

Diversifying the American School System: The Evidence Paints a Clear Picture

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The Eurocentric curriculum of the American school system has been a staple element in the education of its youth. For centuries, schools have incessantly utilized the teachings and themes of white savior narratives while consequently gaslighting the historical portrayals of people of color. Fairly recently, in 2018, The College Board announced a drastic makeover in their placement exam: they would narrow the scope of the AP World History Test to prioritize European expansion and imperialism. While the board had not explicitly made this their incentive, they argued that the curriculum was simply “too broad” and encompassed too many topics.¹ Educational institutions have frequently propelled these similar past iterations; they have praised the historical feats of white figures and pacified the depiction of the few-taught Black historical figures in order to accommodate the white agenda and curriculum. The history books meant to educate the American youth are those that have played a direct role in redirecting educational focus to taper the academic gaze to solely see the white male authority figure. Lack of diversity has been a huge factor in hindering the developmental growth of students - and especially students of color - when encountering situations having to do with prejudice, knowledge, confidence, and confrontation in diverse environments. It has been proven that with an ample exposure to inclusive curricula, students have excelled in classes and overall performance, as well as feeling more empowered.²

When evaluating the historical significance of the few Black individuals introduced to American students, what is taught pales in comparison to the actual sum of these individuals' actions and importance. The narrowed array of Black portrayals present in the education system have been heavily manipulated, pacified, and deformed in the eyes of historical accuracy. Leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, who had been a public enemy to the government, has been consistently - and not to mention, incorrectly - taught as a leader of peace and non-violence. In alignment to the aforementioned agenda, schools have frequently presented the harsh and gaslit dichotomy of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior and Civil Rights Leader, Malcolm X; peace versus violence; right versus wrong. This is only a fraction of the detrimental effects of a school system that is deficient in diversity and complicit in the oversimplification of Black

¹ Washington, Samanthal. “Diversity in Schools Must Include Curriculum.” *The Century Foundation*, 17 Sept. 2018, [tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1](https://www.centuryfoundation.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1).

² Ibid

history. The educational infractions have garnered much public attention, yet little has been done to effectively address the issue at hand. With exposure to a diversified and accurate curriculum, schools could effectively improve the wellbeing of students and expand academic knowledge to a much greater extent. If effective measures were taken to create a more diverse and accurate curriculum, it could also play a large part in the empowerment of students of color, greater academic success, and the enhancement of diverse social interactions. There is overwhelming evidence that paints a clear picture of the importance of a diverse curriculum. Tackling these issues are urgent, and the implementation of a reform in diversity and inclusivity is easy, undemanding, and effective.

A lack of cultural diversification in the American schooling system creates a national student body which lacks exposure to the fundamental importance and awareness of global issues, past or present. This specifically can be seen through the reading selection which is offered to American students. In the past 24 years, multicultural content, according to book publisher Lee & Low, represents only 13% of children's literature, and only 7% of said multicultural content have been written by authors of color.³ This absence of prominent figures of color from a young age can lead to an innate bias or supremacy towards non-people of color, a stunt in mental growth and development, a suppression of skills in certain subject areas, and a difficulty in communication with other students who are culturally different from them. This can also lead to minority students resenting their own culture. Additionally, through this mass racial and ethnic segregation of literature, there are a plethora of negative psychological effects which directly impact students of color.

Oftentimes, the only cultural content students of color can resonate with are stories of suffering. Why should Black students only be introduced to black history and literature when in the context of the Civil War, abolishing slavery, and fighting for equality? The education system needs to inform young minds of the positive and beneficial strides people of color have contributed to society. The white savior complex concept is reiterated in nearly every year of schooling, creating two groups of students and eventual global citizens: the saviors and those who need to be saved. This narrative perpetuates the notion that Westernized cultures and people are inherently more innovative, powerful, and intelligent. These include a significant lack of confidence, drive, and motivation which predominantly affect students of color. By failing to acknowledge historical variance in racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences in the classroom, students suffer psychologically and mentally outside of the classroom. This travesty in the education system is specifically amplified through a narrow reading curriculum and educating elementary students with a lack of colored representation in visual aids, dolls, and toys. This

³ Jalissa. "The Diversity Gap in Children's Book Publishing, 2018." Lee & Low Blog, 11 May 2018, blog.leeandlow.com/2018/05/10/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-book-publishing-2018/.

allows for a white child to grow under the influence that they are supreme, while children of color develop a complex of being “less than.” While this notion is obviously fallacious, an introduction to this societal hierarchy at such a young age negatively affects both groups of students.

