

USC Race and
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TEACHING THE TRUTH ABOUT SLAVERY AND AMERICA'S RACIAL HISTORY

By James Bridgforth, Ph.D.

Racial Equity Guidance for K-12 Teachers



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ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

Teaching the Truth about Slavery and America's Racial History

Well-publicized examples of racial violence in schools typically include the use of racial slurs directed at students of color, hanging nooses in locker rooms, or physical aggression of a racialized nature (Bridgeforth, 2021). Yet it is also important to interrogate the ways that lessons, assignments, and other learning activities can also be manifestations of racial violence or what can be described as pedagogical racism.

Building on the extensive literature on classroom-level racism (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011; King & Woodson, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017; Lovern, 2012; Welton et al., 2015), I define pedagogical racism as “the development and implementation of intentionally or unintentionally racially harmful learning activities with negative physical, psychological, spiritual, or social implications for racially minoritized students.” A key area of concern regarding pedagogical racism in schools is how educators teach about the history of slavery in America. This concern is especially urgent as debates concerning what to teach and how to teach about America's racial history, particularly the history and enduring impact of chattel slavery, continue across the nation (Najarro, 2023).

For example, in a Summer 2020 online discussion on X (the social media platform formerly known as Twitter), users described harrowing experiences learning about slavery as children. In response to a post about field trips to go pick cotton (Kemp, 2020), users negatively described trips where students were invited to reenact “people pretending to be slaves and learning how to read + write (Summer, 2020) and “Underground Railroad simulation[s] where they made us hide in the woods and sing spirituals” (Jimmy, 2020). Another explained that “in fourth grade we did an underground railroad game where we were slaves and had to hide from my teacher who was the slave owner” (creep4yrbonez, 2020).

As I read through these accounts of racist lessons in schools, I cannot say that I was surprised. I have seen more than my fair share of racially and culturally insensitive lessons in schools during my time as an elementary school teacher. This is not to excuse harmful pedagogical practices, but instead to recognize that the endurance of pedagogical racism is not solely a problem limited to one school or one teacher. This issue reflects the depths to which systemic racism is embedded both within school curricula in addition to how educators have been trained to facilitate learning about America's racial history.

Simulating Histories of Racial Trauma



In March 2019, a white teacher in New York facilitated a mock slave auction in her fifth-grade classroom. A CNN report explains that the teacher:

“...asked all of the African-American students in each class to raise their hands and then instructed them to go stand in the hallway, where the teacher placed imaginary chains on their necks, wrists and ankles. Those students were then instructed to walk back into the classroom and line up against the wall. The teacher then proceeded to conduct a simulated auction of the students in front of the rest of the class, in an attempt to depict the sale of enslaved Africans to white plantation owners that happened in the 18th and 19th centuries” (Kaur, 2019).

Similarly, in 2018, another New York teacher instructed three Black students to lie on the ground to demonstrate what slavery felt like. When one of the students expressed that she felt fine, the teacher stepped on her back and asked “How does it feel? See how it feels to be a slave?” (Burke et al., 2018).

While these examples of racial violence are of a physical nature, they are also demonstrative of a disregard for the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the students forced to participate in these actions. Although some might argue that these teachers are attempting to employ some form of experiential pedagogical methods and learning strategies, it is critical that we be clear that some experiences, such as slave auctions and certainly physical abuse of enslaved people, should not be simulated or reenacted.

Reflective Questions

Imagine that you are working with a pre-service educator who shares a proposed lesson plan similar to the examples described above. They explain that they are hoping to “bring history alive” by demonstrating the harsh realities of chattel slavery through facilitating a mock slave auction. Consider how you might respond to this scenario.

1

First, identify the issue(s) with this type of lesson.

- a. What are the potential pitfalls in facilitating such a lesson?
- b. Who could be harmed? In what ways?

2

How might you invite the educator to engage in a reflection on the potential harm(s) of this lesson?

- a. What questions would you ask?

3

What resources might you make available to help support the pre-service educator’s learning?

