Learning and Teaching about Enslavement

Central Historical Question:
How should the history of enslavement be taught?

Directions: Read and annotate the following documents, and comment on the margins. You should have at least **ONE comment per document and three highlighted parts**.

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Document A: 'We are committing educational malpractice': why slavery is mistaught — and worse — in American schools.

Nikita Stewart is a reporter covering social services focusing on City Hall in New York City for the New York section of The New York Times.

Unlike math and reading, states are not required to meet academic content standards for teaching social studies and United States history. That means there is no consensus on the curriculum around slavery, no uniform

recommendation to explain an institution debated in the crafting of the Constitution, and it has influenced nearly every aspect of American society since.

Think about what it would mean for our education system to properly teach students — young children and teenagers — about enslavement and what they would have to learn about our country. It's ugly. For generations, we've been unwilling to do it. Elementary-school teachers, worried about disturbing children, tell students about the "good" people, like the abolitionists and the black people. They escaped to freedom but leave out the details of why they were protesting or what they were fleeing. Middle-school and high-school teachers stick to lesson plans from outdated textbooks that promote long-held, errant views. That means students graduate with a poor understanding of how slavery shaped our country and cannot recognize its powerful and lasting effects.

So how did we get here? How have we been able to fail students for so long? Almost immediately after the Civil War, white Southerners and their sympathizers adopted an ideology called "the lost cause," an outlook that softened the brutality of enslavement and justified immorality. One proponent of the ideology was Edward A. Pollard, whose book "The Lost Cause" transformed many Confederate generals and soldiers into heroes and argued that slavery was proper because black people were inferior. The "lost cause" theory buried the truth that some 750,000 people died in a war because many white people wanted to maintain slavery. Over time, the theory became so ingrained in our collective thinking that even today, people believe that the Civil War was about the South's asserting its rights against the North, not about slavery.

About 80 percent of this country's 3.7 million teachers are white, and white educators, some of whom grew up learning that the Civil War was about states' rights, generally have a hand in the selection of textbooks, which can vary from state to state and from school district to school district. "These decisions are being made by people who learned about slavery differently at a different time," Costello told me.

The law center's study focused on high-school students, but the miseducation of children generally begins much earlier. Teachers bungle history as soon as children are learning to read. Because teachers and parents are often so afraid to frighten children, they awkwardly spin the history of this country. They focus on a handful of heroes like Harriet Tubman, whose picture is tacked to Black History Month and Women's History Month bulletin boards. Elementary-school students learn about our nation's founders but do not learn that many of them owned slaves.

... Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, who was enslaved by him, is described as "intimacy" and an "affair." Another passage from the [textbook *The American Pageant]* 15th edition states: "White masters would frequently force their attentions on female slaves, fathering a sizable mulatto population, most of which remained enchained." Costello noted that "it's a rather delicate way of describing rape." This section has since been edited, but the 15th edition remains in print. It's a reminder that although textbooks like "The American Pageant" are evolving, it's a slow process, and in the interim, misinformation about slavery persists.

Source: Nikita Stewart, "'We are committing educational malpractice': Why slavery is mistaught — and worse — in American schools," The 1619 Project, New York Times (2019).

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote this? When was it published? Where was it published?

2. (Explain) What do they find problematic with how current history is taught?

3. (Identify) What is the argument of this source?

4. (Infer) How do they want history to be taught?

Document B: A Student's Take on Sugar-coated History

This article was published online on Teaching for Justice in 2022. K.C.B. is a high school student in Alabama.

Education is the key to a strong society, so when information is hidden and dishonest, that hinders the future of our society and limits the amount of change possible.

An education consisting of glossed-over information like the one that so many students and I have received reduces the importance of substantial events in U.S. history to only a couple of sugar-coated textbook paragraphs in a textbook...

Our nation: We're taught that it's a land for all, a melting pot, and a place where liberty is a natural right. So how do we, students, execute these ideals if our education doesn't reflect them? How can we effectively change our society if we aren't taught the truth behind what we're changing? You can't know where you're going without knowing where you came from.

...That sugar-coated education is damaging in the worst way possible: Students in the U.S. are not educated honestly. As a student, particularly as a student of color, my education has been a disservice that has had a weighty impact on my life. I'm forced to work harder because I have to learn about my culture on my own time. And then, as if I haven't been through the same educational system as the rest of my class, I've been expected to know the most.

