Teaching Black History in Canada

By Sam, Gracen, Kylie and Chemene

**Introduction**

Black history in Canada has recently been getting more attention but is still not taught as frequently as it should. As teachers we need to ensure that we are exposing students to all the history from throughout the centuries. A Canadian novelist, Lawrence Hill, once said “do we know that the story of African-Canadians spans four hundred years, and includes slavery, abolition, pioneering, urban growth, segregation, the civil rights movement and a long engagement in civic life?” (Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.) Black history refers to everything, including the bad and good things that have taken place in Canada. To foster a diverse and inclusive classroom, students must be educated on all history, especially histories that have been marginalized. This will enable students to be social change agents and work towards not repeating the negative histories that have occurred. This is not only for students who society believes to be “old enough” to learn about black history, we need to start as early as Kindergarten. As previously stated, we do not only have to teach about the wrongs that happened in black history but also about their culture, achievements, etc. and build up to the negative history as children mature. The Canadian Encyclopedia (2021) has an excellent resource that talks about the timeline of black history within Canada and could be utilized in any grade level.

Black history is a part of Canadian history and the lack of black history being taught is a social justice issue. One reason history is taught is commonly thought to be so we can create a world that does not look like the past. Without teaching about black history in Canada, we cannot say that we know what the world of the past looked like. February 1st, 2021 marked the first anniversary since a petition was launched to try to get the Ministry of Education to officially include black history in the curriculum. Learning about the past is about so many things, but what it is mostly about is social reform “by learning about the past and placing it in its true context, we can more clearly know what society must do to create equity within our human family. When we don’t teach the past, the present is not easily understandable, and we run the risk of falling onto conjectures that lead to racist ideas and therefore racist behaviors.” (Mangue, 2020) Teaching black history also gives students the information, ability, and values that they will need to understand the social issues of people around them. Our students are going to be out there as individuals and by teaching black history we are giving them the tools they need to understand themselves and others within their community. Finally, by teaching black history, we are teaching students about a variety of events and people and allowing them to grow by learning about different stories and episodes than we have traditionally done. Overall, black history is not just about black Canadians, it is about all of us and what we can do to ensure equality and inclusion. (505)

**Academic Literature**

**Whitfield, H. A. (2020). White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes. *Canadian Historical Review*, *101*(3), 323–345. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.3138/chr-2019-0050**

For our academic article we chose to focus on one that could give us a better understanding of the true history of Canada and help with our exploration of black history in Canada. This article, titled *White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes* explores the history of slavery in Canada, which is often covered up in order to give Canada an image of a country where all are free. The truth is that black people were enslaved in Canada for just over 200 years beginning in the early 1600’s. (Whitfield, 2020) While slavery looked different in Canada than in the United States as “there were no large-scale slave plantations or major staple products like cotton or tobacco,” (Whitfield, 2020) slavery was still active in colonial Canada and it would be a disservice to both Canadian history and black history to not discuss its role in our history. To glaze over Canadian history and speak about slavery as an American issue would not only be inaccurate, but it would be an erasure of Canadian black history. When teaching black history in the classroom we need to be accurate and truthful in what we speak about, which means we cannot ignore or choose to avoid the true history of our country. Canadian slavery is not something that is talked about and is a topic that most of us were not aware of before this project, so including Canadian slavery in our curriculum is essential. Making it a part of the curriculum means telling a truthful rendition of history that recognizes the abuse faced by black Canadians throughout time.

This article stood out to us because it spoke about elements of the Canadian black experience that we had not heard of and not been educated on. Teaching about black history in Canada means including events like slavery and it would be a serious issue if we were not to discuss it. What we found particularly important for our teaching was that its goal is to talk about slavery not as just a concept but as something that was experienced by real humans. They describe their goal as telling the stories of those who were enslaved and to “put flesh onto the bones of enslaved black people in the Maritimes.” (Whitfield, 2020) This connects very closely to our inquiry project of having students create profiles on black people who were ‘trail-blazers’ or influential on Canadian history as both this article and our students’ projects are exploring the experience of the individual. Too often we look at history from a wide lens which does not capture the true experience of the moment and the event that was taking place. History is experienced by the individual, so this focus on the individual is a way to humanize a moment in history so it is taught in the same way it was experienced, by the individual. (490)

