

Article

Return to the Source: Education, Sankofa, and the Genealogy of the Black Diaspora

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Abstract: Numerous scholars have suggested that the high school history curriculum acts as a hindrance to Black students' achievement of their full potential. While historical knowledge is foundational to a people's self-understanding and survival, most U.S. history curricula elide the history of Black Americans. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive-phenomenological paper was to explore perceptions of the history curriculum from the perspective of selected Black high school graduates in the Southeastern United States, using sankofa as a theoretical framework. Findings revealed that Black voices were underrepresented in the curriculum, and a lack of discourse existed on their historical knowledge, leading to an inferiority complex among Black students. Furthermore, participants perceived most history textbooks as tedious and incomplete, lacking comprehensive coverage of the historical narratives of all ethnicities in the United States. Students who had a deeper understanding of their historical knowledge reported that it contributed to their academic success. The study's implications highlight the need for educational decision-makers in the USA and beyond to review the representation of all students in history curricula critically and to incorporate counter-storytelling. Future research should include more stakeholder perspectives as data sources, and should also be replicated in other countries and courses.

Keywords: black; diaspora; genealogy; history; sankofa

1. Introduction

Research indicates that the exclusion of Black people from the historical narrative of the United States has been deliberate and intentional (Bell 2018; Bradley 2023; Burrell 2010; Isenberg 2016; Van 2003; Yacovone 2018). Many scholars have suggested that education in the United States indoctrinates students with misinformation and tales of the past while simultaneously exaggerating or ignoring the historical realities faced by Black people (Bell 2018; Burrell 2010; Loewen 2018; Van 2003; Yacovone 2018). Education should be a source of knowledge that uplifts, inspires, and enriches students (Blaisdell 2013; Marshall and William 2023; Woodson 2017). Many Black students in the United States may not experience inspiration, enrichment, and elevation in their history courses because their heritage and culture are underrepresented in the required curriculum (Bradley 2023; Marshall and William 2023). For example, a 2018 Southeast U.S. history textbook introduced Black Americans as enslaved people. (Bowman 2023) reported that a textbook publisher removed all direct references to Civil Rights and Rosa Parks to secure approval from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). The history curriculum in U.S. schools has potential to produce two types of mindsets: (a) a mindset where a student identifies with their proud heritage and legacy of greatness, believing that they can do and be all that they aspire to (Arnett 2016; Bell 2018; Burrell 2010; Isenberg 2016; Marshall and William 2023; Van 2003; Yacovone 2018); or (b) a mindset where students think they have no past because they belong to a group of people who have contributed little of value to the United States or the world (Arnett 2016; Bell 2018; Burrell 2010; Isenberg 2016; Marshall and William 2023; Van 2003; Yacovone 2018). Research has revealed that history written from a Western perspective taught to U.S. students glorifies and promotes a Eurocentric worldview (Arnett 2016; Bell 2018; Burrell 2010; Isenberg 2016; Marshall and William 2023; Van 2003; Yacovone 2018).

Provided that all students report to school with an expectation to learn (The Learning Network 2019) and the purpose of learning is to impart information, foster pride, promote self-knowledge, and stimulate academic success (Apple 2003; Woodson 2017), education should be meaningful,

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accurate, and relatable (Kuhn 1999; Marshall and William 2023). According to the FLDOE (n.d.), history courses in the United States are taught as historically accurate fundamental truths. Curriculum accuracy, self-worth, and achievement opportunities are all primary factors in the success or failure of Black students (Arnett 2016; Dennis 2024; Stearns 1998; Turner 2018). For this reason, students should learn about historical accuracy regarding Black people in the United States and abroad, because the African presence and contributions have been tremendous and widespread worldwide (Du Bois 1924/2020; Duncan 2013; Van 2003; Stratton 2016).

The U.S. history curriculum contains many distortions and falsehoods about Black people's genealogical knowledge (Bradley 2023; Darling-Hammond 1998; Loewen 2018; Rainone 2020; Yacovone 2018). Blacks are underrepresented in the curriculum compared to Anglo-Americans (Gibson and Marguerite 2014; Waxman 2022; Yacovone 2018). Teachers and students rely on curriculum standards, benchmarks, and textbooks as instructional guides; further, state mandates and individual school district curricula might be more dominant in guiding instruction (U.S. Department of Education 2020). State-mandated guidelines and district-provided resources have influenced the history curriculum in several states (Álvarez 2023; Ellis 2023), indicating that students need to learn specific history content to earn their high school diploma. Thus, a combination of perspectives from individuals who have experienced Florida's history curriculum firsthand and an analysis of the curriculum itself could provide an in-depth understanding of its messages and impact on students.

The first section of this article provides background and context for the issue—next, a literature review and a discussion of the research problem and the study's purpose. I then provide an overview of the theoretical framework and methodology used in the study, followed by the findings and implications.

2. Background and Contextualization of the Issue

The underrepresentation of Black Americans in the history curriculum has been a problem across the United States (Bowman 2023; Gibson and Marguerite 2014; Mervosh 2023; Rainone 2020; Siegel 2020). The Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) are among the federal policies enacted to address educational inequalities. Despite implementing policies to improve educational equality, people of color are still underrepresented in the curriculum; this underrepresentation, combined with the educational achievement gap, shows that the U.S. Department of Education has been unsuccessful in providing an equal curriculum to all students (Gibson and Marguerite 2014; Rainone 2020; Roberts 2020). The curriculum serves as a roadmap for classroom instruction, a baseline for knowledge, and a springboard for analyzing events and trends (Bradley 2023). According to (Bradley 2023), if students have inaccurate and distorted information, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to engage in rigorous analysis of current events and historical trends.

