

Teaching about the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade: principles to adopt, pitfalls to avoid

Berenice Miles

The approach to teaching about the abolition of slavery outlined here stresses the importance of a broad framework that contains not only abolition but also great African civilisations, black heroes of the resistance, a human rights approach, white abolitionists as role-models but not as the principal agents of change, and respect for the dignity of all pupils.

On 25 March, 1807 the Abolition of Slavery Act was passed in the British parliament. Throughout 2007, the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade will be commemorated in Britain and teachers will want to respond to the anniversary in their teaching. Much material about the Atlantic slave trade will be published and available on the internet for teachers. This article does not

include material on slavery. Rather it gives ten principles for teaching the topic, makes some important points about approaches and provides information to support teachers in using them.

The teaching approach advocated here fits within the context of combating racism in education and of developing inclusive schools and enhances these concepts. The principles have been honed to focus sharply on the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Related topics, such as present day slavery, have intentionally not been included in order to keep the focus.

The ten principles are below.

Ten principles for teaching about the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade

1. Make sure that every child in your class can maintain their dignity and self-esteem during the teaching of this topic
2. Do not approach the topic from a deficit model of 'poor, helpless black people in Africa and the Caribbean'
3. Make sure that the resources you use do not compound a deficit model
4. Make sure that pupils understand about great African civilisations. Never start with African people as slaves
5. Teach pupils the complex nature of cruelty in the Atlantic slave trade and plantation life
6. Include the stories of African heritage leaders of rebellion and opposition in the Caribbean
7. Include the stories of freed African heritage slaves and servants in Europe who took part in the fight for abolition
8. Include the stories of white abolitionists as role models in the fight against injustice and racism, but do not imply that only white people were responsible for the abolition
9. Place the topic in a context of human rights
10. Take care of your own professional development beforehand. This is a sensitive issue.

1 Make sure that every child in your class can maintain their dignity and self-esteem during the teaching of this topic.

All of the principles in this article contribute to this crucial aim.

African heritage pupils, particularly those from the Caribbean, are most at risk of being made to feel uncomfortable and losing dignity and self-esteem.

Never teach so that the first impression, or worse still the only impression, of people of African heritage is of helpless, abject enslavement. However, neither is it helpful to imply that all white people supported the evils of slavery and its legacy, nor that all white people today are responsible for the crimes, negligence, ignorance and injustice of their forebears.

All pupils should be involved in all activities, and African heritage pupils should not be singled out.

Be aware of the potential for some pupils to make inappropriate comments, and if that happens, deal with the situation quickly.

Get a display up as quickly as possible, with the positive images associated with the project. You could do this with commercially produced materials and posters before the project starts rather than wait for them to be introduced in the work. The pupils' own work can be displayed later. Contemporary engravings of abject slaves in chains and degrading situations abound in materials for teaching about slavery. It is appropriate for pupils to see them, but take care not to have them as the pervading images around the classroom.

2 Do not approach the subject from a deficit model of 'poor, helpless black people in Africa and the Caribbean'

The pupils should be confident in a positive concept of people of African heritage, whether it is taught as part of the topic or whether it has been taught previously (for example in Black History Month in 2006) or as part of the history or citizenship curriculum. Ideally, and for best

practice, this concept should be enshrined automatically in an inclusive curriculum.

This is not as obvious as it seems, because not all teaching resources take an inclusive approach. For example, resources for teaching about the Victorians often ignore the presence of black people in England. Resources for teaching about great figures in science, literature and the arts often ignore the contribution of black people. It is important to find appropriate resources in all curriculum areas.

The weblinks in the resources list below will help you to find appropriate material.

3 Make sure that the resources you use do not compound a deficit model

School resources should celebrate and affirm identity and diversity and provide a balanced and inclusive representation of world history and culture. In evaluating resources for teaching about the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the following questions could be considered:

- * Do the illustrations and content reflect perspectives of a range of different communities, as opposed to a Eurocentric viewpoint?
- * Do the illustrations and content allow pupils and communities dignity and respect?
- * Do they extend pupils' knowledge of the world society and interdependence?
- * Do they include first hand accounts from slaves writing about their experience, and arguments from abolitionists?

To source the resources:

- * make use of the websites set up by black organisations specifically for this topic, and use the websites referenced below.
- * make a point of using one of the many specialist suppliers of books, and support any local black bookshops where they exist. Often such booksellers are committed to providing positive images, are very knowledgeable about what is available and are willing to help schools put together appropriate resources.

4 Make sure that pupils understand about great African civilisations. Never start with African people as slaves

There are many civilisations all over Africa which you could choose to teach about. For the purposes of this topic, materials developed for Ealing schools focused on the Akan and Benin empires. This was not only because of their achievements and cultures, but because most of the slaves taken to the Caribbean (and therefore ancestors of pupils in English schools) came from that region of West Africa.

