved a discussion of artifacts related to teaching ethnic studies in the virtual environment. The participants showed me student work that illustrated the sorts of things that students submitted during in Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 after the transition to the virtual environment. I allowed the teacher to lead the way with what sorts of work they shared and asked questions to prompt them to elaborate about what the work signified. Teachers shared work such as student responses to wellness surveys, student artwork that responded to prompts, Google slides that student groups designed to illustrate key terms in ethnic studies, final oral history videos, essays, and reflections. As with the curricular artifacts, I used the “screenshot” feature on my computer to capture images of student work so that they could be coded and compared to the themes that emerged in the interviews.

### ***Virtual Data Collection***

All of the data collection for the study occurred in the virtual environment due to closures of schools and public spaces related to the COVID-19 pandemic. I utilized Zoom, a video conferencing platform that was ubiquitously taken up by schools and other public organizations,

during the closures related to the pandemic. While this was not the only platform available, most of my participants were relatively familiar with the technology, which helped to put teachers at ease in the virtual research environment. I also utilized flexible alternatives when this technology failed, as it did on multiple occasions due to issues with broadband connection for both me and the participants. I had hoped the virtual meeting would be face-to-face with the educators, but this was not always possible. I sometimes toggled my camera off to conserve bandwidth, switched platforms if the participant expressed a preference for an alternative, or called them on the phone. The goal of the technology was to provide connection, and to use the virtual medium as a way of discussing their experiences and classrooms.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is simply “the process of making sense out of the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 201) through an iterative process of consolidation, reduction, and interpretation. In qualitative research, analysis often occurs alongside data collection. In this study, I utilized a constant comparative method of data analysis (Charmaz, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which I constantly coded and analyzed data as I collected it over the course of six months. After each interview, I recorded an audio memo with general impressions of the interview and emergent themes, which were auto-transcribed using the Recorder application on my Android phone. I transcribed the interviews verbatim in the days before my second interview with each participant and wrote a more formal analytic memo identifying observations, new learning, contradictions, and ideas for new or different interview questions. I used ongoing analysis to influence questions I posed and the literature I reviewed the help make sense of the emergent findings. I also used analytic memos (Glesne, 2016) and a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to capture

thoughts and ideas that emerged from the field, as well as manage my own decision-making and biases.

I used In Vivo coding as my first cycle, which captured the voices, turns of phrasing, and particularities of each participant (Saldaña, 2009). A total of 1082 In Vivo codes were identified across the 18 interviews. I used my analytic memos, first cycle of coding, and literature review to identify main categories related to themes that were emergent, and used these codes to do focused, axial coding in the second cycle. This helped to reassemble data which became fragmented in the first cycle, as well as further identify categories and themes that began to emerge within the different interviews (Saldaña, 2009). A code tree was developed that included three categories: teacher identity, ethnic studies pedagogy (before), and ethnic studies pedagogy (after). Sub-categories of teacher identity included dimensions of teacher identity, such as experiences, beliefs, and agency. Sub-categories of ethnic studies pedagogy included codes related to design, purpose, methods, and content, with further sub-categories developed to illustrate emergent patterns between each interview.

I began the coding process manually, using a pen to underline key phrases and the margins to jot notes on ideas. This allowed me to become intimate with the data and know how to integrate a qualitative data analysis software into my own interpretative process. After understanding my process, I selected MAXQDA as a tool for data analysis. Using both manually and computer-assisted coding allowed me to reduce “uncomfortable distance between the researcher and her information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 202), while also being more methodical and organized with my analysis processes. This software program allowed me to more efficiently and methodically move through cycles of coding, and easily capture marginalia in the form of code descriptions and analytic memos on emergent themes.

## **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

In quantitative research, validity means that the work is generalizable, predictive, and reproducible. In interpretative research, inquiry relies on people's experiences and subjective accounts. Validity is an important construct, but it takes on a different meaning because the purpose of the research is not to get at the truth of a setting or situation but to understand available perspectives and their contexts (Glesne, 2016). I utilized triangulation of data sources by conducting multiple interviews with each participant, analyzing the teachers' classroom spaces, and a discussion of the student work with the teacher to help deepen my understanding and my interpretation.

As this was primarily a study seeking to understand the ways that teachers made sense of a unique moment, I also utilized member checking as a way of checking for accuracy (Glesne, 2016). This is a strategy for obtaining participants' feedback about how I interpreted the data about them and how I understood and interpreted the respondents' stories about the ways they were making sense of the moment. I utilized the second of two interviews as an opportunity to share my preliminary thoughts with my participants about what I believed they were doing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I explicitly asked if I was hearing them correctly or if there was anything they would change or add. Since several of the interviews took place over the span of a few months, this strategy also supported capturing a greater range of their experiences and perspectives about teaching during the two crises.

Lather (1986) argues for validity with ideological research that is transparent and intentionally self-reflexive, creating opportunities for critical self-reflection to challenge biases that would otherwise distort the interpretation of the data. I regularly wrote analytic memos, and utilized a research journal to attend to my own sensemaking with the data, as well as a way to

manage my bias and separate my own experiences with pandemic pedagogy from the experiences that I was learning in the interviews with the participants.

### **Limitations**

Case studies are context-specific, not generalizable, and are not suited for deriving causal explanations. However, case studies provide a more holistic interpretation of participant experiences, and are the preferred method of analysis when exploration of whole systems are required for deepening inquiry (Yin, 2009). This limitation was addressed by a phase of research being dedicated to systems or structural analysis (such as examining the relationship between the school and its surrounding community) and also by situating the findings in relation to general theories of structures and society (Carspecken, 1996). Donmoyer also (1990) argues that a thorough case study narrative makes a case accessible and provides alternative avenues of thinking. The purpose is not to necessarily prove that a perspective is valid or preferable, but to “expand the range of interpretations available” (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 194).

As a former high school History/Social Science and English teacher and as a current teacher educator, I hold teachers in high esteem and aim for my work in educational research to uplift teacher experiences and expertise. I was teaching in Spring 2020 when classrooms abruptly moved into the virtual realm and had to do my own sensemaking about how to adapt critical pedagogy for this novel environment. My connection to teaching and sympathy for the challenges that educators faced at this time created a bias towards seeing teachers with a magnanimous lens, though this view may have also had the impact of facilitating greater trust and understanding between myself and the participants. Bias was managed to the extent possible through ongoing reflective memo-writing (Hesse-Biber, 2006) and through the discussion of data collection and analysis with my dissertation chair and committee members (Glesne, 2017).

## Chapter Four: Findings

The following chapters discuss the findings and implications from this study of teacher sensemaking in the emergency virtual environment. The main question that drove this study was, How did ethnic studies teachers make sense of teaching and learning in virtual environments for high school students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests? However, this chapter focuses on the sub-questions by introducing the themes that emerged to answer these questions through highlighted select sensemaking events from the participants in this study to illustrate how teachers made sense of their courses during this tumultuous time.

The first sub-question asked: In what ways do teachers describe the challenges and opportunities of teaching during this time? I utilized grounded thematic analysis to identify three common challenges and four common opportunities. Teachers described facing challenges regarding how to build community while struggling with connectivity, balance teaching content while supporting students' well-being, and navigate the limitations of digital technology. Teachers described the virtual environment during this time as opening up opportunities as they experienced their class as a holding container for understanding unfolding history, student and teacher relationships shifting in positive ways, the expansion of student agency, and the expansion of teacher agency.

The second sub-question asked: How did teachers adjust their pedagogy, content, and practice during this time? Grounded thematic analysis and the application of sensemaking theory led to an answer that is informed by three themes regarding how teachers made sense of the challenges and opportunities of this moment to adjust their pedagogy, content and practice: first, teachers prioritized student well-being; second, teachers emphasized the here-and-now in their

ethnic studies content; and finally, teachers utilized flexible technology integration to support connection and community.

In Chapter Five, I discuss and summarize findings to answer the overarching research question. I found that ethnic studies teacher sensemaking helps us understand the enactment of critical pedagogy in virtual environments and provides insight into how curriculum and school change is navigated through the interaction of teacher beliefs and actions.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The first sub-question asks: In what ways do teachers describe the challenges and opportunities of teaching during this time? The challenges and opportunities of teaching during a pandemic in a novel and continuously evolving environment were manifold and varied in different contexts, however, several themes emerged.

#### **Challenges of Teaching Ethnic Studies in Times of Crisis**

The challenges that were most described related to three areas. First, teachers were challenged on how to build a classroom community while students struggled with connectivity. Secondly, teachers were challenged to balance covering content with tending to issues of well-being, both for students and for themselves. Third, teachers were challenged on how to navigate the limitations of digital technology and the constraints of the virtual environment.

#### ***Building Community as Students Struggled with Connectivity***

Few teachers found ways of continuing their ethnic studies classes with the same degree of dialogue that they had prior to moving online because of school closures. As previously described, one of the essential methods for teaching ethnic studies is dialogical: teachers introduce content, pose open-ended questions for individual reflection, and then students share and listen to one another's perspectives in small groups and/or as a whole class. In the virtual

environment, it was challenging to create spaces for students to dialogue with one another due to a sharp decline in participation and, also, because of the limitations of how students could connect with each other. Mr. Harper's classroom, for example, transitioned into an entirely asynchronous design due to limitations with the students' devices. This move, in effect, eliminated the opportunity for rich dialogues about the course concepts like the class had been able to have in-person. Mr. Harper described how "the heart of that class, or what I wanted the heart of that class to be, was kind of ripped out."

Almost all of the teachers saw a significant drop-off in participation by students, both during class meetings and through assignment submissions. Teachers attributed the decreased connectivity to multiple factors, including the ambiguous and chaotic circumstances created by the pandemic and related social unrest. Ms. Cardona worked at a school in a large city in Southern California that was hit particularly hard by the pandemic. She said,

We had kids who got COVID, we had kids whose parents died from COVID, we have kids who lost jobs, or parents lost jobs, lost their homes, and then, they were literally where the demonstrations were happening for George Floyd. There were tanks and helicopters all around their homes for some time.

With the exception of Ms. Braden's high school in New Mexico, all of the schools had student populations with more than 60% of the student body that qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), a proxy measure for students who come from low-income homes. All student bodies at the schools in California represented in this study were between 93-99.8% students of color, which were populations that were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and were locations more likely to be impacted by the social unrest following the murder of George Floyd.

Teachers explained that districtwide decisions regarding grading in the spring of 2020 meant that students' grades were fixed at the grade they earned before the schools moved into the emergency remote environment, and grades could only go up with increased participation. This grading policy impacted what teachers decided to do regarding their own professional involvement. Ms. Towne described electing not to attend optional training sessions for moving into the virtual environment because:

When we tell students that nothing's going to matter, it's hard [then for a teacher] to be invested in trying to create a robust program. You've lost the people that it's intended for, so all that doesn't matter, and I remember being very present when I heard that, and I said well, that is going to define the experience. I could do everything in my power to get everybody to come to the table, but the precedent has already been set.

In addition to the other structural factors that impacted student participation, teachers frequently referenced the district-wide grading policies as reasons why students opted not to participate in their classes in Spring 2020. As Ms. Wright said, "Some students, [because] we could not diminish their grades, and they knew this, they didn't see the point."

Another factor that contributed to the decline in participation was students' priorities depending on where they were in their academic journey. Where teachers had a large group of 12th grade students, teachers described their participation as declining almost completely. In Indiana where Mr. Harper taught, the governor announced that effectively all seniors would graduate if they showed up for e-learning, but this had the impact of reducing their actual participation in class activities to almost nothing. Mr. Harper attributed that to senioritis and empathized saying, "I probably would have done the same, so I cannot blame them." Mr. Sal and Mr. Johnson, who both taught a semester-long 9th grade ethnic studies class, also found a

significant decline in student interaction with assignments and participation during synchronous video class.

Mr. Sal noticed that English learners were likely to drop off in his class, because the distance environment did not allow students to easily work together and navigate their language learning in community. He explained this by referring to his pre-pandemic common practice of making seating assignments that supported students collaborating on assignments and helping one another. In the virtual environment, he said,

Those students, if they drop off, that's really understandable. Not that I encourage it but it's understandable that it's going to be a lot more difficult to function when we're in a distance learning environment than when we're in class.

### ***Balancing Content Coverage with Well-Being***

In addition to the issue of how to get students connected, teachers also grappled with how to balance teaching their curriculum while tending to the stressful conditions that both the teachers and students experienced during the pandemic. Ms. Navarro saw community dialogue as essential to ethnic studies pedagogy because it allowed students to reflect on their own perspectives and gain knowledge of the perspectives of others, and at first, she tried to keep her virtual class as similar to the in-person class as possible. After a few weeks and listening to the students, she felt she had to cut back on dialogue because students felt overwhelmed by the virtual environment. She explained,

It started making me rethink again, like, okay, I've been keeping them for the full 80 minutes, and doing what I was telling you with the "let's watch this video, and then let's do this and then, let's talk," and then, I started thinking again, well, should I do that with

them every class? Should I do some of that for half? Should I give them some time to work independently?

