

Education Week

SOCIAL STUDIES OPINION

Black History Is About More Than Oppression

We keep teaching about Black history, not through it
By LaGarrett J. King — January 29, 2021 5 min read

LaGarrett J. King is the Isabella Wade Lyda and Paul Lyda Professor of Education and the founding director of the Carter Center for K-12 Black history education at the University of Missouri's College of Education.

Black history education became more mainstream during the 1960s as Black children, parents, teachers, and community members protested for more Black history courses. These acts of agency led to more Black history courses and a handful of states creating legislation mandating Black history in public schools.

Despite its storied past, Black history education continues to have severe problems in the way it is conceived and taught. As prominent educator Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote in her 2003 *Critical Race Theory: Perspectives on the Social Studies*, when schoolchildren learn “Black history,” they learn that Black people “are relatively insignificant to the growth and development of our democracy and our nation, and they represent a drain on the resources and values.”

The first time many schoolchildren learn about Black people is through enslavement and other oppression-centered narratives. Black people are taught as passive people and disconnected from their liberation. The prevailing narrative emphasizes white saviors and the federal government as Black people's primary liberators. When Black liberation is taught, “liberation” is limited to “nonviolence,” and historical narratives that state otherwise are vilified and compared to white supremacy. The stale K-12 Black history instruction rarely builds on itself; instead, the same context and content are regurgitated throughout students' educational careers.

Black historical consciousness is a set of principles to understand, develop, and teach Black histories that recognize Black people's full humanity.

We can't get Black history education right because we teach *about* Black history instead of *through* Black history. Teaching about Black history has meant that schools teach from how white people imagine Black histories. Teaching through Black history should mean listening, writing, and teaching narratives from the actual historical experiences and voices of Black people.

These historical perspectives differ significantly. For instance, teaching *Brown v. Board of Education* through Black voices would acknowledge that many Black communities were not in favor of integrating schools, just equity in school funding. Black schools were culturally confirming, relevant, and sustaining. Integration meant transferring Black students to predominately white schools where instructional practices were culturally insensitive and racist. Black schools were closed, and many Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs. Teaching through Black history about the *Brown* ruling provides a critical assessment of the policy and not the federal government's moral prerogative of racial progress.

We can teach through Black history by adopting what I call Black historical consciousness. Black historical consciousness is a set of principles to understand, develop, and teach Black histories that recognize Black people's full humanity and emphasize pedagogical practices that reimagine the legitimacy, selection, and interpretation of historical sources. This consciousness should be adopted for creating and sustaining Black history programs.

Black historical consciousness consists of six principles and ample examples, some of which may require further research even for history teachers:

1. Don't ignore systemic power, oppression, and racism. We cannot teach about Black history without exploring how these forces have influenced Black life in America. Examples include the institution of slavery, the nadir of race relations, the wealth gap and housing patterns, the war on drugs, and mass incarceration.
2. Acknowledge Black agency. Black people have always acted independently, made their own decisions based on their interests, and fought back against oppression. Just because oppression has influenced Black life histories does not mean that oppression defines Black history. Examples include African resistance to slavery, Black abolitionists, the two Great Migrations, the NAACP and the courts, and the Black Power movement.
3. Study the similarities and differences of Black histories and cultures across Africa and the African Diaspora worldwide. Black history should begin with the study of ancient Africa and move to define Blackness worldwide. Examples include African origins of humanity, the Haitian Revolution, the Caribbean Black Power movement, and African civilization, kingdoms, and dynasties.
4. Focus on Black joy through liberation and radical projects that defied oppressive structures throughout history. Highlight histories about Black culture that are not focused on hardship but sustain Black people's spirits. Examples include Black family dynamics, music, dance, cultural expressions, sports, holidays and traditions, and the Black Arts Movement.
5. Explore the multiple identities that can inform and intersect with Blackness. Examples include the Combahee River Collective, Black political thought, Black nationalism, and the experiences of Black Indigenous people, Black women, and Black LGBTQ+ communities.
6. Recognize that all Black histories are contentious. These histories are twofold. First, Black people are not a monolithic group and have had various and sometimes competing ideas on how to solve social issues. Examples include Black Marxism, the reparations movement, Pan-Africanist movements, and the Garvey movement. Second, like all histories, Black histories are not always positive and include unfavorable and problematic moments and narratives. Examples include recolonizing Africa, homophobia, and sexism during the civil rights movement.

If we continue to teach *about* Black history and not *through* it, we will perpetuate instructional practices that (intentionally or not) dehumanize Black people, emphasize white supremacy and anti-Blackness, and psychologically harm schoolchildren, especially Black children.

The reason why we cannot get Black history right is that we refuse to seriously listen to, understand, and interpret Black historical voices. We fail to listen to Black teachers and educators who have been telling us how to teach Black history for more than a century. We cling to historical fantasies and not historical truths from multiple perspectives.

Until we believe Black people are historical vessels, we will continue to suffer from anti-Blackness and an inequitable society that continue to relegate Black histories to the margins. The unbalanced Black histories we continue to propagate as “history” paint Black people as a problem in society and not a solution. Black historical consciousness holds the hope to transform history education and, in turn, society.