5 Teach pupils the complex nature of cruelty in Atlantic slave trade and plantation life

Concepts to be taught are:

- the horrendous physical cruelty of branding, gagging, chains, whipping and more
- the emotional cruelty of stealing people from Africa, separating families including mothers and children, treating people as ‘chattels’ to be bought and sold
- that the horrific treatment of slaves was refined and institutionalised for profit. The concept of calculated cruelties such as the way slaves were packed into the slave ships and decisions made on balancing the profits slavers could make if they ‘packed’ ships with so many slaves that they would expect a certain number of them to die, compared with slightly lower numbers but fewer deaths at sea.
- the financial reasons which contributed to the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade
- the family fortunes and cities which were founded on the proceeds of the Atlantic slave trade

6 Include the stories of African heritage leaders of rebellion and opposition in the Caribbean

It is absolutely crucial to make sure that the role of African heritage slaves in securing their own freedom is properly included and emphasised. Thousands of slaves took part in uprisings and contributed to the movement for freedom. Links to information are provided below.

‘They will remember that we were sold but they won’t remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were brave’
(William Prescott – former slave 1937, quoted by Linda Ali, in her article for the ‘Set All Free’ website)

In teaching about plantation life, include resistance as well as rebellion. Slaves developed important forms of resistance by finding ways of keeping alive African cultures, stories, beliefs, forms of worship, and languages.

Running away was another form of resistance, and often important slave rebellions were carried out by communities of runaway slaves (such as Nanny and the maroons in Jamaica.)

There is information below in the web references to help you reflect this contribution in your teaching.

If you have pupils in your class with family backgrounds from a particular island in the Caribbean, research the stories of rebellion on their island. There is probably not a single island on which slave resistance did not take place. You will find a comprehensive list of rebellions and their leaders at: <http://caribbean-guide.info/past.and.present/history/slave.rebellion/index.html>. In addition, the websites of Caribbean governments often include relevant information in their history sections. Jamaica is a good example, where clear information on Jamaica’s national heroes is readily available.

7 Include the stories of freed African heritage slaves and servants in Europe who took part in the fight for abolition

It is always important to include the presence and contributions of African people in Britain throughout the curriculum, but it is absolutely essential in teaching about the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.

There is general information below about researching local contexts. However, there were many people of African descent living in Britain and Europe who took part in the overall fight

against slavery and in the abolition movement in Britain. Their own writings and writings about them are readily available. They include such people as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and Ottobah Cugoana, A good starting point to find information about them, and white abolitionists too, is Brycchan Carey's website at <http://www.brycchancarey.com/abolition/index.htm>

8 Include the stories of white abolitionists as role models in the fight against injustice and racism, but do not imply that only white people were responsible for the abolition

The principles 6, 7 and 8 are interrelated.

Pupils need to know that there were white role models in the fight for freedom and justice. There will be a national focus on the role of William Wilberforce, who led the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act. However, thousands of British men and women contributed to the campaign against slavery, especially through abolition societies, politics or the churches.

Examples of evidence of black people living in one local area, researched from churchwardens' accounts records held at the borough archive, and from parish registers researched and published by the London Metropolitan Archive

Gave two slaves 6 pence

Entry in churchwardens' accounts for the Parish of Norwood
Accounts of Mr Charles Stokes and Mr William Coker, May 9 1744

Gave 7 slaves 1 shilling

Entry in churchwardens' accounts for the Parish of Norwood
Accounts of Mr Rich, Gilbert, May 16 1745

Borough: Ealing **Parish:** Saint Mary, Ealing

Father's First Name:

Mother's First Name:

Date Baptised: 29 Dec 1721

Householder:

Notes:

Henry – a Black abt the age of 7, baptised Decr 24. Sponsors: James Welch, Edward Hughes, & Hannah Robins 1721

Borough: Ealing **Parish:** Saint Mary, Ealing

Father's First Name:

Mother's First Name:

Date Baptised: 09 Jun 1779

Householder:

Notes:

Johnson, Laetitia – a negro woman aged about twenty eight years baptised June 9th

Wherever possible relate the teaching content to the local contexts of area and heritage, so that it is meaningful to the pupils in your class.

It is possible to find information about black people living throughout Britain in the period being studied. In some areas this research has already been done. Examples include the work carried out by London Metropolitan Archives in the London area, work carried out in Oxfordshire by the libraries service, work at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and slave trails in Bristol and Liverpool. Such documents as parish registers and churchwardens' accounts can also yield fascinating information. It is interesting to compare the baptism entries of black people, which usually do not have the precise age and family details that other entries include. You can get a flavour of the kind of information available from the entries in Box 3, researched in one particular London borough.