Ms. Navarro acknowledged that students preferred to work independently, but she also believed that independent work “doesn’t make sense for this type of class” that is so dependent on sharing perspectives in a community setting. Ms. Navarro grappled with how get the right balance under the circumstances presented by the remote environment.

Mr. Johnson recognized that students were overwhelmed and questioned whether he should further reduce the content, but he also felt the need to do the curriculum justice. In his school, ethnic studies was a mandatory class, however, it was required for only one semester for 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Like the other teachers in this study, Mr. Johnson elected to teach this course and felt strongly that students needed to have access to the content of this course, which would be perhaps the only time in high school that his students had the opportunity to learn about their own histories, as well as concepts like race, ethnicity, and identity. He said,

But you worry because it's like, this is ethnic studies and they're never going to get it again. I have a semester. This is such an important stuff. I know that they are interested in it. How do I just say, we're not going to talk about the Atlantic slave trade? Or what would it be..., and we're going to do something fun. And I know that that's important, but it's like, they need to have this information, they need to understand the concepts that are part of the class, and that's where I'm struggling. How do I do both? And I don't know if I can [do both].

In addition to supporting students’ well-being, several teachers acknowledged the mental and physical toll that teaching during the pandemic had on themselves and their own personal lives as well. Mr. Johnson wrestled with the loss of his students from the very beginning when

schools were abruptly closed in response to the pandemic. He said, “To lose the interaction of the students, and the energy that they provide to me personally, it was a hard adjustment.” He articulated the difficulty of not being able to rely on his typical support systems, like interactions with his family and friends, due to the restrictions, so he was constantly in the process of figuring out how to keep sane with the new structure of teaching. He explained the experience of teaching during the pandemic like this:

It's literally, like, you're literally surviving. Every, every, every day, you're just trying to survive and get through it. You know what I mean? It's like, there's nothing comfortable at any point where you feel where this is at... I thought I was better prepared for the mental health aspect of the instruction, and teaching. And what I know is just talking to my peers, it's just that we're struggling and in a way that I've never seen. Like, I've seen teachers struggle, but not in this way.

Several other teachers described feelings of loss related to the shift to the virtual environment, both in losing the interactions that they had had with students, and also in the loss of rituals like having the “last day of school” where you walked out of the building and felt that sense of closure that comes from walking out of a building and saying goodbye.

Teachers also found the virtual environment to be taxing and inefficient in the way that it required reviewing student work. Mr. Gonzales described experiencing fatigue due to the time-consuming nature of how they had to interact with student work in the learning management systems. In the in-person classroom, he would have a stack of assignments that he could quickly lay out on his desk, assess, and enter into the grading system. However, in the virtual classroom, the time it took to assess work and enter it into the grading system was three times as long due to

the time it took to click on the different links, pull up the assignments, go back, submit, and so on. He concluded,

It's time consuming. If this was the nature of the beast from the get go, I think, psychologically, we'd be fine. I think the amount of time this is taking, and adding to the work that we're accustomed to, I think this is all like a psychological mental fatigue.

In addition to the time consuming and psychologically draining nature of the virtual classroom spaces, Mr. Gonzales and Mr. Johnson both identified that their bodies were strained differently because of the way that they had set up their computers in their homes. Mr. Gonzales began having neck pain because he was looking down at his computer and, finally, adjusted his computer to put it on a couple books so that he could hold his neck straight. Mr. Johnson had back spasms from sitting on his couch at his coffee table, “leaning over, every single day” and not being able to move around like he had previously done in the physical classroom.

### ***Navigating Limitations of Digital Technology***

The last challenge that emerged was how teachers felt that their instructional choices were limited by the digital technology that they had available. For example, the video conferencing platforms that they utilized were not always easy to create opportunities for dialogue. Mr. Gonzales used Zoom, a video conferencing platform that allowed for the creation of “breakout rooms” where students could be placed into small groups to discuss ideas and then be brought back together in a main room with the whole class. None of the teachers used this feature in Spring 2020, given the reduced time that they had with students, but in the fall, they would try to send students into these breakout rooms to discuss ideas as they might have done in the in-person classroom. Mr. Gonzales put it this way:

I go into the breakouts, and it's time consuming. I wish, if I could just roam the room and go from desk to desk. It'd be a lot easier to hold them accountable [for participation]. But to jump into one breakout, and to see who's talking, who's not talking, it's extremely difficult... and time consuming. So, if I have a breakout for five minutes, I may take two minutes in one breakout group.

Mr. Gonzales found that students rarely talked to one another in the breakout rooms, so he attempted to allow students to choose their own dialogue groups so they might feel more comfortable discussing their ideas with one another, but then discovered that it took about 15 minutes to create those rooms before he could send them off. He noted that this challenge was directly related to his pedagogy, saying, “[M]y frustrations have been to be able to collaborate and work collectively, which is what our ethnic studies pedagogy call for.” He noted that the issues that he described were because he was trying to do collaborative work, and the platform that he used was more suited for doing lectures.

Teachers also ran into unforeseen issues integrating different technology tools into their classrooms. For example, Ms. Wright asked her students to create poetry videos on Loom, a platform that allows users to record and share short videos that can record voice, screen, and face. She had hoped the students would actually be able to share those videos with one another, “which was the point,” but learned that privacy restrictions prevented students from being able to see one another’s videos and interact with them. Mr. Sal encountered similar problems when asking students to create FlipGrid videos, because students had to sign up with their school emails and experienced technological issues that proved insurmountable for many of them.

Teachers faced limitations related to the actual hardware that students had available, which was often “not up to snuff,” as Mr. Harper said about his students’ devices. At Ms.

Cardona's school, the administration encouraged teachers to use technologies like NearPod, which was a software that could be used to embed interactive assessments and activities with slides, but she noted that this platform required students to navigate between the Zoom classroom and something else which was not possible for students who logged onto class on a tablet or a phone. Ms. Cardona said, "We have to be realistic. We [have to] get to know our kids and what their situation is like," because, for her class, many of her students had limited bandwidth for their WiFi or devices that limited how they could interact with synchronous classes.

Some teachers were additionally challenged due to inexperience with digital technology, and the limited or ineffectual training that was offered as classrooms moved into the virtual realm. Mr. Harper used a completely asynchronous class design in Spring 2020, both because his students' devices were ill-equipped for video conferencing and also because he did not have experience using that software. At Mr. Johnson's school, there were no mandated trainings, so those teachers that were more comfortable with educational technology tried to help the other teachers who were still using hard copies. Mr. Johnson explained,

We tried to do the best we can, some administrators weren't necessarily prepared for it, or had the knowledge either, so they're scrambling. Nobody's at district, 'cause it's closed, so there wasn't a whole lot of in-depth training, whatever it was, it was almost, we were sharing information with each other to try to help support one another... I know there's resources and different things that happen in the summer, but for a lot of teachers, summertime is our time, we're not necessarily going to jump into some trainings unless we're really being directed to them.

Similarly, Mr. Gonzales received “no training for virtual [learning] at all. It was just like, good luck.” Ms. Wright’s district offered lots of training sessions, but, according to Ms. Wright, they were “awful.” Her school required her to set up a Google Classroom, but the district training did not work for her. Ms. Wright ended up working with her own teenager to set up her virtual classroom, and she would reach out to trusted colleagues to get answers to her technology questions. None of the teachers described a coordinated support system to help them adjust their pedagogies to the virtual environments, which left it up to them to make the determinations about which technologies to utilize and how to utilize them.

### **Opportunities for Teaching Ethnic Studies in Times of Crisis**

Although teaching ethnic studies in the virtual environment presented numerous challenges, teachers also experienced several opportunities that arose or expanded, as a result of the unique circumstances created by COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement. The opportunities that teachers described coalesced around four themes. First, their classroom became a holding container to help students understand unfolding history. Second, teachers described a shift in their relationship with students that engendered greater responsiveness and shared humanity. Third, student agency expanded in this context. Finally, the de-prioritization and elimination of traditional schooling structures led to expanded teacher agency and freedom.

#### ***The Ethnic Studies Classroom Became a Holding Container to Understand Unfolding History***

The ethnic studies teachers in this study routinely designed their classrooms to be inclusive environments that could facilitate dialogues centered on students’ perspectives and cultural backgrounds. In the context of a chaotic year that had profound implications for students’ school and life experiences, ethnic studies classes were well-positioned to serve as

holding containers for students to understand themselves, one another, and the evolving situations of the pandemic and social movement.

Ms. Braden noted that “the ethnic studies class is always really close knit, and it just really felt like a community always does,” so when the pandemic happened, her classroom was a logical space for students to continue to connect with one another and support each other as the situation unfolded. In her classroom, she always tried to impress upon her students that,

School is the real world, we’re not preparing for something else. We’re in it now. I mean, you are preparing for later in life, but it’s not like your life hasn’t started yet. So, I think when Parkland happened, and when coronavirus happened, it was like, like, see? We’re all in this together. This is all very real. And, just want to really value their feelings and thoughts and beliefs. And I think I already have that tone set in the class.

In her virtual classroom, she noted, her ethnic studies class was “definitely more communicative” and “absolutely interacted more organically” than her assigned English classrooms.

While Ms. Braden’s class in Spring 2020 ended in early May, she had students text her late at night on the Saturday after Mr. Floyd had been murdered to just let her know that they were planning to attend nearby protests or to ask for her advice about how to talk about their involvement in the protests with their parents. As she recounted the story, she reflected, “Then I was like, ‘What different times that I have a student on a Saturday night texting me,’ and it’s just so crazy.” Since her Google Classroom had been archived at the end of the school year, after she had received around a half dozen texts or emails, she unarchived the classroom and posted a link to a Google Meet so they could create a space to discuss and reflect on Mr. Floyd’s murder. She said, “I put that Google Meet time up, and I had several [students attending the meeting], and not

just from this year, but students from the past ethnic studies [classes] met as well.” In this way, the virtual classroom created an opportunity to come together in a student-driven way to hold space for one another’s experiences as tensions and unrest erupted in Summer 2020.

Ms. Wright said that the unfolding pandemic and social justice movements helped her classroom become more alive, and more organic. Students used their final assignment to reflect on the environmental factors impeding African American success and to make connections with the murder of George Floyd and their touchstone text, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Ms. Wright reflected on a final essay by one of her Filipino-American students:

His peer group is largely African American. So, I think through his lens, he's seeing what is happening to his friends who he hangs out with every day. And this is part of his community. And, also, I think, because that's just the nature of the class. These are all things that we've been talking about since the beginning of the class, so for me, it's almost like duh! But I think for him, I teach them a lot of things, but sometimes I would feel like they were thinking, Oh, whatever, Ms. Wright. This is more Ms. Wright stuff. And when [the pandemic] happened, and they're seeing it, it was, I think, like some aha moments, like, that's when it's coming together.

Ms. Wright also had students who participated in the protests, and during their synchronous Zoom classes, they used the classroom space to discuss the situation and the ongoing protests as a way of understanding the significance of the Black Lives Matter protests and each persons’ role in the movement, whether they attended protests or not. The community design of ethnic studies classes created a valuable container for students to understand external dimensions of the pandemic and social movement, and also their own experiences living through it.

### *Relationships Between Students and Teachers Shifted in Positive Ways*

Although the shift to the virtual classroom challenged the development of community and the facilitation of dialogue due to constraints with connectivity and technology, the emergency virtual environment also sometimes shifted the relationship between teachers and students in positive ways. As teachers navigated the novel teaching environment, as well as their own stressful experiences living during the concurrent crises, they identified that the environment created ways to connect with their students in new ways.

The teachers in this study described modeling activities with students by sharing their own journeys, both from their childhood as they grappled with their own racial and ethnic identities, and also from their current experiences, especially when it came to their experiences during the pandemic. Ms. Cardona expressed that ethnic studies also allows for the creation of “a different kind of relationship” because of the nature of the content. She said, “You’re really touching on some really personal issues that kids internalize as their fault” like the color of their skin, and

when you start to talk about internalized racism and a long history of colonialism... and how those notions came to be, it kind of frees [the students] from that sense of shame that they have had forever, and so they love you forever because you’re a part of helping them come to those beautiful realizations.

Several teachers made it a point to share with their students about the struggles that they were facing personally during the pandemic as a way of modeling vulnerability or encouraging students to take care of themselves. For example, Mr. Sal shared a long post with his students on the “Google stream,” which was the landing page for his virtual classroom and was a space where teachers can share announcements and assignments. He had originally posted the message

to his own social media account, and in the post, he detailed the immense challenges that he was facing in the distance learning environment and his gratitude for his students and their families.