**Ridley-Padmore, T. (2020, November 10). *TrailBlazers*. Indigo Press. 9781773938981**

A classroom resource we found was called “Trailblazers” and it tells the stories of over forty influential black change-makers. This book could be used in various ways in the classroom and tells Canadian history through the experiences and hardships black people have experienced over time. This book is an excellent resource to have older students embark on an inquiry project about prominent black people in Canadian history. We can read people's stories to younger grades and discuss what black people in Canada went through and continue to go through. Overall, this book can be a great jumping-off point to introduce the topic of racism, explain Canada’s past and talk about how we can advocate for a respectful society. This book has the potential to be used from the kindergarten classroom to the grade eight level. Specifically in the kindergarten classroom, we can introduce students to strong black people to appreciate and educate on our past without creating fear or misunderstanding. (160)

**Alene, S. P. (2020, Fall) The importance of including black history in B.C. curriculum and heritage programing. Round Up, 279, 36-39. https://issuu.com/bcmuseumsassn/docs/279-fall-2020\_web\_final/s/11123670**

This article for the BC Museums Society was a helpful resource in outlining our unit on black history in Canada and our guiding questions about understanding the importance of including black history in the curriculum. It was a great starting point that helped reinforce the essence of what we are working on and how this topic needs to be included in the curriculum. As an educator, it was fascinating to learn about public school teachers during that time and how much it has changed. The article also included two black teachers from the 1800s who could be great people to include in our lessons or for our students to include in the inquiry project. Giving the students examples of people they can research for this project is a great way to scaffold them toward their inquiry and help direct them toward their learning goal. (144)

**Inquiry Partner**

We have contacted Silvia Mangue, who is a diversity, equity, and inclusion specialist for the inquiry partner. She is also the president of the BC Black History Awareness Society (BCBHAS). And although we have not yet heard back, we are confident she will have excellent guidance towards teaching black history in elementary school classrooms once we do. As Silvia has said: "We live in a society in which we all are very aware of the problems that we are having with racism...So when we know history, then we can put things into context." (CBC News, 2020) Sylvia also wrote an article for the journal RoundUp, put together by the BC Museum Association, where she explained the importance of including black history within the curriculum. “Understanding history and the people that lived that history is paramount to the fight against racism because when we understand the history and its subjects, we are better equipped to write laws and policies that are more equitable and just for all of us” (Mangue,2020)

We hope to discuss some of these questions with her: why is teaching black history so critical in our elementary schools? What things should we be covering as teachers with our classes? What are some additional resources you would recommend to teachers teaching black history? How can one balance teaching anti-Black racism in Canada with success stories from within Canadian Black communities?

With these questions, we hope to open the dialogue gaining a deeper understanding of how we, as future educators, can teach this topic in a meaningful and authentic way.

**Self-Studies**

Sam

I loved social studies as a student because history has always fascinated me. Something that I consider central to teaching history is accuracy because without it we are not teaching history, we are teaching fiction. This is why I believe including black history in our curriculum is so important because it tells the history of our students and gives a truthful rendition of history. Despite this I had some concerns about teaching this unit. How can I, a white person, accurately teach black history when I cannot truly understand the life experience of these people? This concern was at the front of my mind as I began to work on this project and as I researched, I began to understand that while I cannot understand their experience, the stories of black history still need to be told in the classroom. I came to an understanding that I need to teach about but not speak for, meaning I need to educate my students about black history in my classroom but never try to speak for the black community during these lessons. Teaching black history is so important because black history is a part of Canadian history, so to not include it would not only be a disservice to history, but also to our black students who we are excluding from the narrative of history. I want to make sure all my students feel seen in the classroom and have their history told, which is why including black history is so important. (250)

Gracen

I feel that teaching an accurate and inclusive history of Canada is essential for students to learn to understand the segregation and racism minority communities experience in Canada. With the push for Indigenous education to be included in the classroom, we must also have the many other cultures in our communities represented. Inclusivity and acceptance are essential, and this should apply to the content that we as teachers are asked to teach. All students should understand the mistreatment and systemic racism experienced by minorities in our country. Black history should be taught in the classroom from kindergarten all the way to grade twelve. Unfortunately, many students must learn the effects of racism, ignorance, and generalizations from the minute they are born, and they cannot opt-in or out. We need to educate our students so teachers can mitigate racism and students can learn the detrimental effects of racism from the primary grades onward. This project has shown me ways to include black history while still meeting the curricular competencies and teaching content goals. Overall, this project taught me that there are not enough resources on black history in Canada, which needs to change. We need to educate our students on the brave people that came before us and who continue to shape the black community. This project was challenging to juggle between other assignments and switch to online learning; however, it was powerful in the messages it taught me along the way. (241)

