Pedagogy: Teaching Slavery Effectively & Affectively

Providing students with key content about the institution of slavery (both known and less commonly known history) is fundamental to their education. Just as importantly, the teaching of slavery is an opportunity to achieve character education outcomes: building emotional intelligence and civic engagement skills, particularly with regard to the crucial process of racial identity formation and positive race relations for all students. A more comprehensive and culturally competent approach to teaching about this history can build a greater sense of shared humanity as opposed to the separation that has long been wrought by racial hierarchies in our society. Without sensitivity to how students feel when they learn this history we are at risk of either starting or further solidifying patterns of shame, guilt, anger, defensiveness and separation that only deepen as young people become adults. While it may seem inevitable that learning this history will create division, we can actually discuss slavery and race in ways that are honest, inclusive, trust-building, and that can inspire students to commit to the ideals of democracy and the highest moral teachings of all faith traditions.

Overarching observations and suggestions for teaching slavery:

- Being fundamentally relaxed when teaching controversial subjects makes an enormous difference. There is a certain level of anxiety associated with these subjects; showing ease and grace provides a powerful contradiction to that. Having cultivated your own awareness and sensitivity on race issues as a private individual and as an educator is what makes that most possible. And being relaxed doesn’t mean holding back on passion—excited commitment to this important subject can speak volumes as well.
- Kids are often more ready to talk about this than we are! They can handle it!
- Middle school students have been easier to talk to about the film than high school students, perhaps because they are less guarded and self-conscious, and less jaded.
- Race is not simply about people of color; thus white educators become more impactful when they model awareness in identifying their own whiteness and European heritage, and all that has come with that.
- It is helpful to convey the contradictory reality that “race” as a category is a fiction—a social construct—but it is a fiction with power. Hence the ideal of being color blind, and yet the reality that arguably we can’t afford to be so yet, and is it truly desirable?

Emotional intelligence and racial identity—The challenges:

- We do not think there is a singular, linear racial identity development pathway for each racial/ethnic group, but there are tendencies to be aware of – pitfalls and also developmental stages to help students strive for. Part of “cultural competence” as a teacher is the ability to be aware of these tendencies as well as the unique pathway of each student.
- Teachers aren’t obviously meant to be therapists or group therapists! But teachers know that emotions are in the classroom all the time. On this subject, it can make a big
difference to know how to work with these emotions and cultivate students’ awareness of them too, since on issues of race, we are all often coming from a psychological place (and a place of story/identity) more than “from our heads.”

- It is key to help European descended students not get stuck in guilt or defensiveness, although these are very natural responses to learning this history. Naming those emotions often helps to move beyond them. Research shows that when the brain has been triggered in such a way that defensiveness (i.e., fear) takes over, then it is less likely to be able to absorb new information and learn. One promising approach is to help tap into a sense of moral outrage and sadness in white students, rather than guilt and defensiveness.

- It is also key to help students of African descent not get stuck in shame or internalized inferiority, and/or to help them gain a healthy relationship to anger such as moral outrage. It is especially important to have this crucial teaching moment be one that is handled in an empowering way, providing dignity and pride.

- For Asian-American, Latino/a and Native American students, it is of course important to give them an understanding of the connections of their family and particular group history to the history of slavery and its aftermath, so that they do not feel like it’s just one more “black/white” conversation. Multiracial students often feel invisible as well, so recognizing the perspective that they may bring by seeing things from a unique vantage point is key.

- For all groups there is obviously a great deal of diversity of background and experience to be sensitive to: the experience of the descendants of those enslaved in this country may be different than that of black people from the Caribbean, and different from recent African immigrants. The range of ethnic, religious and class backgrounds in “white America” is vast and the question of when one’s family came to the U.S. is a loaded subject in relation to this history. Some Latino/a immigrants come from countries where there was African slavery, others not.

**Strategies for cultivating positive racial identity and wisdom about this history:**

- It is key to help all students see black people — enslaved or free — as people with a long history of agency, resilience and persistence to push for and collaborate with others to secure their own freedom and rights. We heard of an elementary school teacher who teaches slavery as one of the “greatest survival stories.” It is particularly important for African-American students to sense the brilliance, creativity, and genius that it took for their ancestors to make it through this system of massive dehumanization.

- The use of the terms “enslaved people” or “enslaved Africans” maintains a degree of humanity that is lost in the use of the term “slave.” The term “institution of slavery” emphasizes the systematic nature of the multi-faceted economic system that was built on forced labor.

- The heritage and significance of people of African descent living in the United States begins with the expansive history and literature of Africa, not with enslavement. Educators best serve all students when the invisibility and disproportionately negative perceptions of Africa are thoughtfully examined and replaced.
• Students will be able to make better sense of this history and avoid any temptation towards guilt, towards denial/defensiveness, or towards blaming “white people” categorically (and thus building categorical distrust), by having this history put in context. It is important to share: 1) that “man’s inhumanity to man” has been consistent throughout human history across the globe among all people; 2) people of all kinds were complicit in African slavery, including Europeans and Africans; 3) advanced: Jared Diamond’s book: Guns, Germs and Steel provides a compelling case for how the accidents of geography and climate gave Europeans advantages that allowed slavery, conquest and colonialism on several continents; 4) the concept of whiteness evolved as a mechanism to reinforce a system of advantages for some and exclusion of others that originated in economic greed; 5) “white” Americans not only gained but lost in the process of assimilating into the “melting pot.” Lastly: understanding universals doesn’t negate the importance of coming to terms with the specificity of what slavery signified, as the largest forced migration and enslavement in human history. Its magnitude, severity and countless reverberations in the present need to be understood.

Educating students as citizens and leaders in public life:

• A healthy society, vis a vis race relations, requires working through this history and addressing its legacies (visible and invisible). It is important and exciting to provide students with leadership skills in this arena.
• Younger generation often say “we don’t have the issues that older generations do.” You can challenge them to use their greater level of bonding across cultural difference to then work on structural racism... together!
• Young people are often ready to talk about repair/reparations; we’ve observed students’ genuine and thoughtful efforts to think through whether there is a “debt” and if so, what the complicated public policy questions are that arise.
• Exploring the legacy of the enslavement of Africans also raises comparisons to slavery in the world today. There are more people enslaved at this moment on the planet than any other year in human history. Students are usually shocked to hear this, and it puts the study of abolition in a whole new light. They take seriously the invitation to think about how to create a fair economy and the importance of being a conscious consumer. This presents very concrete steps they can take.
• Young people are action-oriented. Our “Ways to Get Involved” handout contains ideas for how students can get engaged in addressing the legacy of historic enslavement, or slavery in the world today.