Research indicates that the foundation of the United States is anchored in marketing Black Americans as inferior and European Americans as superior. The unfavorable perceptions of Black Americans in the history curriculum are readily accepted and harm students (Bradley 2023; Burrell 2010; Grant 2024; Marshall and William 2023; Stratton 2016). The history curriculum appears to favor White Americans and European history while ignoring the impact of marginalization on students of color (Marshall and William 2023; Stratton 2016; Yacovone 2018). The myth that Black students undervalue education does not acknowledge the systemic issues in the U.S. education system (e.g., the way in which the history curriculum often promotes and upholds Whiteness), which fails to highlight the significant contributions of Black Americans and their importance in shaping the nation's history (Burrell 2010; Hauser-Cram et al. 2003; Rainone 2020; Roberts 2020; Stratton 2016; Swail et al. 2005; Yacovone 2018). Many educators may never consider the negative impact of a one-sided curriculum on students of color (Mineo 2020; Nelson 2001; Puchner and Markowitz 2015; Yacovone 2018). Historian (Yacovone 2018) stated, "After reviewing my first 50 or so textbooks, one morning I realized precisely what I was seeing, what instruction, and what priorities were leaping from the pages into the brains of the students compelled to read them: white supremacy" (para. 3). (Yacovone 2018) further explained, "Across time and with precious few exceptions, African-Americans appeared only as 'ignorant negroes,' as slaves, and as anonymous abstractions that only posed 'problems' for the supposed real subjects of history: white people of European descent" (para. 3). According to (Stratton 2016; Turner 2018 and Yacovone 2018), the history of the United States is often portrayed in a way that fosters a sense of pride and empowerment among White American students. At the same time, Black American students may experience an inferiority complex (Marshall and William 2023; Stratton 2016; Turner 2018; Yacovone 2018). An inferiority complex may result from the history of Black Americans being oversimplified to just a few key milestones, which can lead many to believe that Black Americans played only a small role in the formation of the United States (Grant 2024; Marshall and William 2023). Since the inception of the United States, Black Americans have made significant contributions to the country, both physically and culturally. However, the extent of their contributions has been limited in the school history curriculum (Grant 2024; Marshall and William 2023).

(Blaisdell 2013) emphasized that racial prejudice in the United States hinders Black Americans from receiving a proper education in White schools. Many Black American students attend public schools where they receive no recognition in student activities or in the classroom; in these instances, students are not educated, and they are only tolerated (Blaisdell 2013). Because education is understood as an enlightening experience in which a teacher imparts information to a student, who then learns it and stores it for later use, education should benefit all U.S. students; however, it does not (Blaisdell 2013). (Blaisdell 2013 and Woodson 2017) proclaimed that education for Black Americans serves but one purpose: White-washing history and controlling thinking. Further, the authors stated that manipulating education accelerates the oppressor's ability to complicate progress and control opinions, ideas, and perspectives (Blaisdell 2013; Woodson 2017). The assertions that Du Bois and Woodson made regarding education have been prominent in United States history curricula, which have been written to educate, uplift, elevate, and enrich European Americans (Apple 2003; Woodson 2017).

Many contemporary scholars have interpreted *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Woodson 1933/2022) as Afrocentric because Woodson argued that education in the United States had grave effects on Black American students (Snyder 2015). (Woodson 2017) claimed that education for Black American students was misguided because an assumption existed that education was simply a process of imparting information. (Woodson 2017) also observed that "education failed to connect the mind of the negro to the life

that he/she must face” (p. 317). Black American students consistently learn about theories claiming that Black Americans are inferior to European Americans while simultaneously being separated from their people (Woodson 2017). Hence, *sankofa*, or a return to the source, becomes important for Black students in the diaspora. Almost a century after Woodson (1933/2022) first published *The Miseducation of the Negro*, the text still appears to be true for Black American students for multiple reasons. For example, Woodson (2017) stated that U.S. education fails to present African peoples’ talents, capabilities, and contributions in the United States and in Africa. (Woodson 2017) also asserted that European Americans assigned a role of subordination to Black Americans and then used the school to ensure that Black Americans fully absorbed this notion.

(Puchner and Linda 2015) added to Woodson’s point by reporting the results of a study of six preservice teachers who believed that “Black American families do not place a high value on education” (p. 9). Systemic racism describes the ideas of White superiority and the adverse treatment of individuals or groups based on their race as normal because the concept of superiority can infiltrate behaviors and attitudes unconsciously (Gillborn, 2005). Systemic racism can be seen in the behavior patterns of social institutions, such as schools, and in biases in the curriculum (Dhaliwal, Mark et al. 2020; Gillborn 2005; Yacovone, 2018). Historically, racism prohibited Black Americans from attending school because systemic racism assumed White superiority on all fronts: institutionally, philosophically, and individually (Gillborn 2005; Woodson 2017). Presently, Black Americans are no longer prohibited from attending school, yet systemic oppression can still be observed in the history curriculum across the United States, just as it was historically (McLaren 1985; Yacovone 2018). (Puchner and Linda 2015) supported (McLaren 1985) decades-old claim in a research study that found schools are not institutions of learning that provide equal learning opportunities to all students. (Puchner and Linda 2015) suggested that schools maintain order by keeping what educators have deemed lower social classes in their place. One method of preserving social classes is to spread misinformation and distort historical truths through the educational curriculum (Yacovone 2018).

