

# ARE WE TEACHING WORLD HISTORY?

*The study of world history in our public schools has been influenced by a western orientation. In our diverse world it is important to understand how students of today view this limitation. One New Jersey high school student offers her opinion.*

## **A 9th Grade History Student's Perspective on the Curriculum**

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As I walked into my Period 10 World History class at the beginning of my freshman year, I felt excited to learn about international cultures and dig deeper into past civilizations that have existed throughout the world. Because my parents are from India, I particularly wanted to learn more about my ancestral home. However, as the school year went on, I was disappointed to find that the only thing we were learning about was European civilizations. I felt upset as I considered the narrowness of this perspective, and I was determined to share my experience and convey my feelings about why this approach to teaching world history is so damaging.



A [study](#), done by the National Library of Medicine, states, "...Differing perceptions of race by teachers can lead to negative expectations of minority students and impact on the students' achievements as was shown in studies from the United States." In other words, including sources or lesson plans in the curriculum that misrepresent students in the classroom can negatively affect their perception of themselves.

However, this study also introduces a solution to this situation: the skill of intercultural competence which was defined in this study as “the capability of changing the cultural perspective and adapting to cultural differences”. Adding to this definition, “It is the competence to encounter other cultures positively and to interpret oneself in varying cultural ways.” For example, only mentioning India when it coincides with European colonialism is a detrimental mistake. Students of Indian ancestry will feel misrepresented and marginalized by the lack of regard for Indian culture, or life in India before Europeans ever discovered it.

Now, think back to when you were a little kid and were learning about Christopher Columbus. Did you think that he was a hero or villain? What opinions did you form about him? A [study](#) from Stanford Children’s Health notes, “Cognitive development means the growth of a child’s ability to think and reason. This growth happens differently from ages 6 to 12, and from ages 12 to 18.” During these ages, most people are still participating in school, which gives the information they absorb in the classroom a lot of power in shaping and forming their first opinions. By only displaying the dominant or European perspective of past events, schools are choosing to assist students in developing perspectives that give authority to the dominant culture. Going back to the previous example, there are varied narratives offered about Christopher Columbus, the man who “discovered” the region that would soon become America. When I was in second grade and first learned about the origins of Columbus Day, I learned that Christopher Columbus was a hero and deserved to be celebrated. However, when I was in fifth grade, the narrative changed. My teacher assigned us a video that talked about how Columbus can also be considered a villain because he committed a genocide of the Indigenous population in the Americas. It is essential to offer multiple perspectives so students can form the most factual opinions. Instead of only offering the former perspective of Christopher Columbus, teachers should strive to educate students with the latter as well.

The school year was finally coming to a close and I was about to part ways with my 9th grade world history class. Surprisingly, I was grateful for this class because it gave me the motivation to take on one of the biggest projects I have ever completed: the task of fighting against years of tradition in order to make sure everyone in a

classroom feels represented. During the summer, I contacted the social studies supervisor in my school district, Dr. Cindy Assini, who was interested in helping with the changes I was intending to make to the curriculum. I ended up working with her to compile information about the race, ethnicity, gender, etc of the authors of ninth grade world history resources. We found out that 87% of the sources were written specifically by white men, and 13% were written by anybody else (specifically women and people of color). This piece of information was extremely shocking to us because according to [the Washington Post](#), white men only represent 31% of the world population. I never would've figured this out if it weren't for my willing and open-minded social studies supervisor. This should indicate to you, the reader, that anyone can make an impactful change if they're really willing to.

In conclusion, it is crucial to represent all students in a classroom environment, and to represent them in a just and factual way. Consider the experience of the students in Elementary School P.S. 125 in Harlem. They read and discussed a children's book part of the 1619 project that narrated the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America. After doing this, one of the authors of the book reflected, "You can see from the dialogue that these students were able to engage in, that our children are capable of having complex thoughts in dealing with histories that are tough, and feeling empowered by that." Giving importance to global cultures and providing assignments that address multiple points of view can help students feel included within a classroom. It also addresses the generational trauma of multiple groups within the USA that frankly, hasn't been given much recognition before. It brings everyone's story to light, and lets us learn about all of America's heroes.