

laden with resistance and concerns that these courses would cause division among our high school students of varying races. Many of the concerns were addressed through the comprehensive collaboration among university faculty, policymakers, content experts, and community leaders. Recently, both courses as well as other similar courses have been met with additional resistance even after adoption because of several laws in Texas prohibiting certain discussions of race in the classroom. Could the immediate panacea be to hire more Black educators? [Scott et al. \(2023\)](#) indicated that race congruent teacher/student situation plays a role in attendance, self-efficacy, and achievement. Having a teacher of the same race as their students may not be feasible since 80% of the teacher workforce are White female and students of color make up 44% of the teacher population ([Ingersoll et al., 2019](#)).

Therefore, data also suggest that a comprehensive, culturally responsive curriculum can result in healthy adaptation, stress coping, improved literacy, sense of belonging and student engagement ([Ladson-Billings, 2016](#); [Helling and Chandler, 2021](#)). I personally developed a greater understanding and appreciation of my culture, and an insatiable mission to promote and protect our stories through contributing to the development and implementation of the African American studies course curriculum for high schools. This reflexive narrative will explore my journey in learning about the insufficiency of our African American history curriculum, the internal and external struggle with understanding and appreciating what it means to be a “Black man in America,” and the mission to fight for equitable representation in high school curricula.

My exposure

As a former Social Studies teacher, I thought that I had a command on U.S. History in totality. It was not until I led a national team to help write the African American studies course for Texas high schools, that I learned that not only was I exposed to a sparse amount of African American History in high school and college, but as a History teacher, I neglected to engage my students in the depths of accomplishments and contributions of African Americans in our nation. While I assume the burden of blame, I also understand that I was relegated to what I was taught as a K-12 and college student. A comprehensive, culturally responsive African American studies curriculum can build the knowledge base of teachers and students, student engagement, discussions replete with empathy, racial identity and self-esteem, and overall communal diversity of thought and practice ([Brown et al., 2022](#)).

Growing up in an impoverished community that was predominately African American and Hispanic, I was not exposed to many archetypes of Black male success. At school, while our counselor was a Black man, at home and in our community, I witnessed many of our Black men involved in gangs, selling drugs, and living a life devoid of a mission. I can readily remember some of the men who would drink beer and play cards outside all day, propelled by a lack of equitable educational and employment opportunities. When I would go to school, I began to question where my Black skin and kinky hair could fit in to our society. I did experience some self-hatred as our elementary school was predominantly Hispanic (White Race), and to fit in, we had to assimilate to the White and Hispanic folkways and mores. There was a time when I started putting a relaxer in my hair in

an effort to look like my White and Hispanic counterparts. I measured my worth on how aligned my looks and behavior resembled my classmates. This caused an intrapersonal struggle because I was unaware of how self-esteem can be linked to cultural identity, or the lack thereof ([Landor et al., 2019](#)). At this time, we were not learning much about the contributions of our ancestors to the United States. This was also a time when characters in movies like “Colors,” “Boyz in the Hood,” and “Menace to Society” were examples of Black male dominance.

As a P-12 student

When I moved to Charlotte, NC at the age of 11, I was exposed to African American men who were upwardly mobile, educated, and leaders in the community. While I attended a school where the focus was on a relationship with God and not on Black empowerment, Black excellence was implicit and omnipresent. The school was predominately Black and the vast majority of our teachers, and even the school leadership were Black. Even though our curriculum lacked critical concepts of African American contributions to the United States, having the presence of strong Black men provided role models for us to imitate.

One teacher in particular, my English teacher and basketball coach, was one of many teachers that mentored students outside the context of the classroom. He was also one of the first Black men I met with a college degree, wrote books, did speeches, and had a clear mission to invest in young men. Since my mom worked 2 jobs, he gave me a ride to and from school everyday. During this time, we would talk about life, how to set goals, and how to be a leader in school and in the community. This was a far departure from the Black male exposure I received in my old neighborhood in Texas, or what I saw in the media or in the curricula. This encounter with my coach would usher in a yearning to converse and connect with other successful, intelligent, and community-minded Black leaders.

In college

While in college, I did not have any Black male professors. Several studies illustrate that having those campus-based role models, archetypes, or even retention organizations, improves Black students’ sense of belonging and well-being, builds student retention, supports degree attainment ([Strayhorn et al., 2015](#); [Brooms, 2018, 2019](#); [Clark and Brooms, 2018](#); [Scott and Sharp, 2019](#); [Strayhorn, 2022](#)). For our Black boys, a sense of mattering, especially as it relates to a sense of belonging increases engagement that can lead to successful outcomes ([Carey, 2019, 2020](#)); or the lack thereof, can have baneful effects on Black male students’ sense of belonging, causing social and psychological isolation ([Strayhorn, 2020](#)).

