

# Interpreting Slavery with Children and Teens

By Kristin L. Gallas



COURTESY OF MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION. PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM AUJEL.

Brenda Parker portrays Caroline Branham, a woman enslaved to Martha Washington, during a school program.

In my work, I often encounter adults who tell me, “That’s not what I learned about slavery in school,” or “Why didn’t anyone tell me this when I was young?” For decades, schools and museums have obscured and neglected our collective history of slavery, creating generations of people who have false or incomplete understandings of slavery and the people it affected.

This Technical Leaflet is excerpted from AASLH’s forthcoming book *Interpreting Slavery with Children and Teens* (Rowman and Littlefield, September 2021).

There are many reasons slavery has remained on the margins of formal and informal education in the United States, including a lack of accurate knowledge, a denial of the existence of systemic racism, a desire to “get past it” because it happened a long time ago, and a wish (on the part of parents and educators) to protect children from the difficulties and horrors of life. Presenting the history of slavery in comprehensive and conscientious school programs is difficult and necessitates challenging the prevailing, and incomplete, narrative. It requires diligence and compassion—for the history itself, for those telling the story, and for those hearing the stories. It is a necessary part of the collective narrative about our past, present, and future.

We must talk *with* young people about slavery and race, as it is not enough to just talk *to* them or *about* the subject. By engaging students in dialogue about slavery and race, they bring their prior knowledge, scaffold new knowledge, and create their own relevance—all while adults *hear* them and show respect for what they have to say. We cannot fail future generations of learners the way many of us were failed by the sites we visited as children.

*Interpreting Slavery with Children and Teens* offers advice, examples, and replicable practices for the comprehensive development and implementation of slavery-related school and family programs at museums and historic sites. I pulled information from the existing literature, research from related fields, consultations with colleagues, and observations of school programs at a variety of museums and historic sites. From this research emerged a framework that has helped define the process of creating programs for young people:

- (Re)Defining Success
- Who’s at the Table
- Comprehensive Content
- Race, Identity, and Historical Trauma
- Creating a Brave Space
- Age-Appropriate Content and Facilitation
- Fostering Empathy
- Engagement and Dialogue Techniques
- Staff Training and Support
- Teacher Engagement

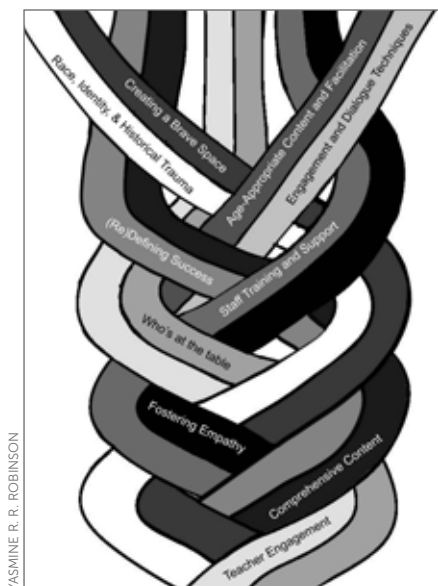
Each of the ten “strands” can stand on its own, but when woven together they provide a strong foundation for youth programming. In this leaflet, I will highlight four of these ten elements.

## (Re)Defining Success

Developing successful experiences—school programs, field trips, family tours—about slavery is more than just historical research and some hands-on activities. There is work your institution must do before developing any programs. This includes mission/vision alignment, goal setting, selecting pedagogical techniques, and considering what terminology to use. This process should include internal (board, staff, volunteers) and external participants, a diverse group of stakeholders comprising members of descendant communities, educators, historians, faith groups, and others who are invested in your content or site.

Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Massachusetts, is an excellent example of a reframed mission statement that reflects a more holistic history of the house. In 2005 the board of The Royall House Association changed the way it thought about the property, the historic structures, and the people who once lived and worked there. The revamped mission states that the organization “explores the meanings of freedom and independence before, during, and since the American Revolution, in the context of a household of wealthy Loyalists and enslaved Africans.” This new mission is inclusive of a wider variety of historical stories and of how the site’s history connects to issues of freedom and independence today. Their new mission statement also changed the focus of their school programs, which now center solely on the enslaved experience.

Success will look different at each organization or site, and sometimes it may mean giving up what you have done for a long time.



Ten components to interpreting slavery with children and teens.

