

Journey Box: Black History Month

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Abstract

Teaching young children about social studies can sometimes take the backburner as more standards and standardized tests now emphasize math and literacy abilities. In this Journey Box Project, I aimed to bring the focus back to those subjects that are pushed to the side. Inside my box, articles, pictures, books, and other manipulatives can be found to provide an interactive unit for elementary aged students. I wanted a topic that was relevant to our society today and decided upon Black History Month. My main focus in choosing this topic was to help children understand that black history is American history and why it is important that we celebrate it.

Introduction

As part of my Social Studies for the Young Learner class, we were assigned a project called the Journey Box Project. We were to pick a person, place, or event and create an interactive unit. I wanted to stretch myself to learn about something I was not as familiar with, but also pick a topic that was meaningful to our current society. I immediately thought about black history because I knew very little about it. How often in school do we take history courses and just learn about old white men? Women and black people are very often left out of our lessons. I wanted to create a unit that would get my future students excited about black history and make them realize how important it is to learn about all of our history as a nation. Some teachers are very nervous to talk and learn about race, but I wanted to open up the conversation to make

students more comfortable and knowledgeable.

Main Body

My first task in creating this project was to figure out what my inquiry question was going to be. This question would shape my entire project and be my end goal for my future students' understanding. I decided upon, "Why do we celebrate Black History Month?" because I wanted the students to be able to understand the importance in recognizing black history as American history and in talking about race in an open and safe environment. Then, I had a choice on whether I would turn my project into a one-day lesson with different stations or if I wanted to do a multi-day unit. I chose a multi-day unit so that I was able to go more in-depth on the subject. I broke my unit into five days, each day focusing on a different

aspect of black history. I set up the first day to be an introduction to the unit. The second day focused on what Black History Month actually was and what it included. Day three turned to the important names. Students were challenged to look beyond what they thought they knew about these historical figures and dig deeper to learn how they truly contributed to history. The fourth day focused on a timeline of important dates and places where students learned that not all resources are truthful and then conducted their own individual research. The fifth and final day was the wrap-up. I brought students back to the original "why" question, so they could fully understand the purpose of the Journey Box Project. By beginning with the question and then refocusing at the end, students looked for the "why" throughout the process and took everything they learned into their final summative assessment.

I wanted to slowly introduce students to the topic, in case they were unfamiliar with black history or unfamiliar with how to talk about different races. I began with a Quick Write, a strategy I learned from Dr. Himmele, so students could share their initial thoughts about what they thought they knew. I did similar activities each day before I had them dig into the content. I wanted the first day to be a preparation for other things they might encounter, like offensive language. People in the past, and sometimes still today, use harsh language when talking about people of different races than their own. I knew I would have to undergo that conversation with students. If they saw that type of language, they had to know that it was not appropriate, but it was considered a norm in history. I grabbed some resources online from history.com about Black History

Month that talked about the origins and people who made it happen. Before I could talk to them about what it was, why it was important, etc., I had to first address how it came about.

For the second day, I wanted to do stations because there was far too much content to cover. I pulled an article, a poem, photographs for a gallery walk, and a video by kids, for kids. Since I could not teach all of the material about what Black History Month is, I wanted students to take the opportunity to explore some of the culture and material. Students are naturally very curious, so the main day would need to be open for students to conduct their own learning. To find these resources, I did some digging of my own. I searched for reliable articles and other resources that had bigger picture ideas and deeper meanings. Some of the books that I found I saved for the following day when I would focus on the bigger names in black history. I researched big events and then found the individuals behind them. When I looked for said books, I knew they would have to be more descriptive than the stereotypical, "Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream," and focus more on his actions and his life. We learned in our class about herofication, which is when a person in history is labeled as a hero for one incident and the rest of their lives are forgotten, and I wanted my future students to be aware of this issue too. I wanted each student to become an "expert" on one person and then be able to share their knowledge with the class. I used K-W-L charts to have students decipher between what individuals were famous for and what they actually did. My closing activity was then a Quick Draw,

another technique from Dr. Himmele, to demonstrate how their thinking changed about a historical figure that one of their classmates researched.

The fourth day would also need a lot of resources, so I used some of the same books and websites, but then did some research of my own to provide more options for students. I searched the Millersville Library for children's books, articles, and websites on black history. I also used resources that were provided to me in class by Dr. Burke. Students would create a timeline to see how events in black history actually correlated with events typically taught in history classes. With their timeline of events, I wanted students to then look at the places that were featured in these historic moments. I knew just looking at pictures of places was not enough, so I made it interactive. I found an article that encouraged students to use Google Maps to virtually walk through places in history. I had students compare the pictures I had of these places when the special events took place and then compare them to what they look like now on Google Maps. Students could travel to these destinations that they were learning about for a more realistic learning experience.

The final day then had to be a culmination of everything they had learned in the previous days. I focused back in on that original question, "Why do we celebrate Black History Month?" I used another technique called Chalkboard Splash that I learned from Dr. Himmele's class. I would write the question on the board and have students reply with their answers on sticky notes. Students would need to explain why they wrote their answer and back it up with evidence from the unit. To finish up the unit,

I would have an open discussion with students to see what they got from the previous lessons. I prepared some questions, in hopes that they would dig deeper into the importance of the celebration and the discussion of race itself. My last thought was to have a summative assessment for students to individually complete so I could assess their understanding of the topic and provide more instruction, if needed. I chose the Brown Bag summative assessment, which I also learned from Dr. Burke's class. Students take the unit question, draw something on the front of the bag to represent their answer, and then fill their bag with answers to the question, supported by their learning during the unit. Completing a summative assessment for this unit was especially important because I wanted to be able to physically assess if students were understanding the bigger picture ideas behind the unit. I wanted them to realize that they do not normally talk about these subjects in school, but that they should. They would have heard a lot of new names and events that had not been mentioned in classes before, but should have. I wanted students to understand why it is important to start the conversation.

Conclusion

It was not until college that I was exposed to people who were very different than myself. It was not until college that I understood what it meant to have white privilege. It was not until college that I had a class where I learned about black history. It was not until college that I had diversity training and learned the power of my own language. It is my belief that children should

be exposed to these things early on in life. I think that if we can have conversations about race with children, they will not be afraid or uncomfortable to do it when they are adults. The place to do this is in the classroom. So with this project, I aimed to start the conversation. I wanted my future students to know about many different aspects of American history, including black history, which is a major part of it. My future classroom will be one of advocates and well-rounded individuals. I want them to be curious and ask deep questions. This Journey Box Project was a first step in my journey to becoming a more inclusive and knowledgeable educator.

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