

Excerpt from the following New Republic Article:

[“What Are the Children Who Grow Up to Become Police Officers Learning in School?” Lessons from Philadelphia’s mandatory African American History classes”](#)

By Rachel Toliver; Published on September 28, 2014

This summer, in Missouri, America got an awful tutorial in the realities of racism. We were taught—yet again, through bullets and teargas—what it means to be black in this country. There is much to be done to prevent future Fergusons, of course. But as a teacher, I find myself wondering what our schools can contribute.

In Philadelphia, where I live and teach high school, we have a course that *could* help to improve race relations. But some students believe that it doesn’t go far enough.

At the selective, high-performing Philly magnet school where I work, African-American, Pan-African, and Caribbean students make up 31 percent of the student body. In the six years I’ve taught English this school, I’ve gotten to know and collaborate with [brilliant](#), revolutionary young people of color. These students are relentless in their critical thought, passionate in their pursuit of justice—much like the young people who protested at the Board of Ed in 1967.

And yet, many of these very students have found themselves disengaged and frustrated in their African-American history classes. I asked a number of former students—all of whom are in their first or second years of college, all of whom are African-American—about where they believe the course falls short. This is what I learned.

When students enter the class eager for higher-level discourse on race—a discourse they are often already having on Twitter and Tumblr—some chafe against lessons that often amount to reiterations of their U.S. history texts. One student, spoken-word poet Kai Davis, felt that “In a class that spoke about the history of Africans and Black Americans, we did not speak about race sufficiently” and that, as a result, “most students left with the same mindsets they entered with.”

The issue is less the curriculum than the way it’s sometimes taught. In the class, students study things like African civilizations, the middle passage, and the civil rights movement. “The plight of people of color was given a voice,” was one student’s positive summary. But certain teachers choose to present that content almost as artifacts, rather than as parts of a larger, ongoing narrative of oppression and resilience. Gabrielle Richardson told me that although the course expanded her knowledge of African-American history, “the way it was taught made it seem that racial injustice was a thing of the past. There was no correlation of historic events with current politics or culture. It was taught in a way that isolated the past and the present.” Davis, now a sophomore at Temple University, questioned her class’s treatment of Trayvon Martin’s murder—or rather, the fact that the class *didn’t* really engage with the tragedy. The class simply “acknowledged that it happened and moved on.”

Andrew Wilkins, another of my school’s young alumni, said: “To this day, I am confused as to what type of emotions this course intended to arise from its students.”

It’s easy to understand the instinct to keep the class objective. People who oppose having a separate African-American history course in the first place will portray it as an ideological program or divisive propaganda. (This, of course, assumes that any other course in history—world history or European history—is *not* ideologically driven.) While no one has to fight to legitimize a course in, say, Algebra, proponents of ethnic studies are always put on the defensive.

But if the class can be vexing for students, it’s no less so for the people standing at the front of the room, who sometimes fear that introducing current events and encouraging interpretation and debate will lead to controversy or open conflict. “It’s uncomfortable for white teachers to speak about race,” said George

Bezanis, who has taught African-American history at my school. “Certain ideas, like white privilege—some people don’t know how to approach it.”

Another of my colleagues, Ken Hung, offered a different theory: Many teachers simply don’t have any comparable experiences in their own educations. “We teach the way we were taught, and many of us don’t remember our teachers covering these types of topics. That’s an interesting point with ethnic studies. There’s a critical mass of people who want to teach these topics, but we don’t have the background because we didn’t go through it in school, and there aren’t many resources available.”

Darien Carter, a sophomore at Howard University, says that dialogue with classmates caused a paradigm shift in his view of race: “Before taking the course, I remember being skeptical of the concept that race is important, primarily thinking that race was used as a divisive tool by people who were insidiously racist in order to obtain and exert power over others. However, African-American history taught me, through the curriculum and discussions that would happen throughout my racially diverse class, that there are some experiences that I will have only because of my race—socially accepted racial profiling and stereotyping, to name just two examples.”

It’s not just African-American students who benefit from these discussions; through this exchange of ideas, students of all races can reevaluate power dynamics and their roles in systemic inequity. Dana King, who wrote the curriculum, notes, “I have found that the course has also reshaped the identity of ‘Euro-American’ students, because of the misinterpretation of their own identities.”

No single curriculum or teaching style can prevent Ferguson from becoming history that repeats itself. But classes like Philadelphia’s African-American history course do have the power to teach one invaluable lesson to students of all races. It’s called empathy.

Empathy can’t be quantified by a standardized test. But it is central to any discussion of race in America—and empathy is often the one thing that’s missing in such discussions. “African-American history did not necessarily help me make sense of my identity as an African-American,” Wilkins told me. “It did however help me make sense of myself as a human.”

Dana King, who has taught numerous African-American history courses, put it a different way: “What are the children who grow up to become police officers learning in school, and who are their teachers?”