He explained his reasoning for sharing like this:

I feel like if I don't have these open and honest conversations about me struggling to meet my own needs in the classroom, while trying to meet the needs of my students in the classroom, that [the students are] not going to feel comfortable about, you know, asking me to help meet their needs.

Ms. Towne also modeled vulnerability with her students by sharing video messages with her students where she shared reflections and encouragements. In one of her videos that she shared in early May, she acknowledged to her students the pain they may be feeling as they experienced life during the pandemic. In the video, she shared, “If you're sad about graduation, if you're sad that you can't get a job, if you're sad that you can't go outside, like you should be grieving because it's a death and death of a life that we used to live.” She explained that teachers were all facing some of the same challenges as the students, and this set of circumstances invited opportunities for vulnerability and empathy.

As teachers engaged with the virtual environment during this time, they found, in some cases, that the level of intimacy they had with their students changed. Although Ms. Towne opted not to ask her students to come to a synchronous class in Spring 2020, she invited students to follow her on Instagram where she would regularly post about her daily “vibe.” Students were able to comment on her posts, and she would be able to peek into their day-to-day lives, as well. She reflected on the interactions that developed:

That was very intimate, and whatever they posted I would see... and they would engage with me, like, I'm thinking of a student giving his dad a haircut, and being like, yeah,

that's a good job, and like yeah, and I know his dad, and his dad's like, hey! And it was just really weird to be like, this is so different, the intimacy involved here is so different.

Teachers had a look into their students' lives in a way that was unique to this moment. Some teachers commented on how they were able to learn about their students' lives based on what was in the background of their cameras when they logged onto the video conferencing platform. For example, Mr. Gonzales noted that he could tell that he had students who had moved back home to Mexico based on the students' backgrounds, which gave him insight into the sorts of circumstances students were facing outside of the virtual classroom.

The virtual environment offered more opportunities for reflective, one-on-one communication, which was likely amplified because students and teachers were living through a crisis together. Ms. Wright noted that she checked in with students, but she also had students checking in on her. She said, "I got so many lovely emails that I wanted to tell them that I'm supposed to be supporting you, they were really concerned about me, like, Ms. Wright, are you OK?" She wondered if they were checking in because she is African American and they were worried about her. In her class, she often shared about the pandemic and the disproportionate impact it had on African American people as well provided opportunities to discuss the Black Lives Matter movement as it unfolded at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Ms. Cardona attributed the student's comfort to the intimacy created in the virtual environment. She said, "the virtual allows for you to give a kid a space that's comfortable for them to be able to share what they would not have shared in a classroom."

Other teachers also noted that the virtual environment enabled some students to thrive in different ways than they did when they were physically coming to school. Ms. Wright perceived that the virtual environment allowed students a different way to communicate that was more

aligned with some of their personalities. For example, Ms. Wright assigned students to reflect on each of the Zoom classes, and one of her students who never would have participated in class, was able to give her thoughts more comfortably in the asynchronous reflections. Ms. Wright said that this student “turned out to be one of the strongest students in distance learning.” Mr. Gonzales witnessed something like this with one of his students, and when he asked her what changed, the student expressed that, “It’s all drama. I hate going to [this] high school. So virtually? It helped her so much.”

### ***Student Agency Expanded***

The virtual environment also opened up possibilities for an expansion of student agency in different ways. First, the virtual environment created opportunities for more democratic ways that students could interact with one another such as by posting on forums or in comments on announcements, and some students took leadership in this space to share technical support with their teachers and/or each other. For example, in Mr. Sal’s classroom, students had some difficulty in the early weeks of the new school year logging into their synchronous Zoom classes, and students would comment in the Google stream with instructions for one another about how to technically navigate the virtual classroom spaces.

The virtual environment also shifted the ways that students could show up for class, with some teachers noting that they could not tell if students actually attended class since they could keep their cameras off. Some teachers recognized this as a big opportunity for students to take the lead in their learning. For example, Ms. Wright never chastised students who didn’t come to class, but she “did remind them that, when we go back to school they’re not going to do remediation. You need to be ready to work your senior year.” Ms. Towne celebrated the no-harm

grading, especially because it meant that for the first time, all of the seniors at her school got to graduate. She said,

I think about a system that it is actively pushing students out in our urban situation and I thought also there's grace there because these students are getting their diploma, and I don't know, you know, it's hard, it's hard for all of us, but I would get these glimpses, it felt like justice, it felt like finally our community is winning.

Ms. Towne lived in the community where she taught, which was part of her values of living a simple life and not owning a car. She recognized that the narrative about her community was very negative, and that the experiences of the people in the community was "tarnished with a lot of injustice." Ms. Towne also recognized that the virtual space gave "students all the control." She explained that at her school, there was a big issue with students using the restroom, and she said,

I couldn't help thinking, well, now they can use the restroom whenever they want. The whole oppressive system, it was now thrown out the window, and I think in some ways, it might have been better for them than coming to school.

For ethnic studies teachers, whose pedagogy is rooted in resisting and challenging systems, the shift in power differentials between students and teachers felt positive in some ways in the virtual environment.

### ***De-Prioritization and Elimination of Traditional Structures Led to Expanded Teacher Agency***

As students had more control in the virtual environment, teachers also acknowledged that the pandemic and shift to the virtual environment also resulted in an environment that also felt freer for them. As an 11th grade English teacher, Ms. Wright frequently felt like the spring semesters at her school were wrapped up in standardized tests that did not help her students, and

only further served to pathologize her students of color. Standardized tests have a long history of racial bias, which when promoted as objective fact, have served to reinforce segregation and to limit access to educational opportunities for students of color (Knoester & Au, 2017; Rosales & Walker, 2021). In Spring 2020, however, the governor of California eliminated the requirement for schools to do standardized testing, and even Advanced Placement tests were cancelled. While most of the ethnic studies teachers in this study did not have to teach to subject matter tests as their classes were electives, for Ms. Wright, her class was a required 11th grade English course and so this statewide decision brought a great deal of relief. In the virtual environment. Ms. Wright said that she “felt freer to just teach.” She put it like this:

[My principal] is great, but she is still my boss. She walks through the classroom, I need to make sure my objective, my ‘I-can’ statements, all that is up. I did not have to be subject to that. It was me and the students. And there’s, it’s really a feeling I have not, I don’t know if I’ve ever felt this [free] to this extent.

Ms. Towne expressed a similar feeling of freedom and optimism in Spring 2020, because she was able to make choices that prioritized her students’ social-emotional well-being and did not have to engage in what she saw as oppressive forms of grading. Several teachers commented on the creativity of the moment, and how it inspired them to find new ways to connect and relate to their students.

### **Adjusting Ethnic Studies Pedagogy for the Virtual Environment**

Having described the challenges and opportunities that arose in this moment, we can now turn to explore the ways that teachers made sense of adjusting the design, implementation, and assessment of their instruction during this time of dual crises. As I described in Chapter Two, ethnic studies emerges from a unique historical context of student activism, community

engagement, and anti-imperialism (Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Hu-DeHart, 1993). Although the ethnic studies teachers represented in this study taught different configurations of ethnic studies (e.g. semester, yearlong, embedded in English or History/Social Science, elective), the teachers articulated a pedagogy of ethnic studies was relatively consistent in its purposes, practices, and content. All of the teachers designed their pre-pandemic classrooms to adapt to students' interests and cultural backgrounds in ways that emphasized the creation of a respectful classroom culture where students could engage in reflection and discourse. Teachers articulated that the purpose of their class to support students to develop cultural knowledge and/or critical consciousness. The curriculum focused on the development of students' ethnic identity, and the histories and perspectives of people of color from the four racialized groups. Their methods emphasized reflection, discussion, and the creation and presentation of projects.

Their classrooms embodied many of the principles of critical pedagogy, which is characterized by problem-posing education (Freire, 1970). This type of pedagogy presents problems based in students' lived experiences and engenders a relationship between teacher and student that is based primarily on the co-creation of knowledge through dialogue. As previously described, little is known about how to adapt courses like this for the virtual environment, which meant that the teachers in this study had to quickly make sense of strategies to adapt their pedagogy during the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism epidemic.

As I described in Chapter Three, I read the data to explore common moments where sensemaking was especially pronounced for ethnic studies teachers. I isolated frames and cues in the form of examining either the beliefs or goals that teachers expressed about teaching ethnic studies and then by examining the actions that they took to adjust their pedagogy. The beliefs

and actions were framed around the interaction of challenges and opportunities they expressed about teaching during this time, and provide insight into how ethnic studies pedagogy was adjusted for the virtual environment in the context of health and social crises. I found that teachers adjusted their pedagogy, practice, and content in three main ways: first, they prioritized student well-being; second, they emphasized the here-and-now in their content; finally, they utilized technology in ways that were flexible and accessible for their students.

### **Prioritization of Student Well-Being**

Within the context of the emergency virtual environment, and given the concurrent crises which students faced during this time, teachers expressed a belief that their main role working with students was supporting them to stay healthy and well. This goal took precedence over pushing forward with the projects and units that they had planned for the remaining months of the 2019-2020 school year. School and district decision-making led to significant curtailing of the amount of time that teachers could meet with students in the virtual environment, which forced the teachers to be clear in their priorities for how to utilize their limited class time with students. Teachers prioritized student well-being in the virtual environment in the ways that they designed, implemented, and assessed their instruction during this time.

### ***Designing Instruction to Prioritize Well-Being***

The ethnic studies teachers in this study routinely engaged in dialogue with their students to better understand their situated so that they could design instruction that responded directly to students' complicated needs during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests. It should be noted that many of the ethnic studies teachers in this study taught their courses as elective classes, which contributed to the ways that they felt freer to make adjustments to accommodate students' needs during this time. However, three of the teachers in

this study taught the ethnic studies classes that were integrated into mandatory History or English Language Arts classes, and these teachers also prioritized using their classes to promote student well-being during this time.

Teachers incorporated multiple opportunities to assess students' needs in the virtual environment, either during live Zoom classes or through posting on forums where students could respond publically, or through confidential Google form submissions where students could share privately. Mr. Harper used the discussion forum in his virtual classroom to share funny images or videos with students and ask, "Can you relate?" He noted that this way of checking in elicited both funny and honest responses. He said,

It also kind of revealed how serious their situations were. I had one student I remember, who responded, yes, my mom acts the same way [as the person in the video], going overboard with the precautions and sanitizing everything, and he finished with, my mom won't allow me to go outside. The following week, [he shared] oh, I got to go outside and take a walk today, and this was early May and we had been on shut down at the end of March. So, he'd not been allowed outside for over a month.

Ms. Towne taught a year-long ethnic studies elective in a high school in a large city in Southern California that was nearly 100% Latino/a, and where 88% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. After the schools closed, she directly asked her students what they wanted to learn during the remaining weeks of the semester and used their feedback to adjust her class curriculum. She prioritized student well-being and self-determination, completely releasing her students of any expectation to complete work or assignments during this time. Her decision came about in part because her administration and district announced to students that there would be a policy of "no-harm grading," which meant that students could not receive a lower grade

based on work completed in the weeks following the school closures in March 2020. After she heard this announcement, she decided she needed to encourage students to pursue their interests and find joy in their own ways in their lives. She put it like this:

I just really thought... learning is going to happen in a different capacity than we're used to, learning is going to happen because we're in a pandemic, so like, the idea of whatever I was teaching before March 13... doesn't have a lot of value, right? So, I knew that. I mean, I could have mused on, we could have done a lot, but I tend to think, meditate, and listen to myself, and [I thought] this is not the time, and this is not the time to get crazy, like the teachers are getting *crazy*, like we need to just breathe and take it all in and start to listen to ourselves, and so I saw that, and I tend to be someone who wants to do a good job, but I'm like, this is not the time to. What does a good job look like in a pandemic with no kids?

Ms. Towne posted surveys to check-in on her students' mental well-being, and posted videos of herself processing her own feelings about living during the pandemic. She asked her students, "Who's coloring?" and mailed them color pages. She mailed Easter cards to her students. She posted on her Instagram account about the things in her life that were giving her joy. She encouraged her students to do what brought them comfort.

Ms. Wright taught an African American literature ethnic studies course in a large school in Southern California. She is also the mother of four older children, so she witnessed their experiences and empathized with the specific difficulty of just being at home and in enclosed spaces with their families. When she reflected on the impact of the pandemic and the school closures, she said, "I just don't think, you know, 6 months or a year out of your life, that's inconsequential in the big scheme of things. You're not going to get that far behind." She

laughed and continued on to emphasize the importance of encouraging student well-being, saying,

I had more students who were asking me for book recommendations. Students who hadn't been in the past. They know I really like yoga, it helps me, and when they were stressed, I would just tell them to pause and breathe... [I heard from a student about] and I don't remember ever saying it, but she just really detailed how I had helped her with just, 'stay in the moment, don't look in the past, don't look in the future,' and she said that that really got her through the distance learning. But mostly just things that I kind of use for my own self, that I saw that she was struggling and like, maybe you just need this, [instead of] all this studying right now.

