
From the Executive Director's Desk
The three "whys" of Black History Month

Whoa, can you believe that it's already February? It feels like I was just saying goodbye to "2020" and hallelujah for 2021. And now we're already in February. Whew, that was fast and I vaguely hear Janet Jackson's song "funny how time flies..." in the background. Nevertheless, I'd like to spend just a few moments reflecting on "the three whys of Black History Month." My first "why" is: "why was Black History Month even created?" Well, I'm glad you asked, because according to ASALH (Association for the Study of African American Life and History) it was started back in 1926. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the famed Black historian who was the second Black to earn a doctorate in history, the founder of ASALH, and the acclaimed author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, decided that "Negro History Week was needed to promote the achievements [of Blacks] that researchers were uncovering" in an effort "to inspire us [Blacks] to greater achievements" (Scott, 2011). Dr. Woodson choose February to recognize these historical achievements because there were already long traditions "since the late 1890s [of] Black communities across the country...celebrating [Frederick] Douglass [and Abraham Lincoln, both of whom were said to have birthdays in February]" (Scott, 2011). However, to be clear, Dr. Woodson did not want to just celebrate these two "great men" but instead he believed that the "[B]lack community...should focus on the countless [B]lack men and women who had contributed to the advance of human civilization" (Scott, 2011).

My second "why" is: "why has the celebration of Black History Month continued?" Well, I'm glad you asked, because from my cursory reading of history, it was continued because it was a huge success. Dr. Woodson began observing "Negro History Week" and historical records note that when it was launched "Woodson and the Association [ASALH] scrambled to meet demand" (Scott, 2011). Soon "Negro History clubs" sprang up in schools across the nation, as did new ASALH branches to join in this celebration. In 1937, the legendary Black educator, Mary McCleod Bethune, urged "Woodson [to] establish the Negro History Bulletin" to further expound upon this idea. And Dr. Woodson is noted to have spoken of wanting to "shift from Negro History Week to...[become a] Negro History movement" that would be celebrated year-round. However, by the 1940s we see some municipalities moving to celebrate it for the entire month. Then in the 1960s, with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, it began to be called "Black History Month." And, according to ASALH, "[s]ince the mid-1970s, every American president, Democrat and Republican, has issued proclamations endorsing the Association's annual theme" [for Black history].

Finally, my third “why” is: “why not just observe Black history along with American history?” And to this final question, I’d say, I’m glad you asked. Yes, Black history is a part of American history and should be celebrated in tandem with U.S. history *and* it still deserves to be specially explored. As a nation we have just seen, with the effort to have “patriotic education” by the 1776 Commission, a continuation of a longstanding norm in US education, where educators mainly teach “American Exceptionalism” which, for too long, has resulted in “Black lives” *not* mattering or Black life being devalued. I believe that it is critical for us to lift up works that interrogate and stretch our normally “biased” way of teaching history (Nelsen, 2021). Furthermore, I’d also say that Black history transcends American History, because Black history also encompasses the history of the African diaspora which extends tens of thousands of years. So, whether one wanted to consider Van Sertima’s *They Came Before Columbus*, or Diop’s *The African Origin of Civilization*, or Blain’s *Set the World on Fire*, or Asante’s *The History of Africa*, or James’ *The Black Jacobins, et al.* These works appear to demonstrate that Black history transcends American history in time and scope and are worthy of researching, and wrestling with year-round. Additionally, as we’ve Thus, you’ve heard my case for “the three whys of Black History Month” and in honor of Black History Month I’m excited to announce that Britt Hawthorne will be interviewing past AERA (American Educational Research Association) President Dr. Joyce King for this year’s opening Montessori Experience Keynote.



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References

Nelsen, M. (2021, Jan. 28). “Serious historians are criticizing Trump’s 1776 report. It’s how most U.S. history is already taught,” The Washington Post, online edition.

Scott, D.M. (2011). Origins of Black History Month. ASALH website.



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Black History Month Resources:

Teaching Tolerance magazine or website (especially with their Jan 2021 article “Why We Need Black History Month –Especially This Year) (See @Tolerance_org)

The National Museum of African American History and Culture’s website or take a trip to the actual museum (see @NMAAHC)

Zinn Education Project’s website, which provides free resources for teaching “a People’s History” outside the norm (See @ZinnEdProject)

Teaching for Change’s website, which provides teachers and parents with tools to create schools where students “learn to read, write, and change the world” (See @teachingchange)

Social Justice Book’s website (See @sojustbooks)