....A dishonest education is disorienting and destructive to a student's understanding of the real world. That is what my early education summed up. The foundation of false facts is laid down in early elementary school. From there, you're only given the tools necessary to continue to add to the falsities. That's

what happened to me. I was completely clueless about what was lacking, and eventually, the negative truth of all these unpleasant experiences I had with education hit me. I came to this realization thinking about what I was going through and what I wasn't learning. I was forced to remove all the layers of inaccurate information I initially put on.

After cleaning up the confusion from falsities and sugar-coated facts, I learned the importance of transparent education through art, music, speech, writing, and so on. It's our only route to real education and the root of all our expressions. How, then, can teachers effectively communicate such important principles to students? How can you teach someone the law, how can you teach them personal finance, how can you teach them literature, how can you teach them history—and how can you teach all of these things effectively? My advice is quite simple: Honesty is the answer.

A teacher's first duty is to their students. Hindering students with a false education—or a sugar-coated one—does not align with what is so necessary for a teacher to do. Instead of relying on a student's ability to correct a given curriculum, teachers can lean into their ability to lead. Educators can teach with clear expectations and give students ample support to actively engage in learning. Hold steadfast to educational promises made in the classroom, and when being vulnerable enough to show your imperfections (because you should, within reason), lend to students, with that same vulnerability, comfort in knowing the truth behind their curriculum and instruction.

I wish that future youth are allowed to have an honest education. I also hope that all cultures are included in education. Every group deserves to be regarded because, at the very least, that inclusion prepares students for what's to come. Throughout life, we will be exposed to people with different experiences than ours. How can we be an inclusive society if our education is not inclusive? How can we exercise liberty and equality if we don't know anything about the other communities that deserve those principles?

...It wasn't until recently that a more student-centered approach to education was highlighted. Education should always be tailored to meet students' needs. If the educator has enough information on the subject to teach it, they should be able to tailor it to focus on those learning it. There are so many methods, resources, and ways to research today. There are no more excuses to continue allowing a sugar-coated education with inaccurate information to dominate. We can change things for the better.

Education is key to a successful society. Hiding information and being dishonest with learning leave the socially disadvantaged. Educators should teach with honesty. My education started with a foundation that could not support the reality of my life and experiences. I had to sift through falsities and find my way forward. But I was empowered to get a clear picture, and that knowledge has forever impacted me in the best ways.

To truly be an inclusive society, we must value one another and our stories. We must learn from each other. We are capable of change and success. If we begin our education without sugar-coated paragraphs and with a focus on honesty, the impact on our society—and the world—will be extraordinary.

Source: K.C.B ., "A Student's Take on Sugar-coated History," Learning for Justice (2022).

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Document C: Ending Curriculum Violence

Stephanie P. Jones is an Assistant Professor of Education at Grinnell College and the founder of 'Mapping Racial Trauma in Schools.' She is also a member of the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board.

In elementary school, my teacher made me pick cotton. She brought each student their plant, and her goal was to make us understand how hard cotton is to pick. It has only been a couple of years since I publicly told this story. I kept it a secret for a couple of reasons. First, as a small child, I trusted my teacher and did not allow myself to believe that she would cause me or any other students harm. Second, after some years, I was ashamed that it had taken me this long to understand the impact of what had happened.

I understand now that this experience is why I later learned to hate family tree assignments, especially those that included pictures. How do you explain to your classmates and your teacher that your family is not missing, but the assignment will always be incomplete because you don't know their names or have pictures of them?

I started researching to find out. Every level of education has been affected by the presence of racial trauma. K to 12, private, public, parochial, and higher education institutions report racist incidents that include the isolation, bullying, taunting, stalking, intimidation, and physical assault of Black and Brown students. Although identifying these types of harm is important in capturing a realistic landscape of what school is like for many students, it leaves out what is often a more subtle aspect of racial trauma: curriculum violence.

... Curriculum violence warrants special attention because, while it is not as highly reported as other forms of racial trauma, it has an active presence in our schools. And, unlike the other categories, it has implications for every classroom.

... Some curricula even demand that students physically act out aspects of American slavery. I have observed that when the curriculum requires students to learn about specific moments of Black history, there is an alarming pattern of learning through staged reenactments—a practice not replicated to the same extent with other histories, traumas, or genocides. This is a common way that curriculum violence manifests.