## Race, Identity, and Historical Trauma

The history of slavery and racism are inextricably linked. We cannot talk about one without the other. White people created and maintained the institution of chattel slavery in the United States and perpetuated the subsequent 100+ years of segregation and discrimination; however, today most white Americans live their lives completely disconnected and disassociated (consciously or not) from its legacies. Learning



Educators attending the 2019 Monticello Teacher Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia, examine the fingerprints left in the bricks of Thomas Jefferson's home by enslaved laborers.

about slavery and its legacies is not about placing blame, guilt, or shame. Educating oneself and our student visitors about this content is to better understand the state of the United States today. And what better place to help young Americans learn about the relevance of our collective history than museums and historic sites.

Interpreting the history of slavery often requires offering students new historical narratives and helping them to navigate the emotions that arise when new narratives conflict with longstanding beliefs. The racial identities of both staff and visitors play a role in how we offer interpretation and how guests receive it. As pro-

fessionals, we must be aware of, and confident with, our own knowledge and feelings about race and slavery. For white public historians, these acknowledgements are hard and important. We must wrestle with our own biases and identities. We must be knowledgeable and humble, sharing authority with our Black colleagues, community stakeholders, and our student visitors. We must also understand where visitors are coming from to help them better understand their own concerns surrounding race and identity when learning about slavery.

We must also recognize that even our youngest visitors may question the knowledge and skills of the interpreter based on his or her race. Black students may perceive an older white person as lacking emotional sensitivity to deliver a comprehensive story of slavery and might assume more truth and solidarity from a Black interpreter. White students may anticipate hearing the “good master” narrative from a white interpreter and feel betrayed when they receive a narrative that crushes that myth. White students may also distrust African American staff members, anticipating a story biased towards the enslaved. Upending long-held narratives can be challenging. It helps if we explicitly acknowledge how identity plays a role in historical narratives, as it should help students adjust their expectations and open their minds to learning.

The traumatic nature of the content sits both at the surface and is buried deep in the souls of Black Americans who descend from enslaved people. We must be aware that it is a distinct possibility that we could be traumatizing or retraumatizing student visitors with this history, so we must take steps to ensure their emotional and psychological care, while also being cognizant of our own emotional health. Students who identify or present as African American come to us with knowledge about what it means to be Black in the United States. The world around them—popular culture, historical myths, mainstream media, economic disparities, and even politicians—provides young

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PHOTO BY MATT CASSADY, COURTESY OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



A costumed interpreter leading a school group in the Dred and Harriet Scott quarters at Historic Fort Snelling.

people with cues that can be triggering. This content is inherently traumatic, and we cannot control how each individual student will respond, but we must do what we can to avoid intentionally traumatizing students. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers recommendations for conscientiously addressing race and trauma:

- Establish a sense of psychological safety and trust (a brave space) so that students can express their perspectives and listen respectfully to others' perspectives, even when there are disagreements.
- Prior to engaging in the discussion, set up options and provide clear directions for managing overwhelming emotional responses related to the discussion (e.g., stepping out of the tour for a moment to debrief with a teacher or friend).
- Validate and honor students' experiences and emotions rather than trying to convince them that they no longer have a rational reason to feel that way. Avoid telling them that their past experiences should not affect their current beliefs.
- Check in with students periodically throughout the

discussion, to ensure that they are managing emotional experiences in a healthy manner and that they continue to feel safe.

- Use processes (such as restorative or dialogue circles) to facilitate and support authentic discussions, even when conflict may be at the core.
- Build into your program a variety of ways for students to deal with their emotions in productive, constructive, and meaningful ways. Consider devoting time to physical activities, art, music, and/or quiet time following these discussions.
- Help students understand the connection between historical trauma, systemic racism, and community trauma in communities of color.
- Share stories of various movements in racial and social justice history to illustrate how individuals can make a difference.

Students do not always possess the tools to process the traumatic history or their emotions, which makes comprehensive staff training and the development of empathetic and pedagogically-sound activities that much more important.



Historical interpreter Dontavius Williams uses material culture to teach a young family member about slavery by allowing him to handle a brick made by an enslaved brickmaker. The young visitor places his thumb in the thumbprint of the brickmaker.

