How to write about Black History Month when, to be blunt, we’re two white guys?

We had to recognize that we are coming from a position of privilege, that there’s a history of lived experience that is not our experience. To gain some perspective, we spoke with youth from the black community. These young people said that black history is much more than slavery. They made the connection between racism today and the blank spots in textbooks, and argued that Black History Month needs more Canada.

Petra Owusu was “floating” through high school in Windsor, Ontario. “Post-secondary education just wasn’t in the future for me,” she says.

Then she joined an African studies class, part of a special history curriculum developed by the Greater Essex County School Board. She was inspired by stories she’d never heard before—remarkable historic figures like escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. “Learning that there are black people who were successful showed me that I could be successful.”

Now 22, Owusu is studying history at the University of Windsor.

“It’s all about recognizing the role we’ve had, to see the potential we have,” adds Joel Ndongmi, 17, from Toronto. He feels empowered learning about the contributions of black Canadians in shaping our nation. He mentions escaped slaves and abolitionists Josiah Henson and Henry Bibb.

Discovering pre-colonial black history and the vibrant cultures that thrived throughout Africa, he says, is just as empowering. Most Canadians probably don’t know that in the heart of Zimbabwe sits a 900-year-old stone fortress, as formidable as any European castle—once the capital of a vast kingdom.

“Our history didn’t start with slavery. We had great empires once,” says 13-year-old Toronto student MaKayla Cole.

When her Toronto school put on a play about Viola Desmond, who in 1946 refused to give up her seat in a whites-only section of a Halifax theatre, 16-year-old Ola Olusegun had an epiphany. “I was surprised and shocked to learn that there was slavery and segregation here. Canadians know Canada as the country of freedom.”

Maybe it shouldn’t be surprising that Olusegun didn’t know.

All of the youth identified that there isn’t enough Canadian content in our black history. “Since Grade 1, every Black History Month I learn about the same American heroes, like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks,” says Esmirandah Ampong, 16.

The youth we spoke with say Canada tends to gloss over the darker sides of its history, seeing segregation and slavery as exclusively American problems. That knowledge gap affects the racism they encounter in their daily lives.

“People say Canada is the most accepting, but I’ve personally experienced racism. Not knowing our history stops people from realizing we have our own issues here,” says Bilal Mohamed, 18.

When asked what message they would give Canadians this month, a common theme emerged: Use it as a launch point for continued learning. “Take an hour out of each weekend and learn about the history of another culture,” says 23-year-old university student Siena Browning-Morgan.

Azieb Kidanu, 13, agrees: “It’s really good to have a month that pays attention to black history, but it’s even better to have a whole year.”

Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the WE movement, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out WE Stories.