(*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954) aimed to demolish educational inequality by making segregation in public schools illegal. The (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954) decision sought to dismantle inequalities surrounding education, yet systemic racism in education still exists. Integration was an attempt to provide equal educational opportunities to Black American students, and although desegregation was a good attempt, it was unsuccessful because it only desegregated bodies; desegregation of the curriculum has yet to occur (Loewen 2018; Woodson 2017; Zinn 2015).

(*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954) occurred nearly 70 years prior to the current study; however, in many aspects, the history curriculum has been equivalent to that taught before integration because it still mainly contains historical information concerning people of European descent (Loewen 2018; Reddick 1934; Woodson 2017). As a result of (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954), desegregating schools forced White and Black Americans to attend the same schools even though the education provided in those schools did not afford them the same educational experiences (Woodson 2017). The (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954) ruling did not address the curriculum; therefore, it did not change the curriculum. A seemingly biased single-narrative history has still been taught as the true history of the United States, even though the United States has always been a nation of diverse people; diversity is often left out of the historical narrative of the United States (Loewen 2018; Reddick 1934; Woodson 2017; Yacovone 2018).

Education means acquiring knowledge, receiving or giving systematic instruction, and having an enlightening experience (Muskan 2020). (Muskan 2020) of the Biyani Group of Colleges defined *education* as more than book knowledge. (Muskan 2020) stated that education imparts moral and ethical values and fosters positive thinking, enabling students to become good human beings with an attitude that fosters societal change. (Smith 2021) proposed that education should encourage students to discover and invite truth and possibility. (Smith 2021) also stated that education should be “deliberate and hopeful, informed, respectful, and wise, as well as grounded in a desire that all may flourish and share in life” (para. 3).

Learning can be understood as a process that occurs every day, whether people are aware of it or not (Smith 2021). Acquiring knowledge is how the human mind works and is a part of living in the world; it is also how people understand what they have learned directly or indirectly (Smith 2021). Going to school and learning the curriculum is one of the many ways students learn because it serves as a blueprint for educational goals (Smith 2021). The curriculum is complex and can be described as the interactive system of learning and instruction, measurement, resources, and content taught in a course (Dodd 2021). Harvard Graduate School of Education (n.d.) defined *curriculum* as a variety of purposefully designed activities employed to cultivate education and support the learning community’s needs. The National Equity Project (n.d.) desired to answer the following question: If curriculum serves as the bridge between education and development and if activities employed should serve the needs of the learning community, how can U.S. students complete their entire educational career without the presentation of relatable, inspiring, factual, and affirming historical information?

(Williams 2013) discovered that the number of comprehension texts narrated about or for Black American students was relatively small compared to the total number of reading selections. For example, in one textbook, (Williams 2013) found an abundance of characters; however, among the hundreds in the text, only four were people of color (three Black and one Hispanic), and the rest were White. (Williams 2013) discovery confirmed the assertions of (Loewen 2018; Lomotey 1992; Marks 2005) regarding the lack of diversity and sufficient information on the Black American experience in school textbooks. The exclusion of people of color has been a significant problem, especially in view of the fact that White students made up only 48% of the nationwide public-school population in 2017, which was a decrease from 61% in 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020b). U.S. school curricula should reflect a diverse student body because it is important for students to see themselves represented in the information they learn (Leviton and Nicholas 2024; Marshall and William 2023). Florida’s diverse student population is more significant proof of the need for a diverse history curriculum. White American students comprised less than 50% of the Florida student population during the 2018–2019 school year (NCES 2020b; Rado 2019). The United States is a nation of diverse people; therefore, the history curriculum taught to U.S. students must directly reflect its people (Marshall and William 2023).

Countless scholars, authors, and historians have acknowledged the scarcity of African presence in the United States history curriculum, including the limited presence of Black history and the Black experience (Loewen 2018; Marshall and William 2023; Turselli 2019; Yacovone 2018), yet the impact the current history curriculum has on Black students is widely unknown. Many studies on curriculum bias have continued to reveal the persistent inequalities in the history curriculum (Crenshaw et al. 2010;

Marshall and William 2023), but very few studies have examined the impact of curriculum bias. (Zhen 2022) explained how ignoring inaccuracies in textbooks “perpetrates a cycle of misinformation” (para. 1) as well as how facts can be easily distorted when information is missing. (Loewen 2018) and (Marshall and William 2023) described how many topics that focus on Black people are misleading, incomplete, or inaccurate.

Numerous studies have confirmed that systemic discrimination contributes to unequal learning opportunities for students of color (American University of School Education 2021; Marshall and William 2023; Roberts 2020). Although the curriculum has changed over time, the inaccurate, biased, and racially motivated information in textbooks has not kept pace in a significant way (American University of School Education 2021; Conway 2015; Fitzgerald 1983). For example, (American University of School Education 2021) estimated that only 8% of 12th-grade students were taught accurate fragments of U.S. history. Although biases in the history curriculum are well documented, the long-term impact that a biased history curriculum has on Black students has gone largely unexamined. Therefore, the current study explored Black students' perceptions of the history curriculum, seeking to understand the impact of historical bias on students.

Although the United States has many cultures, U.S. students may not learn from a multicultural curriculum (Roberts 2020). Many of the biases in U.S. education have been successfully pinpointed, yet the challenges students of color face because of these biases have gone mostly unacknowledged. Given the understanding that curriculum bias can subvert the goals of nondiscriminatory schooling, research exploring the experiences and perceptions of Black high school graduates who faced such bias is necessary.