Kylie

Social studies education is something that I did not particularly enjoy throughout my time in school. After doing this project I have learned that social studies education can be fun and interactive. Black history in Canada is a topic that should be included as one of these topics. Oftentimes students learn predominantly Euro-Western history and some Indigenous history. I believe that we should be teaching a multicultural curriculum that includes a wide range of different cultures, people, and more. All students should understand not only the mistreatment of black people in Canada but also their successes. When this topic is first being introduced it is a good idea to start with the successes that black people have had in our country. As the students start to get older and mature it is okay to start bringing in the topics of mistreatment that happened to them in our country. By talking about black history, we are not only hoping to teach students about what has happened to them in the past, we are also teaching them about what made Canada the country it is today. Canada has had many successes as a country, but this was not without flaw. Canada has gone through many ups and downs and has done many good things, but also many bad things. These things should be talked about in our classrooms so that students understand what got us to where we are as a country and what they can do to be active citizens. (249)

Chemene

Canadian black history is simply Canadian history. Teaching it in school is important because all students should have the opportunity to see themselves represented in the history taught in our classrooms. It is also important because as a society we need to both see our failures and celebrate our successes; we need to know where we have been to know where we can go. However, how do you teach black history, doing it justice, in an elementary classroom? This topic could be taught well to illustrate both the struggles that black Canadians have faced in the past and present and the many positive contributions that black Canadians have made. But this topic could also be approached in the wrong way making light of a challenging, or not illuminating the positive many contributions that have come from black Canadians. As a teacher I want to create a learning experience for all students so they can become change agents and have the tools to challenge the status quo. I am curious to discover what, when, and how to teach black history in a both meaningful and authentic way. However, I am also nervous that I would not do justice to this important topic. For the ‘what’ I am curious which topics to cover or focus on. For the ‘when’ I am curious about which grade to discuss certain topics, although believe this should be covered through most grades. Lastly, for the ‘how’ I am curious about the means in which the information will be taught. (254)

**Conclusion**

Canadian Black History is a topic that needs to be taught in elementary and middle school classrooms to provide a comprehensive learning experience for all students. We need to teach our students the history of oppression towards minority groups to create change agents going forward. To not be racist, our students must understand the history of racism and its effects on our society. Education should include all aspects of Canadian history to create a well-rounded educational experience. We chose to use the classroom resource “Trailblazers” to educate our students on influential black people throughout history. We learned from the online resource by BC Museums and educated ourselves further on black history and issues. We also found an inquiry partner that stands for Black History in classrooms all across Canada. She is an inspiration for our students, and we can learn how to take action on injustice issues from her. Overall throughout this assignment, we not only educated ourselves on Canadian Black History, Found REsources to inform others, and made connections to the curriculum to provide real ways we can include this learning in the classroom today.

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**Black History in Canada**

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| **Unit: Black History** | **Subject area(s): Social Studies** | **Grade: 5** | **Anticipated Number of Lessons: 6** |

