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Black History Month: The value of a more complete American story

By Clayborne Carson and Tom Davidson Feb. 18, 2020



A bronze statue of abolitionist Frederick Douglass is displayed in the Maryland State House in Annapolis. Teaching the speeches and antislavery writings of Douglass will ensure that young students have a deeper understanding of African American history.

Photo: Julio Cortez / Associated Press

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the “separate but equal” standards of racial segregation in public schools were unconstitutional. While this ruling is significant and historic, segregation in classrooms continues to exist today, specifically in the modest African American history curriculum we’re teaching students nationwide.

Black Americans grow up learning U.S. history that focuses predominantly on the actions and impact of white individuals. Meanwhile, Americans are too often not taught the full scope of African American history. It is essential that we assess the significant impact that African American history has on conscientious citizenship and civic duty.

Surveys of middle and high school students show that, regardless of race, 82% of those who have taken a course in African American history are more likely to stand up for what they think is right and 69% think it’s important to help solve problems in communities. Furthermore, these surveys show that 83% of students are likely to vote in federal, state and local elections after having a better understanding of African American history. Some of the greatest moments in African American history are defined by ordinary people making their voices heard to enact extraordinary change – despite seemingly insurmountable barriers. It is, therefore, no surprise that students feel empowered to make a difference, too.

Education is a powerful form of empowerment and community building. Teaching a more inclusive understanding of U.S. history in both middle schools and high schools can motivate tomorrow’s leaders to take action today. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached what he called “The World House,” the notion that we inherited this “house” (i.e., planet Earth) with a diverse group of people, and we can either learn to get along and build a community or face the prospect of living together in chaos. Understanding the history and culture of our “World House” neighbors is critical to bringing us closer as a nation, understanding what is morally and culturally right, and how we can come together to better our communities.

When exploring the journey of African American history, we find stories of strength, resilience and achievement. It was leaders like Frederick Douglass and Hiram Revels who helped pave the way for more opportunities for black Americans. Teaching the speeches and antislavery writings for which Douglass received notoriety and learning that Revels was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Senate despite objection from the Senate are essential to ensure that young students have a deeper understanding of African American history. Moreover, such inspirational stories have the potential to move an entire generation of students.

When students are taught the contributions that African Americans have had in academia, science, sports, music and the arts – regardless of the students' own race, religion or background – they learn to appreciate African Americans of the past and present. For example, the state of American art, music and culture today was undeniably affected by the creative explosion known as the Harlem Renaissance. There's no telling how far the impact of hearing stories about artists like Duke Ellington or athletes like Althea Gibson can go, especially in a classroom of young and aspirational students. And yet, traditional history books eschew these achievements or relegate them to just a footnote.

Fortunately, we live in a world where we can be instantly connected to people and resources. In that respect, we have the capacity to make education global and accessible. By creating resources that explore African American history we can empower teachers to incorporate a more inclusive curriculum in their classrooms, thereby empowering an entire generation of young people to speak up, stand out and work together.

A year to the day before he was assassinated, April 4, 1967, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at New York City's Riverside Church about how we must put a higher value on *people* rather than *things* or else the grip of racism will be insurmountable. In the same speech, King voices that we

have a “Western arrogance” of feeling that we have everything to teach the world but nothing to learn from it.

By empowering teachers across the country to incorporate a more diverse and robust curriculum of African American history into their classrooms through access to free educational resources, we motivate the next generation to become more civically engaged and conscientious citizens. And, subsequently, with it, we have the potential to shape the future of this nation in a powerful manner.

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