2.1 U.S. History Curriculum and Standards

The United States does not have national social studies or history standards (Schwartz 2021). Instead, each of the 50 states has its own set of standards, resulting in a wide range of history curricula across the United States (Schwartz 2021). Because no national history standards exist, the Southern Poverty Law Center surveyed over 1,700 social studies teachers and 1,000 high school seniors in the United States in Fall 2017, including analysis of 15 state standards and 10 U.S. history textbooks (Seliga 2021). Table 1 presents the survey's main objective: to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Black history was taught and what U.S. students were taught in classrooms across the United States (Seliga 2021; Southern Poverty Law Center 2018).

In the survey, the (Southern Poverty Law Center 2018) reported on the state of Black history education in the United States. The survey aimed to understand how Black history was taught and what high school students nationwide were learning. The survey results provided valuable insights into the current state of education on this important topic. There is a pressing need for a more comprehensive and accurate teaching of the contributions and experiences of all groups that make up a diverse U.S. society (Seliga 2021). When historical events and people are not included in the required state standards, the absence of content can lead to assumptions about irrelevance, resulting in some educators choosing not to teach the information not included—in other words, if something is not directly incorporated into the state curriculum. Many teachers choose not to teach it (Seliga 2021). In some state history curricula, White American figures are mentioned much more frequently than Black American figures, for instance, for every 39 White historical figures (Seliga 2021). Similarly, for every 18 White historical American figures, texts mentioned only five Black American figures (Seliga 2021). Some textbooks did not even include the Civil Rights Movement, an important part of U.S. history and a state requirement in the Academic Standards for History (Seliga 2021). Many textbooks across the nation have little to no true history of Black Americans (Greenlee 2019). (Romanowski 1996) described that the selection of written material, the choice of wording, and the illustrations create impressions in students' minds. For example, (CBS News 2012) reported that after reading a book about Fredrick Douglass, third-grade students had a cross-curricular assignment wherein it asked the following: “Each tree had 56 oranges. If eight slaves pick them equally, then how much would each slave pick?” (para. 5). The other asked, “If Frederick got two beatings per day, how many beatings did he get in one week?” (CBS News 2012). This assignment for students may be an example of evidence supporting the biases in the curriculum because students had to have prior knowledge of the enslavement of Frederick Douglass.

According to (Marshall and William 2023), the way U.S. history is taught in schools across the United States misrepresents and distorts the past and present. As of 2021, 44 states introduced bills to censor discussions about race. Many states also do not require learning Black history (Marshall and William 2023). (Greenlee 2019; Loewen 2018) described how textbooks directly reflect the U.S. refusal to deal with its racist past; this refusal can be seen in countless textbooks and curricula across the country.

(Rainone 2020) asserted that it is important to acknowledge and recognize the rich history and diverse empires that thrived in Africa for thousands of years before the devastating impact of slavery. However, students are not introduced to the humanity of Black Americans in a meaningful way via textbooks (Rainone 2020). Florida state standards state that students should learn about Africans before the development of slavery (FLDOE, n.d.); however, a textbook in use (Lapsansky-Werner et al. 2018) failed to meet those criteria. In 2023, educational officials in Florida revealed that the FLDOE rejected over 30 social studies textbooks (Sokol and Ion et al. 2023). Not only were entire textbooks rejected, but passages were also rejected (Sokol and Ion et al. 2023). For example, educational officials required two particular passages to be removed: (a) a passage regarding the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a Minneapolis police officer; and (b) sections regarding the Black Lives Matter movement (Sokol and Ion et al. 2023). According to (Sokol and Ion et al. 2023), Florida's position regarding learning about the oppression, discrimination, and mistreatment of people of color and institutional racism is that it may cause some students to feel uncomfortable; therefore, officials considered such learning to be inappropriate and excluded it from the curriculum.

Given that history is the study of the past (Marwick 2001; North Carolina State University 2019; Stearns 1998), highlighting the triumphs and failures of all people who make up a society is essential to students' success. Therefore, ignoring the triumphs and failures of all people who make up a society contributes to the absence of success and the inability to think critically (Wenger 2021) for students who cannot find themselves on the pages of the text or included in the historical dialogue. Nevertheless, Black American students must learn a Eurocentric history wherein they are often excluded from the historical narrative (Cole 2008; Hernandez 2020; Knott-Dawson 2019; Zimmerman 2004). Eurocentric history is centered around myths and pretenses of U.S. and world history, neglecting the presence and the importance of people of color as it relates to their experiences, accomplishments, and advancements

(Cole 2008; Du Bois 1924/2020; Hernandez 2020; Knott-Dawson 2019; Zimmerman 2004). Furthermore, the history curriculum taught in the United States does not provide an accurate account of the African legacy and heritage, leaving students of color without anyone to admire or aspire to be like (Cole 2008; Newell 2016; Zimmerman 2004). (Stearns 1998) proposed that accurate, inclusive historical content contributes to the aspirations and hope of people studying the text; therefore, Black American students must have representation in the historical narrative (Steele 1992). Even with this knowledge, the history curriculum has failed students of color, not because of what is taught but because of what is intentionally left out (Steele 1992). The omission of African people from the history textbooks creates a biased curriculum wherein Black American students may feel undervalued (Steele 1992).

Eurocentric curricula limit Black American students' academic growth, identity development, and self-image, providing very few, if any, positive influences for students of color (Burrell 2010; Newell 2016; Woodson 2017). Even with the discourse and research surrounding the impact that biased curriculum has on Black American students, the current historical texts that Black American students are required to learn largely omit the African existence throughout the world (Cole 2008; High School of America n.d.; Newell 2016; Steele 1992; Zimmerman 2004). This lack of representation harms Black American students because it conveys that Africans and Black Americans are unimportant (Burrell 2010; Newell 2016; Steele 1992; Woodson 2017; Zimmerman 2004).

