

Beyond slavery and the civil rights movement: Teachers should be integrating black history into their lessons

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This Black History Month has been packed with controversy, with scandals and headlines revolving around blackface dominating the national conversation. But some say the singular focus on blackface distracts from the larger issues — namely, [how little is known](#) about the nation’s deeply racist history, and what is — and isn’t — taught about the black American experience in the nation’s public schools.

This month, two of [Virginia’s top-elected officials admitted to wearing blackface](#) during their college years. Luxury retailer [Gucci pulled a black turtleneck](#) with oversized red lips from its shelves for resembling blackface. And high school students — from [Wisconsin](#) to [Alabama](#) — came under fire for blackface incidents. The debate brought into focus [blackface minstrelsy](#), the practice of white performers darkening their skin to caricature black people that dates back to the 19th century.

According to experts, teaching an accurate and thorough version of history is essential to breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions. Yet much of what students learn about black people’s distinct American story is hit-or-miss.

“We’re teaching Dr. King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech from kindergarten. But kids have no idea of the kind of risks he took,” Marika Iyer, an eighth-grade history and humanities teacher, said. “They’re not reading his speeches on

Vietnam or learning about the organizing he did in Chicago ... the moments when he's not popular.”

Some blame the whitewashing of U.S. history, with Eurocentric viewpoints and biases dominating textbooks, classroom materials and lesson plans.

“The American narrative is structured around a very consistent set of erasures and forgetting,” said Greg E. Carr, chairman of the department of Afro-American studies at Howard University. “You can’t disturb that paradigm without disturbing the fundamental mythmaking of American history.”

Carr cited the link between the history curriculum and society’s values and priorities, with the staunch belief in America’s “exceptionalism” drowning out exceptionally difficult historical truths. Another point of contention is how black people as historical actors are commonly presented: as a sidebar to American history, relegated to February, and limited to iconic figures and events — Harriet Tubman, slavery, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

What’s more, the racial makeup of the teaching force — [about 80 percent](#) of public school teachers are white — is an obstacle, with many educators lacking the knowledge and willingness to teach black history content. Tommy Ender, a postdoctoral fellow in social studies education at Loyola University Maryland, supervises college students preparing to become teachers. Among the difficulties he named are courses in history methods that fail to address black history in teacher preparation, and racial biases and assumptions that prevent some teachers from seeing black history as relevant to their white students’ lives.

Ender said that to overcome these barriers, schools of education and teacher educators must shift the culture of teaching to one that views studying black

history as indispensable to all students. Because the status quo is unacceptable, some teachers and scholars say.

Yet, signs of progress are emerging, as a growing number of educators are confronting America's racial past — combating myths and misrepresentations in the classroom. In East Oakland, California, Iyer helps youngsters at Greenleaf Elementary School make connections between the past and the present by teaching lessons steeped in black history and culture. That includes a recent [role-play](#) activity exploring Reconstruction — an oft-overlooked and [pivotal chapter](#) in American history following the Civil War when the newly-freed black population gained economic, political and social power.

Additionally, students studied the terms and conditions of [sharecropping contracts](#), the evolution of [Black Codes](#), and primary documents by and about the Ku Klux Klan. One of the cooler aspects, she said, was looking at the propaganda and the political cartoons from the Reconstruction period that actively divided poor white people and free black people.

“The kids made tons of comparisons to the 2016 election, and the rhetoric fermenting divisions between people who are migrants, or who look like immigrants, and working-class white folks,” Iyer, whose class is almost exclusively black and Latino children, said.

Whether she's teaching the post-Civil War or the post-civil rights era — the Black Panther Party, FBI counterintelligence program COINTELPRO and the killing of activist Fred Hampton — Iyer said closely examining black history puts contemporary injustices in context.

“Looking for the complexities and contradictions expands their lens,” she said, “and offers so many links to their own daily realities.”

Illinois high school history teacher Corey Winchester agrees. He focuses on teaching black history and black experiences not only to challenge dominant narratives, but also as “a vehicle to help white people understand their role in our nation’s collective trauma.”

At Evanston Township High School, Winchester’s honors and AP history classes emphasize unlearning and relearning historical facts. Recently, his students spent two days analyzing the text of the Emancipation Proclamation, correcting the [popular misconception](#) that the document freed enslaved black people.

As a black male teacher, he sees his work as disruptive in nature — exposing the history around black identity that often goes untold. “When I first started, it was hard for me to teach about black history, especially in classes with predominantly white students,” he said, referring to pushback he received about centering race. Now in his ninth year, he’s concluded, “You can’t talk about U.S. history without talking about race.”

Hilary Green, associate professor of history and co-director of the African-American studies program at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, expressed similar sentiments about the costs of ignoring black history in K-12 classrooms. She is an adviser to the Zinn Education Project “[Teach Reconstruction Campaign](#),” which helps teachers and schools uncover the complex history of the African-American experience.

In her college classes, Green finds misinformation is common among students about black people’s historical battles and successes. Which is why she’s connected her work as a historian to the work of middle- and high-school teachers.

Sharing this often unspoken history is about equipping the next generation of American citizens to apply the lessons of the past to create a better future, she

explained.

“African-Americans’ desire to become an educated people laid the foundation for southern state constitutions ensuring public schools as a right of citizenship regardless of race, class or gender,” she said. “Ida B. Wells and other African-American women pushed for anti-lynching legislation and women’s suffrage.”

“The reduction of black history overlooks the actions of ordinary people who struggled, experienced setbacks, and yet achieved extraordinary changes.”

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Melinda D. Anderson

Melinda D. Anderson is a freelance journalist reporting on race and equity in education. Follow her on Twitter @mdawriter.