

Blog post

Black History Month: Moving beyond tokenism

[Denise Miller, Associate Professor at University of Greenwich](#) 21 Oct 2024

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I was inspired to write this blog post after contributing to a social media soundbite for Black History Month, specifically addressing the challenges Black researchers face. The cognitive dissonance that followed left me reflecting on the gap between surface-level gestures and the systemic issues that perpetually remain unaddressed.

Throughout October, educational institutions across the UK will be commemorating Black History Month. Traditionally, October is designated as the month for UK-based educators to honour the achievements and contributions of Black people. This is often done through displays of posters featuring world-renowned Black historical figures, organising panel events focused on discussing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), sharing diverse food and music from around the globe, and inviting guest speakers to discuss the achievements of Black people.

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While these activities may seem to align with broader EDI efforts, upon closer examination, they often reveal a deeper issue: that is, tokenism. In many cases, the superficial engagement with Black history suggests a lack of genuine interest in systemic change or ongoing engagement. Critical race theory highlights how the allure of tokenistic gestures can often make things worse (Plitmann, 2022). When Black history is reduced to comfortable and unchallenging narratives, it risks sidelining critical conversations about institutional power and systemic racism. In this way, Black History Month can easily become a ‘tick-box’ exercise, where EDI metrics are temporarily met, but the root causes of systemic inequality remain unaddressed.

The problem with taking a tokenistic approach is that it often means that Black History Month becomes a fleeting performance rather than a catalyst for change. Moreover, when educational institutions treat Black history as a one-off annual event, it reinforces the notion that Black contributions are peripheral, rather than central to the national narrative (Leach et al., 2020). This approach risks reinforcing rather than challenging existing power structures. As Ladson-Billings argues, education systems must go beyond superficial inclusion and adopt a ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’ that highlights Black experiences and perspectives throughout the year (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

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Black History Month risks perpetuating a ‘sanitised’ version of history by focusing on palatable figures, while ignoring the more radical voices that challenge entrenched power structures. As an example, Hunt and colleagues (2021) note that the UK’s consistent focus on Martin Luther King as a historical figure, parallels similar trends in the US. In the UK, this focus often serves as a substitute for engaging with our own Black history and imperial past, and results in ‘cultural amnesia’ about the significance of race and racism in Britain (Hunt et al., 2021, p. 391). The authors advocate for more relevant teaching of King’s legacy and a greater focus on Black British history.

To move beyond tokenism, educational institutions must integrate Black history into their EDI strategies consistently throughout the year, not just in October. Put differently, Black history should not be treated as an optional add-on or be confined to a specific month. Instead, it must be seen as an essential and foundational part of the broader educational offer and the UK's Black British narrative. This requires a shift at every level of education, from early years through to higher education, and includes reimagining curricula, policies and everyday practices. This kind of systemic commitment is supported by Lee and colleagues' (2011) concept of moving 'beyond the heroes and holidays' approach to multicultural education.

Conclusion

As institutions mark Black History Month, they must assess whether their actions contribute to meaningful change or perpetuate tokenism. To avoid reducing Black History Month to a performative exercise, educational organisations must use this time as a springboard for systemic changes that last well beyond October. This requires integrating Black history into the curriculum all year round, valuing Black voices, and addressing institutional power structures that perpetuate inequality. Without such efforts, by November, it will indeed be back to business as usual, and the opportunity for real progress will have been missed.

References

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Denise Miller achieved a BA in education from the University of Greenwich. She taught in primary schools for eight years before training to become an educational psychologist. After achieving an MSc in educational psychology from University College London, she started working as a fully qualified educational psychologist in the London Borough of Lambeth. Her work involved supporting parents and teachers to meet the needs of marginalised children and those with special educational needs and disabilities, through assessment, consultation and in-service training. In 2014, Denise successfully completed a doctorate in educational and child psychology and then returned to the University of Greenwich as a senior lecturer. Currently, Denise is an associate professor in the School of Human Sciences, and a Child and Educational Psychologist in private practice. Denise continues to work in all educational settings, as well as clinical and legal (as an expert witness) contexts.