

"My Family's Not from Africa —We Come from North Carolina!"

Teaching Slavery in Context

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As a student, I always dreaded when we came to "my" section in the history book: the section on the transatlantic slave trade. I remember wondering, "If I sink down far enough in my seat, can I become invisible?" As far as the textbook was concerned, and perhaps my teachers as well, my history as a Black person began in West Africa with my ancestors being abducted and sold into slavery, herded onto ships, and piled on top of one another in shackles as we set sail for the "New World." My teachers would present this section almost as news anchors, emotionless and neutral as they recounted the horrors experienced by people, my people: "Once they arrived to the New World, they had no rights, they were considered three-fifths human, they were forced to work without pay, and their children were taken away from them and sold to the highest bidder, until one day Abraham Lincoln decided that slavery was wrong and set the slaves free. Class, make sure that you take solid notes, you will be expected to know this information for the unit test."

I remember sitting there, feeling powerless, humiliated, and victimized by a teacher presenting such a sordid part of human history in a matter-of-fact manner, with no attempt to humanize the topic of slavery or engage me with information about the many acts of resistance and rebellion that led to the emancipation of the enslaved. Nor was I invited into a discussion about who we were before slavery or how something so horrific ever came to be in the first place.

Now I teach history myself. I will never forget the blank stares that gazed back at me one day from my 7th-grade geography class at a public school in Washington, D.C. As we were wrapping up our unit

on Latin America, I said to the class: "So, everyone in the United States, with the exception of Native Americans, has roots in other parts of the world. For example, many Latin Americans in Washington have ancestral roots in El Salvador, many African Americans can trace all or part of our ancestry back to West Africa, while white Americans can trace their ancestry to various countries in Europe."

"My family's not from Africa," sparked Ra'Sean. "We come from North Carolina!"

"I see what you mean, Ra'Sean. I was born in Kentucky and my grandparents were born in Tupelo, Mississippi. But if I trace my roots back far enough, I can trace them to West Africa and perhaps even to a specific country."

The class erupted in mumbling and discontent. Marcus shook his head the hardest as I unloaded information that he was just not prepared to take in.

"Well, if we came from West Africa, how did we get here?" demanded Keona.

I had unintentionally opened up a can of worms. I couldn't believe this was new information for my middle school students. And that, as African Americans, they couldn't deal with the fact that their ancestors were from Africa. Clearly they had been inundated with the same racist media images that I was exposed to, images that showed Africa and its people as helpless and hungry.

As I paused to take in my unwelcome discovery, Karla chimed in: "My mother told me we used to be kings and queens until we were taken from Africa and brought here as slaves."

I rolled down my world map to show students the route of the transatlantic slave trade. "Karla's right. Then, over hundreds of years, European slave

traders captured millions of people in West Africa, including many of our ancestors. They transported them, against their will, across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World and sold them into slavery.”

I breathed a sigh of a relief as I glanced at the clock and noticed that it was time for students to transition to their next class. They quickly packed their belongings and I was left to grapple with this new information.

Teaching the History of Slavery Differently

I shared my shock and frustration with Jeff, my friend and co-planner, and discussed with him my desire to divert from the scope and sequence to teach students a bit about Africa and the transatlantic slave trade. But I wanted to do it very differently from my experience as a student. I wanted to center on the many acts of resistance to colonial conquest, in Africa and

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in the diaspora, up until the present. I knew that it was important to start with an overview of Africa as a continent, as a place with a rich history prior to slavery and colonialism. This piece was especially critical because, more often than not, slavery is the only time African history is considered, leaving many Black students no choice but to feel like their only place in history is that of a victim.

I knew that most of my students viewed Africa as a homogeneous place and, moreover, a place that they wanted no connection to. I wanted to be sure that I presented this unit in a way that empowered students and made them proud of their ancestry, as opposed to leaving them feeling the shame and humiliation that I once felt. I wanted to show them

the beauty and diverse realities of Africa in order to shift their perceptions, but I also wanted to give an honest representation of some of the struggles.

That Sunday evening, I drew a blank outline of Africa on a large poster board, wrote “Africa” in large black letters at the top, and divided it into three sections: What do you know or think you know? What do you want/need to know? What have you learned?

As students walked into the classroom on Monday, the warm-up exercise on the board said: *On the blank Post-it notes on your desk, record what you know about Africa and what you think you know.*

Students struggled to write anything. As I circulated around the classroom, I thought aloud: “Perhaps you know the names of a few countries in Africa, or maybe you know a language that people speak in a particular country. Perhaps you know fruits and vegetables that grow in some parts of Africa or a bit about the history of some countries.”

I asked students to share with a neighbor and then called on a few partnerships to report back: Africa is hot, many people speak French, people wear colorful clothes, Africa is dirty, people are starving, Africa has kings and queens, and people live with elephants and lions.

I bit my tongue, wanting desperately to correct student responses. A few student volunteers collected the Post-it notes and placed them on the first section of the wall chart. As we progress through the unit, I told the class that we would go back and check our assumptions for accuracy.

