



LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

BLACK HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY — AND IT MATTERS

“Expose me to my history because I need to know who I am historically.” This is the sentiment of Black children all across the U.S. Some students are able to articulate it, but many others simply realize that there is something missing in their classrooms. They know that learning lacks relevance and relatability to their lives, but they can’t quite put their fingers on why. It is incumbent upon us as educators to understand the why — and address the problem.

In so many classrooms, Black students are physically present but instruction is delivered in a way that renders them invisible. The historical record of people who look like them is missing from curriculum and instruction. So is the connection of content to their lives and cultures. As a result, teachers and administrators are delivering instruction that doesn’t speak to them or their reality.

This is a longstanding problem, and one that has affected me personally. I spent three of my high school years as one of only five Black students in a school of 2,000. One hundred percent of the staff was white. I knew I didn’t belong after the first day of classes, and I felt completely invisible for the rest of my time there. I now know that was because there was nothing relevant to my experience as a Black student, not in the classroom and not in the afternoons as a student athlete. But, at the time, I was one of the many young people of color in this country who couldn’t pinpoint the problem.

I now know that exposure to Black history in school would have been a game-changer for me. It would be a game-changer for Black children across America today. Millions of Black children go through a K-12 education in which their history is marginalized, caricatured, distorted, or completely omitted. So often, the richness of Black history is reduced to biographies of famous entertainers and athletes or “famous firsts.” This approach is woefully inadequate.

We must take the African American component of American history out of the margins and bring it into an honest and truthful account of history. The story of Black people in America must be told fully and truthfully, as it unfolded from our arrival in 1619 all the way to the present day.

Black children need access to their collective historical experience. And they aren’t the only ones who need exposure to the fullness of Black history. White children and other non-Black children need that knowledge in equal measure. Because the vast history of Black people in America is unknown to the masses, many non-Black people look at Black people as strangers in their own country. They know Black people only as athletes and entertainers or see them through the lens of the nightly newscast’s negative depictions, not as the individuals we are, born from the rich, diverse communities in which we develop.

I don’t have to tell you that this is difficult content to teach. With all there is to learn about African American history and Black people in America, the experience of learning it is not always going to be comfortable for teachers or students. The history of Black people in America, despite its triumphs over the past four centuries, is a painful narrative. Because it is deeply rooted

Continued on p. 18



If we continue failing to prepare our educators to teach the fullness of history, we will continue failing all our children.

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Continued from p. 14

model for students the potential to move into new territory and make progress on difficult issues.

3. Speak up thoughtfully.

We need to show students that we can speak up when we see a change that could be helpful and show that it's important to do so with respect, tact, and consideration. We can do that by modeling the sharing of productive ideas when asked for feedback, using words and messages that are solution-oriented and humane, and choosing to speak up only when we are ready to do so thoughtfully and constructively. As communication expert Liz Fosslien writes, we can proofread comments before speaking them to be authentic

yet mindful of our language so we can be heard (Fosslien & Duffy, 2019).

To reflect on whether we are modeling these skills, it's helpful to ask ourselves:

- Am I actively working to word my disagreements skillfully and considerately?
- Am I growing my ability to be uncomfortable with challenging topics to explore what is hidden?
- Am I taking full responsibility for managing my emotional responses?
- Am I actively working to improve my ability to remain resourceful in moments of tension?

We have agency over how we

communicate and behave around emotionally heated topics. Our words in all these situations are ours to craft, model, and teach. Asking, "How might I communicate my perspective humanely in a kind, supportive, and nonaggressive manner?" is a collective responsibility for us all. The students are watching.

REFERENCES

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LEARNING LEADERS / Baruti K. Kafele

Continued from p. 15

in racism, it can be quite difficult for non-Black people, especially white people, to consider and discuss. But this discomfort is exactly what makes it important.

School districts — including professional learning leaders — must develop the courage and the skills to engage in difficult conversations about race, rooted in history. We can't meaningfully engage in conversations about eliminating racism

without a thorough examination and understanding of the history that got us here. And we can't truly prepare our teachers to educate students without having those difficult conversations about race — regardless of the skin color of the students they teach.

Because we're not used to having those conversations, it will take support and patience to learn how to have them. We must make this learning for educators a priority. If we continue failing to prepare our educators to teach

the fullness of history, we will continue failing all our children. We will continue to graduate students — Black and non-Black — who do not recognize the fullness of who Black people are.

This work is a moral imperative, and we can't wait any longer to do it. The children of America are sitting in our classrooms, looking to us and wondering about that thing that's missing, the thing they can't put their fingers on, but they can feel deep down. ■



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