

Black History in Education: A Closer Step to Racial Justice

Author's Statement

This paper was originally written as a contribution essay to the field of Black Social Justice Rhetoric for my Interpretation and Argument class. Nowadays, racial justice has become a frontier topic. And with the rapid development of education and technology, all kinds of ideas and opinions—including discrimination and hate speech—are spreading through the internet, leading to exceptional obstacles to rectify racial rhetoric in education.

After taking the course 76-101 and learning about current Black social justice rhetoric, especially Black history, I gained a fresh impression on the significance of education. I realized that understanding Black history is the key to properly comprehending racial justice—a topic that needs to be covered more often and more deeply in our current educational curriculum.

I hope my paper can bring new perspectives in invoking racial justice, and encourage other students not just to admire those who fight for social justice but to also become pioneers themselves.

-Hanson

Abstract

This paper focuses on the importance of Black history education and its connection with racial justice in society. Although Black history is widely accepted as a crucial part of American history, delivering Black history in the curriculum appears to be challenging for teachers given the heightened rhetoric around racial justice. I argue that educators need the proper training and support to carefully teach about Black history. Meanwhile, research has shown that incorporating Black history in education is beneficial to students, teachers, and the education system as a whole. Even though we recognize the advantages of Black history education, the neglect to conceptualize this within schools to date has been at a deficit. Moreover, the significance of Black history education is not simply academic. Given how it helps to rationally recognize racism, teaching Black history also promotes racial and social justice for the public. Hence, this study claims that overcoming the hurdles this education deficit causes is directly related to effective implementation of a curriculum that promotes racial justice both in the classroom and within society.

Introduction

Racial injustice and inequality have long been issues of debate in American society. Given the crucial role education plays for society and for next generations, ensuring racial justice in education means that we are challenging this inequality from the start. Racial justice discourse in education can be a major reason leading to Black suffering and impeding social justice efforts (Tuck & Yang 432). Various research has shown how encouraging Black history education benefits society as it helps people become more empathetic to the experiences of others. For instance, when American youth learn about the historical trauma Black people endured, they can mature to be more conscientious of racial justice issues as adults.

Nevertheless, opinions of the general public do not always favor Black history education. Many people, either unconsciously or not, view slavery and lynching as passing historical issues all while celebrating American independence as memorable and glorious events that are still relevant today (Anderson & Span 647). Such a flawed impression arises from racial discrimination, wrong perception towards historical people and their pursuit for a more equitable society, and all these things lead especially to the kinds of racism we see in modern media and other places, such as systemic and institutional entities (Psencik 377). Thus, our urgency to clarify how vital Black history education is to establishing more empathic attitudes towards racial justice is even more paramount in the 21st century. Therefore, this paper explores: 1) the significance of Black history education; 2) existing and past challenges to teach Black history; and 3) practical solutions to further implement Black history education in American curricula across the academic spectrum. Based on collected research, this study shows that to overcome educational deficits it is necessary to systematically implement Black history education in the curriculum which would thus promote racial justice in society.

A Well-formed Understanding of Racial Problems for Students

For students, learning about Black history throughout grade and secondary schooling is the best way to form a proper understanding of racial justice. Students in the United States are exposed to too many dramatic and misleading sources primarily since the advent of social media (Psencik 377). For example, we've seen how Black people are exaggeratedly pictured to be lazy and ignorant or how violence is shown as a mainstream cultural phenomenon of the Black community. Without proper educational guidance, it will remain much more difficult for American youth to correctly figure out racial grievances and the justice needed to repair them. History education, as an objective demonstration of past human behaviors and actions, can help

students understand the roles and contributions from the various ethnic minority groups in the history of the United States, especially from Black Americans (Psencik 375). Without having a well-formed understanding as to why racial injustice and inequalities exist, students will never feel obligated to seek racial justice and engage in racial justice activism because for many they've been taught that these issues are no longer prevalent. In a study by George Mwangi, et al., researchers discovered that students' desire to distance themselves from issues of race is one of the major reasons that discourage them from engaging in racial justice activism. On the other hand, students who have a chance to develop racial awareness, such as from racial affinity groups, are more willing to take actions (George Mwangi et al. 415). Without doubt, incorporating Black history education should be the first step to raise such racial awareness for students. Students can get to know where contemporary racial inequities come from, and thus voluntarily explore solutions such as engaging in racial justice activism.

