

Beyond the 'Ragged Bundle': How Far Can Educators Develop Hope and Justice Through the Teaching of Black History?

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Introduction and Perspectives

Manning Marable (2006) talked of the significance of teaching 'Living Black History' in the American context:

We all "live history" every day. But history is more than the construction of collective experiences... It can be a ragged bundle of hopes, especially for those who have been relegated beyond society's brutal boundaries (p.1).

There is a strong sense of social justice throughout Marable's analysis, and he talks about the continuing imbalance in American society, where the historical narratives in schools reflect the privilege of 'whiteness' and the relegation of Black people to the margins, or indeed their disappearance from the recorded past altogether. We seek an approach to 'doing justice to history' that sees this as a vital subject for the development of democratic globalised societies.¹ In our English context we celebrate an annual Black History Month, like the USA², and most schools will have some kind of focus on Black history in their compulsory history curriculum, to age thirteen or fourteen; unfortunately this is almost always centres around the study of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its abolition, which from 2007-14 was one of only two specifically named elements in the English National Curriculum for 11-14 year

¹ K. C. Barton and L.S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

² In October, rather than February.

olds in History. We recognise, as research has shown,³ that lessons about the history of slavery from Africa to the Americas seldom constitute a 'bundle of hope' for Black British young people. We have sought to develop the study of Black history in London schools in the past three years by researching and crafting lessons on lesser known neglected histories, in the belief that this work can indeed foster hope⁴ in more than a 'ragged bundle'⁵. We want to discover what the students think about the lessons and Black history in general: Do they consider Black history to be a part of developing a more just and engaging history education, and does it indeed bring 'hope'? Moreover, in discussing ideas of hope, we refer to the work of Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade⁶ who has presented a typology both of false hopes that are peddled to suggest that we have moved beyond the challenges of race and racism, and of critical hopes that do not ignore the challenges of systemic racism in society but work within the pain and present realistic paths for progress.

Our concept of justice draws on the ideas of Sen who sees striving for justice in terms of struggling against injustice, rather than establishing a perfect just system (the so-called 'level-playing field').⁷ So our interest in Black history is not to determine its proportionate place in a brand new canon of history, in which all peoples, distinguished by class, gender and race, might be represented, but rather to campaign for the significant inclusion of Black history in school curricula, to counter the damage done through the centuries not only to the historical record, but also to the awareness of Black culture and heritage, not least for the people of African descent themselves.⁸ Our interpretation of 'Black education' therefore not only

³ K. Traill 'You should be proud about your history. They made me feel ashamed': Teaching History Hurts', *Teaching History*, 2007, 127: 31-37.

⁴ D. Halpin, *Hope and Education*, London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003.

⁵ Since 2013 we have worked together in partnership as 'Justice to History' to develop relevant, rigorous and well researched multicultural history curricula in secondary schools in London.

⁶ J. Duncan-Andrade, Notes to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete, *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 2009.

⁷ A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London and New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010.

⁸ M. Marable, *Living Black History - How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006; T. Epstein, *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities*, New York & London: Routledge, 2009;

embraces, vitally, the education of Black young people, but also denotes the inclusion of Black history, culture and experience in the education of all children in the globalised 21st century. Our principal type of justice is restorative, rather than retributive, and questions of compensation and reparations for slavery are largely absent in our British context. However, we would also want to consider the importance of a just approach to the disciplinary study of history, and would therefore include a veracious dimension to historical enquiry, as well as a certain procedural justice in terms of 'doing history right'⁹ as well as 'doing the right history'.

Our work has been in London schools, although the parallels with the African-American experience are very clear to us, and were manifest in a recent visit to Charleston, South Carolina¹⁰. We have taught a number of historical enquiries¹¹ on Black history topics in a range of London schools over the past two years, including: the life of Claudia Jones; the significance of the history of Timbuktu; the nature of royal power in the Asante Empire; the struggles against Apartheid in 1960s South Africa; and the life and times of British Somali people.

Methodology

In researching the impact of the work we have done with young people on Black history we have decided to record their own thoughts of their learning experiences in a phenomenographic enquiry, rather than to analyse any artefacts of learning that were produced through their lessons. We do believe strongly in a rigorous disciplinary approach to the study of any history in the classroom, including Black

C. A. Grant, 'Escaping Devil's Island: confronting racism, learning history', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 2011, 14, 1: 33-49

⁹ C. Counsell, 'Disciplinary Knowledge For All, the Secondary History Curriculum and History Teachers' Achievement', *Curriculum Journal*, 2011, 22, 2: 201-225

¹⁰ As visiting academics at the Citadel, Charleston, we presented our work on Black History Enquiries to an audience of faculty and students, as well as presenting to two local schools.

¹¹ A historical enquiry is a sequence of lessons that is focused on one historical topic and the exploration of an enquiry question.

history,¹² but in this research we wanted to concern ourselves with the personal and social impact of the studies more than their academic learning: how did the young people construct meaning around the curriculum and pedagogy that they encountered? So, the research method was the focus group interview, and one of us (whichever one had not taught the lessons) would conduct a focus group interview after the enquiry (enquiries) had been taught, asking the students a range of questions about their experience, including one about the importance of Black history, in general and in relation to the particular topic. Information was made available to both students and their carers, and there was a signed permission letter for each student and for each parent/carer, to establish 'informed consent'. The data discussed here came from four different schools, two of them mixed, and two all-boys, state non-selective schools, and the students were from year eight, which includes twelve and thirteen year-olds; all the schools had very diverse multi-ethnic populations.