Ms. Wright also recalled a student whose brother got COVID and required hospitalization. He emailed her to tell her that he would need to miss the Zoom meeting, and her response was simply, "Of course, why would you come to the Zoom class?"

### ***Implementing Instruction to Promote Well-being***

The teachers in this study adjusted the focus of their ethnic studies class time and assignments to explicitly provide social-emotional support for students. For example, Mr. Sal and Mr. Johnson both taught a required 9th grade semester-long elective class in a large city in Northern California where 73% of their student body received free or reduced-price lunch. Both Mr. Sal and Mr. Johnson sought to prioritize well-being in their classrooms after the school closures and engaging in online teaching. Mr. Sal converted his ethnic studies assignments to self-care-oriented activities by conducting mental health check-ins and, ultimately saw those touchpoints as "an opportunity to maintain contact without asking a bunch of additional classwork from our students." Similarly, Mr. Johnson said, "I don't want to be one of the

teachers adding stress. I want to be one of the teachers who [the students] feel is a mental break.” In Spring 2020, he created a space for students to go over questions about assignments, but noted that he also wanted to make time for students to talk about their experiences noting that “they wanted to share, too, what was going on with other teachers [things] they felt that were confusing or stressful. But it wasn't, I can tell you this, it wasn't talking about the curriculum.”

As previously mentioned, Ms. Towne invited students to provide direct feedback on a survey about how they wanted to do school for the remainder of the semester in Spring 2020, and she took their preferences seriously. She had only one student who wanted to meet in synchronous Zoom classes, and so she opted to listen to the majority of her students and only posted asynchronous assignments that students could complete on their own time.

Mr. Johnson also attempted to balance the curriculum with student well-being by focusing the class on the most essential aspects, and eliminating projects that he felt would be unnecessarily stressful. Ultimately, Mr. Johnson spent the whole first quarter of the Fall 2020 semester on the identity unit, reasoning, “Let’s at least let them learn about themselves and their classmates.” With the remaining time, he moved through the four racialized groups, with some African American history to contextualize current events and what students were seeing in the news and then he focused their work on the culture of indigenous tribes, Latino communities, the African American community and the immigration community of Southeast Asia, a population which reflected many of his students’ ethnic backgrounds.

### ***Assessments that Prioritized Well-Being***

In addition to adjusting the design and implementation of their assignments, all of the teachers used assessment strategies that were more supportive and affirming of student effort, particularly during the latter part of the Spring 2020 semester. Mr. Harper taught a 9-12th grade

year-long ethnic studies elective class in a small city in Indiana. He noted that participation declined in the latter part of the Spring 2020 semester and, consequently, he said, “As long as you turned something in that is on topic, then I see that you took the time to answer the questions, and then I can kind of get the idea of what you were trying to say, I was giving credit.” Similarly, Ms. Towne relaxed expectations that students would complete work, recognizing the mental toll of the early pandemic days. Ms. Cardona also described thinking about assessment in more flexible ways, to make it manageable for students to catch up if they fell behind. As an example, she offered,

If the kid couldn't do [the final video assignment], you know, the mom's in the hospital, you're taking care of kids, whatever. Like for me to be able to just [say], like, “Okay. Stay after class. Okay, tell me your narrative, like to me right now.” And then be able to give credit for that.

Although all of her students were able to complete the final video project, she expressed a mindset of, “You have to make adjustments and just let go of this, like, class is so important.” Similarly, Ms. Wright adopted an about the point of learning during this time, and with her students' writing, she said, “Whatever they were writing, I was validating. As long as they were writing.” The idea of accepting students' work and adopting humanizing approaches to giving credit was a theme amongst all the teachers in this study.

Mr. Gonzales taught an 11th grade ethnic studies U.S. history course in a large city in Southern California. He not only made his classes “very student-friendly,” he also advocated with his non-ethnic studies colleagues to encourage them to accommodate students' difficult circumstances. He said,

I was really vocal in our staff meetings, talking about, I was pretty [much] like shaming teachers that if anybody failed a kid because of this transition, kids that didn't jump on the Zooms or the classroom or didn't come back, you know it was so punitive to fail a kid, and they would say, 'well, I'm just gonna give them a no grade' but giving them a no grade is punitive because they just lost a semester of their life, and they're gonna have to make that up in summer or next year.

Although I did not interview non-ethnic studies teachers in these schools, from the comments of these ethnic studies teachers, they felt that, in comparison with their colleagues, they held an expansive understanding of the structural realities that their students faced outside of the classroom and were focused on how best to approach teaching during the pandemic and concurrent Black Lives Matter protests.

Several teachers also invited students to reflect on and assess the virtual classroom structures and provide feedback on how they could be adjusted or improved. Ms. Wright incorporated a reflection activity that asked students to identify what went well and what they thought could be done differently in future virtual classes. She utilized these feedback tools to make responsive adjustments to her classroom based on the needs and preferences of her students. For example, her classroom was assigned to meet "way too early" in the morning at 8:00AM, and her students identified that they were too tired at that time to engage in classroom discussion, and they also were getting lost in their class text *A Raisin in the Sun*. Ms. Wright responded to this by doing some lectures to start off the class as students gathered in the space and got ready to share their ideas with one another.

Systems thinking plays an important role in ethnic studies pedagogy, and this way of understanding student needs shaped how teachers made sense of what was happening with their

students, how they needed to respond, and what mattered in terms of teaching priorities. The teachers who participated in this study discussed the health and economic impacts that COVID-19 had on their students' lives and wellness. The recognition of these factors helped them set priorities for teaching in ways that attempted to accommodate their students' needs.

### **Emphasis on the Here-and-Now in Ethnic Studies Content**

Although students' well-being was a priority for teachers, particularly in Spring 2020 when the pandemic situation was new and the transition to the virtual environment was abrupt, the teachers then focused on redesigning their curriculum to support students' understanding of the unfolding current events. Teachers had to adjust their content and expectations to accommodate the limited amount of time they had to teach in the remote environment, and, also, to make their courses relevant and engaging for students. Across the teachers interviewed, there were differences in how much time and energy this accommodation effort took, but all of the teachers, to some degree, adapted what they had planned to teach related to centering their courses on the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and, instead, situated their curriculum within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd.

Ms. Wright let go of the units that she originally planned and recognized the need for an organic approach to the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester. Once she did this, she described the redesigned unit as "taking on a life of its own." The essential question that was guiding her unit was, "What are the environmental factors that impede African American success in society?" She had planned for students to complete an essay answering this question, but after the pandemic, the assignment felt "so formulaic" and "stupid. Like, what are you asking us? Of course the environmental factors impede African American life." She read the news daily and

incorporated current events into their discussion of the text *A Raisin in the Sun*. Additionally, she provided more options for how students could respond to the essential question in their final projects. In addition to writing an essay, as was originally planned, she provided opportunities for action, art, and/or writing.

In Ms. Braden's ethnic studies elective, "everything in Spring [2020] went back to coronavirus." She introduced essential questions that helped students make connections between what they were learning through the pandemic and planned her content accordingly. For example, she posed the question, "What lessons can we learn now to help us with future crises?" during a week that had been planned for discussion of climate change. That week, she remembered that a student had said, "Is this what we really need to talk about right now with coronavirus?" and she responded with "It's all intersecting, yes, it all works together." As she reflected on how teaching during this time had impacted her philosophy about what makes for effective teaching, Ms. Braden offered,

I think that the most important part in effective teaching is connection. I'll use an example. Our school is not checking out novels [because it is] too much social interaction and kids just aren't going to campus at all yet. So, it's like, 'OK, how do we teach without having actual books?' And reflecting on that, it really doesn't matter. [laughter] It really doesn't matter. What matters is that they are working together, working with me, connecting, and they can critically think and critically question with anything. With an article, with a documentary, it doesn't have to be the books of the old.

The day-to-day news became a large focus for the teachers, as the events of the pandemic unfolded, and they would try to help students make connections between the pandemic and the planned content. Ms. Navarro explained how the focus of her class became:

much, much more oriented on what's literally happening in the news on a daily basis, and then trying to bring that [current event] back into it, so for example, we've been talking right now, we talk about the school to prison pipeline, um, and so looking at sort of how that's reflective today with police brutality.

Mr. Harper also sought to find ways to adapt this classroom for the remote environment by bringing in the unfolding pandemic situation. One of the units that he had remaining to cover for the semester was about Native American experiences. He explained,

I wanted them to take away being exposed in the history... and we were asynchronous, it wasn't a live session, so try to make it relevant. So that's when I went to look and found how the Native Americans on the reservations were being impacted by COVID. So I tried... to make it relevant, but it was to try to get that exposure and to offer some different perspectives to take into consideration when you leave the classroom and see things online or in person.

Mr. Harper adjusted his slide deck to be something that students could read asynchronously to understand concepts such as cultural assimilation, resistance, and the way that reservations were designed. He included an article entitled, "Navajo Nation Sees a High Rate of COVID-19 and Contact Tracing Is a Challenge." Afterwards, he posed questions for students about the article to help them connect what was happening on the reservation with the history they had learned from the slide deck, which supported the purpose of helping students develop cultural knowledge and to understand the impact of history on what they saw happening in the world around them in the moment.

Ms. Navarro taught an ethnic studies class integrated into an English Language Arts class geared toward upperclassmen in a large suburb in Southern California. She had always invited

students to bring in media or things that they encountered in their daily lives, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited time forced a different priority in her approach. She said,

I think to a certain extent you still have the main priorities, the goals of the class... but we've got to be flexible with what we're teaching and how it's reflective of what's happening right now, and then also what the kids want to discuss and talk about and what we need to teach, and so it's sort of mirroring that... I don't have the time for [teaching an entire book], and not only do I not have the time, but because there's just so much else out there that I have to now say: we've got to talk about police brutality; we've got to talk about Black Lives versus Blue Lives, if there has to be a versus, things like that.

Ethnic studies teachers at this time were able to flexibly adjust their curriculum to address the here-and-now in part because there was no standardized curriculum or textbook that had to be followed. These teachers were used to developing curriculum, selecting texts, and setting priorities for student learning as part of their day-to-day approach to teaching. Their ability to create and adapt was reflected throughout their response to the pandemic and social crises, as the shifting set of circumstances in society and their student population created a need for continual responsiveness.

### **Utilization of Flexible, Accessible Digital Technology**

The last theme relating to how teachers adjusted their ethnic studies pedagogy, practice, and content in the virtual environment focuses on how they made sense of the utilization of technology. I previously outlined both challenges and opportunities that teachers experienced in the virtual realm, including the way that the platforms challenged dialogue, but also the way that they allowed relationships between teachers and students to shift in unexpected ways. As

teachers grappled with the novel environment, they explored innovative, flexible ways to integrate technology to promote the goals they had for their ethnic studies classes.

### ***Designing Flexible, Accessible Instruction with Technology***

Teachers described using any kind of digital technology to reach students: text, phone calls, emails, Zoom, Loom, YouTube, and FlipGrid. Mr. Gonzales used technology flexibly according to what each student needed. Mr. Gonzales had one student who could never consistently log onto the Google Classroom, even when they met in-person, because the student would always forget his password, so Mr. Gonzales said, “When the virtual learning [happened], I was like, one-on-one, we're just going to do emails bro. Me and you, let's do it.” Likewise, Ms. Wright had a landline phone, and she ended up giving out her phone number specifically to connect with her students with special needs. She said, “They just were not getting the Zoom and all that, so I just said, ‘Let’s just talk on the phone.’”

The teachers were drawn to technologies that could offer creative ways to reach students and give students autonomy to decide how to interact with their lessons. Ms. Cardona described the importance of FlipGrid, an app where students could record themselves presenting ideas and then share the recordings with their teacher and classmates. It allowed students to “fix their situation” and present themselves more intentionally. Ms. Cardona elaborated on the issues students faced with participating live during class, such as feeling self-conscious about their backgrounds if they lived in multiple family houses with people “who could care less what your classroom situation looks like,” or were in rooms that had a lot of noise. With FlipGrid, students could “go next to a tree, or in a corner or their house, and record responses, and so kids [could] see one another.”

### *Implementing Instruction to Promote Connection and Community*

Although teachers were challenged by both connectivity and by the limitation of digital technology, they described attempting to identify small ways to use technology to build community in the virtual environment, emphasizing their belief in its importance to teaching ethnic studies. For example, Mr. Harper used Zoom polls with simple topics like, “Iced water or room temp water?” or “Pancakes or waffles” to scaffold participation with students and “just try to create some type of atmosphere where they're comfortable and sharing and discussing.” Ms. Cardona designed a virtual, interactive talking circle chart on a Google Slide that she populated with her students’ names and they could pass the talking stick to the next person like they would if they were participating in an in-person talking circle.