In the local context there may be information about the history of notable local families whose fortunes were made through slave plantations. In Liverpool and Bristol for example, this information is readily available, but in other areas the borough archivist may already have the information, or be willing to help research it. There may also have been abolitionists living in the local area. The work in Ealing unearthed details of a local politician who supported abolition.

9 Place the topic in a context of human rights

Teaching the topic of slavery from a human rights perspective places it within a context which pupils can understand today and in which the dignity of humankind is respected.

The weblinks below include links to human rights charters on which the work can be based, and a link to the Lift Off teaching project sponsored by Amnesty International.

10 Take care of your own professional development beforehand. This is a sensitive issue

Teaching about slavery requires a sensitive approach and requires careful preparation. This article is intended to be a resource to help. Teaching about racism is sensitive too, and often teachers are not confident with it. With older pupils, teaching about slavery can lead to discussion of controversial issues, such as whether there should be reparations. There are likely to be courses offered to teachers in 2007 to teach about the abolition of slavery and the websites below contain much material for you to read more about the issue of abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.

For information on talking with children about difficult and controversial issues, you could look at the Ealing Grid for Learning webpage on 'Talking with Children: events in London and elsewhere'. This webpage was largely developed to assist teachers to talk to children in response

Parents and community organisations

Sometimes parents are concerned about this topic being taught – and justifiably so, given that in the past it has been taught using the 'deficit model' approach which is so damaging to the image of people of African heritage.

For schools which have easy and ongoing discussions with parents on curriculum issues, it should present no problem to have the discussion about what you are intending to teach and how you are going to approach it. For schools which do not have a current channel of communication with parents on such issues, the topic might offer the opportunity of opening it. However, the topic should not be 'blown up' as something extra or different. It is just part of the school curriculum.

Many areas have community organisations such as supplementary schools, parents' organisations or racial equality councils which will support this work

to current issues reported in the media, but you might find the approach helpful. There is a section on the Insted Consultancy website at <http://www.insted.co.uk/links.html#issues> which provides helpful information on handling controversial issues. You can also look at the DfES countering racist bullying website on the Teachernet site. This has a section on professional development. Below are some examples of the many websites available. In the run-up to 2007 more websites are being developed, especially by black organisations, and further excellent material will become available

It is important to see this work as an integral part of the national curriculum. Aspects of it will fit within the history and citizenship curricular targets. The contextual topic of African civilisations will also have content relevant to English, art and design, science and mathematics. There is considerable scope for pupils to write in different modes and for drama.

The topic contributes to the school's duty to promote race equality, under the Race Relations Amendment Act. Finally, the topic can be followed up with work on countering racism.

Teaching the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade well can make a very positive contribution to the developing students' commitment to justice and understanding and combating racism. As with all sensitive issues, this article recognises that it is vital for teachers to be well prepared before embarking on the topic, and to have a framework for teaching it. The ten principles should help teachers to develop a relevant framework and content.

Berenice Miles is an independent consultant, working in education and equality

'Black History Month 2006: black history for the inclusive school' was prepared for Ealing Council by Berenice using the approaches in this article, and can be accessed at <http://www.egfl.org.uk/categories/pupils/inclusion/equality/race/events/blhist.html>

Useful websites for researching the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Note: Within the space available here the list of websites focuses very specifically on teaching about the abolition. Further websites giving information on the West African civilisations of Akan and Benin, on black achievers and on Black history Month can be found in the Ealing Black History Month booklet at <http://www.egfl.org.uk/categories/pupils/inclusion/equality/race/events/blhist.html>

The web references given here have been chosen to research the histories of people and events in the Caribbean rather than the United States.

Anti-Slavery

<http://www.antislavery.org/archive/press/pressrelease2005bicentenary.htm>

Powerful, interactive material to research both the transatlantic slave trade and current issues of slavery and oppression. See the **Breaking the Silence** page at <http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/index.shtml>

The Atlantic Slave trade and life in the Americas

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/search.html>
Copyright-free images and maps from history.

Breaking the Silence

<http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/index.shtml>

Teaching resources and information for learning about the transatlantic slave trade.

Brycchan Carey's webpage

<http://www.brycchancarey.com/index.htm>
Brycchan Carey is a senior lecturer in English literature who has written extensively on the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. His website is clear and packed with information. Excellent resource.

Caribbean Guide

<http://caribbean-guide.info/past.and.present/history/abolition/index.html>

Good website for the history of the Caribbean, including information on slave rebellions.