## Engagement and Dialogue Techniques

Selecting appropriate engagement strategies, including dialogue facilitation and hands-on learning, is key to creating a successful school program. Learning is inherently active and occurs best when our minds *and* bodies are engaged. Physical, emotional, and social engagement are all integral to the learning experience, but our go-to program strategies like role-play and simulation can be emotionally harmful for students and can trivialize enslavement and the experiences of enslaved people. It is important to think purposefully and creatively about how to engage students with historic structures, landscapes, objects, and documents. Actively engaging students with historical actors and narratives can help them build deeper understandings and a desire to seek additional information. Building dialogue with effective questioning strategies is essential for helping students engage with the content.

### HANDS-ON LEARNING

Handling objects, even reproductions, is powerful and can provoke emotions we need to acknowledge and discuss with students. An informed approach to using hands-on objects when teaching about slavery is critical.

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Letting a ten-year-old churn butter for thirty (fun) seconds could be intellectually harming students by giving them a rosy concept of slavery. If you instill the wrong impression of slavery at a young age, students will struggle to comprehend a deeper narrative when they get older. We must contextualize the use of hands-on objects into the larger narrative of enslavement, while featuring the lives of individual enslaved people.

This will help students fold the hands-on experience into their existing knowledge of slavery. The chores of

an enslaved person mean less when they stand alone than when the narrative imbeds them within the context of the bondage and inhumanity of slavery as an institution.

## ROLE-PLAY AND SIMULATION

An immersive experience of being crowded in the hold of slave ship, worked under threat of a whip, or fleeing for freedom, even when designed with the utmost care, can risk leaving children feeling as though slavery was not so bad after all. In fact, educators Samuel Totten and Stephen Feinberg found that all too often, students end up laughing about the simulation, or mocking students of color or those assigned to role-play the enslaved. Role-playing and simulation exercises belittle the subject matter and experts question whether students can actually experience what historical figures did, and whether they are likely to believe that they have, causing them to drastically underestimate historical reality. “[The] simplification of reality can,” Totten posits, “lead to a facile understanding of complex issues and, worse still, a trivialization.” In addition, how genuinely *real* can you make a simulation that will not trick people into thinking that they really know what it was like? The more “real” a simulation gets, the more confusing it can be.

When museums engage students in role-playing a real (or composite) historical person during a tour or program, they may participate in a variety of activities, including dressing up in reproduction clothing, performing period tasks, and reading quotations in a first-person voice. These types of role-play mostly produce negative results, even if students are assigned roles randomly, as the lines between past and present, and reality and fiction, blur for them. This was evident in a program I observed in 2017. At one point in the tour, the educator gave students costumes to put on: simple homespun shirts for enslaved people, fancy suit coats for wealthy planters, etc. As the students donned their costumes, I overheard one student say to another, “You’re a slave. I can own you now. You’re probably a slave because you’re wearing this,” while pointing to the homespun shirt the student was wearing.

This encounter reflects a myriad of concerns with role-playing. Situations like this might have been avoided all together by not having students wear reproduction clothing. Donning historical, often inaccurate, reproduction clothing is a bedrock learning activity for countless museums. It is a way that educators try to get students to connect with the past and gain some empathy for historical people. However, as in this example, the students immediately gleaned a dichotomy in the relationships between their historical personages because of the type of clothing they wore. This is no

different from assumptions students make today about their classmates based on the type of clothing they are wearing (e.g., designer labels, hand-me downs, etc.). Kids have a keen sense of what separates themselves from others. In this case, the student used his prior knowledge to discern that a simple shirt must mean that person was a “slave” and his fancy coat made him someone rich and important. These students could have easily gotten trapped in the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, which makes the situation about dominating each other in the present. This paradigm obfuscates the desire to have students empathize with enslaved Africans and examine the oppressor/oppressed binary of the past. Dress-up is a tempting activity for nine- and ten-year-old students, as they are still of an age when they will use their imaginations and are willingly to try almost anything. But, as in this example, it is not appropriate for the topic of slavery.

While some argue the benefit of simulation techniques, Totten concludes that “none of these arguments stand up to close scrutiny” in the case of traumatic history. Know that role-playing and simulations can be psychologically *harmful*, especially for children. The risk of harm may be especially great for someone who identifies as a member of the historically oppressed group. It is more important for us to help students learn about the lives of historically oppressed people rather than putting a fourth grader into the metaphorical shoes of an enslaved person. Educators—formal and informal alike—need to let go of this learning technique when it comes to teaching about slavery.