Some teachers also took advantage of synchronous and asynchronous instructional modes to provide options for how students connected with the content to accommodate students who needed to get jobs to help support their families during the pandemic or might have spotty access to WiFi or devices. Ms. Wright recorded her synchronous classes and allowed students to watch the classes on their own and submit reflections and assignments on a more flexible time schedule. She also would record direct instruction about thesis development or other writing topics that students could watch on their own in response to their individual questions. In Spring 2020, Ms. Braden only met with her students for thirty minutes on a Monday, but provided asynchronous assignments that students could do on their own. Ms. Cardona designed her classes to be as streamlined as possible, so that students could easily log in and be given instructions for asynchronous assignments they could do on their own time with additional scaffolding and support.

After the shift to the remote environment, Ms. Wright described how she allowed students freedom to respond to the essential question about environment factors impeding African Americans in ways that felt authentic for them. In the days following the murder of George Floyd, she tried to check in on one of her African American male students to see how he was doing. He did not want to share in the class at that moment, but he created a video for his final project that was composed of video clips and images of him with his family. Ms. Wright reflected,

There's this beautiful interaction between him and his father and they're playing basketball, but they're talking and the father just has such love for him, he calls him 'my knight' and that video just revealed to me, like, this is what I'm going through. And what saddened me, it was beautiful, but it was like, everything he was talking about, he was trying to share his humanity.

In short, the technologies that teachers incorporated into their classroom and the ways that they adjusted their assignments attempted to create space for students to expansively explore their identities and deepen their connection to the course content.

However, given the challenging circumstances and the various limitations of the virtual platforms, teachers were not always confident that they were adopting the right pedagogical strategies to promote community in the virtual environment. Earlier I described how Mr. Gonzales struggled to use small group "breakout" rooms on the video conferencing platform that his school adopted. His pre-pandemic classroom relied on constant discussion with students, as he prioritized creating an inclusive classroom culture that could welcome all students and all ideologies. He strove to create a respectful community where students could

struggle [their positions] out, at least be able to defend your position. A lot of times it's hard for them [to defend their position] ... because I will tell them, I can't in any way say you're wrong, because who am I to say that I'm right?

However, in the virtual classroom, his students would not talk to one another in small groups. As a way of streamlining discussions to maximize the limited time they had together, Mr. Gonzales opted to utilize whole class discussions to discuss concepts and then allowed students to work together optionally for their project work. He also adopted a grading strategy to hold students accountable to show up and share their ideas:

I was wracking my brain, how do I get them all [engaged], because I'm trying to couch high expectations with flexibility. A lot of them feel uncomfortable with their screens on, so you want to give them the space to not have [them on], but then, as I would call on people, they weren't there, the accountability piece. So I came up with a participation grade. I give them 200 points per month. And if I call on you, and you unmute yourself and you participate, you get the points, you retain the 200. If not, I dock you. So that may sound punitive, but it's worked. You know, I thought about building [the points] from scratch, and every time I call, you know, 50, but I lose track. It's really hard. I mean, it's a better method, but it's very difficult to keep track of who I haven't called on or to give them all multiple opportunities. But I'm going to attempt the second quarter... just building it, you know, but a lot of students don't like it, because it'll start at zero out of 200. So, they'll have an F but maybe that'll? But it's worked this way? and you know, yeah, so I don't like being punitive. But it's worked.

His discussion of this decision highlights how he grappled with this decision as a strategy for his classroom, and how he continued to grapple with it even as he was implementing it. He also

pointed out that he only had this issue with the students in his mainstream courses, and recognized that

[the virtual environment] exposes the stuff that we already knew with face to face teaching: the AP kids are still being served, they're still getting what they need, but the mainstream track students who need more support, more structure, more accountability, more inspiration, those are the ones that it's hard for me to get them.

Mr. Johnson had a different set of experiences from some of the other ethnic studies teachers in his Fall 2020 9th grade ethnic studies class because he had support from university students who volunteered in his class to help facilitate discussions. He was able to structure his class in a way that students were able to engage with one another in virtual small groups that were facilitated by the university students. While supportive of student engagement, Mr. Johnson was unable to really be a part of the discussions that his students were having in small groups because he noticed that when he would “pop into” the virtual small group rooms, he found that he would “kind of take the room” and he felt that his presence would derail good discussions because “everything kind of stops.” Recognizing this, he ultimately allowed the tutors to lead those discussions and report back to him on how they went, but this impeded the creation of the full sense of community that he was used to in the in-person environment. He expressed a great feeling of loss about the connection that he was not able to replicate with students in the virtual environment:

This is just not the way that it's supposed to be and it's hard... even seeing their faces [during class], like when say something that you got a kid that hasn't said a word to you, but you see that their face is like, 'Wait, what do you mean?' Like, their head turns a little bit, and they lean in a little bit more and you're like, 'Oh, I got somebody, like, I got 'em

on the hook,' and you're not even able to do that. Because you give these kids the option to put their screens on, and most of them already have their screens off. So, things like that. It's just trying to connect with the kids and you can't feel the room. It's like you're bombing every day no matter what it feels like, compared to like, normally it's like this lesson was getting action. And I guess, through the chat you get some stuff that gets through, but it's just not what it can be.

This two experiences from Mr. Gonzales and Mr. Johnson highlight the way that ethnic studies teachers found that the virtual environment did not always facilitate connection and community, which felt like an especially important loss given the goals and priorities of this course.

### ***Assessing Instruction with Projects***

The final adjustment to ethnic studies pedagogy that emerged through this investigation was the adoption of open-ended assignments and projects to facilitate assessment of student learning. Projects were a common approach to instruction and assessment in the pre-pandemic classroom, as well, as they promoted student reflection, creativity, and autonomy with the way they interacted with the curricular content. Teachers adapted these experiences for the virtual environment in a variety of ways.

Mr. Gonzales showed off a video project that a group of students opted to put together in response to the Willie Lynch letter, a historical document that introduces a theory about how to control enslaved people by identifying differences and using them to create division. For the project, Mr. Gonzales asked his students to debate with Willie Lynch and respond to his argument by recording a video of themselves and sharing the links with him on their Google Classroom. One of Mr. Gonzales's main goals was to meet his students, since most of his students opted to have their cameras off during class, but some of the students asked if they

could collaborate and work together on the project. They put together a three-minute response with image, video, and music overlaid on their words. Their video project integrated their understanding of African American history and the response to discrimination and argued that African Americans fought to end segregation and enslavement. Their video concluded with a list of suggestions for solving systemic racism, including reforming the police, labeling the KKK as a terrorist group, and how to move away from the school-to-prison pipeline. One of the things that impressed Mr. Gonzales about their video, beyond their application of content, was that they collaborated on the project, and that they brought in the visuals to match their speech, going far above and beyond the simple recording that he had asked students to produce.

Mr. Sal adapted projects he had done with students in the past, including producing a “Soundtrack of Our Lives” project, which invited students to select songs that represented significant moments or parts of their lives. The project normally included 10 songs, and one that was presented to the class along with some reflection about its significance. Mr. Sal reflected on the importance of this project in building community early on in the school year, because students would sometimes cry as they shared a song that reminded them of a loved one, or reflected important moments in their lives like their Quinceañera celebration. According to Mr. Sal, the project gave students “an opportunity to discuss their community, their family, who they are, and just solidify that for the rest of the class. The added benefit is that everybody else watching and listening is like, wow, yeah, I remember when that happened to me.” For the virtual realm, Mr. Sal modified the assignment to just presenting two songs to create a personal connection. Rather than live presentations, he asked students to record their presentation using FlipGrid, a website that allows students to record and share short video presentations with one another on their website.

Other projects were more extensive and helped to focus student work for much of the semester. Some teachers asked students to create final projects to present their understanding of the themes from the class. Ms. Navarro asked students to create a 2-5 minute video that demonstrated one or more of the following ideas:

What you have learned in this class this semester or year; a plan you have to make a difference in the future within any of the following: your life, your family, your community, your state, the country, the world; a message you want to spread about any of the above themes that is respectful of diversity and open-mindedness.

During our virtual classroom observation, Ms. Navarro showed me one of those final videos where the student brought together video clips comparing protests from the civil rights movement to the protests happening in 2020, as well as videos that juxtaposed the treatment of white people with the treatment of African Americans as each group protested. Ms. Navarro described the video as beautifully done, and “a great example of capturing multiple aspects [of content] that we talked about, both privilege [and] systemic oppression.”

Ms. Cardona incorporated an oral history project in her classroom with the following instructions:

Interview someone in your life who either migrated or immigrated to where they live now, and get the story and then to research what was happening in the country or state at that time that coincided with the family leaving to try to get a better understanding of the situation that pushed them to leave their homeland.

Ms. Cardona shared with me one of the student projects where the student introduced the story of how their mother immigrated from Mexico to southern California and explained that the peso was being devalued, which contributed to her wanting to move for greater economic security for

her family. The student also described their own experience growing up as Latinx in that community and finding her place in mainstream American culture. This project guided the semester, with the midterm relating to the interview of the family members and the final project being a video that brought photographs and narrative together.

Projects and open-ended experiences like the ones described above helped to provide students with opportunities for personal connection with the content, reflection on its meaning to themselves, and connection with their classmates. For example, Ms. Cardona shared that students were able to deepen their understanding of their immigration and family history, and really start to have those conversations with their families about their history and how it connected to larger systems. The presentation of their final projects also served to build the class community. Ms. Cardona had students share their final videos in one of their synchronous Zoom classes, and recalled that the students “were super supportive of one another” and “they all were sharing things that impacted them and made them feel sad or inspired” and the “kids were getting that positive feedback for what they presented.”

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced findings related to how ethnic studies teachers made sense of teaching and learning during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Teachers described a variety of challenges and opportunities for teaching ethnic studies during this time. The challenges mainly revolved around three themes. First, teachers found it difficult to build community as students struggled with connectivity and attendance sharply declined. Second, teachers constantly grappled with the balance between teaching content and supporting well-being, both for their students and for themselves. Third, teachers struggled to

navigate the different limitations of the virtual environment and the digital technology that they had available.

In spite of the challenges, teachers also described several opportunities that arose for their classes. First, their ethnic studies classes became an important holding container for supporting students' understanding of themselves amidst the ongoing crisis situations. Second, the relationships between students and teachers evolved in important ways to become more empathetic, vulnerable, and dialogical. Third, student agency expanded in the virtual environment as students were granted more power over their learning and were able to share expertise in specific ways. Finally, teacher agency expanded as some restrictions on teaching were lifted in the innovative environment, which led to freedom.

To make sense of the challenges and opportunities that this moment engendered, teachers adjusted their pedagogy, content and practice in several ways. First, they prioritized student well-being by providing flexible, humanizing assignments and assessments, and by using their classroom to directly address students' social and emotional needs. Second, they incorporated the unfolding situation as a part of their ethnic studies curriculum, both to make the classroom more relevant, and also to help students understand themselves and each other more deeply. Finally, they utilized digital technology in flexible, innovative ways to strengthen connection and community with their students.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings in relation to the literature on ethnic studies, teacher beliefs, and virtual education. I also introduce implications for educators, school leaders, and policymakers that emerged from this study, and suggest directions for future research on ethnic studies.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

In the years to come, online educational environments and the digitization of education will continue to expand. Unlike other digital educational reforms, teachers who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic had little or no opportunity professional development or training, and had to rely on their own beliefs and resources to make this transition happen in a matter of weeks. The health crisis and contiguous social unrest created a rich moment for probing how teachers made sense of this moment and investigating how this moment clarified and confounded their goals for teaching ethnic studies, a new course of study in high schools that is being rapidly adopted as a graduation requirement across many school districts (Alejo, 2018).

As more classrooms transition into the virtual realm, and as more digital technologies are integrated into in-person classrooms, this study problematized the way we think about educational technology and understand whose voices it privilege. The teachers in this study collectively illustrate a way to bring critical pedagogy into the virtual environment through the way they made sense of teaching ethnic studies in the emergency virtual environment context through the interaction of their beliefs and actions. Their pedagogical sensemaking has implications for any classrooms and schools that are seeking ways to bring culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies to students across subject areas and grade levels, both in virtual and in-person classrooms.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The overarching research question for this study was: How did ethnic studies teachers make sense of teaching and learning in virtual environments for high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests? My sub-questions explored how teachers described the challenges and opportunities of teaching during this time and how the teachers then

adapted their pedagogy, practice, and content. Analysis using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016) helped to keep the analysis of the participants' sensemaking firmly situated in their experiences, rather than in my own sensemaking or a priori assumptions.