Digital history

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>

Ealing Grid for Learning

'Black History Month 2006: black history for the inclusive school' material using the approaches in this article, and can be accessed at <http://www.egfl.org.uk/categories/pupils/inclusion/equality/race/events/blhist.html>

Talking with children: recent events in London and elsewhere <http://www.egfl.org.uk/categories/pupils/inclusion/equality/race/talking/index.html>

Webpages with advice on talking with children about traumatic events.

Freedom

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/>
Excellent teaching resource from various museums in Britain

Geocities

<http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/9912/freedomfighters.html>
The link takes you directly to clear information about slaves who fought for freedom.

Global Gateway: Breaking the Silence

<http://www.globalgateway.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=2966>

This site is dedicated to teaching about the bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. It has downloadable resources for teachers. It also suggests that teachers link with schools overseas, in particular in Africa, on a curriculum area. It advises becoming part of a learning circle run by the iEARN network:

'The International Education and Resource Network is collaborative learning rather than communication for its own sake. iEARN is free to join and helps you plan projects and find partners – but they suggest you start by joining an existing project.'

Grandy Nanny

<http://www.edunetconnect.com/cat/soccult/grnan.html>
The story of Nanny of the Mountains

Jamaicaway

<http://www.jamaicaway.com/Heroes/index.html#heroindex>
Website dedicated to information on the national heroes of Jamaica. It includes Nanny, Paul Bogle and Sam Sharpe.

London Metropolitan Archives Black and Asian Londoners Project

http://www.corpoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/lma_learning/dataonline/lz_baproject.asp

Search the Black and Asian Londoners project for general historical information, and for records of individual black and Asian people living in the London area.

Slightly different, but very well worth mentioning, is the Schoolmate section of the site, which has a historical perspective on the history of Black and Asian communities in London. It is interactive for pupil use, and is a welcome resource. You can click on the timeline to find out which communities were living in London at the time of your current history curriculum programme.

National Archives

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/>
The National Archives website contains interactive material for educators and students at all key stages at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/teachers/?source=ddmenu_research8

You can research the Learning Curve material and create your own web-based exhibition, for example on the contribution of black and Asian communities to Britain.

The National Maritime Museum – Understanding Slavery

<http://www.understandingslavery.com/http://www.understandingslavery.com/>
Produced by the *Understanding Slavery* Project, the website is a free resource designed to give teachers and educators a tool-kit for teaching the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies.

Positive Images

<http://www.multicultural-art.co.uk/black.html>
This is the website and online catalogue of a company supplying a wide range of posters presenting aspects of positive images and black history. Very high quality motivational material for all key stages. Highly recommended.

Set All Free

<http://www.setallfree.net/>

Website produced by the Churches Together in England organisation, with comprehensive resources for the bicentenary in 2007. Although it is primarily for Christian churches, it contains much that is useful for teachers.

Spartacus Schoolnet

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/slavery.htm>

This is a clear and extremely comprehensive website for school use. It has biographies of the major participants in abolition, including lists on women who participated, anti-slavery societies, plantation life, historical events and more.

UNESCO

http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5420&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
Unesco website with historical information including biographies.

Wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/>

Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, has articles on most of the leaders of rebellions, also on other people involved in the fight for abolition. A good starting point. (Use it in conjunction with websites above to identify names to research.)

■ Researching human rights charters

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>

The South African Freedom Charter

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/charter.html>

The Children's Charter of South Africa

<http://www.anc.org.za/misc/childcht.html>

Amnesty International on human rights education – the Lift Off project

<http://www.amnesty.ie/user/content/view/full/818>
<http://www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=748>
The Lift Off project on human rights education, sponsored by Amnesty International, has teaching activities, and downloadable posters giving child-friendly versions of the United Nations charters.

■ Finding resources suppliers

It has not been possible to provide a list of black suppliers, producers and publishers of resources across the country. Teachers should start their search with local community organisations. In areas where such organisations are not available, the following websites will be useful starting points:

Black History Month

[http://www.black-history-month.co.uk/links.html#top`](http://www.black-history-month.co.uk/links.html#top)

The Black History Month website has an excellent list of suppliers and publishers of resources. It is a resource for the whole year, and keeps up to date with new information, projects and resources.

Insted Consultancy website

has a suppliers list at <http://www.insted.co.uk/links.html#suppliers>

Leicester City Council Education Services has lists of book and poster suppliers:

<http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council—services/education—lifelong-learning/about-us/lea-services/multicultural-education/multicultural-centre/>

Portsmouth EMAS service has a list of suppliers at

<http://www.blss.portsmouth.sch.uk/resources/publis-hers.shtml>

Berenice Miles

berenicemiles@hotmail.co.uk

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Robin Richardson for his support with this article.