**Know that role-playing and simulations can be psychologically harmful, especially for children.**

## LET THEM TALK

Museum educators, myself included, need to learn how to stop talking *at* and start listening *to* their student visitors. Learning is a social activity, and social engagement employs a variety of approaches to stimulate learning through communal interactions. For students, learning together is another way to construct meaning, and it happens in the mind and out loud. By engaging students in dialogue, they hear and share different points of view, and can decide for themselves which pieces are most relevant to them.

When planning out your program, think about how the activity, questioning strategies, and dialogue will flow from one point to the next. Where are the opportunities for questions or quiet reflective time? Think about how you will get feedback from the students—are there ways other than the traditional question/answer format to solicit their thoughts? Building dialogue with your students is empowering—for you and for them. It creates a foundation of respect for everyone to construct new knowledge, understanding, and relevance.



A group of students during a school program at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

## Staff Training and Support

To effectively interpret slavery for any audience, an organization must invest in *all* its staff—from front-line to directors—providing training as well as ongoing emotional and intellectual support. It is essential for public historians and educators to put in significant work before they can expect to work effectively with visitors on this challenging history. Staff training is not just about historical content: it must also include sessions on age-appropriate facilitation techniques, developing open-ended questions, discussions about race and identity, implicit bias awareness, and much more. Investing time and resources in staff training and ongoing emotional support is what makes for a robust student experience and promotes a healthy work environment. I cannot stress enough the importance of ongoing support of staff. It makes a positive difference in your workplace, and in the personal and professional lives of your staff.

One place to start is by creating a brave, open space for your employees and colleagues to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. We must listen to and believe each other: everyone's emotions are valid. To my white colleagues, we must trust in the concerns that our Black colleagues share, and not write them off as hysterics or make-believe because they speak of some-

thing *we* have not experienced. African American staff members are categorically having different experiences than their white colleagues and it needs to be discussed and *believed*. Offering all staff members a brave space in which they can share fears and experiences provides the opportunity for them to have discussions that can build trust and elevate their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Open discussions are not the only way to help staff, however. Colleagues have offered these additional ways to provide support for staff and co-workers who lead school programs:

- **Patricia Brooks, former Manager of African American Initiatives at Colonial Williamsburg:**  
“Practicing different scenarios of how to respond to various difficult situations during training is important. I would also recommend using staff meeting time to regularly discuss what actual situations staff encountered recently, how they managed it, how it felt, and open up for discussion other possible responses. This gives managers a chance to chime in on what is and is not appropriate. Regularly discussing this is also a way to recognize staff feelings that are triggered by doing this work and providing them support in doing this work.”
- **Emmanuel Dabney, National Park Service:**  
“Stay current in the historical literature. How can you know what should be interpreted if you do not know

the subject matter? Secondly, supervisors need to be engaged. They should know something about programs given. They should engage with students and educators to see what is being gained from experiencing this subject matter at the site or by offsite education programs. This includes supervisors observing and offering constructive criticism of programs.”

- **Nicole Moore, National Center for Civil and Human Rights:**

“Supervisors need to be able to hear the concerns of their staff members and support them in ideas of how to better reach students, or what could change in the interpretation. [They] need to listen to their staff, hear their suggestions, complaints, concerns, ideas, and help them move forward in their interpretation.”

- **Elon Cook Lee, public historian and consultant:**

“At the Robbins House [in Concord, Massachusetts], we had an online repository for all challenging frequently asked questions with suggested responses. Supervisors should offer opportunities for interpreters to talk through challenging comments from the public with colleagues and supervisors.”

It is important to develop an institutional training plan that not only includes historical content but also race, identity, and bias awareness; working with different grade levels; situational awareness (“What ifs...”); being an effective ally; and how to exercise self-care. We must educate and take care of ourselves first before we can educate and take care of our visitors.

## Conclusion

This framework aims to move the field forward in its collective conversation about the interpretation of slavery with young audiences, acknowledging the criticism of the past and acting in the present to develop inclusive interpretation of slavery. When an organization commits to doing school and family programs on the topic of slavery, it makes a promise to past and future generations to keep alive the memory of long-silenced millions and to raise awareness of the racist legacies of slavery in our society today. It is time for the public history field to contribute to a more equitable future for all United States citizens, and we can do that through our school, family, and public programming.



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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Totten and Stephen Feinberg, “Teaching about the Holocaust,” [socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/5906/590601.html](http://socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/5906/590601.html).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Totten, “Diminishing the Complexity and Horror of the Holocaust: Using Simulations in an Attempt to Convey Historical Experiences,” *Social Education* 64, no.3 (April 2000): 165-171.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Resources

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