For example, in 2016, students in an elementary school in New Jersey were tasked with drawing "wanted" posters of fugitives from slavery. Meanwhile, in May 2019, if students in a North Carolina classroom failed to answer questions about slavery correctly, they had their group's "freedom card" revoked.

Reenactments and simulations do not help students to understand slavery. Instead, they distort students' understanding of the past and the present. They promote a sanitized version of slavery that isolates the system and its legacy within a bracket of time with only a select few perpetrators and beneficiaries.

When teachers ask students to learn about slavery by practicing being enslaved people or enslavers, students are not critically engaging with difficult histories. When we force students to participate in acts of curriculum violence, we do so at the risk of situating slavery as a past event with no current connection while depriving students of its full social, historical and economic context. There is often no room to include stories of resistance, contribution, and triumph. The curriculum is preoccupied with having students simulate what literary and Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe calls "the story that cannot be told."

To reclaim our schools as sites of real learning and safety rather than suffering racial trauma, it is necessary to help prepare teachers to examine what curriculum violence looks like within their discipline critically. Both prospective and current practitioners should continue to frame teaching as a reflective and

reflexive practice by asking important questions of themselves and their curricula. Teachers should have continued support for professional development that is antiracist at its core and includes narratives of joy and resistance.

Most importantly, it is the wrong reaction for teachers to avoid teaching Black histories for fear of perpetuating curriculum violence. Remaining silent or choosing to omit certain elements of history has the same impact. We must want to do the right thing by our students, even if that means we have to struggle to learn more and seek feedback from students about the impact of our curricular choices. We should want to review and revise our existing lessons to ensure we're not wreaking havoc on our student's emotional and intellectual lives.

We do this to begin the educational reparations—wherein we repair the harm we have done to children by reconstructing curricula that have failed them.

Source: Stephanie P. Jones, "Ending Curriculum Violence," Learning for Justice (2020).

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2. (Explain) What do they find problematic with how current history is taught?

3. (Identify) What is the argument of this source?

4. (Infer) How do they want history to be taught?

Document D: The Mis-Education of African Americans

Carter Godwin Woodson is a historian and founder of The Journal of Negro History. He was educated at the University of Chicago and Harvard University,

where he earned his doctoral degree. He advocated for teaching African American history and celebrating Black History Month.

...[Carter G. Woodson] considers the educational system as it has developed both in Europe and America. This antiquated [old-fashioned] process does not hit the mark even in the case of the needs of the white man himself. If the white man wants to hold on to it, let him do so; but the African Americans, so far as he can, should develop and carry out a program of their own.

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much better than the African Americans because it has been worked out in conformity [agreement] to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, handicap, and kill the oppressed. African Americans daily educated in the tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of the weak as divinely ordained. During the last three generations of their nominal freedom, they have done practically nothing to change it. Their pouting and resolutions indulged in by a few of the race have been of little avail.

No systematic effort toward change has been possible, for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature, and religion which have established the present code of morals, the mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding African Americans down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. He will cut one for his special benefit if there is no back door. His education makes it necessary.

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile

depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the African Americans by making them feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. The African Americans, thus educated, is a hopeless liability of the race.

The difficulty is that the "educated African Americans" is compelled to live and move among his people whom he has been taught to despise. Therefore, the "educated African Americans" prefers to buy food from a white grocer because he has been taught that African Americans are not clean. It does not matter how often African Americans wash their hands, then he cannot clean them, and it does not matter how often a white man uses his hands he cannot soil them. The educated African Americans, moreover, are disinclined to participate in African Americans business because he has been taught in economics that African Americans cannot operate in this particular sphere. The "educated African Americans" gets less and less pleasure out of the African American church, not because of its primitiveness and increasing corruption, but because he prefers the seats of "righteousness" controlled by their oppressor. This has been his education, and nothing else can be expected of him.

If the "educated African Americans" could go off and be white, they might be happy, but only a mulatto now and then can do this. The majority of this class, then, must go through life denouncing white people because they are trying to run away from the Blacks and decrying them because they are not white.

Source: Carter G. Woodson, "Preface," in *The Mis-Education of African Americans* (1933).

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2. (Explain) What do they find problematic with how current history is taught?

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Document E: The Propaganda of History

W.E.B. Du Bois is the first African-American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and edited its newspaper, The Crisis. His scholarship in sociology, The Philadelphia Negro (1899), existential Africana The Souls of Black Folk (1903), and as a historian Black Reconstruction (1935) are highly influential.