Children are our future. They are the ones that will dictate the state of our society for generations to come, and so, in order for them to foster an inclusive environment, both socioeconomically and politically, it is imperative that we properly educate them about the reality of human history. History is not as heteronormative and white as the textbooks paint it out to be; it is vast and diverse and multilayered. Why should only white leaders be highlighted when learning about the world? “This is understanding the audience that you’re teaching to and making sure everybody thrives in the environment,” says the chancellor of UCLA, Gene Block.⁴ “There are large classes and students with very diverse experiences.” With Block’s words in mind, more and more schools should model their lesson plans to champion diversity in the classroom. Interdisciplinary lessons must incorporate a more inclusive outlook on our world’s timeline, such as mentioning POC leaders, POC authors, the impact the LGBTQ+ community had on our history, covering the female presence in milestone moments, and just stop over-representing the white male persona since it is not healthy for children to grow up thinking that you must be white and male to be relevant, as was the case with North Carolina State University educator, Thomas Easley. Easley’s college years as a young black student in the late ‘90s were not welcoming or academically pleasant for him at all. As stated in an article written for *The Atlantic*, he describes those years as lonely, saying he “didn’t feel like he belonged or saw himself reflected in his classes.” He then elaborates by saying, “Our black students are sitting in class wondering how they’re being perceived by their professors. Those thoughts impact how students perform.” Therefore, it is important for curriculums to be honest in their teachings and abolish the white-washed nature of American education systems. Not only must there be a diverse curriculum, but a diverse hiring and retention of teachers, faculty, families, and students.

As we transcend into an increasingly evolving global civilization, the ability to analyze international concepts and ideas through a culturally-diverse academic lens is integral to the intellectual development and mental health of our youth. According to a study conducted by Celestial Zaldana of Claremont McKenna University, the establishment of a multicultural education has proven to greatly benefit students of color in terms of emanating social and

⁴ DeRuy, Emily. “Can Cross-Cultural Understanding Be Taught?” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 9 Aug. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/the-complicated-process-of-adding-diversity-to-the-college-syllabus/493643/.

emotional positivity.⁵ This research has demonstrated that “reading texts written by members of the ethnic groups that are underrepresented in school curricula improves the self esteem of students of that ethnic group, and causes all students to have a greater appreciation for cultural difference.” Additionally, in a report put forth by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, students who receive a comprehensive social studies education end up becoming statistically more engaged citizens.⁶ Studies have shown that they are four times more likely to volunteer for community issues, more likely to vote, and are generally more confident in voicing their political opinion and communicating with government representatives. After all, this is no surprise, especially after coming across the notable observations of professor Amy Nathan Wright, who teaches core diversity-focused courses at St. Edward’s University (as a part of the school’s growing cross-cultural curriculum).⁷ She notices that the students “leave with a very different sense of history and it prepares them for looking at contemporary issues,” which is proof that diversity in a lesson plan can produce massive benefits.

Thus, based on the information presented above, wholly eliminating biased educational methodologies and integrating diversity initiatives in school curricula would be logically effective. However, some school boards still have trouble understanding how to materialize this proposal. According to Easley, most school administrators often neglect or aren’t well-versed in how to implement a cross-cultural lesson plan into the curriculum, even those who are “generally supportive of incorporating conversations about diversity into their teachings.” But sometimes, it is also a matter of socioeconomic power imbalances within the schools themselves. For example, in his numerous visits to various universities, Easley has noted that many diversity offices usually don’t hold hiring power or fall short of having their own hiring budget, and are often restricted in these areas by more powerful administrators. Not to mention, other schools see diversity course requirements as an additional stress to the student body’s workload, claiming that they want to limit debt for students and help them graduate on time. But this fear of theirs (that extra mandatory diversity courses will possibly hold students back) cannot be further from the truth! Stanford University researchers looked at data from a pilot program in San Francisco where students considered at high risk for dropping out were enrolled in one of the state’s ethnic studies programs. The results were striking: attendance rose by 21 percentage points, while grade-point averages rose by 1.4 points. Students enrolled in ethnic-studies courses earned 23

⁵ Washington, Samanthal. “Diversity in Schools Must Include Curriculum.” *The Century Foundation*, 17 Sept. 2018, tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1.