As some scholars have pointed out, studying racial justice can be a difficult topic. In the 21st century, for instance, race and racial education continues to mitigate harmful outcomes for all students involved. In the image, parents protest the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) at their local Education Department's office, even though this desire to exclude CRT from education is a fabricated ploy. Because CRT is a complex legal theory, no school-age child is learning this work; however, CRT could help alleviate some of the systemic pressure people may feel as it clearly shows how racism is baked into the fabric of American jurisprudence, not the heart of its citizens. In this way, CRT should be *freeing* to the vast majority of people, even those who stand opposed to it. Because although it is hard to teach Black History properly given the existence of so many



different and even conflicting views and theories, students still get far more objective knowledge if they learn about Black history in schools.

For these reasons, it would be much easier for students to comprehend Black history in classrooms with the careful guidance of well-trained teachers, who are dedicated to free expression and critical thinking

People protest outside the offices of the New Mexico Public Education Department's office in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Lang) source: <https://time.com/6127626/new-words-that-defined-2021/>

(Griffin). With this training and commitment to students, when they go out into the world, they will be more empathetic to the experiences of others and have more objective knowledge about the issues that led the United States to this inflection point around race and racism. Teachers who are more aware of systemic issues can enhance their pedagogical offerings to ensure that students aren't being left behind and that they are being fair and equitable to all students. This type of modeling is paramount to instilling racial justice activism beyond simple rhetoric and news flashpoints.

Black History Education: A Critical Tool to Ensure Racial Equity in Education for Teachers

Admittedly, it is less obvious how Black history education can benefit teachers: they tend to get more critical insights on history and racism during their formal academic training (King 370). As pointed out in the paper "Interpreting Black History: Toward a Black History Framework for Teacher Education," teachers' Black history knowledge is necessary to improve curricular and instructional approaches of Black education. The research reveals that even one summer reading program about Black history can help pre-service teachers gain necessary knowledge in teaching race through Black history and thus promote racial literacy in education (King 371). Having knowledge (or the lack thereof) about Black history is therefore a dominant

factor for teachers to learn about racial justice and deliver Black history education to students. In addition, learning about Black history also helps teachers ensure racial equality in their teaching process. Without a new and complete review of Black history, teachers are unlikely to implement racial equity in their teaching process as most teachers today learnt about American history from textbooks that largely failed to recognize Black and other ethnic minority groups (Psencik 375). In more words, many teachers today have the wrong impression of Black history and racial justice, which can lead to unfair treatment or discrimination towards their Black students.

Another study by Dumas and Ross finds that Black students are subjected to the harshest disciplinary actions either by school policies or their teachers (Dumas and Ross 434). By recognizing racial justice and establishing critical views towards racism, misrecognition of students and unchecked anti-Blackness can be eliminated among teachers. School resource officers, often an extension to teaching staff, are trained, sworn police officers. They also factor into mistreatment of Black students at a much higher rate than their white counterparts, and removing them from schools could aid in decreasing unjust disciplinary actions against Black students. Data suggested that it's 80% more likely for Black students to be abused or even killed by school officers (Ellis). And this move will greatly decrease educational inequalities and improve instructional approaches for the whole education system.

In addition to the benefits for students and teachers, Black history education also has a positive impact on the overall education system as it helps to decrease education inequalities and help Black students feel more connected to the class and thus our society. One example is the school desegregation policies. Black students are as important and equal as any other students, and enrichment of their cultural and racial backgrounds can greatly improve their learning experiences. When I was a teaching assistant in Fundamentals of Programming and Computer

