



Improve your teaching of the slave trade



It's a sensitive subject but will help pupils understand topical #BlackLivesMatter issues, says **Julia Edwards**

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“Ensure children understand that the people we refer to as ‘slaves’ were ordinary men, women and children, often kidnapped”

the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the final abolition of slavery itself in 1834. Explain to children that enslaved people now became ‘apprentices’, required to work for up to six more years unpaid, until this was abolished in 1838. Make sure that pupils are aware of black abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano, Phyllis Wheatley, Mary Prince and Ottobah Cugoana, as well as white campaigners such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Hannah More.

Discuss the fact that the abolition of slavery was brought about by the British government paying compensation in 1834, not to those who had been enslaved, but to the slave owners for their loss of ‘property’. One slave trader, Thomas Daniel, received a payment of £75,000, equivalent to about £60 million today. This money still benefits the UK, since the recipients invested it in the building of British railways, the establishment of insurance companies, support of the Church of England and some British universities, and the foundation of institutions such as the Natural History Museum.

*Julia Edwards is the author of **Slaves for the Isabella**, part of **The Scar Gatherer series**, a sequence of seven historically accurate time-travel adventures, written to engage children in learning about daily life across British history. She runs workshops on all the periods covered by the series, including the slave trade.*

women and children, often kidnapped. Using the word ‘slaves’ implies these people were destined for slavery, so try to use the expression ‘enslaved people’ or ‘enslaved Africans’ when referring to them.

Discuss the conditions on board ship, the length of the journey, the penalties for rebellion, and the cost in human lives (estimated at 10% from disease caused by insanitary conditions, overcrowding and inadequate food and water). There are some helpful video clips available on BBC History at tinyurl.com/tp-plantation.

On the third part of the route, ships transported sugar and tobacco back to Britain. No enslaved people were ever landed at ports in Britain, so

for many years the British public was largely oblivious to the suffering involved in producing their goods.

2 TERRIBLE JOURNEY

For the next part of the lesson, ask children to write a diary entry for an enslaved child working on a plantation. Consider the effects of the terrible journey they had just survived, the experience of being sold (and branded) like an animal on arrival, and the deliberate isolation of each enslaved person from anyone they knew or who spoke the same language.

The text Recollections

of Slavery by a Runaway Slave (tinyurl.com/tp-runaway) describes daily life on a plantation, including the long hours of back-breaking work, the inadequate and unfamiliar food and the constant barbaric punishments. This text is inevitably upsetting, but these experiences should be discussed if possible, as well as the bravery of those who dared to rebel. (A further 30% of enslaved people died in the first three years of enslavement from malnutrition, exhaustion and tropical diseases.)

3 ABOLITION TIMELINE

For the final part of the lesson or topic, make a timeline of abolition, including campaigning from the 1780s,

The transatlantic slave trade is a fundamental part of British history, but it can feel like a difficult subject to tackle in the classroom. Understanding the slave trade enables children to make sense of events such as the #BlackLivesMatter protest, which led to the Edward Colston statue in Bristol being torn down. In this cross-curricular lesson, children will learn about all aspects of the slave trade, including a sensitivity for the language we should use to talk about it. Pupils will explore the legacy of abolition, and reflect on how we remember the past.

WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

• How the slave trade operated, including the Middle Passage

• Map the triangular route and the cargo that was carried

• What life was like on a slave plantation

• How abolition shaped modern Britain

START HERE

Begin by asking children what they know about the slave trade, collecting key words such as ‘slaves’, ‘plantation’, ‘African’, ‘black’, ‘ships’, ‘Jamaica’, ‘Caribbean’,

‘America’, ‘plantation’, ‘sugar’, and ‘tobacco’. Give a general explanation of the slave trade: ships from Europe sailed to the west coast of Africa with goods to exchange for innocent people; these people were transported across the Atlantic to the Americas where they were forced to work as slaves on plantations; the sugar and tobacco produced on the plantations was then shipped back to Britain. Over time, about 12 million people were taken from Africa like this.



MAIN LESSON

1 MAP THE ROUTE

Using blank maps of the world, ask children to plot the triangular route of the transatlantic slave trade, marking each part of the route with the cargo carried. Ships sailing from Britain carried brass, copper, glass beads, cloth and guns to west Africa. (Guns enabled warring tribes to defeat their enemies and exchange them with slave traders for more weapons.)

Human cargo was transported on the Middle Passage, from Africa to the West Indies and America. Ensure children understand that the people we refer to as ‘slaves’ were ordinary men,

EXTENDING THE LESSON

• Look at the famous diagram of the Brookes slave ship (tinyurl.com/tp-ship) and use the sizes given in inches in the explanation to measure out in centimetres the space given to each man, woman and child. Note too that the ship previously transported more people than in the diagram. Find out where this picture was first published and why.

• Research the contribution of one of the black abolitionists to the campaign for abolition.

• Learn and perform a Negro spiritual – songs created by African Americans that merged their African cultural heritage with their experiences of being held in slavery.

• Read about the #BlackLivesMatter protest in Bristol in June 2020. Discuss whether we should continue to have statues of individuals such as Edward Colston, and if not, what we should do with them.

USEFUL QUESTIONS

- How do people try to justify treating others badly?
- If your ancestors had received a compensation payment in 1834, how would you feel about the money?
- How can we stop racial inequality in Britain today?