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| **Connecting with my Learners** | | |
| **Rationale:**  1. **Social Initiation**: Teaching black history means we can teach students the truth about history and instill in them the values and knowledge to be members of society who understand the social issues that affect the people around them  2. **Social Reform**: We need to teach students black history in order to give them the knowledge and understanding to be a part of positive change.  3. **Personal Development**: Our students will be individuals going out into the world and to be fully developed individuals and social beings they need to know about the history of themselves and others, which includes black history  4. **Intellectual Development**: Introducing students to all bodies of knowledge means teaching students about all people and their history, which includes black history. | | |
| **Connecting with the Curriculum** | | |
| **Core Competencies**  Communication   * Students will share their learning with their peers and communicate their progress through their presentations   Thinking   * Throughout the lessons students will have the chance to think critically about history and its lasting impacts on black people * They will be able to reflect on their life experiences and how their experiences differ from others due to history   Personal and Social   * Throughout the lessons students will understand how history and society effect people differently and how they can be socially aware of these impacts | | |
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| **Big Ideas**: Immigration and multiculturalism continue to shape Canadian society and identity.  This unit aims to highlight the significant black people in Canadian history and their contributions to our country. This directly ties into the big idea of how multiculturalism continues to shape our country today. | | **Essential Questions:**  Which Black people have had a significant impact on Canadian History?  How have people shaped history?  How is history affected by the exclusion of black history? |
| **Learning Standards: Curricular Competencies**   * Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions * Sequence objects, images, or events, and recognize the positive and negative aspects of continuities and changes in the past and present (continuity and change) * Ask questions, corroborate inferences, and draw conclusions about the content and origins of a variety of sources, including mass media (evidence) | | **Learning Standards: Content**   * Human rights and responses to discrimination in Canadian society * The development and evolution of Canadian identity over time |
| **First Peoples Principles**   * Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story * Having students engage in the legacy and stories of prominent black people in history to understand the effects their lives had on our current society | | |
| **Connecting with Assessment** | | |
| **Formative**   * **Self-assessment**: Have students write about their learning journey, including one thing they are proud of, one thing they learned, and one thing they would be differently next time. * **Peer Assessment**: have students write two stars and a wish for another student in the class’s final project. * **Exit Slips**: Use regularly to document how students are feeling about each class and track their learning progress. | | **Summative**   * Final Presentation: Students will be asked to present an inquiry into a prominent black person in history. This presentation can be done in any way that works for them; they will be graded on their research journey, overall understanding, response to critical questions and competency understanding. Student’s final grades will be formulated from their final presentation, learning journey, and their interactions with the competencies. |

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| **Engaging in Learning Design** | | |
| **Subtopic Area 1:**  Sequence events over time and highlight their impact.  **Central Focus Activity:**  Creating a timeline of influential black people in Canadian history.  **BC Learning Standards: Curricular Competencies/Content**  Sequence objects, images, or events, and recognize the positive and negative aspects of continuities and changes in the past. | **How will students develop competencies, skills, and knowledge?**  Students will develop competencies by learning about different historical figures through the book trail blazers and place each date in order of events.  **How will the teacher support student learning?**  The teacher will engage with students and their use of the book to help support them choose important dates and label them on a timeline. Help locating pages, provide computers for further investigation, demonstrate timeline usage. | **Resources and technologies**   * Canadian Encyclopedia * Books   - Trailblazers  **Opportunities for reflection and feedback**   * Peer Share/ Reflect * Self-reflective exit slips * Hand in for marks |

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| **Subtopic Area 2:**  Research Trail Blazers  **Central Focus Activity:**  Choosing a black pioneer and engaging in research.  **BC Learning Standards: Curricular Competencies/Content**  Sequence objects, images, or events, and recognize the positive and negative aspects of continuities and changes in the past. | **How will students develop competencies, skills, and knowledge?**  Students will develop competencies by learning about different historical figures through the book “Trail Blazers.” They will analyze the positive contributions they made to Canadian history while also realizing the negative obstacles they faced. Each student will engage in the beginning stages of research on their trailblazer.  **How will the teacher support student learning?**  The teacher will engage with students and their use of the book to help support them conduct further research. The teacher will bring in books centered on certain people so further research can be conducted on different people throughout history. The teacher will also provide check in meetings to make sure each student is on track and gets the help they need. | **Resources and technologies (list)**   * Canadian Encyclopedia * Biography Worksheet * Books: * Trailblazers * Black Heroes * Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History * Little Legends: Exceptional Men in Black History * Viola Desmond   **Opportunities for reflection and feedback:**   * Biography sheets * Peer reviews * Exit Slips |
| **Subtopic Area 3:**  Inquire about a pioneer’s history, story, and significant life events and present.  **Central Focus Activity:**  Inquiring further about each student's chosen black pioneer.  **BC Learning Standards: Curricular Competencies/Content**  Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions. | **How will students develop competencies, skills, and knowledge?**  Students will actively engage in the inquiry process by furthering their research and asking deeper questions about their chosen black pioneers' life. They will then present their topic to the classroom and highlight their findings.  **How will the teacher support student learning?**  The teacher will provide computers and other relevant sources to the students and will create a positive environment to share each student's findings and research | **Resources and technologies (list)**   * Laptops * Books listed above   **Opportunities for reflection and feedback**   * Peer assessment * Self-Reflection   Teacher notes |