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The 1619 Project

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Why Can't We Teach This?

By Nikita Stewart

In the preface to "The Geographical Reader for the Dixie Children," Mazinda Branson Moore, a teacher who founded a girls' school in North Carolina, noted that she wanted to teach children about the world without it going over their heads. "The author of this little work, having found most of the juvenile books too complex for young minds, has for some time intended making an effort to simplify the science of Geography," she wrote. "If she shall succeed in bringing this beautiful and useful study within the grasp of little folks, and making it both interesting and pleasant, her purpose will be fully accomplished." The book was published in 1863, the same year as the Emancipation Proclamation and in the midst of the Civil War. Teachers could review the lessons with suggested questions in the back of the book. Part of Lesson IX's suggestions read:

Q. Which race is the most civilized?

A. The Caucasian.

Q. Is the African savage in this country?

A. No; they are docile and religious here.

Q. How are they in Africa where they first come from?

A. They are very ignorant, cruel and wretched.

More than a century and a half later, textbooks no longer publish such overt racist lies, but the United States still struggles to teach children about slavery.

Unlike math and reading, states are not required to meet academic content standards for teaching social studies and United States history. That means that there is no consensus on the curriculum around slavery, no uniform recommendation to explain an institution that was debated in the crafting of the Constitution and that 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, 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 who 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 Middle-school and high-school teachers stick to lesson plans from outdated textbooks that promote long-held, errant views.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 they are unable to recognize the powerful and lasting effects it has had.

In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization that researches and monitors hate groups, pored over 12 popular U.S. history books and surveyed more than 1,700 social-studies teachers and 1,000 high-school seniors to understand how American

slavery is taught and what is learned. The findings were disturbing: There was widespread slavery illiteracy among students. More than a third thought the Emancipation Proclamation formally ended slavery. (It was actually the 13th Amendment.) Nearly 60 percent of teachers did not believe their textbook's coverage of slavery was adequate. A panel made up of the center's staff, an independent education researcher with a background in middle- and high-school education and a history professor with expertise in the history of slavery looked at how the books depicted enslavement, evaluating them with a 30-point rubric. On average, the textbooks received a failing grade of 46 percent.

Maureen Costello, director of Teaching Tolerance, a program at the Southern Poverty Law Center that promotes diversity education, said the rubric used to analyze the textbooks was about seeing how the history of enslavement was integrated throughout a book and exactly what those contents were. In most teachings, she said, slavery is treated like a dot on a timeline. "The best textbooks maybe have 20 pages, and that's in an 800-page textbook," Costello told me. "At its best, slavery is taught because we have to explain the Civil War. We tend to teach it like a Southern problem and a backward economic institution. The North is industrialized; the South was locked in a backward agricultural system." About 92 percent of students did not know that slavery was the war's central cause, according to the survey.

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 its 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 large numbers of 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 in a different way 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 bulletin

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