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Teaching Slavery

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Understanding Slavery Initiative has undertaken research, consultation and piloting to develop recommendations for primary school teachers wishing to teach transatlantic slavery. The following 'FAQs' offer guidance to those who wish to engage younger children with the history of transatlantic slavery and its subsequent legacies:

- [How much historical knowledge do I need to have to effectively teach the history of transatlantic slavery?](#)
- [Are primary school children psychologically equipped to learn about a history that is sensitive, brutal and controversial?](#)
- [I feel my class of children have developed the 'building blocks' of knowledge and understanding and are ready to learn about the history of transatlantic slavery. What teaching approaches should I use?](#)
- [How can museum objects be used to teach the history of transatlantic slavery to primary school children?](#)
- [How can drama be used to teach the history of transatlantic slavery to primary school children?](#)
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How much historical knowledge do I need to have to effectively teach the history of transatlantic slavery?

This is a complex history and it is wise for a teacher to invest some of his or her own time to gain knowledge and understanding of the historical and social conditions that led to the system of transatlantic slavery. Teachers can access detailed background information from this site, as well as a large range of museum objects relating to it.

In particular, it is important that younger children learn about the sophisticated civilisations that existed across the African continent prior to transatlantic slavery. Studying ancient civilisations such as Mali and Benin, and reminding children that Ancient Egypt was an African civilisation, challenges the stereotypical image of Africa as an unsophisticated continent. It will also allow them when older to better appreciate the devastating effects the system of transatlantic slavery had on the continent, and how its legacy is felt today.

Children should also develop their knowledge of Africa today – to understand that it is a vast and varied continent with different countries and languages. Contrasting modern African cities and lifestyles with the more clichéd depictions of rural communities will help to develop a more sophisticated understanding of African society both past and present and how this is reflected in the UK's multi-cultural society and traditions.

Are primary school children psychologically equipped to learn about a history that is sensitive, brutal and controversial?

This question must be very carefully considered. The USI partner museums have worked with many primary schools delivering this history as a topic.

Children aged ten and under are often not able to contextualise and make sense of the transatlantic slave trade. This may be because:

They lack the broader historical knowledge of the economic and social conditions that drove Britain from the 16th century onwards – essential to understand how such an abhorrent system of trade could flourish and be widely accepted.

They may not yet be emotionally equipped to deal with learning about the brutality and violence that was meted out during the era of transatlantic slavery.

Young children may not yet have properly explored their own identity and rights and therefore cannot appreciate the gravity of having such things forcibly removed.

There are many complexities to this history and many areas where the wrong approach to teaching it can cause children to become confused and traumatised, or develop serious misconceptions about events and legacies. For these reasons, and more, many primary school teachers choose not to explore this history with their pupils.

USI recommends that teachers instead focus on the themes, histories and legacies that surround this history to provide a context, without exposing them to the disturbing parts of the history. The Building Blocks units are designed to do this – focusing younger children on developing a more sophisticated knowledge and understanding base around some of the key themes of transatlantic slavery to prepare them to learn about this difficult history in more depth when older.

I feel my class of children have developed the ‘building blocks’ of knowledge and understanding and are ready to learn about the history of transatlantic slavery. What teaching approaches should I use?

This site recommends that all teachers consider the sensitivities attached to this history and the importance of your use of language associated with the histories and legacies of transatlantic slavery. Some of the teaching approaches and activities outlined the secondary teachers section of this site are adaptable for primary aged children.

When working with younger children, USI strongly recommends that teachers do not focus heavily on the violence and brutality of this history. It is possible to explore themes relating to the history and legacy of the trade – including justice, what is fair and unfair, Africa pre-slavery, trade and its significance to Britain’s past and present, how the trade links Britain to Africa, the Caribbean and North and South America, identity and human rights – without focusing children on to images and objects relating to torture, brutality and punishment.

Primary teachers should focus on very clearly defined learning objectives and ensure that all classroom activities are undertaken to achieve these. The Building Blocks units provide a template for this, with the fourth unit ‘Carnival’ allowing Key Stage 2 teachers a contemporary platform from which to explore the history of transatlantic slavery.

How can museum objects be used to teach the history of transatlantic slavery to primary school children?

Primary school teachers are accustomed to using objects to explore topics with children and can access historical objects via museums local to them, the USI partner museums, or digitally from this site for their pupils to engage with and develop their knowledge and understanding of this difficult history.

It is not recommended that objects of violence, brutality or torture are used when working with younger children to teach this history.

The following clips offer tutorials on using objects with younger learners:

- [How should primary school teachers approach using objects relating to this history with young children?](#)
- [In what ways could objects be used symbolically to allow and encourage creative responses to this history?](#)

How can drama be used to teach the history of transatlantic slavery to primary school children?

Some well-designed drama techniques – such as status activities, improvisation and scripting, can be used very effectively for children to develop perspective and points of view on themes relating to this history. For example – children might take on roles within a debate on fair trade.

Some dramatization is unsuitable, however, and can cause children to feel traumatised and confused – for example role-playing an enslaved person interacting with their ‘owner’, ‘re-enacting’ the middle passage or a slave auction, or separation of a mother and child. Few teachers would consider re-enacting scenes from the death camps of World War Two whilst teaching the holocaust. Taking this approach to the history of transatlantic slavery is inappropriate for many of the same reasons.

How do I deal with sensitive issues such as identity, racism, blame, guilt and ignorance that may come up when discussing this history?

Teachers can agree with their class a set of ground rules to aid discussion around different view-points whilst maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect and support. Discussing the school’s anti-racist policy, anti-bullying policy and other codes of conduct familiar to the

children will help with this, and also provide a deeper learning experience and further context to the history.

Some children may have life experiences that trigger strong emotions when learning about this history. Teachers must accept that this may occur and be supportive to the child. Images and objects of violence and brutality should not be used to teach this history to young children.

Can I make connections from transatlantic slavery to other periods of history and curriculum subjects?

The history of transatlantic slavery and its legacy spans a vast period of British history, from early exploration, through Britain's period of lucrative maritime trade, the rise and fall of the British Empire, right up to the present day. The history is also shared and intertwined with African, European, North and South American and Caribbean history. Transatlantic slavery is shared, world history not 'black' history.

Primary school teachers can use this history to make connections across many of the key periods in the Key Stage 1&2 Breadth of Study, for example:

- by looking at Tudor maritime exploration and trade and the early beginnings of transatlantic slavery during this time
- by looking at Vikings to learn about the nature of trade and why ships have been vital to trade, and why trade has long been a vital component of how we live
- by looking at rationing during World War Two to explore how reliant countries are on ships bringing in goods from overseas and what happens when these routes are compromised
- by doing a case study on Benin as an ancient civilisation
- by exploring how many of the raw goods that Victorian factory workers manufactured were supplied from plantations using enslaved people for labour

Further cross-curricular links can be made from this history into the Geography and Citizenship curriculum. The Building Blocks units provide an outline of how they link to the Key Stage 1 & 2 Curriculum.

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