How the facts of American history have in the last half-century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery. The North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery, and establish democracy.

Grounded in such elementary and high school teaching, an American youth attending college today would learn from current textbooks of history that the Constitution recognized slavery; that the Abolitionists ruined the chance of getting rid of slavery by peaceful methods; that after the period of Andrew Jackson, the two sections of the United States "had become fully conscious of their conflicting interests. Two irreconcilable forms of civilization . . . in the North, the democratic . . . in the South, a more stationary and aristocratic civilization."

...In other words, he would, in all probability, complete his education without any idea of the part which the black race has played in America; of the tremendous moral problem of abolition; of the cause and meaning of the Civil War and the relation which Reconstruction had to democratic government and the labor movement today.

Herein lies more than mere omission and difference of emphasis. The treatment of the period of Reconstruction reflects small credit upon American historians as scientists. We have often deliberately attempted to change the facts of history so that the story will be pleasant reading for Americans.

War and especially civil strife leave terrible wounds. Humanity must heal them. It was, therefore, soon conceived as neither wise nor patriotic to speak of all the causes of strife and the terrible results to which sectional differences in the United States had led. And so, first of all, we minimized the slavery controversy, which convulsed the nation from the Missouri Compromise down to the Civil War. On top of that, we passed by Reconstruction with a phrase of regret or disgust.

But are these reasons of courtesy and philanthropy sufficient for denying Truth? If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guidepost for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation.

Here in the United States, we have a clear example. It was morally wrong and economically retrogressive to build human slavery in the United States in the eighteenth century. We know that now perfectly well; many Americans North and South knew this and said it in the eighteenth century. Today, in the face of new slavery established elsewhere in the world under other names and guises, we ought to emphasize this past lesson. Moreover, it is not well to be reticent in describing that past. Our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially that, in the end, nobody seems to have done wrong, and everybody was right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America, while the South was blameless in becoming its center. The difference in development between North and South is explained as working out of cosmic social and economic law.

... the history of the United States from 1866 to 1876 is something of which the nation ought to be ashamed and which did more to slow down and set back the

African Americans than anything that has happened to him. While at the same time, it grievously and wantonly wounded again a part of the nation already hurt to death....

The historian has no right to conceal or distort facts, posing as a scientist. Until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we will render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over.

... We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner, Thomas Jefferson had mulatto children, and Alexander Hamilton had African American blood. We simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations but does not tell the truth...

What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people who fought to make slaves of African Americans? Is it to show that the North had higher motives than freeing black men? Is it to prove that African Americans were black angels? No, it is simply to establish the Truth on which Right in the future may be built. We shall never have a science of history until we have men in our colleges who regard the truth as more important than the defense of the white race and who will not deliberately encourage students to gather thesis material to support a prejudice or buttress a lie....

Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History," in *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote this? When was it published? Where was it published?

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3. (Identify) What is the argument of this source?

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Structured Academic Controversy

During today's class, you will work in teams to discuss how the history of enslavement should be taught. Your goals for today should include looking at all the issues, seeing both sides, and finding common ground.

SAC QUESTION: How should the history of enslavement be taught?

Your team will develop an argument and support it with evidence from the sources above.

PROCEDURE

30 minutes With your teammate, read the documents in the Learning and Teaching about Enslavement document set. Find **four** pieces of evidence that support your side.

10 minutes Team A presents. BOTH PARTNERS MUST PRESENT! Team B writes down Team A's arguments and then repeats them back to Team A.

10 minutes Team B presents. BOTH PARTNERS MUST PRESENT! Team A writes down the arguments of Team B and then repeats them to Team B.

10 minutes Everyone CAN ABANDON their positions. Groups of 4 attempt to develop a consensus.

Organizing the Evidence

Use this space to write your main points and the main points made by the other side. The history of enslavement should be taught _____:

List the **four** main points/evidence that support this side.

1) From Document ____:

2) From Document ____:

3) From Document ____:

4) From Document ____:

The history of enslavement should be taught _____:

List the **four** main points/evidence that support this side.

1) From Document ____:

2) From Document ____:

3) From Document ____:

4) From Document ____:

Coming to Consensus

STARTING NOW, YOU MAY ABANDON YOUR ASSIGNED POSITION AND ARGUE FOR EITHER SIDE.

Use the space below to outline your group's agreement. Your agreement should address evidence and arguments from both sides.