People in a society learn what makes them essential, who they are, where they come from, and why a particular social order exists, mainly from the context of history (American Historical Association [AHA], n.d.). For students of color, the who, where, and why have been intentionally excluded from the curriculum (Duncan 2013; Giddings 2001; Steele 1992; Yacovone 2018). Excluding the majority of information related to Black Americans, except for the enslavement of their ancestors, might create a deficiency among Black students (Burrell 2010; Knott-Dawson 2019; Marshall and William 2023; Newell 2016; Woodson 2017). For many students, their first introduction to Black history comes through school textbooks, and a curriculum that excludes people of color from its content is detrimental to Black American students (Knott-Dawson 2019; Steele 1992; Woodson 2017). School textbooks highlighting the accomplishments of people of color are sporadically included, if at all (Mineo 2020; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 2007; Rainone 2020). The majority of stories describing Africans portray them as barbaric or savage people who were saved from an uncivilized Africa (Knott-Dawson 2019). No matter how untrue the message, it still implies that African people are less than human, are only fit for servitude, that their initial stage of life began in bondage, and that the superior race owned them (Knott-Dawson 2019; Public Broadcast Station 2001; Woodson 2017).

U.S. historians, curriculum writers, and textbook writers seem not to be moving toward incorporating the humanity of Black Americans (Blatch 2013; Greenlee 2019; Van 2003; Zaslavsky 1983). Although slavery was never the exclusive history of Africans before or after European colonization, students have not learned of the richly diverse history of their African ancestors before U.S. enslavement, and the existing history curriculum has mostly glossed over slavery itself (D'Orio 2019). For instance, various manuscripts have documented revolts, uprisings, and the lived experiences of enslaved individuals (Pargas and Felicia 2018), yet this information is often omitted from the history curriculum (Boudreau 2021). U.S. students are not typically introduced to people like Matilsa McCrear, a young African girl who vividly remembers her family's dislocation when they were taken from their homeland and brought to the United States (Durkin 2020). Students are also not introduced to the desperation that Matilsa, her family, and millions of other enslaved Africans felt as they longed for home and freedom, attempting drastic measures to escape their captivity (Durkin 2020). The education system excludes counter-stories such as Matilsa's from the historical context taught to students. This exclusion removes the humanity of African people and insinuates that people of color had no history before U.S. slavery. For these reasons, including all people in the history curriculum is vital (Isenberg 2016; Loewen 2018; Zinn 2015).

Withholding factual historical information from students of color may restrict the intellectual growth and potential of Black American students (Steele 1992). Withholding such information can subconsciously teach Black American students to look at themselves and the world through the eyes of the oppressor (Hayes 2019; Zimmerman 2004). When students learn a history that emphasizes only chronological dates and the acknowledgment of a particular group of people and events, they are denied the opportunity to think critically about the world (Loewen 2018). Exclusion also denies them the opportunity to understand the current condition of U.S. society (Loewen 2018). Therefore, Black American students should learn a historical account that includes people who look like them. Experiencing an accurate historical narrative of African people may enable Black American students to understand the persecution people of color face in the United States in modern times, which stems from over 400 years of torment, oppression, and discrimination (Wolf 2012).

A true historical narrative might also aid Black American students in understanding how and why some Europeans were able to prohibit enslaved Africans from receiving an education, and how they were able to enforce their racist propaganda for so long (Jay 1835; Wolf 2012; Woodson 2017). Withholding facts concerning Africans in addition to accurate information concerning the genocide of North America's Native people, the evils of slavery, the European inability to establish the United States as a world leader without Africans, and how intentional oppression has led to the current state of Black American people prohibit Black American students from understanding the world (Beckert and Seth 2016; Nelson 2001; Porter 1997; Romanowski 1996). Misinformation strategically placed Black Americans in a position where they were robbed of their right to knowledge, power, and independence (Steele 1992; Woodson 2017). An authentic history curriculum might assist students in understanding how prohibiting Black Americans from their fundamental human rights enabled European Americans to systematically erase the positive self-image of Black Americans and replace it with images of poverty-stricken, worthless, and lazy people (Burrell 2010; Merelman, 1993; Woodson 2017). These simple truths may not only inform Black American students but also empower them (Merelman, 1993).

School textbooks include little historical information about people of color, representing them as strong and courageous; further, excluding people of color from the curriculum hinders all students' opportunities to think critically about the world in which they live (Cole 2008). Exclusion robs students of color of the opportunity to learn about the greatness of African people and Africa (Steele 1992; Woodson 2017). The aspirations of Black American students might also be snuffed out when they are given few role models to admire (Steele 1992). Students may find it more difficult to thrive and grow intellectually when they are hindered from learning about people who look like them (Steele 1992).

Countless Black American students do not learn of Black businesspeople, scientists, educators, or scholars while attending public schools in the United States, although countless people of color fit into these categories and have made immense contributions

to the United States and the world (Blatch, 2013; Merelman 1993; Zimmerman, 2004). For this reason, many Black American students find no interest in school, specifically history and social studies, resulting in poor performance (Berry & Candis 2013; Duncan, 2013; Williams 2013). Poor performance may result from a lack of relatability to the curriculum (Duncan, 2013). A history curriculum that neglects and ignores the humanity of its African citizens can weigh heavily on the minds of Black American students and may affect their educational experience, aspirations, and self-image, leaving them with feelings of being inferior (Lake 1996; Marks 2005; Merelman 1993; Zimmerman 2004). Vice President Humphrey warned of the scarring that racist textbooks would have on the mentalities of Black American students in the 1960s (Zimmerman 2004), yet very few attempts have been made toward correcting the mandatory historical texts (Loewen 2018; Zinn 2015).