Then I explained: “We are going on a cross-continent tour to a few specific countries in Africa, but before we go, we need to prepare. If you were preparing for a tour of countries in Africa, what would you want to know before heading there?”

Students jotted down responses on their Post-it notes: What languages do people speak? How do they dress? What money do they use? What is the history? Religion? Weather? Is it safe?

Then I introduced one of my favorite picture books: *Africa Is Not a Country* by Margy Burns, a collection of 25 short stories about children in various countries in Africa. It portrays families on the continent with integrity, highlighting the beauty of Africa and loving relationships, as opposed to the glaring poverty and doom that is all too familiar to most students.



I started with the story about Thomas, who lives in Lesotho, a small country in southern Africa. The Lesotho story provides readers with a glimpse into a day in Thomas's life as he navigates the cold winter weather in rural Lesotho in July. Lesotho is one of the few places in Africa where you can actually find snow. Thomas and his father snuggle up with blankets to remain warm in the frigid weather as they travel by horse to do errands and visit friends and family. After we read the story, I asked students to jot down new learning and questions and then share with a neighbor:

"I can't believe it snows in Africa. I thought it was hot all year round."

"Does everyone in Lesotho travel by horse?"

After a few partners shared new information and questions with the class, we explored a second short story about two siblings, Arim and Efrem, who live in a colorful row house on a bustling street in urban Eritrea. This story focuses on the importance to their family of religion and respecting elders.

Students as Researchers

For day two of our cross-continental tour, I arranged desks in groups of four. Each group had a sign that included the name of a country, its flag, and the students assigned to that group. The countries I selected were South Africa, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, and Algeria. On the whiteboard in the front of the classroom was the country that I would focus on: Ghana. I chose countries to represent the various regions and diversity of Africa. I also had to be intentional about selecting countries for which information was readily accessible online and in the public library.

After students had a few moments to find their seats and share anything they knew about "their" country, I made an announcement: "Students, for this unit you will become resident experts on your assigned country. You will learn a ton of information that you will eventually develop into a brief research paper on a specific topic. But first you need to gather general information about your country. I have the country Ghana and I will become the resident expert on that country. I selected Ghana because it is one of the countries that many African Americans trace their ancestry back to, so Ghanaian history is very much a part of our collective history. When I was a

student at Berea College, I had the opportunity to travel to Ghana. So I know quite a bit about Ghana, but I still want to learn more."

I gathered the class's attention for the day's strategy lesson: "We are researchers and I want to demonstrate strategies that researchers use to collect information. We will collect important information and organize it using this research tracking sheet. The tracking sheet is divided into four sections: Land and Climate, People and Culture, History, and Economy. These are the four categories that we are going to focus on this week. Right now, information is important if it helps us understand our country better and fits into one of the categories on your tracking sheet. We are going to record important information on a Post-it note and then determine which category it fits into best.

"Last night, as I was browsing through my research bin for information on Ghana, I came across a helpful article about the history of ancient Ghana. Listen carefully as I read an excerpt from the passage and notice how I think aloud about the steps I just identified.

Despite its name, the old Empire of Ghana is not geographically, ethnically, or in any other way related to modern Ghana. It lies about 400 miles northwest of modern Ghana. Ancient Ghana encompassed what is now modern northern Senegal and southern Mauritania.

"Hmm, I had no idea that modern-day Ghana is not related to the old Empire of Ghana. This is important information to note, so on my Post-it I'm going to write: *Ancient Ghana is not related to modern Ghana; modern Ghana is actually 400 miles away from the old Empire of Ghana.* What category does this fit in? I think history makes the most sense, so I will place this information under the history category. I want to make sure I can find this article again if I need it, so I have to cite my source. I am going to include the title of the article, the author's name, the name of the website, and the page number. To help you remember what you need to do, there is an enlarged version of my Post-it on the board."

After walking through another example, I asked my students to share the steps with a neighbor and

then to share any new information that they learned about Ghana:

"I can't believe that Ghana had gold mines. I always thought of Africa as being poor."

"They traded slaves for salt and copper."

A few student volunteers recorded our new knowledge on our wall chart. Then the students were ready to delve into research on their own.

I had loaded small plastic bins located in each "country" with several short books and articles on their assigned country to choose from. (The selection included readings that provided an overview of pre-, colonial, and postcolonial history.) I asked my students to skim the text looking for information that fell into each of the four categories. As students dug into their reading materials, I circulated around the classroom, checking in with students to ensure that they were on the right track. Students continued with their research on these four categories for the next week. Each day I modeled strategies for capturing important information based on my research of Ghana. We continued to fill our Africa wall chart with new information about the countries that we were exploring.

The following week, I wanted students to begin working on specific topics about their countries. I revisited the public library and checked online for more resources. I tried to find two to four topics and two to four texts that explored those topics for each country's bin. My plan was to model researching a specific topic by looking at the history of the transatlantic slave trade as it related to Ghana.