Science at Carnegie Mellon University, there were many Black students in the class. However, I quickly noticed that there were no Black teaching assistants. While being a TA is competitive, having more representation could go a long way in helping Black students feel seen and welcomed in this course and in others. This point speaks to how cultural and racial background can be seen as positive contributions to the classroom space when the teaching force mirrors the students. As school desegregation is promoted, the content of education should also be “desegregated”: Black history should have an equal weight as other history classes. For Black students, they have the right to learn about their own culture and history. Moreover, it can preserve a better sense of community for Black students. Often, Black students feel isolated in the school among others (George Mwangi, et al. 411). Thus, learning about Black history would promote diversity and inclusion among students by reducing the cultural gaps (Dumas and Ross 434). African American Studies was recently introduced as part of a new “pilot program” by Advanced Placement (Feldman). This new course shows how diversity and intersectionality are embraced in the curriculum, and will motivate more high school students to understand these key values. Black history education can even go beyond history courses. It can be integrated perfectly with subjects such as Economics and Literature, and such interdisciplinary integration is necessary and meaningful. The omission of African American literacies and rhetoric from English curricula has eliminated the African American contributions in Literature, which inevitably leads to the feeling of isolation and disconnection for Black students (Richardson 72). Even in my field of Computer Science, we must do more work to both recruit and represent our Black American peers, so that they not simply feel welcomed but what they offer is validated and used to ensure equity. As such, including Black history education in schools is a solid way to

show acknowledgement of the roles and contributions of the various ethnic minority groups in the history of the United States (Psencik 375).

Social Media: A Place of Racial Injustice

Social media provides many advantages of Black history education that can seem promising. Unfortunately, plenty of challenges have prevented such a push of racial justice in these online spaces. For instance, and similar to how the Daughters of the Confederacy used the media of early 1900s, film, sounds, arts, etc., to encourage learning the history of their rogue nation, the Confederate States of America, to the detriment of Black Americans, stereotyping Black people as lazy and dirty (Lowndes). We also saw a rise centering white contributions to American intellectual history. The Daughters of the Confederacy, for example, is often seen as a white Southern women's "heritage" group. Many Confederate families owned slaves while many others aspired to slave ownership (Holloway). Such historical use of the media to discourage knowledge about the real lived experiences of Black folks is the progenitor to how racism has infiltrated contemporary social media space.

In our lifetimes, social media has been a stalwart at disseminating misinformation about Black people and their history. According to Brendesha Tynes, online racial discrimination is a common stressor for Black adolescents and other minority groups. Misinformation about history and culture of certain racial/ethnic groups is widely spread without control. Study showed among 340 African American, Latino, Asian and biracial adolescents, the percentage of those who experienced a direct discriminatory incident rose from 42 percent to 58 percent from 2010 to 2013 (Tynes).

Discrimination Items	Time 1 (percent)	Time 2 (percent)	Time 3 (percent)
People have said mean or rude things about me because of my race or ethnic group	28	34	36
People have shown me a racist image online	32	46	50
People have cracked jokes about people of my race or ethnic group online	48	55	60
People have said things that were untrue about people in my race or ethnic group	46	56	55
I have witnessed people saying mean or rude things about another person's ethnic group online	55	60	58
People have excluded me from a site because of my race or ethnic group online	9	9	13
People have threatened me online with violence because of my race or ethnic group	10	7	13

Table 1: Percentage Perceiving Discriminatory Incident via the Internet at Least Once in the Past Year (2010-2013)

With more and more young people immersing themselves on the Internet, their flawed impression towards Black history and culture may only become increasingly negative. And these impressions – the unreasonable hate towards Black people, the ignorance of Black people's contributions throughout history, and the malicious comments on race – add a higher barrier to teaching Black history as wiping out prejudice is always harder. Therefore, one necessary action is to clear those discriminative speech on the Internet, and teach Black history properly in the classroom as early as possible.