The impact of fabricated and misleading history on the educational experience of Black American students has been evident (Steele 1992; Woodson 2017), yet many publishers and educators have not taken measures to address it (Greenlee 2019; Loewen 2018; Zinn 2015). An unwillingness to include Black and Brown faces in the context is evident annually as Black American stories are left out of the school curriculum. Students of color are overlooked and hindered from excelling in school due to a biased curriculum, which stems from a systemic, racist education system. This system, also known as institutional racism, places students at the mercy of biased curriculum and prejudiced educators who believe education is unimportant to Black American students and their families (Gillborn 2005; Puchner and Linda 2015).

Black American students are required to learn a history wherein their history is omitted, combined with many educators' reluctance to insert factual historical knowledge concerning African people due to their lack of awareness of Black history, racist attitudes, or biased perceptions (Gillborn 2005; Puchner and Linda 2015). Black American students are underrepresented in the history curriculum, where they are seldom introduced to their rich, diverse African history and heritage (Greenlee 2019). Research has revealed that educator bias and the lack of representation in the curriculum are not only intentional but also reinforce the concept of inferiority in the minds of Black students, hindering academic excellence and the development of self-image and self-identity (Gillborn 2005; Williams 2013).

Given that the United States was founded on marketing Black Americans as inferior, the history curriculum has followed the same pattern by creating a system wherein Black American students do not learn self-knowledge, self-respect, dignity, or pride while attending school that their White American peers learn (Burrell 2010; Duncan 2013; Giddings 2001). Students who cannot identify with the information presented may shut down and disconnect (Lake 1996; Marks 2005). (Lake 1996; Marks 2005) explained how self-perception and motivation directly relate to Black American students' success and failure. (Burrell 2010) described the vital need to incorporate content relevant to the Black American existence and experience in education to improve academic achievement, increase student engagement, and improve self-image and self-worth. The exclusion of Black Americans from the curriculum is an intentional form of oppression and hurts the minds of Black American students (Gillborn 2005; Steele 1992; Williams 2013; Zimmerman 2004). U.S. history curriculum has not acknowledged the torment, exploitation, accomplishments, or spirit of perseverance of Africans in the United States or around the world (Loewen 2018; Steele 1992; Woodson 2017; Zimmerman 2004). As a result, Black American students are impacted negatively (Steele 1992; Woodson 2017; Zimmerman 2004).

Given that school history is taught as accurate, trustworthy, and factual (Berg 2017; National History Education Clearinghouse 2018), the subject matter included in the text should be accurate and inclusive of all societies and all people of the past (Zimmerman 2004). Historical inclusion might help improve the academic achievement gap, yielding a sense of pride, aspiration, and direction among Black American students (Woodson 2017). Curriculum bias should be considered unacceptable because curriculum largely shapes academic outcomes and speaks to a collective commitment to dismantling racism and creating a culture of belonging and appreciation of diversity.

3. Overview of Theoretical Framework

I selected sankofa as a theoretical framework. Sankofa was developed to help black students, primarily in the diaspora, gain a deeper understanding of their history and identity in a global context (Slater 2019; Talpade 2020). For scholars researching African genealogies of knowledge, sankofa is a method for remembering and restoring what was lost due to the diaspora. Sankofa is interpreted as implying that, as people create new knowledge, they also stand to gain by reaching into the past. It is both a theoretical framework and a research method based on the experiences of people of African descent worldwide. Sankofa challenges the notion that Black people lack a shared cultural genealogy. Even though Black people in the diaspora are scattered across the world, sankofa provides a way to understand and define their history. The stories of historical origin might be many and different, but the genesis is in Africa.

4. Overview of Methodology

I selected a qualitative methodology to address this study's purpose. (Creswell 2012) explained that "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Qualitative research explores questions such as how and why because the research aims to understand "what" a participant thinks as well as "why" the participant thinks so (Creswell 2012; Keegan 2009; Stake 2005). At the core of qualitative research lies the necessity to understand why or how something relates to human behavior (Creswell and Cheryl 2018; Keegan 2009), deeming phenomenology the most appropriate qualitative approach for this study. One of the main goals of qualitative research methodology is to evaluate knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. Therefore, I selected phenomenology as the appropriate qualitative approach (Keegan 2009). A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals and focuses on the cohesive experiences of the participants (Creswell 2012; Creswell and Abbas 2007; Todd 2016).

5. Data Sources

I selected a qualitative methodology to address this study's purpose. (Creswell 2012) explained that "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Qualitative research explores questions such as how and why because the research aims to understand "what" a participant thinks as well as "why" the participant thinks so (Creswell 2012; Keegan 2009; Stake 2005). At the core of qualitative research lies the necessity to understand why or how something relates to human behavior.

Despite the many new forms of data that have emerged in the literature, all data can still be grouped into four basic types of information (Creswell 2012, 2014; Creswell and Abbas 2018; Merriam and Elizabeth 2015). Information from data sources can include interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. I used two of the four data sources for this phenomenological study: interviews and document analysis (i.e., textbooks).

Because this was a phenomenological study, collecting data involved in-depth interviews with as many participants as needed (Creswell and Abbas 2018). The importance of interviews in this study was to gain in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon and to provide an accurate description and interpretation of its meaning for individuals who experienced it (Creswell and Abbas 2018). Interviews are essential to the data collection process and to understanding the phenomenon being studied (Smith and Paul et al. 2009). Interviews are more than just stories participants share.