### **Belief- and Action-Driven Processes for Sensemaking**

Chapter Four introduced themes that pertained to each of my sub-questions to illustrate sensemaking events that ethnic studies teachers emphasized as they assessed needs and resources, and designed, implemented, and assessed instruction in the emergency virtual environment. My findings revealed that ethnic studies teachers utilized their beliefs about teaching, and their goals for teaching ethnic studies in particular, to help them make sense of their actions during the constantly evolving and challenging nature of their teaching conditions during this time. Beliefs helped the teachers to navigate the ambiguous and evolving contexts, and they were able to make situational adjustments to flexibly and responsively adapt their classrooms to the needs of the students (Becker, 1964; Horn & McGugan, 2020). Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is an effort to connect beliefs and actions, by “taking whatever is clearer, whether it be a belief or an action, and linking it with that which is less clear” (p. 135). Table 3 summarizes three shared beliefs that were expressed in the interviews and virtual classroom observations, along with corresponding actions.

**Table 3***Interaction of Beliefs and Actions for Pedagogical Sensemaking*

Beliefs	→	Actions
<i>Ethnic studies pedagogy is responsive to students' needs, lived experiences, and identities.</i>	→	<i>Designing course content and structures that emphasize students' well-being, experiences in the here-and-now, interests and identities.</i>
<i>The relationship between teachers and students should be dialogical</i>	→	<i>Enacting structures for shared decision-making, shared expertise, and co-creation of knowledge through discourse</i>
<i>Ethnic studies is a space to develop ethnic identity and/or critical consciousness</i>	→	<i>Designing content and activities that emphasize cultural histories, perspectives, and problem-posing</i>

Understanding the interaction between teacher beliefs and actions is important for two reasons. First, it identifies the teacher as a key agent in implementing educational change and recognizes that all disturbances to their ecology are filtered through their beliefs about what constitutes good teaching and their goals for their particular subject. Educational change frequently focuses on “top-down” approaches that presume that change is conceptualized by a leader or expert, however, in a study about school reform initiatives, Datnow et al. (2002) found that educational change occurs through a complex negotiation in local contexts, and is influenced by the way actors accept, resist, initiate, and ultimately enact new policies or practices.

During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and districts made decisions and imposed constraints that influenced the ways that teachers were able to adapt their teaching. Many of these decisions were more or less routine across all of the schools represented in this study, such as grading policies that required teachers to not assign grades that would diminish

students' overall grade in the class, or ways of counting attendance of any and every interaction. Schedules were created that reduced the time in class, or limited teachers to meeting synchronously with students. Little consultation if any ensued with educators, the individuals who were responsible to enact those policies in classrooms with their students. Despite the many imposed mandates, the findings revealed the ways in which teachers made sense of this moment through their beliefs about teaching. Their beliefs guided them to enact structures and practices that responded directly to their students' needs and preferences, and utilize technology in ways that tried to be supportive of students' well-being or situations.

Secondly, the interaction of ethnic studies teachers' beliefs and actions provides important insight into ethnic studies pedagogy can be enacted in the virtual environment. The teachers' commitment to critical pedagogy influenced the adoption of a critical digital pedagogy (Stommel, 2014), which is focused on the practice of communication and collaboration through the integration of multiple voices and the application of learning outside of traditional institutions of education. The teachers in this study made use of technologies to center student voices, blur the lines between teacher and student authority, and flexibly adapt to provide opportunities for reflection, discussion, and action. This study demonstrates that critical pedagogy can be enacted in virtual environments, even in an environment that was non-ideal for a host of reasons (Al Lily et al., 2020). The ethnic studies teachers enacted practices that were characterized by flexible adoption of technology, responsive and dialogical practices with students, content that embodied the here-and-now, open-ended assignments or projects, and perhaps most importantly, a recognition of the material and structural dimensions of students' identities and lived experiences.

The beliefs that ethnic studies teachers enacted through their actions in the virtual environment during a time of crisis provide a valuable way to understand concrete strategies to enact critical digital pedagogy. However, it is important to acknowledge that the teachers in this study did not always positively evaluate their own teaching strategies in this context. The complex situation of the pandemic and BLM protests, along with constantly evolving sets of circumstances, meant that most of the teachers identified this time period as one fraught with challenge and difficulty. Had the teachers had more coaching regarding how to use technologies or more time to design and implement their classes, the teachers would likely have made different choices. Nevertheless, the chaos of the moment created an ideal opportunity to explore teacher sensemaking because chaotic situations require teachers to make situational adjustments and rely on their heuristics (Becker, 1964; Horn & McGugan, 2020; Weick, 1995). Therefore, I elaborate on the common beliefs that teachers expressed below to illustrate how the findings reveal insights into how we might begin to conceptualize the enactment of critical pedagogy in virtual environments.

***Belief #1: Good Teaching Is Responsive***

The ethnic studies teachers in this study consistently expressed a belief that good teaching is responsive teaching; it takes into account students' developmental and well-being needs, as well as responds to their interests, preferences, and cultural identities. Educational scholars have long demonstrated positive developmental and academic outcomes when teachers adopt curriculums that are culturally responsive and relevant to students' lives (Ladson-Billings, 2008; Sleeter, 2011). This belief influenced how ethnic studies teachers made sense of their course content and structures during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Given the particular challenges presented by the two crises, they prioritized

structures that promoted student wellness, such as mental health check-ins and humanizing assessments. They created open-ended assignments that allowed students to explore their own questions or create products in ways that reflected their interests.

All of the teachers described themselves and their students in the physical environments that they occupied, recognizing all of the different factors that influenced the way that they and their students could show up and engage with each other and the assignments in the virtual classroom. This recognition played a huge role in how teachers made decisions about assignments, class structure, technology, and assessment, once again trying to be responsive to the needs of their students. Rather than adopting a monomodal instructional approach to educational technology, the teachers' belief in responsive teaching encouraged them to adopt a dialectical approach, i.e., a kind of approach that Freire (1973) espoused when he wrote, "The answer does not lie in the rejection of the machine but in the humanization of man" (Freire, 1973, p. 35). The teachers in this study humanized their students by frequently employing systems thinking to help students make connections between their lived experiences and the historical and political actions that shape structural realities (Kwon & de los Ríos, 2019; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015; Vasquez & Altschuer, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, humanizing their pedagogy supported the teachers in this study to make sense of what was happening with their students, how they, as teachers, needed to respond, and what mattered in terms of priorities.

**Ms. Towne's Pedagogical Sensemaking of Designing Curriculum.** Figure 2 highlights the interaction of beliefs and actions for Ms. Towne's approach to designing curriculum for students in the virtual environment. Prior to the pandemic, Ms. Towne designed her classroom to support student self-determination and support their social emotional wellness. Although the

concurrent crises presented numerous challenges to her community, she made sense of these challenges by seeing them as opportunities to advance her goals for her students. In the face of district mandates to adopt more relaxed grading and participation requirements, Ms. Towne relaxed her expectations for students to complete assignments, making her class and assignments optional for students to complete during this time. She reasoned that students could determine for themselves what made them feel alive in this stressful, ambiguous moment. She strove to create opportunities in her class that promoted healing and understanding of the unfolding historical events.

## Figure 2

*Sample Case: Designing Instruction – Beliefs, Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions*

<u>Beliefs/Goals</u>	<u>Challenges and/or Opportunities</u>	<u>Actions/Reflection</u>
<p>Ms. Towne believed that self-determination and personal empowerment was one of the chief purposes of her ethnic studies classroom.</p> <p>She believed that her class should prioritize students' needs and support their well-being.</p>	<p>Her community was challenged by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related social protests.</p> <p>The shift to the virtual environment opened up new possibilities for students to make more expansive choices for how and whether to do school.</p>	<p>Ms. Towne relaxed her expectations for students to complete assignments and adopted assessment strategies that affirmed student effort.</p> <p>She created optional assignments that were based on social emotional well-being.</p> <p>She reflected that this moment empowered her as an educator to reimagine school structures and led to more self-determination for her students.</p>

### ***Belief #2: The Relationship Between Teachers and Students Should Be Dialogical***

Teachers also valued pedagogy and practice that cultivated a dialogical relationship between teachers and students. The role of teacher and student in a traditional classroom are typically presented as the teacher as the authority figure who possesses the knowledge, and the students as those who are recipients of knowledge. The teachers in this study problematized

these traditional roles, viewing themselves more as facilitators of knowledge or experiences, rather than as the people who possessed all the answers. Ethnic studies pedagogy frequently draws on critical pedagogy and dialogical relationships, where teachers do help to drive learning experiences, but ultimately, the content and unfolding of activities also occurs through the students' input and engagement.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argues against the “banking model” of education, wherein students are treated as empty vessels to be filled, rather than as full humans with dignity and agency to be engaged in dialogues about learning and the purpose of education. Critical pedagogy, then, is introduced as the preferred approach to education. Rather than assuming that teachers are the only people with authority in the classroom, authority becomes more diffuse. Each person possesses authority in the co-creation of meaning. Students are not served by dialogues which are actually monologues, with teachers depositing information into students. Shih (2018) articulates three premises of Freirean dialogue, which is that each person has the right to speak, dialogue cannot be the act of depositing information in another, and it is not a hostile or polemical argument. Dialogue exists because both parties are in a shared search for truth.

While students engaged with teachers in the emergency distance environment, there was an opportunity for equalizing voices. Scholars of virtual environments have noted the democratic possibilities of education in networked learning spaces (Jaakola, 2015; Williamson & DeSouza, 2002). In the emergency remote environment, the situation in some ways amplified equality due to its ambiguity. Teachers wrestled with needing to make choices in this virtual landscape in the midst of evolving and tumultuous situations. In typical virtual environments, considerable training and preparation for both teachers and students may lead to more prescriptive approaches.

But in this case, the educators had to consistently question the best way to set up and interact in the spaces in ways that served their students. When teachers had access to their students, they sought to invite their perspectives into navigating the moment, and honored their needs, preferences, and situations to provide humane, responsive education, which made the spaces rich with democratic possibility.

Teachers described creating opportunities for students to share their expertise in ways that influenced the class structure and content. It shifted a sense of expertise in some cases, where students would take ownership for correcting tech errors on virtual classroom spaces, or by creating space for consistent reflection on the virtual classroom experience. Teachers utilized feedback forms or process reflections to get real-time information about how students were experiencing their class, their lives, and provide space to ask for what they needed. Teachers identified ways to provide flexible options for students, attend classes asynchronously, determine how to complete assignments, and trust that they were making good choices, even if that went counter to ways that teachers often assess success through participation or assignment completion. The ways that communication shifted in the virtual environment also created space for students to initiate discussions about current events.

**Ms. Braden's Pedagogical Sensemaking of Implementing Instruction.** Figure 3 illustrates how Ms. Braden made sense of implementing instruction in the virtual environment for her students during a time of crisis. Ms. Braden identified student empowerment and self-determination as key purposes for her ethnic studies elective. Her pre-pandemic classroom facilitated opportunities for reflection and discussion in small groups, emphasized the creation of a community, and encouraged students to find ways to enact change in their communities. She was challenged by the limited amount of time she had to meet with her ethnic studies class after

the schools closed in March 2020, so she prioritized using her classroom as a space to continue the community that they had developed throughout the school year. Ms. Braden’s school year ended in mid-May, however, after the murder of George Floyd, she had students contact her via text and email to express concerns over this event. She utilized the flexibility of the virtual classroom to create an opportunity for her students to meet and reflect together. She reflected that, prior to the pandemic, she thought students needed books or resources to understand ethnic studies. After this moment, she understood that, as long as students are engaged in critical thinking, they could learn the important concepts of ethnic studies.

### Figure 3

*Sample Case: Implementing Instruction – Beliefs, Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions*

<u>Beliefs/Goals</u>	<u>Challenges and/or Opportunities</u>	<u>Actions/Reflection</u>
Ms. Braden believed that student empowerment was a chief purpose of ethnic studies.	Her virtual classroom was challenged by the limited time they had to meet together to discuss ideas.	She used her classroom as a space for continued dialogue and community about the unfolding historical events.
She believed ethnic studies should be a space for students to reflect on and share ideas in community.	The virtual realm also created opportunities for more democratized, flexible ways to connect with her students.	She re-opened her virtual classroom at the behest of her students to create a space for discussion and reflection about how students could get involved in this event.
Her goal was for students to become inspired to become change makers in their community.		She reflected that ethnic studies can be taught with critical reflection on anything; it did not require “the books of old”

Where possible, ethnic studies teachers structured their virtual classrooms to allow for ample opportunities for students to reflect on the course content independently, in projects, and in small or whole group discussions with their peers. Where it was not possible, ethnic studies teachers lamented the way that the emergency remote environment impeded this important pedagogical practice. In both cases, this revealed the common paradigm of centering reflection

and discussion in ethnic studies pedagogy. Ethnic studies pedagogy in high school is emergent in the literature, but this study's findings confirm existing literature about how ethnic studies is being theorized and enacted in secondary school settings in that the emphasis was on supporting students to develop ethnic identity and critical consciousness through methods that invite students to reflect on themselves, to situate themselves in history, and to understand tools to transform injustice (Curammeng et al., 2016; de los Ríos, 2013; Ramirez, 2008).

