

**“NOT JUST IN FEBRUARY, BUT...”****Examining the Treatment of Black History**

March 2008

**Now that Black History Month is over**, bookstores have replaced titles featuring African-American figures with books about spring. After 29 days of “celebration”, *this* year, targeted television programming and commercials have returned to their regularized majority mass-marketing. And many teachers have put away materials on Black heroes and the Civil Rights movement, which they dutifully incorporated during exactly 21 days of school, and have shifted back to their regular curricula.

We are far from achieving Carter G. Woodson’s original hope when he founded “Negro History Week” in 1926. His ideal was that this separate observation would eventually become unnecessary, due to a more representative integration of African American contributions to this country. Although 82 years have passed, and the week was expanded to a month-long recognition in 1976, Black History remains an elusive element of *American* History, as well as America’s present, in our public schools.

In the *Teaching Tolerance* article, “The Do’s and Don’ts of Teaching Black History”, Camille Jackson writes that Black History should be made “relevant to *all* students”. Yet, the tendency is to view the historical accomplishments, involvements, and experiences of African-Americans as only – or, at a minimum, *mostly* – relevant to Black children. However,

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if White, Latino, Asian, and other children, not to mention Black children, continue to be taught the dominant narrative of a European-based history – sprinkled every once in a while (i.e. one month out of the year) with stories representing “minority” groups, how can schools expect to promote educational equity?

The New York State Department of Education’s “English Language Arts Core Curriculum” makes several references to students’ need to respect the age, gender, and cultural background of a writer.<sup>1</sup> While this guide does not state outright that children should be exposed to “multicultural” materials, such as those that might include Black History, this standard would not exist if students were expected to be educated with materials composed by a homogenous group of writers.

Yet, the introduction to this Core Curriculum clearly states that it “respects the tradition of local choice in New York State that empowers educators to select texts, identify products, and use a rich array of instructional strategies and activities to meet student needs”. Many teachers, whether because of personal preference or familiarity, adherence to “the canon”, lack of resources, or lack of time, unintentionally perpetuate the notion that the only stories worthy of classroom time – and worth knowing – are those involving White/European characters, authors, and /or viewpoints. These stories are universalized to the point that they are situated as the norm against which other perspectives are positioned. In other words, *all* children are expected to gain new understandings from White/European

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Grade 1 Reading Standard 4: “Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction”.

contributions to and experiences of the world, whereas only *some* children are viewed as benefiting from learning about other groups' contributions and experiences.

Because a non-inclusive curriculum is synonymous with educational inequality, it is, therefore, imperative that educators examine their treatment of Black History *and Present*, as well as that of Latino, Asian and other groups. The following is a list of questions to consider, centered around Black History but applicable to a wide range of cultural groups:

- **In what ways is Black History incorporated into the larger school curriculum?**
- **Which books/authors comprise “the canon” in your educational setting?**
- **How familiar with Black History are the educators in your school or district?**
- **To what extent do the materials used to teach Black History reflect multiple *realistic* perspectives?**
- **How comfortable with discussions around race are the educators in your school or district?**
- **Where might educators begin culling resources on Black History?**

Once educators and administrators begin serious reflection upon their treatment of Black History and take the *action* necessary to ignite change, we might come closer to achieving Woodson's goal and see students truly learn about the contributions of African-Americans – not just in February, to stress what many others have already said, but throughout the year.

## References

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