6. Research Question

The following central research question guided this study: How do selected Black high school graduates perceive the history curriculum in the Southeastern United States?

7. Literature Review

7.1 Absence of Storytelling in the U.S. History Curriculum

Education aims to produce informed citizens, foster pride, stimulate self-identity, and promote self-worth (Apple 2003; Woodson 2017). With this goal in mind, historians aim to tell a unified story (Reed 2021). However, the problem in the history curriculum is that U.S. history has been told from the dominant narrative (Reed 2021). No unity has existed in the one-sided story told to U.S. students because the experiences and perspectives of people of color are often left out (Reed 2021). U.S. history textbooks tend to begin with the colonization of North America and do not necessarily include the experiences of the Native American people whose homeland was stolen from them (Reed 2021). When the history curriculum instructs students on African enslavement, the experiences and perspectives of the Africans are generally not included in the narrative because it tends to be told from the enslaver's perspective and not that of the enslaved (Reed 2021). Intentionally omitting information from the history curriculum creates a lack of storytelling.

(Greenlee 2019 and Yacovone 2018) suggested that an absence of storytelling harms students of color by teaching a nonacademic lesson to both Black and White students that is founded on systemic racial bias and prejudices. (Mirage News 2023) stated, "Psychologists propose that we think in narrative structures, creating life stories that give our lives meaning and shape our self-identity; thus, storytelling exerts powerful influences on our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors" (para. 8). (Crenshaw and Neil et al. 2010) claimed that the absence of storytelling preserves stereotypes and diminishes the experiences of people of color. A curriculum that offers only a single, one-sided perspective is dangerous (Adichie 2009).

(Loewen 2018) studied 300 Black and White 11th- and 12th-grade students to determine the influence of thought and attitudes on the preservation of stereotypes in the absence of storytelling. The study measured students' perceptions of the social studies curriculum (Loewen 2018). To gain insight, each student completed a 5-point Likert-scale survey (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; Loewen 2018). This study also measured students' perceptions of how the history curriculum shaped their historical and current understanding of race relations in the United States (Loewen 2018). The interpretation of results differed significantly between Black and White students. (Loewen 2018) stated:

There was a significant difference in responses between Black and White students' beliefs: (a) the curricula provide a misrepresentation of historical events, such as downplaying the contribution of Black people to global initiatives; (b) leaving out the contributions of black scientists, advocates, or political leaders; and (c) inaccurately describing the social condition of other races based on outdated information and biased viewpoints. (p. 52)

7.2 Textbook Biases

Biases in textbooks stem from decades of misinformation and distortions (King et al. 2012; Yacovone 2018). The narratives in textbooks and curricula can be traced back to the 1800s, when authors created an image of Black Americans as the inferior race to White Americans. This narrative has been systemically normalized, and biased beliefs have been ingrained in society, while school curricula have reinforced them (King et al. 2012).

(Singleton 2020) study corroborated the assertions of (King et al. 2012) and (Yacovone 2018). (Singleton 2020) conducted a qualitative content analysis of the third- through fifth-grade social science curriculum, focusing on how history was taught in schools. More specifically, the study focused on analyzing how African enslavement was taught in context. (Singleton's 2020) study suggested that false narratives concerning enslavement and immigration were present in the text, alluding to the idea that enslavement and immigration are equivalent in choice, opportunities, and experiences. For example, the history curriculum that fifth-grade students were required to learn suggested that Africans came to the United States not as enslaved people but by way of migration. The text suggested that Africans migrated to this country with the intent of picking cotton and working on plantations to achieve the American dream (Singleton 2020). (Singleton 2020) pointed out that misrepresentation of facts, such as Africans migrating to achieve the American dream on plantations, supported American exceptionalism and erased the exact process and callousness of enslavement; the inhumaneness of the lived experiences of the enslaved; and the aftermath that lingers in modern systems, practices, and perceptions. The study also highlighted that students learned to see themselves through the social studies curriculum; this view is problematic for Black American students because they are frequently introduced to themselves as property

or the descendants of enslaved people. (Singleton 2020) pointed out that the social studies curriculum informed Black American students of their value and worth or lack thereof; therefore, when people of color are not mentioned or mentioned as an afterthought or person of insignificance, students learn a great deal about Black Americans.

8. Findings

8.1 Social Construction of Race in the U.S. History Curriculum

In the United States, students of color often experience extensive and diverse educational challenges (Banks and Cherry 2007; G. Gay, 2018; Villegas et al. 2012); many of the challenge's students face stem from their educational settings due to race and racism because "the social construction of race is fundamentally a story of power" (Stein 2005). The idea of race as a way of classifying people according to insignificant physical traits is a relatively recent invention that both overlaps with and constructs the history of the United States (Stein 2005).

Due to the creation of race as a social construct, Black people have suffered many inhumane acts to maintain systems of oppression (Aiyetoro 2023). Aiyetoro stated, "The first lie that underpins all the other lies" in constructing and maintaining race as a social construction and a system of oppression is that "race is a biological fact" (p. 417). In their works, (Bell 2018; Delgado et al. 2023; Demaske and Stevens 2024; Ladson-Billings 2023) all supported (Aiyetoro's 2023) assertion; each maintained that despite the scientific evidence proving that the biological differences in the races are microscopic and genetic research has revealed that race is not a reliable indicator of inherent differences, the social constructs and system of oppression are influenced by the disproven belief that race contributes to inherent differences such as worth, intelligence, and ability. Although scholars in recent years have come to understand race not as a factual, unchanging, or natural reality but as an artificial structure (Stein 2005), systems of oppression stemming from the social construction of race still exist in education.

