

Teaching White Students Black History

The African-American Experience in the Classroom

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In July, Vermont's *Burlington Free Press* carried a piece headlined "Poll: Whites have misperceptions about race." Reporting on a national survey by the *Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University, the article noted: "large numbers of white Americans incorrectly believe that blacks are as well-off as whites in terms of their jobs, schooling, income, and health care." The article observed that the consequences of these mistaken beliefs "represent formidable obstacles to any government effort to equalize the social and economic standing of the races."

Swarthmore College political scientist Keith Reeves, an expert on racial attitudes who was a consultant on the survey, explained: "The results of the survey suggest there is the overwhelming sense among whites that this is 2000—we could not possibly be saddled with segregation and discrimination and therefore things can't possibly be as bad as black Americans say they are."

The misperceptions raised by the survey are hardly surprising. Many white students are barely exposed to African-American history throughout their schooling. When students do examine the other side of American history, the one not generally found in their textbooks, they often wonder: "Why haven't we learned this before?"

Following the Civil War and through the Jim Crow years, public schools devoted little attention to African-American history. To counter this failure, a black historian named Carter Woodson proposed the establishment of Black History Week in 1926. Fifty years later, on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, Black History Month was created to exhibit the past, present and future status of African-Americans. The month of February, which coincides with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, was designated for teachers to address the issues and history of black Americans in elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges in the United States. The past several decades have also witnessed the establishment of African-American studies programs on predominantly white college campuses; today, approximately 158 such programs are in operation across the nation.

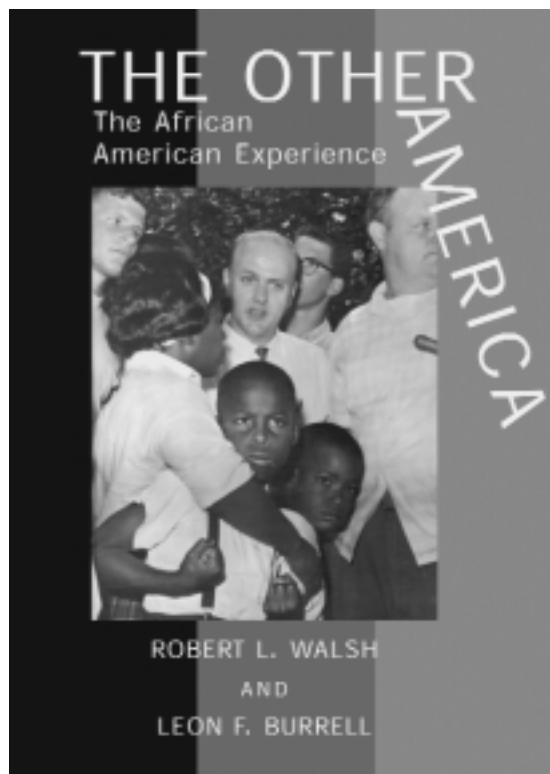
An understanding of African-American history is central to any effort to eliminate racism. This is particularly true in New England where most schools are predominantly white, and myths and stereotypes are not countered by exposure to a diverse community.

Each year, for 20 years, we asked white students at the University of Vermont: "Write down as many things as you can think of that white folks say about black folks that prevent positive interactions from occurring." The following are some of the perceptions the students revealed: "Black folks are lazy, dangerous, dishonest, ignorant and abuse drugs. They are incapable of learning, expect handouts and lack ambition. They have large families that break apart and then they are on welfare." Students who are not exposed to African-American history will continue to believe these myths and stereotypes when they leave New England and enter a more pluralistic society. Surely we will have done them a disservice.

African-Americans are the only minority group that came to this country involuntarily. They were brought here as a cheap source of labor. They were enslaved and their slavery was justified on the basis that they were inferior beings. Their African culture was denied them. Their families were broken up. It was against the law to teach them to read. Although their skills were important in developing society, their achievements were denigrated. Those are the roots of the racism that permeates American society. And that is why it is important to teach the African-American experience to today's students.

By learning about the pragmatic economic reasons for slavery in Colonial America and the years of Jim Crow laws, white and black students begin to understand the American caste system—based on the established inferiority of the African-American race—and the complex racial problems facing America today. Students need to learn how the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement have mitigated, but have not eliminated, prejudice and racial discrimination in American culture.

White students also need to learn about the African-American men and women who have shaped



To help teachers incorporate African-American history in their classes, Burrell and Walsh have written a new book called "The Other America: The African-American Experience." The book is available at selected bookstores and on the World Wide Web at www.theotheramerica.com.

history such as Benjamin Bannecker, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell and Althea Gibson. They should also learn about lesser-known personalities including James Forten, a sailmaker and civil rights activist, the Reverend Richard Allen, who was the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the renowned poet Phillis Wheatley. They need new insights about prominent personalities such as Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

We are aware of at least one high school in Vermont (South Burlington), and four schools districts in Massachusetts (Concord, Brockton, Cambridge and Boston) that offer a course in African-American history. There may be additional courses offered in the other states that we have been unable to identify. But in northern New England, there is little emphasis on African-American history in the curriculum. Most

northern New England states teach African-American history as part of an existing American history course. A New Hampshire teacher indicated that African-American history is most commonly addressed in units on slavery or civil rights.

There doesn't appear to be a formal effort within the educational community to prepare teachers or to present instruction in African-American history. The states that we contacted did not maintain statistics on African-American history courses in secondary schools. We found little evidence of New England colleges preparing teachers to teach African-American history specifically. (However, we did find that teachers in Massachusetts who were interested in teaching African-American history could obtain materials and attend workshops at the Primary Source, a Watertown, Mass.-based nonprofit center that works with elementary and secondary teachers "to bring American history and world culture to life.")

To enhance teaching and understanding of African-American history, we recently co-authored *The Other America: The African-American Experience*. *The Other America* is an abridged history of the African-American experience through the end of the 20th century. The book is meant as a basic text for a semester course in African-American history but also as a resource for augmenting American history instruction and an outside reading book for English courses or the general public.

New England is not immune to racism. But we can eliminate racism through education. We know the importance of possessing a basic knowledge of a more inclusive American history that speaks for all Americans. Knowledge prevents the worst of the past from occurring again. Without knowledge, we cannot eradicate the attitudes and beliefs that have been passed down from generation to generation perpetuating racism and prejudice.

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