Black History enquiries taught to young teenagers in London schools – some initial research data and findings

Suffering and racism played a central role in our London students' understanding of Black history. Khalid, of Somali heritage, was ambivalent as to whether the British Somali history enquiry lessons could be categorised as Black history:

Khalid: Black history month, we just learn about Black people and what they did in their histories and their past, but with British Somali we do learn the same thing, but we learn like the trades that was going on, like how they did the short cuts and stuff, and like they even give us some of the people that that happened to as well, like.. for Black History Month it's only about racism that happened, like Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, he was imprisoned, that's all racism and stuff, like, most of it is racism.

The positive elements about the involvement of Somali seamen in the development of British trade and the Suez Canal in the 19th century were actually Khalid's

¹² J. A. Banks, 'Teaching Black History with a focus on decision-making, in *Race, Culture, and Education: The selected works of James A. Banks*', London and New York, Routledge, 2006.

favourite aspect of the enquiry, he told us, but he could not declare those to be part of 'Black history' because of their exclusively positive dimension.

Even when presented with the story of the activist Claudia Jones who was primarily persecuted for her communist leanings, our students seemed to rationalise the struggles of her life through the prism of the struggle against racism; Anthony remarked that her story only qualified to him as 'Black history' due to the general struggles she encountered:

Anthony: Claudia Jones was shown disrespect by being deported from America because she was standing up for her rights and was showing that just because she was black she didn't have to suffer because other white people thought she was not worthy to have the rights that they had.

Other students often mentioned that what marked out certain history as distinctly 'Black' was not only the element of struggle but the interaction with Europeans. This was especially prominent in discussions on European encounters with the Asante Kingdom with many students referring to the central role of the excesses of colonialism in Africa as the defining factor; in explaining this phenomenon Carl described it so:

Carl: for something to be a part of Black history it has to involve White people trying to take things from them [Black people].

In the words of the other students Black history loses this association the moment it becomes independent of European involvement. Undoubtedly the experience that most British students have of Black history, almost exclusively within the designated Black History month of October, is a prolonged anti-racist exposition. Ayesha alludes to having become weary of the monotony as she felt that there had to be more to Black history than simply challenging the obvious evils of racism:

Ayesha: they should spread the word, but I think it's just taught an awful lot, rather than focus on other things... we talk a lot about Black and Whites, and getting on together and not being racist. I understand it completely, to an extent, why it's taught and I don't mind learning about it, I think it's really interesting, but I think it's that over-the-top feeling..

What Ayesha is expressing here does not stray too far from our own position: that the unimaginative approach to Black history in British schools has often grown into a repetitive annual sermon that only serves to distort students' perceptions of Black history and its truly transformative capacities.

Much of that repetitive narrative has focused on the African-American Civil Rights Movement. A doctoral scholar at Queen Mary University in London, Rob Waters, has been researching into the impact of stories of the Civil Rights Movement on British television in the 1960s and '70s¹³. He has found that many British people used this medium to frame their nascent ideas about race relations in Britain; Stokely Carmichael was contrasted with Martin Luther King on television broadcasts. A similar pattern appears to be happening in the 21st century, but through the school curriculum. Are our young people learning that there are 'safe' Black people like Dr King and 'dangerous' ones like Malcolm X? Is that shaping their contemporary view of race relations? It was recently reported to us that a London school was constructing lessons that connected Martin Luther King to ideas of Christian peaceful protest, and Malcolm X with a highly stereotypical distorted view of jihad in Islam. Such narrow narratives are not doing justice to the rich diversity of the histories of African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora; they are most likely to be serving Western desires for control of interpretations in the interests of continued dominance and self-satisfaction.

To present a heroic narrative of Black history, centred on Dr King and Presidents Mandela and Obama, is to project a 'mythical hope' that avoids uncomfortable and potentially controversial histories that have relevance to contemporary struggles, but no easy answers to the latter. Duncan-Andrade presents alternative kinds of hope that don't present easy options, but his 'Socratic hope', in particular, resonates with the opportunities we see in 'doing justice' to Black history. This Socratic hope 'requires both teachers and students to painfully examine our lives and actions

¹³ Waters, R. (2013) Unpublished presentation at Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 7th June: *'Black Power on the telly: re-thinking reracialisation in Britain'*.

within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice'¹⁴.

Conclusions

For London children Black history may have taken on an identity that centres on Black peoples' struggles against white racism, principally in the United States¹⁵, and therefore functions as a cautionary tale to shape the proper behaviour of British people in their multicultural society. The hope that this prevailing narrative of Black history appears to offer is the prospect of a society without racism, secured by heroes of another country. The idea appears to be that remediable justice can be achieved through Black history in a retributive sense by learning of the triumphs of the American Civil Rights heroes over ugly racist oppressors. Although our students appreciated other elements of the stories of Black peoples, these were not considered part of their category of 'Black history'. We worry that this is not the complete picture of hope that we would want to see emerge from 'doing justice to history'. A strong sense of restorative justice is missing, with no consideration of the longevity of positive achievements of African peoples across the centuries, including the importance of African kingdoms before the arrival of Europeans; this historiography was well known to Medieval Muslim scholars and transmitted throughout Europe via Spain, but has been neglected in more recent centuries by Western scholars. The 'bigger picture' of African history can help peoples of the African Diaspora to understand that they have not been defined throughout history merely by their interaction with Europeans. We think that history educators should re-evaluate the position of Black History, in both its celebratory Month and the school curriculum generally, and also recognise that students may already hold entrenched views about Black history that might impede a course of hope. The

¹⁴ J. Duncan-Andrade, *op.cit.* pp. 187-88.

¹⁵ Even Nelson Mandela is sometimes assumed by London children to be operating in the American context.

notion of hope for the British context should go beyond Marable's American 'ragged bundle' and present a proud portmanteau of Black peoples' historic achievements.