Even as an officer in our Black Student Union, I did not have a strong connection to my culture and history. I was a political science major, and a history minor. My university did not offer African American studies at any level, so much of what I learned about my culture was through self-study and discoveries. I would watch documentaries and historical shows that went beyond the perfunctory mentions during Black History Month. I would also read several Black authors such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jawanza Kunjufu, W.E.B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, and many others to supplement the historical and sociocultural gaps that existed in my learning.

I found myself having to do supplementary research for contextual depth of the content. This dearth of content surrounding the African American experience even at the collegiate level was astonishing and concerning. I knew that more of our nation's universities, especially if you are preparing Social Studies/history teachers, need to offer a comprehensive African American studies course, or at the least, further integrate our history in the American history classes.

As an educator

I taught 8th grade Social Studies for several years and even worked for the Social Studies Department for my district in which I shared a purview of 24 middle school Social Studies programs with my colleague. Unfortunately, throughout my teaching experience, I readily realized that I was able to tell a comprehensive story about America, with little references to many of the contributions of African Americans. Our textbooks did not comprehensively cover the intellectual, cultural, and scientific contributions of African-Americans. For instance, the intellectual and cultural revival of African-American music, dance, art, fashion known as the Harlem Renaissance may have received a simple mention. I certainly did not learn or teach about the affluent Black area in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District, called Black Wall Street, where the residents lived in opulent homes, generated massive incomes, owned their own banks and even airplanes. I suspected this was omitted in the history books, because we would have to subsequently discuss how it was destroyed and many were killed during the Tulsa Race Massacre, which the effects are still felt today.

Sadly, we did not learn the names of Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan, the mathematicians portrayed in the movie *Hidden Figures*, who worked at NASA and were responsible for many of the early space explorations such as Project Mercury, and Apollo 11 (US First Flight to the Moon). Even our World History curricula did not share that literary staples like *Three Musketeers*, *Robin Hood*, or *the Count of Monte Cristo* were all written by a Black French named, Alexander Dumas, or that Mexico had a Black President from 1810–1821 named Vicente Guerrero.

As a curriculum writer of the African American studies course

It wasn't until my State Board of Education member asked me to assemble a team to help write the African American studies course for the State of Texas high schools, did I learn that my exposure continued to be insufficient. I was able to gather 41 local and national experts, from K-12 educators and leaders, to historians, policymakers, and stakeholders within the broader educational community. They ranged in ages of 25–75, and represented several races and cultural backgrounds. The common denominator – they all worked in education or policy, and had a vested interest in the development and implementation of a comprehensive and accurate African American studies curricula for our students. I was able to assemble these members through several national networks created as a public-school practitioner and professor working on issues of equity across the nation. I am currently a part of a national mentoring program called Research, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Empowerment

(R.A.C.E.) Mentoring in which I mentor doctoral students while being mentored by senior faculty across the nation. I posted a call on the site and even the co-founder joined this effort. Locally, since I worked in the Social Studies Department in San Antonio ISD, I still had connections with many of the history teachers and historians that served our communities.

For about 8 months, we would meet and discuss all the intricacies of telling the story of the lived experiences from the perspective and lenses of Black America, what can also be the counterstorytelling component of Critical Race Theory (James et al., 2022). Locally, we met a couple a times a month in an historic library and would break into groups based on the strands of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) – Civics, Government, Economics, Geography, Citizenship, Culture, and History (including Texas, U. S., and World History). For our national team, we would meet once a month on a video conference to review and make suggestions to the information discussed in the local meetings. We all worked on a shared document, in which everyone placed their reviews, suggestions, and revisions replete with justifications. We used this amalgamated document as a representation of our team's revisions. We knew that we had to be strategic to make sure we were able to prioritize concepts and historical staples, as well as educate and negotiate with opposing state board members when necessary (Scott and Perez-Diaz, 2021).

Subsequently, an *ad hoc* committee was created by Texas State Board Member who was the original orchestrator of African American studies course curriculum in Texas as her District (Dallas ISD area) was the first to pilot the course. We met in Austin (our state's capital) with experts from around the state, as we represented the San Antonio delegation (as well as the national experts that joined us). This *ad hoc* committee consisted of representatives of all the work groups around Texas. Once this final *ad hoc* committee standardized the content of the course, it was presented to the Texas Board of Education.