**Mr. Gonzales's Pedagogical Sensemaking of Assessing Instruction.** Figure 4 highlights the interaction between beliefs and actions for Mr. Gonzales, and serves to illustrate how teachers questioned their pedagogical decisions during this time as they attempted to navigate the challenges of the virtual environment. Mr. Gonzales expressed a strong belief that ethnic studies pedagogy called for students to explore and express their ideas about content in community with one another. His pre-pandemic classroom included many opportunities for individual reflection and small group discussion. In Fall 2020, Mr. Gonzales attempted to place students in virtual small grouping to promote discourse about the content, however, he found that students were not talking in those groups. He decided to change his practice to eliminate the use of small groups and instituted a point strategy to hold students accountable in the virtual environment. He was concerned that this grading practice was punitive and oppressive, but he struggled to identify another way to promote participation in his classroom during this time.

**Figure 4***Sample Case: Assessing Instruction – Beliefs, Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions*

<u>Beliefs/Goals</u>	<u>Challenges and/or Opportunities</u>	<u>Actions/Reflection</u>
Mr. Gonzales believed that ethnic studies pedagogy called for learning in community	His virtual classroom was challenged issues related to connectivity: students were not always showing up to the virtual class, or staying in the classroom after it started	He changed his practice to eliminate the use of small groups so that he could hold students accountable in a whole class discussion
His goal was for students to be engaged in discussions with one another about the course content	Students were not connecting with one another in the virtual small group rooms	He used a point strategy to dock points from students if they did not respond when called on
The purpose of his course was to build unity and raise consciousness utilizing the content		He reflected on this strategy with concern for whether it was punitive, and wondering if he could come up with a better way

***Belief #3: Ethnic Studies Is a Space to Develop Ethnic Identity / Critical Consciousness***

All teachers in this study identified ethnic studies as a space for sharing and exposing students to cultural knowledge, an important component of ethnic identity development. Ethnic identity has theoretically two fundamental components: a group membership component, and developmental component (Phinney et al., 2001). The first component is generally defined as “a subjective sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the feelings and attitudes that accompany this sense of group membership” (Phinney, 1990). The second component includes the extent to which adolescents have engaged in the developmental process of ethnic identity exploration, which “may include learning about the history and traditions of their group and confronting issues of discrimination and prejudice. Adolescents may discuss such issues with their parents or others as part of this exploration process” (pp. 136-137). While the teachers in this study did not explicitly express ethnic identity development as a purpose of their course, all of the teachers included curricular units and assignments that supported students in exploring their own and each other’s intersectional identities as part of the core content of the course. Phinney et al.

(2001) argued that exploration of this nature may support students to develop a positive ethnic identity and feel a sense of belonging. Other ethnic studies scholars have noted that culturally-based units and ethnic studies curriculum are associated with students' developing a sense of belonging (Ramirez, 2009; Sleeter, 2011).

As the teachers considered how to make do with reduced class time in Fall 2020, several teachers explicitly articulated the ethnic identity curricular units were a major priority in their courses, given the reduced time they had to meet with and work with students. Mr. Johnson's compulsory 9th grade ethnic studies class is only one semester in length, and he dedicated about half of the semester to supporting students to explore their identities. He reasoned, "That was the big thing that I didn't want to sacrifice. I felt and I think that we all agreed that hey, you know, let's at least let them learn about themselves and their classmates."

The teachers also prioritized the development of critical consciousness, a construct developed by Freire (1970) that emphasizes self-determination, self-empowerment, and the utilization of dialogue and reflection to transform oppressive systems. Whether through assigning new readings that connected with the pandemic or devoting class time to discussing current events and/or students' lived experiences, all of the teachers adapted their curriculum to include the here-and-now, as a way of helping students to situate themselves in the unfolding historical context. Although ethnic studies teachers expressed utilizing current events to help make their curriculum relevant prior to the pandemic, the urgency of exploring and addressing the historical moment in their curriculum became a larger priority. In some cases, the emphasis on the here-and-now in the ethnic studies curriculum helped students to better understand how systems and structures impacted current events in ways that had direct relevance to their lives.

The teachers in this study also utilized open-ended assignments to allow students to explore their personal histories and/or determine ways to effect change in their communities.

**Ms. Wright's Pedagogical Sensemaking of Implementing and Assessing Instruction.**

Figure 5 highlights how Ms. Wright's beliefs about teaching ethnic studies influenced the actions that she took in the virtual environment. Ms. Wright expressed that her pre-pandemic classroom was always designed to be responsive to students' needs and interests, although she held a consistent goal of supporting students to develop cultural knowledge through the study of African American literature and history. In the virtual environment, Ms. Wright was challenged by the way that her planned curriculum began to feel "stupid" and obvious. She saw the virtual environment as opening opportunities for learning and freedom, and so she decided to refocus her classroom on the here-and-now and supporting students to make connections with the curriculum to the unfolding historical moment. She then created options for her 11<sup>th</sup> grade students to demonstrate their learning and focused her assessment on validating their writing and expression. In reflection, she viewed this moment as an opportunity to return to what mattered most for her in teaching.

**Figure 5**

*Sample Case: Implementing and Assessing Instruction – Beliefs, Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions*

<u>Beliefs/Goals</u>	<u>Challenges and/or Opportunities</u>	<u>Actions/Reflection</u>
<p>Ms. Wright believed that her class should be responsive to her students' needs and interests.</p> <p>Her goal was for her students to develop cultural knowledge through the study of African American history and literature.</p>	<p>She was challenged by the way that the planned curriculum felt redundant during the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests.</p> <p>The virtual environment opened up new opportunities for freedom with grading and flexibility with how students participated in the classroom.</p>	<p>She altered her assignments to focus on the here-and-now and the connection of the curriculum to current events.</p> <p>She provided more options for how students could demonstrate their learning.</p> <p>She reflected that teaching in this context felt more alive and free.</p>

**Implications**

This study investigated ethnic studies teachers' sensemaking during the unfolding educational crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Through understanding the perspectives and experiences of high school ethnic studies teachers, this study advances our understanding of how critical and dialogic pedagogies can be enacted in online educational spaces. Secondly, this study also contributes to the growing body of research about ethnic studies courses in secondary school settings, particularly with respect to how teacher beliefs influence their actions regarding their sensemaking of ethnic studies pedagogy.

While the impact of abrupt shift to emergency remote environments has yet to be fully understood, early research indicates that marginalized students will be disproportionately affected by the school closures, exacerbating opportunity gaps and inequalities (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Malkus, 2020; Reich et al., 2020; Reilly, 2020). As we consider how to design virtual environments and integrate digital technology in ways that affirm the knowledge and identities

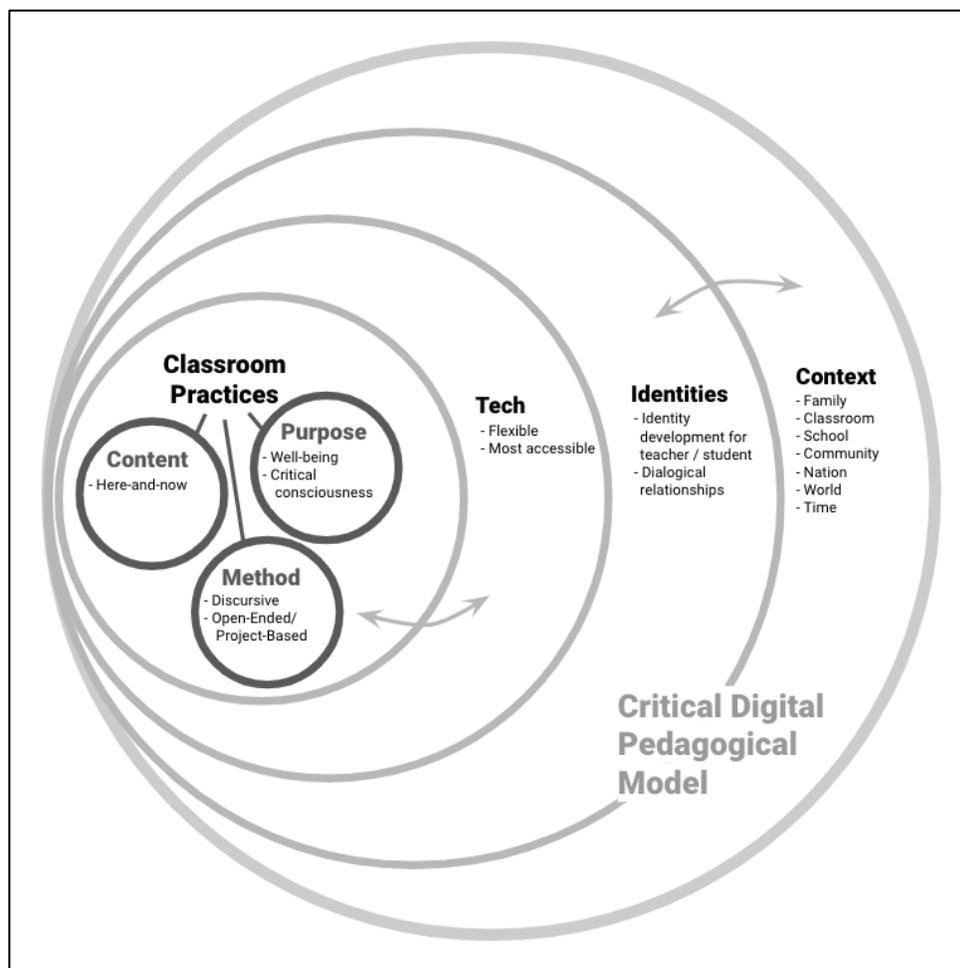
of all students, this study offers important implications for classrooms and teacher education and professional development.

### **Enacting a Critical Digital Pedagogy in the Classroom**

The findings from this study of ethnic studies teachers' sensemaking in a virtual classroom contributes to our understanding of teaching critical pedagogy in virtual environments, which is an important site for educational equity because it forms students' most direct educational experiences. As mentioned previously, critical digital pedagogies prioritize communication, collaboration, an openness to multiple perspectives, and an application of learning outside of educational institutions. It rejects online educational environments as mere repositories of content, and views them as "platforms for engaging students and teachers as full agents of their own learning" (Stommel, 2014). The ethnic studies teachers in this study embodied these principles in the virtual classroom through emphasizing authentic dialogue between students and teachers that blurred the lines of authority, and through relevant discussions of students' lived experiences.

However, beyond merely classroom practices that encourage action, reflection and dialogue, this dissertation also illustrates the importance of situating critical digital pedagogy in a sociocultural context. Ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of understanding human development through the lens of nested environments (family, peer, school, community, nation, time) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The scholarship on youth development specifically underscores the importance of ethnic identity development in the context of social and ecological systems (Borrero et al., 2012; Christens & Petersen, 2012; Evans et al., 2012). However, virtual education literature rarely accounts for these dimensions in describing its implementation or efficacy.

The findings in this study reveal particular ways that ethnic studies educators applied critical pedagogy in digital spaces through an expansive understanding of the material, physical, and structural realities facing their students. Figure 6 below illustrates a theory of critical digital pedagogy that is informed by the identities of students and teachers, and is situated in an understanding of the ecological systems as a context. In this case of ethnic studies classes during a pandemic and movement for Black lives, teachers adapted their pedagogy with flexible, accessible technology to accommodate students' lived realities. Dialogue between the teachers and students helped teachers to create content that held relevance and to enact classroom practices that responded to students' social, emotional, and practical needs.

**Figure 6***Critical digital pedagogical model*

My critical digital pedagogical model builds from two conceptions of pedagogy. First, Jaakkola's (2015) dimensions of pedagogical usage, which articulates a theory of teaching and learning through the lens of "users" within the context of educational technology. This model helps to articulate the various relationships between learning and teaching, technology, community, and society that are at play in virtual educational environments. Second, my model builds from the definition of pedagogy that informed the emergent pedagogy of ethnic studies (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Pedagogy is defined as:

[A] philosophy of education informed by positionalities, ideologies, and standpoints (of both teacher and learner). It takes into account the critical relationships between the PURPOSE of education, the CONTEXT of education, the CONTENT of what is being taught, and the METHODS of how it is taught. It also includes (the IDENTITY of) who is being taught, who is teaching, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to structure and power (p. 106).

These two conceptions of pedagogy are brought together in Figure 6 to illustrate how we might articulate a critical pedagogy that is also situated in our relationship to educational technology.

