

# Sequean Zev Mahnke

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Representative David Sharpe, Chair  
House Education Committee  
Vermont State House  
Montpelier, VT 05602

**Re: H.794, Ethnic Studies Bill**

Dear Representative Sharpe and Committee Members:

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on H.794 from the standpoint of a young Black professional, currently living and working out of state, who grew up in Vermont and went through Vermont schools K-12. I offer the following observations in support of the bill, based on my own personal experience and academic and professional training.

First, I would like to say how enthusiastic I am about House Bill H.794. As always, Vermont seems to be on the progressive side of history. As a young Black boy growing up in Burlington, Vermont, it's needless to say that I experienced a different side of academics in school. Growing up in Vermont, I did not "see" many people, if any, that looked like me in successful situations. On the playground I had to struggle to identify with the superhero games my peers played. How could I pretend to be Spiderman or Superman? I didn't even look like them. This was also the argument that my peers used when deciding which characters we would be. Their idea was that we should all embody characters that we look like. Well, can you guess what "characters" I always looked like? I will give you a hint, not the good guy.

Implementing ethnic studies in Vermont schools will help counteract the negative stereotypes that are so deeply embedded in our media and culture. Ethnic studies would also give students from ethnic groups (African, Asian, Latin, etc.) and social groups (women, LGBTQA, immigrants, etc.) a chance to directly identify with constructive and progressive moments and people in history, both past, present, and future.

This basic concept centers around the fact that we as human beings identify with people or things that we find similarities to (Bandura's Social Learning Theory). In school I did not see similarities, not only to characters from fictional stories, but real people in history as well. How many Black figures are discussed or taught to us in our K-12 curricula? I remember learning about only two African-Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harriet Tubman. My question is, how many of our children now, with black and brown skin, only have these two figures to look up to in school? How many children are missing the opportunity to learn about the entire history of this country that made it what it is today? How many children never learn about important moments in time involving women, refugees, immigrants? I then also ask you to remember this quote, "Those who do not know history, are doomed to repeat it."

Thankfully, I was fortunate enough to be exposed to diverse situations, people, and history in my life. While attending Burlington High School, which is arguably the most diverse school in the state, I did not

find many positive Black role models until I left Vermont to attend Morgan State University, a Historically Black College and University in Baltimore, Maryland.

### **Supporting Evidence Utilizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

I believe that in order to be successful in life, you have to be in situations where you can realize your full potential. In short you have to "see it, to be it." Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Human Needs calls this "Self-Actualization." In case you are not familiar with it, in short, the theory identifies our basic needs in order to be successful as human beings. This list includes:

- **Physiological needs** (food, water, sleep, oxygen, etc.),
- **Safety needs** (security of body, employment, resources, family, property, health, etc.),
- **Belonging needs** (friendship, family, intimacy),
- **Esteem needs** (self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, respect by others), and
- **Self- Actualization** (morality, creativity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of the facts, etc.).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Bandura's Social Learning and Modeling Theories support the importance of implementing ethnic studies in Vermont's public and approved independent schools.

Maslow's theory argues that every human being needs to feel a part of something. We all search for acceptance, whether it is within family, by friends, a sports team, or a lover. Without feeling like you "belong," a person gets a sense of isolation and aloneness, very similar to how I often felt in the Burlington system, even while attending school with a few Black counterparts. Implementing ethnic studies in K-12 will ensure that ALL ethnicities, cultures and social groups are included in school curricula. Imagine being a Person of Color in school learning about: Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, etc. How many of those men – all White and all men – can our young minorities identify with, not to mention girls and young women? As of now, nation-wide, history taught in K-12 is not very "inclusive," even with all the progress we have made so far. This bill would promote inclusion and help everyone – all the ethnic and social groups identified in H.794 – feel part of something, feel like they belong.

Teach minorities about their history and teach it year round. Black History did not begin with slavery and should not be relegated to February. Women's history and the Woman's Suffrage Movement should not be relegated only to March as well. While learning about United States history, minorities rarely are given the chance to learn about history they can actually be proud of. Every culture and ethnicity has a rich history that can be looked on with pride. If you teach ethnic studies, you will be able to improve minorities' self-esteem, confidence, and respect for themselves and others. It also is a great opportunity to help promote acceptance, diversity, and tolerance in the school body as a whole, minimizing racial tensions.

### **Supporting Evidence Utilizing Bandura's Social Learning Theory<sup>1</sup>**

Bandura's Social Learning Theory argues that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling. This theory encompasses attention, memory, and motivation. Individuals that students observe are called "models." In our society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents, characters on TV, friends or peer groups, teachers at school, etc. These models provide examples of behavior to observe and imitate. It is also proven that students are more likely to attend to, and imitate those people they perceive as similar to themselves. Consequently, it is more likely for them to imitate behavior modeled by people of the same gender or race.

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<sup>1</sup> Bandura, A. (1977). Social Learning Theory. New York: General Learning Press.

Ask yourselves, what do our children observe while in school? Students from different ethnic backgrounds from the majority constantly learn about White success and accomplishment, more specifically mostly White male success. This teaches White students that they can be successful. In addition it would be more likely to hold their attention, easier for the students to retain the information, and easier for the student to identify and therefore be motivated by these lessons because the student can directly identify with the lesson and envision themselves in this position.

This, unfortunately, means the opposite for minorities. In addition, when we teach, what side of history are the minorities on most of the time? How do these images, or lack of positive images, impact our minorities in education? Implementing ethnic studies would give minority students a chance to identify with what they are learning in school. In turn this gives majority students a chance to diversify their knowledge, better preparing them for the diverse realities of the world outside of Vermont.

### **Modeling Theory**<sup>2</sup>

Modeling theory is used in academics to change or improve behavior. Modeling can lead to the creation of new attitudes and beliefs that are consistent with the behavior. A negative example could be: a child observes racist behavior from a parent and models it. A positive example could be: a student is introduced to a prominent figure in history that they can look up to and admire. In turn the student starts to model the behavior of the person they are learning about or influenced by. According to modeling theory, implementing ethnic studies would benefit the school system by enabling children of different ethnic backgrounds to:

1. Observe a role model that they can directly identify with,
2. Imitate the model's actions, and
3. Experience positive reinforcement as a result.<sup>3</sup>

Based on my academic training and my professional experience as a social worker, in both the school system and mental health, as well as my entire life experience growing up in Vermont, I urge you to support the strongest possible version of H.794. It will help enhance the potential for young Black students and those from other ethnic and social groups going through Vermont schools to grow into successful, fulfilled adults. It will also help prepare our White students for life in our increasingly diverse world.

Thanks again for this opportunity to weigh in on this important bill.

Sincerely,



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*"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."*  
– Malcolm X

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<sup>2</sup> Bandura, A. (1962). "Social learning through imitation," In M. Jones (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* (pp. 211-269). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ashford, D., Bennett, S., & Davids, K. (2006). "Observational Modeling Effects for Movement Dynamics and Movement Outcome Measures Across Differing Task Constraints: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Motor Behavior*. Vol 38, 185-205.