After 8 months of preparation and several days of testimony over that period, the course was passed unanimously. This was impactful because there were 10 Republicans and 5 Democrats on the Texas state board. Even though they voted on other issues strictly on party lines (sex education, evolution vs. creationism in the Science standards, etc.), this issue received full bi-partisan support. This served as a statement to all students, parents, and communities in Texas, that the story of African Americans in our nation's history needs to be comprehensively told with fidelity from P-12 to higher education. It was the 6-year fight to establish the Mexican American Studies course for high school credit in Texas, that laid the infrastructure for a seamless passage and implementation of the African American studies course.

The internal struggle: from activity to advocacy

Even though I had a History minor, taught Social Studies and wrote Social Studies curricula in a large district in Texas for several years, it was this experience I learned to fully understand and appreciate all the contributions to the progression of our people. Receiving a modicum of truth through the typical P-12 experience, sprinkled with the perfunctory Black History lessons and assignments, proved to be quite baneful, as it created a performative perspective of who I am and where I stand as a Black man in America. As a Christian,

my first allegiance and identity resides with my faith. The other ascribed statuses were secondary. Some of my previous exposure to the missions of Martin Luther King, Black Theology, and Liberation Theology helped me reconcile this intrapersonal struggle. I learned that the foundation and praxis of these movements was to express the love of Christ by bringing healing, restoration, liberation, and justice to those who experienced suffering, oppression, and all forms of evil (Cone, 1977; Begg, 2007; Joseph, 2018; Latimore, 2022; Tranvik, 2022). I ascertained that it was out of my Christian faith, that I empathized with those who were traditionally disempowered, a pre-eminent tenant of Christianity and Liberation Theology movements (Begg, 2007; Latimore, 2022).

Today, this faith expression, amid other missions, continues to manifest into a sense of agency and urgency to promote equity in representation in curricula. There is also a push to preserve the great work of so many who are fighting to make sure our students, of all races, are learning a history replete with all the positive contributions of the contributors. The goal, for all of us to be equipped with African American history to go beyond simply posting a #blackouttuesday post on our social media pages, but to help heal our nation through cogent conversations using accurate and comprehensive history learned in our formal education.

Awareness to advocacy

As a professor, it can be most comfortable to teach my classes, write my books and journal articles, and do my reasonable service. However, professors of color, particularly Black professors are faced with a dilemma. Do you continue the status quo or combat the inequitable representation of the African American experience in our course curricula? After seeing how much resistance educators are experiencing in an attempt to teach ethnic studies, particularly, African American studies with fidelity, my *awareness* has moved to *advocacy*. Around the nation, we have witnessed the deliberate attempt to eradicate classroom discussions on race and race reconciliation by the passage of legislation that prohibits certain topics being discussed or resources being used.

This all started with the mischaracterization of the legal and scholarly theoretical framework called Critical Race Theory. A conservative activist that is a part of a conservative think tank began a campaign to conflate all things diversity, equity, and inclusion with the term, "Critical Race Theory" (Gabriel, 2022). The President at the time and other politicians began to weaponize this term to rally parents (prospective voters) and community leaders to extirpate anything that makes students feel uncomfortable or causes distress, even if it is part of a comprehensive curriculum that discusses how Black people moved from slavery to upward mobility (Gabriel, 2022). Many bills were passed throughout the nation that contained this exact verbiage. One of the most known bills would be the Stop W.O.K.E. Act in Florida which was built on the previous state school board banning of the 1,619 project, and many other resources that discuss our nation's historical connection with slavery. This law also heavily modifies how diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings are given in public sectors. This legislation even had implications for the AP African American studies course as it prohibited some of the readings of Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, Leslie Kay Jones and the Black Lives Matter movement (Hartocollis and Fawcett, 2023). Much of what was revised by the College Board

was in response to political pressure from the Florida state school board and Governor.

Even in my own state of Texas, we have worked with and testified before the Texas Senate Education committee and the Texas State Board, to help the passage and implementation of African American studies for Texas high schools. Parenthetically, the Mexican American and African American studies courses were both passed unanimously with bipartisanship (10 Republicans and 5 Democrats), but was met with immediate resistance with the passage of Senate Bill 3 (a derivative of HB 3979) which states we should not teach a lesson if "an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex." The law also prohibits any discussions on the 1,619 project, written by Pulitzer Prize Winner Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Through this process, even as my own tenure at my university could be jeopardized through a newly proposed legislative agenda, I stand firm on the idea that all students, regardless of race, can benefit from the African American studies class taught with fidelity. In my own life, I grew up with images of African American men that were disproportionately negative. The archetype of African American male masculinity in my community was synonymous to a gang member, a drug dealer, a philanderer with several children with unwed mothers. Even in the media, there were only a few examples of strong, intelligent, well-accomplished African American men, only to be counterbalanced by the ubiquity of the negative imagery that was mediated by the media.

