

## **BEING CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS WHEN TEACHING HISTORY**

*Edwin Lou Javius*

Traditionally, the month of February has been honored as Black History Month. Schools make a deliberate effort to highlight the achievement and accomplishments of African Americans. As a young student, the month of February became a source of discomfort and low self-esteem for me.

Beginning in elementary school during February, our teachers would dust off the Civil Rights tapes and "shock" the rest of the class with the brutality and inhumane acts of white police officers toward Blacks, without any explanations from the teacher.

Consequently, I was on center stage to become the expert of the black experience from the 60's. Each year, I was asked, "How does that make you feel?" Each year, I answered with a somber, "I don't know." Sharing what I really felt would have easily landed me in the principal's office.

Interestingly enough, as I moved from grade level to grade level, the infamous tapes seemed to follow as well. Very little new material or instruction was offered to add depth to this period in Black history. But now, the teacher no longer had to ask how I was feeling; the students would take the liberty to take on the teacher's role and ask me.

Being the only African American student in my classes created high anxiety every day, not just in February. I tried as much as possible to hide in class, by not creating any problems and not asking too many questions. I realized early in my educational experience, that if I did not stand out maybe the students and teacher would not realize that I was the only black student in class.

Many times, educators do not provide the necessary activities, readings or instruction that will help all students understand the complexity of the content or build positive racial identity for students. The first strategy to being a culturally conscious teacher is for the teacher to share their racial biography! When teachers consciously honor Race and Culture in the classroom, all students gain an appreciation for their classmates. For a classroom to be culturally conscious, the teacher must share his/her racial journey with their students!

This February, I encountered an experience that reminded me of my childhood anxiety. One of my close black friends was very upset over what happened to her child. In her child's kindergarten class, the students were watching a video during February. The video was about civil rights and the information from the footage illustrated black people sitting in the back of the bus. Her child came home and asked, "Is it because I'm black that I have to sit at the back of the bus?"

Nevertheless, my friend was upset because her child was questioning his place in our society due to the color of his skin. Perhaps the teacher did not realize the only black child in the class was viewing the video with a different lens.

I genuinely believe educators do not intentionally plan to have students experience school with anxiety or negativity. Some educators "don't know what they don't know"! Some educators do not know the psychological effect of certain events and curriculum may have on students, especially students of color what students read and see shape their view and perception of how the world works positively or negatively! Unfortunately our traditional curriculum usually does not overtly empower students of color and their historical contributions, more importantly the sacrifice and perseverance people of color continue to have in shaping America.

Special recognition goes to schools that infuse different cultures into their curriculum, not as a separate and isolated piece of history but as American history. This courageous attempt will inevitably provide opportunities for all students to learn from one another. More importantly, it gives the impetus for students to see themselves and their experiences in the curriculum.

Black History Month has come a long way from the Black History Day to Black History Week to the present Black History Month. I believe if it is only one day or 28 days, schools should provide a historical perspective which will serve to enhance the cultural and racial identity of students 365 days a year.

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