

Introduction: How Do I Start Teaching Black History?

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Recently, my third-grade daughter told my wife and me about her day. When she started to explain social studies, she inhaled and said, “We learned about Ruby Bridges and George Washington Carver again. I know about them already; when are we going to learn about new Black people?” She was in her first semester at her new school, 800 miles away from her previous school, in a different region of the United States, and she was shocked to learn about the same people. She was adamant that she should have learned something different by now.

My first thought was, “Well, at least they are teaching social studies!” As a social studies professor, who teaches elementary methods and has conducted professional development for over a decade, I understood the marginalization of social studies in elementary grades. Then I thought, “Well, at least it is not Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks!” common go-to Black historical figures in elementary spaces. My wife, who is a literacy professor, chimed in and said, “Well, at least they started before February,” which is Black History Month and when a lot of teachers begin to focus on Black history instruction.

Our lackadaisical and cynical attitudes (like many Black parents) are a result of our knowledge about what goes on in schools. My research looks at the Teaching and Learning of Black history in schools, and my wife, Christina, examines the uses (or not) of African Diasporic children’s literature. Our attitudes are also based on the fact that our children will ultimately receive a more comprehensive Black history education than many of their peers due to what we do and our knowledge regarding what happens when school children do not receive a well-rounded and diverse social studies education.

It is no mystery that many elementary teachers struggle with the teaching of Black history. This results from centuries of exclusion of Black history in K–12 schooling.

Plus, Black history instruction is typically lumped in with other historically marginalized subjects in teacher education and professional development, giving little time for deep exploration in the one social studies method class most elementary teacher education students take. When you add the political contention regarding Black history instruction and laws that vilify teachers for teaching the subject, it is clear why many teachers struggle.

There is psychological damage when we are not inclusive with historical instruction. History is about identity, provides blueprints for the future, and helps students understand the world around them and the decisions people made throughout time. History is also the first time that children learn about themselves and those who are different. There are implications to learning that only White men were historically important or that everything revolves around Western ways of thinking.

For the last five years, I have developed a Black history framework called Black Historical Consciousness.¹ My research studies the teaching of Black history, which has been an issue with Black educators since the 19th century, immediately after Emancipation. Studying historical Black history textbooks and resources, I noticed that there was a certain way that Black history was conceived that was different from what some people would call traditional history. In essence, I see Black history as knowledge derived from Black people’s historical experiences. Most histories that “teach” Black history do not necessarily come from Black experiences but from Eurocentric knowledge. The histories that we currently use teach *about* but not *through* Black history. When Black history is taught *through* the Black experience, that history will look different, because the historical experiences of Black people are different from those of White people.

Take, for instance, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which is considered one of the most influential Supreme Court cases in history. It helped push integration, which many considered a civil rights win. Yet, when we teach *through* Black people, the court case looks different. When teaching through Black people, we will find that:

1. Many in Black communities did not want integration, only equity in school financing,
2. Black schools were beloved by Black children and parents,
3. Integration occurred at White schools and not Black schools,
4. Black teachers and administrator lost their jobs, and
5. Black students were taught by racist White teachers or teachers who did not know how to teach diverse groups of students.

If we consider Black historical experiences and voices, the *Brown* case is understood differently and more completely.

From that baseline of teaching *through* Black people and studying historical Black history textbooks, I began to develop principles around Black history teaching that teachers should consider as they develop curriculum and instruction in the classroom. The principles are designed for flexibility and nuance. This framework has been used and adopted by several teachers and school districts, and with the help of Brianne and Dawnavyn, the principles have been converted to help elementary school educators begin to reimagine their classes and pedagogy. See the application of these principles in this issue’s pullout. ■

Note

1. LaGarrett J. King, “Interpreting Black History: Toward a Black History Framework for Teacher Education,” *Urban Education* 54, no. 3 (2018): 1–29; King, “Black History is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness” *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 335–341; Updated framework included in this issue.

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Elementary Black Historical Consciousness¹ with elementary descriptions and commitments²

Principles		Description	Commitments for Teaching
1	Power & Oppression	Addresses the lack of justice, freedom, equality, and equity experienced by Black people throughout history.	I will name racism and the impact it has on power and oppression.
2	Agency, Resistance, & Perseverance	Acknowledges that although victimized, Black people were not helpless.	I will share the history of Black people’s resistance.
3	Africa & the African Diaspora	Contextualizes histories within the African Diaspora, including global Black histories.	I will expand the narratives of Black history beyond where I live (and beyond the U.S.).
4	Black Joy & Emotionality	Focuses on Black people’s and communities’ resolve, joy, and emotionality in the past and present.	I will honor the full range of Black people’s emotions.
5	Black Identities	Promotes the inclusion of Black identities beyond Black, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian men.	I will include the intersectional identities of Black people.
6	Historical Contention	Recognizes that Black histories are complex and should not be ignored, even if they are not all positive.	I will teach the complexity of Black history, teaching through Black people’s diverse experiences.
7	Community, Local, & Social Histories	Includes histories of “regular” people (especially children) who have made (and are making) a difference in their communities.	I will research local Black histories within my communities.
8	Black Futurism	(Re)imagines, (re)invents, and recognizes the possibilities of Black people in the future.	I will imagine, dream, and support the futures of Black people and children.

1. See the introduction by LaGarrett J. King on pp. 3–4 in this issue.
 2. See the article and pullout by Brianne Pitts and Dawnavyn James on pp. 13–19 in this issue.