Through the process of establishing the African American studies course, I learned that the story of African Americans started prior to 1,619, and that we were kings and queens, leaders, tradesmen, enterprising, and innovative. That our contribution to the progression of the United States is overwhelmingly overlooked, completely left out of our classroom curricula, or relegated to the perfunctory assignments during Black History Month. As we were developing the course, I began to have a strong sense of pride in my race, culture, and our lived experiences. While I was proud to be Black, I always felt that I had to taper my Blackness to be palatable for certain surroundings in our country. The creators felt that this course would give our students the autonomy to express their cultural ethos in its full splendor without fear of reprisal or ostracism.

Discussion

I contest that having a comprehensive, culturally responsive study of Ethnic courses, and in this case African American studies, would create conversations to help heal our nation by increasing empathy, mitigating personal biases, and helping Black students build their self-efficacy and agency by embracing their cultural identity. After the murder of George Floyd and witnessing the international responses of this and previous injustices of Blacks in America, it is evident that our nation needs to heal. This healing can start when we can grapple with our nation's past sin of the enslavement of Blacks, the intergenerational gaps this enslavement created, and viable solutions to mitigate these gaps and move forward in unison. After meeting with several school and community leaders to discuss the implementation of the African American studies course, we readily noticed people want to have cogent and collegial conversations about race and reconciliation. They felt that this elective could provide a safe place to engage in these conversations to help HEAL our nation.

These conversations would help us all mitigate our personal biases. Throughout history, we have seen these biases promulgated through the disempowerment and marginalization of Blacks in America through education (discipline in schools), housing (redlining), entrepreneurship (bank loan inequities), voting (disenfranchisement, voter suppression, and gerrymandering), and employment (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Epperly et al., 2020; Gourrier, 2021; Scott, 2021; Walsemann et al., 2022); or how a simple doll test proved the need for the desegregation of schools, because Black children felt inferior, a sentiment mediated by miseducation. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation across the nation have made these conversations difficult. The opposition felt, if their children learned in detail the many historical atrocities of Blacks in America, they would feel “*distress, anguish, and discomfort*” – which is the actual verbiage in many of the state legislative bills being passed throughout the nation, including the Stop Woke Act passed in Florida.

It is natural to wonder, what if I were taught African American history with fidelity, would there be a difference in my life outcome, career trajectory, or perspective on race and reconciliation? Would it have quelled the insatiable desire to learn more about my culture, while eliminating the inadequacies and guilt I feel from my inadvertent ignorance about my culture? I understand this is the impotence to my advocating for a comprehensive African American history curriculum starting in the primary grades. When I found out about the many figures and concepts during the development of the African American studies course curriculum, I felt a dualism. On one hand, I felt empowered with an inexplicable sense of pride for the resilience and all the accomplishments of my ancestors. On the other hand, I felt a sense of remorse for the generations of students who never knew of these accomplishments, and like me, were plagued with the imposter syndrome. This is why children need to know that they matter and their skin tone, and the accompanying cultural ethos, should not be ignored.

In considering how we can improve the opportunity for students of color to understand and embrace their cultural identity, we should consider several proactive steps to ensure all students, especially our African American students are learning their history with fidelity at both P-12 and collegiate levels. The various times I testified before the Texas State School Board, and the Texas Senate Education Committee, I readily noticed high school and college students and professors, of all races, were adamant about the need to learn culturally responsive, historically accurate, and comprehensive Black history. When my state school board member, and several others a part of our committee, proposed the African American studies course to various districts, our county’s major districts, which are predominately White and Hispanic, were the first to adopt the course. There is not only a need for this course, but a desire.

First, we need to make sure we are implementing a comprehensive African American studies course at both levels that cover more than slavery, civil rights movement, and the perfunctory information distributed during Black History Month. Next, we need to protect the

curriculum as it has been conflated with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and thus, comprehensive and contextual discussions in the classroom have been prohibited by many states. Next, we need to continue to remove barriers and create pathways for Black high school and college students to consider teaching as a viable profession.

Also, we need to make sure all teachers at all levels are adequately trained in culturally responsive instruction. At the P-12 level, this would presuppose the curriculum for African American studies is unadulterated. At the collegiate level, we need to make sure we build African or Black studies into the course schedule, as a credit, with a best-case scenario of having a Black studies department replete with professors and resources. At its apex, we could have a series of interdisciplinary classes that offer a hybrid of Black studies classes within the education department to prepare teachers to teach African American studies to high school, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual credit students. We should promote and protect mentorship programs at the collegiate level that are specifically designed to retain Black males. Finally, we need to have more Black male presence at the campus level. We as administrators, school counselors, and those in higher education have to be intentional about the attraction and retention of Black males so our students are learning their history from an educator who understands the cultural ethos of the students they serve. I have hope.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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