⁶ Wong, Alia. “Why So Many U.S. Students Are Learning Lies About America's Racial Past.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 5 Oct. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-history-class-dilemma/411601/.

⁷ DeRuy, Emily. “Can Cross-Cultural Understanding Be Taught?” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 9 Aug. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/the-complicated-process-of-adding-diversity-to-the-college-syllabus/493643/.

more credits toward graduation, on average, than those who did not.⁸ The largest improvements in test scores were found among Hispanic students in math and science. As you can see, introducing diversity-gearred lesson plans are not only emotionally effective, but effective in terms of academic completion and long-term success.

While many advocates have stressed the need for a diversified structured curriculum, some argue that there is already diversity in classrooms. Many schools have already scheduled arbitrary days to discuss diversity and inclusivity. Some say that diversity is already inherent in our society, meaning that it would simply be a superfluous topic to teach in school. The overarching vindication of educational pundits who choose to neglect diversified curriculum is merely that this type of curriculum would place too much of a burden and workload on students' shoulders. However, these educational adversaries are misguided. Take for example the AP History Exam 2018 ordeal wherein the constituency of the College Board announced their abated history subjects in which there were many fundamental drawbacks. Foremost, students' education would be dominated by solely white male figures. AP World History teacher, William Conway, criticized this drastic reform, saying that "If we start the story at 1450, we lose so much of the richness of that story. [People of color] are still there in these periods. But the role they play is secondary. It's colonized. ... It's the story of what Europeans do to them."⁹ Neglecting this issue would exacerbate and damage the learning experience and accomplishments of students all over America.

The fact of the matter is that schools provide extremely inadequate exposure to diversity and inclusivity. It is worthwhile to consider some of these questions in order to grasp the problem at hand in its entirety: How many Black teachers has a student had? How many Black authors' books has a student read? How many Black historical figures has a student learned about compared to the expanse of white representatives? And were these figures even taught accurately? Curriculum based solely on the prominence of the achievements of white historical figures, and the absences of teachers trained in navigating the worlds of Black figures that are currently lacking from the curriculum, can lead to the alienation of students of color. The plethora of white-centered curricula not only contributes to the common detachment of students of color, but it similarly engenders academic and social challenges. When considering the addition of a diverse curriculum, schools should not be considering the over encumbrance that broadened studies may have on the students. Rather, schools should be focusing on the impact that said curricula would have on every student present in the classroom.

⁸ Anderson, Melinda D. "The Academic Benefits of Ethnic Studies." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 8 Mar. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/the-ongoing-battle-over-ethnic-studies/472422/.

⁹ Washington, Samanthal. "Diversity in Schools Must Include Curriculum." *The Century Foundation*, 17 Sept. 2018, tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1.

The American school system has been bound to a European-centered curriculum for centuries. Schools have consistently promoted a curriculum that fosters unhealthy mindsets and perpetuates white savior complexes from a young age. It is imperative that schools, families, teachers, and students take acute action to eliminate these inevitably damaging transgressions. It is no longer an option to sit idle. We have seen the visible consequences that spawn from a monochromatic curriculum. We have witnessed a stark hierarchical imbalance in the workforce, where people of color are rarely represented in dominant positions. We have acknowledged the fact that 91% of people living under the poverty line in the United States are people of color.¹⁰ Yet, we refuse to address the root of this issue; the root that is kindled in the American school system; the root that discourages students of color and disrupts their academic growth disproportionately. Ultimately, the lack of skill conveyed by American students does not derive from any other issue as prominently as it does from racial and social inequality in the curriculum.

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¹⁰ "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity." *KFF*, 4 Dec. 2019, www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0.