Gamifying Racially Traumatic History



In Wilmington, North Carolina, a fourth-grade class was instructed by their teacher to play a role-playing game “that included shackles, plantations, severe punishment, and simulated slaves running toward freedom” (Smart, 2019). A similar game played in Ashburn, Virginia encouraged students to pretend to be slaves moving through an obstacle course that was designed to simulate the underground railroad (Karimi, 2019). Although a school district spokesperson attempted to explain that “students were not designated as slaves or slave owners” (Collazo, 2019), the object of the game clearly positions students as playing the role of enslaved people attempting to escape to freedom. This follows a previous incident in Phoenix, Arizona in 2017, where elementary school teachers taught a lesson using an online simulation that required students to “navigate the plantation master’s demands and plot a river escape, sometimes receiving beatings”

(Polletta & Cano, 2017).

Reducing traumatic historical experiences for Black people to games that can be won or lost provides students with a decidedly flawed understanding of the realities of chattel slavery and perpetrates a level of violence that cannot be understated. For Black students whose ancestors may have died while attempting to escape literal bondage, the triviality embedded in gamifying their trauma is a stark introduction to the inherent value that many in society place on Black lives.

Reflective Questions

A Black student teacher shares that they observed a similar lesson being conducted by their mentor teacher. The history lesson, downloaded from an online source, involved a board game where students were asked to role-play their way through the Underground Railroad. Next week, the student teacher is expected to lead the next phase of this lesson with the students and they are concerned about how to proceed.

1

How would you advise the student teacher to address their concerns?

2

What opportunities exist for professional learning and development for mentor teachers within your context?

3

What systems or policies are currently in place to support student teachers of color through situations that are not in alignment with the equity-focused mission of your preparation program?

Rehabilitating and Justifying White Supremacy



In 2017, elementary school students in South Carolina were tasked with imagining that they were a member of the Ku Klux Klan and justifying their rationale for membership. Similarly, in 2018, elementary school students in Wisconsin were asked to give three good reasons for slavery.

While the purpose of these assignments may have been an attempt at encouraging students to engage in critical thought, an implicit message conveyed by these activities was the justification of chattel slavery and membership in White supremacist terrorist groups. This latent defense does nothing more than disorient students by opening the door for the erroneous notion that White supremacy is redeemable in any form.

Reflective Questions

A teacher that you are working with explains that they are concerned with a lesson that they have been tasked to teach next month. The lesson, provided directly from the materials required by the school district, instructs students to list the positive and negative aspects of being enslaved. They do not believe this is an appropriate lesson, but are unsure what to do since it is from the district-required curricula. Consider how you might support this educator.

1

What systems or procedures exist in your district or context for educators to challenge racially harmful curricular materials?

- a. If none currently exist, consider how you might navigate creating such opportunities.

2

Consider who potential allies are in addressing this issue.

- a. Are there like-minded educators within the school system who you could turn to? If so, what strategies might you use to address this concern? If not, how might you use intentional conversations to begin to build support to address this issue?
- b. Are there local, state, or national advocacy organizations or coalitions with whom you can partner?

Looking Ahead

Heightened awareness of issues of racial injustice post-Summer 2020 offers an opportunity for educator preparation programs to reflect on their responsibility to prepare future educators to meaningfully facilitate learning about America's racial history. While many preparation programs provide courses on diversity and multiculturalism in their early stages, radical honesty about racism in our society must continue to be centered as candidates enter their student teaching experiences. Using practical case studies and opportunities for reflection and action such as those provided here can help to bridge gaps between what is taught within the academy and the realities of what is experienced in the field.

In closing, it is also important to name that teaching the truth about America's racial history cannot and should not be diminished or disregarded in efforts to protect students from the realities of past traumas. Learning about the depths of racialized trauma experienced throughout history may understandably be painful, even when facilitated by critically conscious, trauma informed educators. However, an honest reckoning with this history and its continued impact on present-day experiences is critical for moving us toward a place of racial healing and untapped possibilities (Warren, 2021).

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ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.