One effect of the social construction of race is that White Americans have a seemingly unjustified, imbalanced, and unmerited advantage over Black Americans (Delgado et al. 2023; Pawley et al. 2018). The impact of this unfair advantage exists in the history curriculum, which uses the social construction of race to create a curriculum wherein students learn that Black people are less than or inferior to White people (Yacovone 2018).

8.2 Consequences of History Curriculum Bias

Marcus Garvey declared that "a people without knowledge of their past is like a tree without roots" (Pine 2011). (Burrell 2010) emphasized Garvey's declaration, suggesting that an individual unaware of their own history not only robs them of self-pride and identity but also makes them more susceptible to accepting negative stereotypes, images, and self-defeating attitudes and behaviors imposed by those who wish to oppress them. Therefore, when students are taught fictitious information, whether that be in the form of the explicitly biased history curriculum, a null-bias history curriculum, or hidden biases in the history curriculum, they are robbed of proper education, provided that education is meant to enhance and enrich the lives of people (Blaisdell 2013; Woodson 2017).

(Blaisdell 2013 and Woodson 2017) suggested that education enables students to think critically, draw conclusions about the world, and make informed life decisions. (Blaisdell 2013 and Woodson 2017) also described education as a source of inspiration that should never hinder students. (Stabback 2016 and Malik et al. 2017) described the curriculum as a bridge between education and development. Provided that curriculum is the bridge between education and development, students should not be bombarded with half-truths or fabricated stories (Muskan 2020; Stabback 2016; Yacovone 2018). Further, the history curriculum should not be silent on any manner of history, because doing so robs students of a real education (Yacovone 2018). Withholding proper education from students of color may result in poor academic achievement and complicate the development of self-identity (Bell 1980, 2018; Ladson-Billings 2023; Lee 2021; Rouland 2017). In addition to the provided research studies highlighting biased history curriculum, sankofa emphasizes the importance of examining and understanding society's role in shaping how people perceive, experience, and respond to racism (Lacy 2022).

8.3 Incomplete History

The inability of the history curriculum to reflect the history of minorities, particularly Black history in the 21st century, supports (Coleman's 2021) assertion that education curricula are used as weapons to separate, disenfranchise, and reinforce White superiority. (Coleman's 2021) assertion is supported by (Yacovone 2018), who opined that Whiteness is endorsed in the history curriculum, functioning as a testimonial to privilege and superiority through curriculum biases. The theme of incomplete history affirmed (Morgan's 2017) suggestion that many U.S. citizens would assume that textbooks published before 1970 were biased. However, modern textbooks only sparsely include the full historical accounts of Black people and other people of color, but continue to uplift White Americans fully.

8.4 Interest Convergence in the U.S. History Curriculum

The invisibility of Black people in the curriculum, coupled with educational policies and practices, supports (Bell's 1980) concept of interest convergence, as described in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma. (Bell 1980) asserted that racial advances were not primarily dedicated to racial justice but to the convergence of interests in the dominant group's broader political and societal interests. The lack of understanding White students held regarding race and racism, as revealed in (Martell's 2013) studies, related to history, supported (Bell's 1980) assertions. U.S. students have yet to receive an all-inclusive, accurate world and U.S. history curriculum because it does not benefit the dominant group that controls how the history narrative is written. The disproportionate allocation of societal and cultural capital in society mirrors an equal distribution of knowledge among students (Kumashiro 2000; D. Ross and Bondy 2013), further exemplifying a need for the current study.

Several studies have supported (Bell's 1980) assertions regarding interest convergence. For example, (Morgan's 2017) study highlighted that modern textbooks of today that include Black Americans and other people of color only do so sparsely and in roles that uplift White Americans. (Milner 2017) stated that racial equality and equity for people of color will be engaged and moved forward only when the expectations, needs, interests, and ideologies of White Americans are converged.

8.5 Implications

The findings of this study contribute significantly to sankofa and existing literature on education, curriculum bias, and racial representation. First, the findings contribute to the existing literature by providing concrete examples of Eurocentrism and White perspectives dominating historical narratives (Blaisdell 2013; IDRA 2016; Sadker 2003; Soto 2015; Stovall 2005; Williams 2013). The characterization of history as “boring, half-truths” by study participants emphasized the need for more critical analyses of textbook content, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the importance of diverse and accurate representations in educational materials.

The study unpacked the construction of race as a social tool by delving into how the history curriculum has presented it as a tool of oppression, and by deeply exploring the psychological and aspirational impacts on students. This study contributes to understanding education’s role in identity formation and reinforces its critique of education as a tool for shaping racial hierarchies (Bell 2018; Delgado 2013; Demaske and Stevens 2024). By connecting curriculum content to students’ self-perceptions and aspirations, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the broader societal implications of biased education.

9. Conclusion

A study of Black people in the diaspora reveals a deep connection to Africa and Africanness across generations. Many Black students studying at various institutions of learning note that key components of ancestral knowledge are missing from Eurocentric educational systems. A return to roots (sankofa) is crucial not only for academic achievement but also for understanding one’s place and purpose in world affairs. While a physical or personal return to Africa is not possible for all students, books and schools can provide students with a ‘return to Africa’ for intellectual growth and to gain knowledge that Black history does not begin with slavery or colonialism.

In this paper, we highlighted how sankofa invites all learners, not only Black students, to learn more about the historical and cultural genealogy of Black students and to include African worldviews in any dialogue about the human family. We conclude by arguing for the need to use African theoretical frameworks and ways of engaging with the world in various research methodologies (Banda and Banda 2018). I also argue that a history of the human experience is best understood through understanding and utilizing Sankofa.

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