Misconception of History: Black History or American History

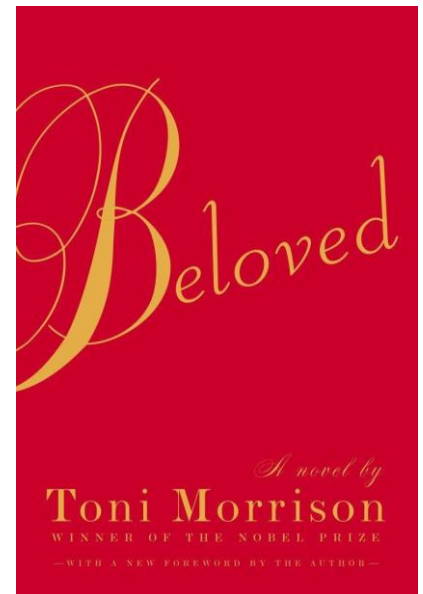
What makes the problem worse is the misconception from educators. Too often, educators are not willing to face the real history directly and tell the truth to the students. To some educators, Black history is not something children should learn: the concepts of slavery and lynching are too heavy, and Black history is therefore “darker” than other American history (Heim and Rozsa). But history is meant to be real. What is considered as “dark history” is still history – it was what people did in the past and these actions have consequences in the present.

Black history is not just the history for Black people. Those devastating stories of slavery and lynching were committed by White people. Fear of facing the truth inevitably leads to hiding the truth, which only adds to the culture of violence that's since defined the American ethos. Hiding Black history even becomes an effective way to protect children, some would argue, as books that reveal the darkest periods like *Beloved* (1987) have been banned (Griffin) despite Toni Morrison being celebrated as an American literary icon and *Beloved* being recognized with the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Some institutions even provide rhetoric on the inclusion of differences, while masking the existence of social inequities and racist practices lived by students of color (Jones 23). And many public schools only cover some basic information of Black history, forcing students to learn about Black history elsewhere (Heim and Rozsa). These phenomena all reflect problems that are deeply entrenched in the education system: what they claim they do is not what they really do. According to Griffin, hiding racial problems becomes “a distraction that takes our attention away from the true threat to democracy.” If educators are afraid to teach the real history in the classroom, what do they expect the students to perceive once they must face misleading information from the Internet? What is real in history is real and should be delivered to students without decoration.

Solutions

The obstacles to implementing Black history education are tough and deeply embedded in the education system. Therefore, it is impossible to fix everything right away. Still, some changes and possible improvements will be offered in this section.



First, Black history education should start early rather than later. If “the youth are not mature enough to perceive” and “Black history is too heavy” can be reasons to delay Black history education, students will possibly get their first, and likely to be flawed, impression from misleading media or from their parents who might also learn about Black history first from inaccurate sources. Black history is not too heavy to be presented in classrooms and students run the risk of learning misinformation through social media without careful guidance from teachers. Trying to wipe out their wrong impression and replace it with the right one could be much more difficult and less effective. Sooner is better than later.

Second, Black history should not simply be discussed during Black history Month. The real contents of history must be presented to students throughout the year, especially around important Black cultural events such as Juneteenth. For instance, simply telling students some big events or famous figures as “teaching Black history” to fulfill the requirement does not help students understand Black history and how this traumatic past continues to affect lives in our present moment. To make sure real and meaningful content is taught, Black history must be placed at the same level as other subjects, and students should understand that Black history education involves all of them. Policymakers should make sure textbook content is historically accurate more so than politically expedient. Assessments or evaluation rubrics can be applied to make sure students do learn from the history course. These courses and assessments can be optional, though they shouldn’t be; nevertheless, they need to be carried out by experienced and professional teachers.

Finally, before teaching Black history, it would be necessary to have some training program for the teachers in the subject. Since most history teachers who are teaching today were themselves trained from textbooks which largely failed to recognize Black history and the

contribution from other ethnic minority groups, effective integration of Black history and the social studies curriculum may require a new orientation for teachers' thoughts. Without a complete review of Black history, teachers are unlikely to implement racial equity in their teaching process. Therefore, making sure the teachers have the right understanding towards Black history is preliminary to the effective teaching of Black history to students.

Conclusion

The benefit of Black history education is not just for students and teachers that are involved – it helps establish a reconciliation towards racial injustice as a whole in society, and thus boost racial and social justice. The motive to teach Black history includes not only the valuable knowledge itself but the infinite benefits for all groups of people and future generations. Black history is not a history just for Black people – it is American history. Diversity and inclusion should not only exist in slogans. They are the ultimate goal to pursue, and Black history education is a vital step.

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