A Focus on Resistance

By the end of the first week of mini-lessons, I had briefly explored the ancient Empire of Ghana and arrived at the 15th century, when the first European slave traders appeared. I wanted to provide students with an overview, but I did not want the trading of human cargo to be the only focus, as it had been in my own middle school experience. Instead, I wanted to focus on the acts of resistance and rebellion that ultimately brought the institution of slavery to shambles. I looked for texts that highlighted slave rebellions, were written from the perspective of the enslaved, and those that detailed everyday acts of resistance that led to the emancipation of

Black people in the United States.

I began the week's lessons: "Last week I was impressed with how focused you were doing background research on your countries. Now it is time to focus on a specific topic or person. Your research bins have new texts in them. Today you will decide on a topic to explore. For example, in the South African bin, you will find books and articles on Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robben Island, and the Soweto Uprisings of 1976.

"I'm going to walk you through the process of selecting a topic for your research. I've created a new research tracking sheet. At the top of the sheet there is space for your country's name and the topic that you have chosen to explore. Underneath the topic, you will find two columns: Facts About My Topic and My Reactions/Opinions on My Topic. Watch me model the steps for conducting round two of your research. First, I need to browse through my research bin to see what interests me."

I began to look through the books and articles in my Ghana bin: "This is a short biography written about Ghana's first president after independence, Kwame Nkrumah. I could choose to focus my research on him and his contributions. Here is an article about the Ashanti Kingdom. Hmm, here is one that discusses everyday acts of resistance by enslaved people. I want to focus on this. At the top of my new research tracking sheet I am going to record my topic: *Antislavery Resistance and Rebellion*. Next, I am going to thumb through my research bin to find more books and texts on the same topic."

I looked through the bin and thought aloud with students as I pulled out the relevant texts and placed them in the tray holder on the whiteboard for students to view. There were narratives written from the perspective of the enslaved, picture books about resistance, and encyclopedia articles on the history of slavery. We reviewed the process of identifying important information, recording it on a Post-it note, and then writing our opinion or reaction next to the information.

Over the next few days, I modeled the research process by exploring the history and impact of slavery. We discussed ways that Africans resisted slavery from the beginning until it was abolished. I raised the issue of mental slavery. I recorded facts along with my

reactions/opinions: "According to my research, African men, women, and children were seen as goods to be bought and sold, just like silver or gold. Many people actually jumped into the Atlantic Ocean as they were being carried to the New World. This is really tough for me to believe—that human beings were treated like merchandise and that so many white people went along with it. Didn't they think this was wrong?"

After each lesson, students shared with a partner or talked with members of their group and with the class as a whole. I wanted to be sure they had time and felt safe processing their thoughts and feelings about the history of slavery and the history of Africa. Many students were sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved, some were less so:

"I can't believe that the slaves let the master talk to them like that."

"I bet that it must have been really scary to be a slave."

"If I would've lived during slavery days, I wouldn't have taken that!"

In one lesson, I read a picture book about an individual story of resistance: *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story of the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine tells the true story of a man who courageously shipped himself to the North. Henry was born into slavery. Once he was grown, his family was sold away from him. As I shared Henry's bittersweet story of loss, triumph, and rebirth, I sensed that students' perceptions were beginning to shift from the distance and disdain they previously held—their perception that enslaved Black people had been docile bystanders, forever victims.

Shame into Pride

Once students had amassed enough information on their research projects, I did specific lessons on turning their findings into cohesive essays.

We culminated our unit with a closing celebration and invited others to come and share our newfound knowledge. Our resident experts on South Africa beamed with pride as they shared their research with classmates and the teachers who came through during their planning periods. They spoke with passion about the Soweto Uprisings of 1976. They had immersed themselves in research about this

revolutionary event in human history and learned the power of uniting around a cause.

"Students were so angry that they were forced to learn Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, that they organized a student protest," Marcus said.

Other members of his group explained that 20,000 students had participated, and some of them were murdered during what began as a peaceful protest. They described how learning about Soweto shifted their perception from South Africans as victims to South Africans as victors, willing and able to rebel against oppression. I glanced at Marcus as he brought his presentation to a close. He was one of the students who at first could not fathom why he would want to have any association with Africa. Now he spoke with pride about the power of the human spirit and the bravery of the youth of Soweto.

We went back to our Africa chart and added our new knowledge. I asked students to reflect on the new information that they had learned. What seemed most significant?

It was no longer necessary for me to ask probing questions or give examples of what one might write. Students quickly filled up their Post-it notes: Africa is diverse, the climate is different in different regions, many people resisted slavery, enslaved people used to sneak and learn to read, enslaved people escaped to the North, young people in Soweto died for the right to learn their own language, Lesotho is located inside of South Africa, Nelson Mandela was in prison for 27 years because he fought against apartheid, there was a genocide in Darfur, and—most moving for me—enslaved Africans were brave. *

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