

The Unscripted

Series

Topic:
Black History
In Schools

About

There are scripts running all the time in our society that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. Sociologists describe these scripts as social norms or mores which determine what is acceptable or unacceptable in any given culture. These norms are often represented in different types of social contracts. Some contracts are very formal in that they spell out explicit expectations and rules that govern the expectations and acceptable actions of stakeholders or citizens (E.g. Laws or legal documents). Other scripts like "the status quo" are much more informal and sometimes even go unspoken. Make no mistake, however, the status quo is still a very powerful force in creating, maintaining and perpetuating a state of affairs that governs how individuals and groups relate to each other. In the sections below, we hope to help you reconsider what is "normal" and "acceptable". We know that we will only scratch the surface, but if we can help you become a little more conscious of how bias or prejudice operates in our social contracts that influence our expectations and behaviors we will have taken a significant step toward unpacking the power of scripts in our society.

What?

For the purposes of this project, our primary concern is not whether Black History should or shouldn't be taught in schools. Scripts about Black History are always running in the classroom. That said, our interest isn't "if" Black History is being taught (because it is...) but rather "how" it is being treated. To dig deeper, let's first consider how Black culture is represented in the formal curriculum. Is the Black experience referred to at all? If so, how is it represented? Do you need to supplement the script students are being exposed to? Second, consider what might students unintentionally be learning when they are being taught about the history of the United States. Some scripts about American history embed contributions from African-Americans in all aspects of culture, other scripts center the experience of slavery in the birth of the nation, while still others marginalize or exclude Black experiences all together. Regardless of the racial composition of students, Black History is central to understanding American History and becoming responsible citizens in modern society.

So What?

In classrooms and communities across the country, racial bias and prejudice is created, maintained and perpetuated through powerful scripts that determine what is expected and acceptable in schools. The collective impact of educational policies that preserve the status quo for dominate cultural groups over the years can't be understated. At times in our country's history, shared racial biases and prejudices have morph into powerful ideologies that have directly affected educational policy decisions resulting in social change. One powerful example can be found in the landmark Supreme Court case "Brown vs the Board of Education". As a direct result of slavery and Jim Crow laws that preserved a status quo of segregation, public schools throughout the South were able to discriminate against Blacks. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a case from Oliver Brown, et al. versus the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas, et al. The High Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for States to segregate public schools and overturned a long standing "separate but equal" ideology at work in education. The Brown vs the Board of Education ruling paved the way for integrating public schools and mandating that equal protections of the law are given to all. Following Brown vs. the Board of Education, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) championed the new found rights of black students to register in previously segregated schools throughout the country. One especially powerful example can be found in "The Little Rock Nine" - a group of nine African-American students who enrolled in Little Rock Central High School in 1957 with the support of the NAACP. The Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus initially prevented these students from entering the school until President Dwight D. Eisenhower intervened by issuing an Executive Order that compelled the National Guard to protect these student's rights. The photographs of these nine students going to school under the protection of armed guards represents a powerful moment of Black History and social change.

Now What?

As you reflect on the social norms here are some additional resources for consideration:

For discussion:

- Read "Savage Inequalities" by Jonathan Kozal. Does segregation still exist in public schools? Why or why not?
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/95388/savage-inequalities-by-jonathan-kozol/>
- Question for discussion: "In what ways could common cultural scripts of celebrating the Rev. Dr. MLK National Day of Service or Black History Month contribute to the erasure of important but painful Black History?"
- "America's Racial Contract Is Killing Us" by Adam Serwer | Atlantic (May 8, 2020)
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/americas-racial-contract-showing/611389/>
- Online resources defining racism: <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/racism-defined.html>
- Resources for Rev. Dr. MLK Jr. National Day of Service: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve-your-community/mlk-day-service>
- Do's and Don'ts of Celebrating MLK Day: <https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/dos-and-donts-of-celebrating-mlk-day>
- Ten "Must Watch" Black History Documentaries: http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/10-black-history-documentaries-to-watch/?fbclid=IwAR0uF0IL_WrWZ0z3LHivYsNc69hww22B0iI5-O1_VpNXGpidrfzGItR7LEU