Figure 6 outlines the essential themes that emerged from my study of ethnic studies teacher sensemaking in the emergency virtual environment. At the center of the model are three aspects of classroom practice: purpose, methods, and content. The purpose of education was ensuring the well-being of their students, and supporting the development of their critical consciousness. The methods they selected were primarily discursive, and driven by open-ended and/or project-based assignments, which allowed students to direct their learning. The content was informed by students' lived experiences, and drew on relevant content from the here-and-now, such as the pandemic and the social unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd.

The outer rings of the model position teaching and learning as occurring within multiple contexts: the technological, relational, and societal. Teachers incorporated technology into their classrooms flexibly, and they designed options that were the most accessible given students' sometimes limited access to computers and/or WiFi. The third ring recognizes how teachers' pedagogy was informed by the identities of the teachers and students, and was encouraged through dialogical relationships between the students and teacher where students were invited to

share expertise in technical and qualitative ways. All of the pedagogical decisions were situated in the particular contexts that students and teachers inhabited, and technology was used flexibly to accommodate the physical, cultural, and structural realities that students faced. The arrows in the model recognize the multifaceted ways in which adjustments were made, as each ring held important implications for the decisions ultimately made within classroom practice.

The inclusion of ecological systems in my critical digital pedagogical model is significant because the rhetoric and writing about digital technology in the classroom often centers the technology, its capabilities, and what technology can do for learning. The discourse about educational technology and virtual educational environments frequently ignores pedagogy altogether, diminishing the importance of which teacher and students' identities, as well as the structural factors which impact technology's adoption and use. However, my findings suggest that the way teachers made sense of their own adaptation was complicated, nuanced, and multilayered, reflective of their identities and the structural realities in which this shift took place.

Trauma-informed and culturally relevant teaching pedagogies call for teachers to recognize the unseen, developmental experiences of students and how these experiences influence the ways that they show up in the classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2008; Souers & Hall, 2016). In the emergency remote environment, those experiences became all the more visible, as students were literally in their homes as they were simultaneously in the virtual classroom space. Teachers created classroom environments with feedback tools to invite students to share their lived realities, and the teachers also committed to integrating those understandings in the choices that they made in the classroom. As teachers lived through the challenges of fear, isolation, and loss, they engaged with their students with empathy and respect for the diverse experiences that

influenced the ways that students could show up in their classrooms. Rather than assuming that virtual environments had to be one-size-fits-all, they were able to flexibly adapt their lessons, their classes, and their assessments to meet students' needs and prioritize their well-being.

While this pedagogical model has relevance for in-person classroom experiences where students bring a variety of assets and experiences to the classroom, it is especially important to remember that our students are real people in physical bodies and environment in the virtual classroom. Boyd (2018) wrote about this in an examination of Blackboard and critical pedagogy. Citing Freire, he talked about how education was meant to be holistic:

We study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. We do all of these things with feeling, with emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion and also with critical reasoning (Freire, 1988, p. 3).

Taub and Morris (2018) described ways of embodying virtuality through community building in remote educational spaces, by recalling not only their physical experiences in the online environment:

The realization dawned that students are still students when they go home; bodies in the classroom become bodies at their desks. Somewhere we can't see, granted, but still subject to all the natural laws and human emotions and intellectual needs, regardless of *distance* (para. 43).

The authors also recognized the importance of centering student voices in assignments and processes, much in the same way that the ethnic studies teachers did in their adaptation of their pedagogy in the emergency remote environment. As online education environments expand in the future, teachers can adopt a critical digital pedagogy that emphasizes collaboration, here-

and-now content, and open-ended assignments, while also designing their virtual classrooms to respond to their students' particular identities and contexts.

### **Sensemaking in Professional Development and Teacher Education**

The findings from this study present several lessons for school leaders and teacher educators, particularly those who want to expand critical pedagogical practices or ethnic studies programs in schools, whether in physical or virtual educational environments. My study illustrates the importance of understanding teacher sensemaking, and in particular, the way that teachers' beliefs are influential in shaping their actions. This is something that prior literature has acknowledged, but which is still frequently sidelined in school change efforts, professional development, and teacher education.

School leaders and teacher educators should acknowledge that teacher experiences and beliefs are powerful drivers that have a direct impact on teacher practice. Ethnic studies pedagogy is community responsive, adaptive, and reflective of the identities of both teachers and students. This means that teachers need to have both the skill and autonomy to make professional choices about designing and implementing curriculum. School leaders and teacher educators need to support teachers to integrate new classroom practices through professional development that emphasizes reflection and action on their existing beliefs or mental models (Senge, 1999). Teacher education for ethnic studies teachers must incorporate an attention to teacher identity, which requires supporting as well as challenging the evolution of self/identity: a coherent mission and learning that is grounded in experiences, that is, action and reflection related to self (Daus-Magbual, 2016; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

This study also illustrated the dearth of supportive technology training during the rapid shift to the virtual environment. Teachers were offered either technical software training, or no

training at all, and teachers opted instead to use simple tools that could easily adapt to their existing beliefs and pedagogical approaches. This suggests that professional development on educational technology should begin with reflection on pedagogy and purpose, and then support teachers to flexibly adapt technology to their choices, rather than the other way around.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study investigated the pedagogical choices that teachers made to teach critical pedagogy in the virtual environment during a time of dual crises. It illustrated the limitations of educational technology for teaching courses that rely on discursive strategies to support students' identity and social development. The experiences and sensemaking of the participants in this study, however, also revealed some commonalities in ways we might think about critical pedagogy in a virtual environment. Their expertise in critical pedagogy and ethnic studies provides insight into the multidimensional ways of thinking about pedagogy in this environment that prioritizes problem-posing, relevance, and critical consciousness development. As this study focused on teacher beliefs and actions to understand the sensemaking, future studies should explore the impact of critical pedagogical decision-making on student learning, particularly in the virtual environment. Additionally, as ethnic studies classes continue to become more prevalent at the elementary and secondary level, more research is needed on the implementation and enactment of ethnic studies pedagogy in these settings.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted education-as-usual when it shuttered school doors and abruptly moved education into virtual spaces. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on already marginalized communities of colors, along with the epidemic of violence against Black and Brown bodies in the United States, forced a social reckoning in 2020, spurring the

largest social protests of our time. This study looked at the ways that critical educators made sense of teaching ethnic studies, and identified critical beliefs that translated into actions, in the midst of incredible social and cultural challenges. Their stories remind us of what Dr. Bettina Love (2020) wrote in her article about transformation of systems in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic: “The impossible is becoming possible. As we all stand in the midst of a world crisis, those of us who can dream must dream. And after we dream, we must demand and act” (para. 1). The teachers in this study confronted the pandemic crisis and Black Lives Matter protests by making sense of the challenges and opportunities that the moment engendered, and their stories invite us to imagine new possibilities for teaching and learning in the future.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide #1

### *Background*

1. How long have you been teaching ethnic studies?
2. What sorts of experiences, if any, have you had with ethnic studies courses in the past, either with your own schooling or in other educational spaces you've worked?
3. Are there any particular theories, beliefs, or experiences that influence the way that you approach teaching ethnic studies? If so, can you tell me about them and how they influence your work?

### *Teaching Practices Before*

4. Can you tell me what your class was like before the school closures? (teaching practice, content, relationships, tools, strategies)
5. When you first learned about the school closures, how did you begin to think about how you would move your class to a distant learning model?
6. What was your experience or comfort level with educational technology prior to moving to the virtual learning environment? Do you have a sense of how comfortable your students were with the technology?

### *Teaching Practices During*

7. In what ways, if any, have you been supported to make the shift to online or remote learning (district, principal, colleagues, courses, etc.)? What kind of support do you think would have been helpful?
8. How did you end up adapting your class for the new setting? (teaching practice, content, relationships, tools, strategies) Was there anything you did or tried that felt especially successful or especially unsuccessful? What sorts of challenges did you face?
9. What sorts of things about your class as you taught it before felt challenging or impossible to translate to the virtual setting? Were there any new possibilities that opened up because of the virtual setting?

### *Interaction/Relationships*

10. How did the virtual setting impact the way you interact with your students? How did it impact the way they interact with each other? (relationships, types of discussions, questioning)
11. In what ways, if any, were students able bring or connect their own experiences into your class? How was that challenged? Are there ways in which it was been enabled in new ways through the online/remote learning structures?

### *General Reflection/Future*

12. What were your priorities for teaching and learning? Are they similar or different from what your priorities were prior to the school closures?
13. In what ways, if any, has teaching online changed your theory or philosophy about what constitutes effective teaching?

*Anything Else?*

**14.** Is there anything else you would like to add that would help me understand how you adapted your ethnic studies course for the virtual learning environment?

## Appendix B: Teacher Interview #2 Guide

*Course Planning*

1. What adjustments did you make to the course assignments after the school closures? Why did you make these adjustments?
2. What were your desired learning outcomes for students after you made the shift to the virtual learning environment?
3. What resources have been helpful to you in planning and developing this course?

*Digital Classroom*

4. How did you use digital technology to organize or set up your virtual learning environment? Can you walk me through this digital learning space (via screen share)?
5. What has been the most memorable for you (either positive or negative) about teaching ethnic studies in this way? Why?

*Interactions*

6. How did you see the students engaging with the activity / lessons? Can you show me an example of student engagement in your digital classroom?
7. To what extent were able to meet or interact with the students one-on-one or in small groups? What were those interactions like? Can you show me an example (email, forum, chat, etc.)?

*Assessment*

8. How did you assess your students' learning during this time? How was this similar or different to how you assessed students prior to moving to the distance learning environment?
9. In your perspective, what activities / lessons / units have had the biggest impact on your students? Why?
10. How has the class content or process changed since you began teaching the course?
11. Anything else?

### Appendix C: Epistemic Interview Excerpts

The second interview employed a strategy known as “blended memory” (Fawn, 2012; Sinclair & Macleod, 2015) where teachers would access their virtual classroom spaces and “share” the screen so that we could examine artifacts from their virtual teaching. This interview functioned as a virtual classroom observation, so the nature of the interview was more collaborative and informal. The following excerpts illustrate the back-and-forth conversation that emerged and how the interview created opportunities for the co-creation of knowledge.

#### **Interview Excerpt with Ms. Wright:**

Ms. Wright: Yeah, okay. This is it. So, this is like, this is what you call the stream when you're just posting.

Ms. Flewelling: Yeah, so just scroll down.

Ms. Wright: I'm posting attendance and then even my co-teachers can have access right there. This is right around grades. Even see the students' comments, my comments. What else?

Ms. Flewelling: [Student Name], you told me about her. She's the one that would help you out when it didn't look right.

Ms. Wright: Oh yes, with everything. She should have been the co-teacher. And when outside class would come out, the Black Student Union of San Diego. So, it was a Zoom session. So, when I would get information I would post things like that. This is like our mentor text. So, this was like during the protests, and I think this was like a warm up. Where we were talking about like, you know, when we're, because that was an assignment. You needed to know that poem by heart. We opened up the year. We were comparing it to the protests and *Raisin in the Sun*. That was when Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, he wrote a really good op-ed that I wanted them to take a look at, after George Floyd was murdered. A lot are invites to the Zoom meeting.

#### **Interview Excerpt with Ms. Towne:**

Ms. Towne: [The video I shared] was it was very much about that, about emotion just put the emotion. So yeah, that's what it was. I was like captivated. I was watching. I'm like, wow, this is like. Like, yeah, yeah, if you're sad about graduation, if you're sad that you can get a job, if you're sad that you can't go outside, like you should be grieving because it's a death and death of a life that we used to live.

Ms. Flewelling: Oh, wow. And that was the same week that you had all those questions [on the student questionnaire] about death, as well.

Ms. Towne: [laughter]

Ms. Flewelling: Yeah. So, it was kind of like, riffing off of what you were sitting with, and then wanting to share and connect and seed for them if it was useful, which is really interesting to see how that kind of in your embodied experience was something that you were kind of then just bringing to your students. But I wonder, do you feel like that's similar or different to how you would have typically experienced May in your ethnic studies classes in the past?

Ms. Towne: Oh, no, not at all. No, no, I mean, I think May in ethnic studies previously is so celebratory, and so communal work getting off of the youth action research. So, there's been this amazing kind of experience, collective experience of action. High of like, everyone is in full community, there is this, this, this kind of sense of accomplishment and growth? So yeah, so definitely, definitely not that that experience.

Ms. Flewelling: So I kind of want to pick up that thread, actually, because, um, you know, something that we talked about last time, but I'm seeing play out in the Google classroom space, is that your classroom is typically super interactive, you're not the lead, right? Like, you're just one person and a participant in that community. But they are driving things with their voices and their discussions. And so, it was that big shift of we're looking at students turning in work, and they're turning it in work just to you, which was not how the class was previously. work was shared with everyone. So maybe just kind of talk about that piece of it

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## Study History

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<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Expedited	<b>Decision</b> Approved
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