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Playing Slavery in First Grade: When “Developmental Appropriateness” Goes Awry in the Progressive Classroom

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This article unfurls in the aftermath of an event where three first grade children at a reputable progressive elementary school were found playing slavery during school recess. As word caught on, parents ignited into a frenzy: some railed against the teacher, others demanded an answer, while still others believed this was precisely the meaning of progressive schooling. In swift response, school administrators sent a conciliatory email apologizing for their misjudgment. Slavery, they declared, was too difficult a topic and developmentally inappropriate for such a young age. Guided by critical childhood studies and concepts of difficult knowledge, this reflective article explores how adults drew from developmental frameworks and used children as proxies to protect themselves from the complicated conversation of race and slavery. It unpacks this event through three entry points: encountering difficult knowledge in primary school; the moralization of child development; and the ongoing work inherent to social justice-oriented schooling. It is hoped that readers can take this example into their own teacher education programs and school faculty meetings to query how adults can open up spaces for critical encounters rather than launch accusations when faced with the emotional charge of oppressive histories.

Introduction

“Okay, now you are going to be my slaves?” instructed first grader Joey¹ as he grabbed the hands of two of his African-American classmates. The three children were playing in the yard during recess, just having emerged from a read aloud about one of the most prominent and well-known abolitionist activists in United States history, Harriet Tubman. At the Little Children’s School (LCS), infusing school curriculum with figures from racially minoritized communities aligns well with their progressive mission. Described as a small, child-centered public school in a big metropolitan city in the Northeast corridor of the United States, LCS boasts a yearly measure of close to 80% of parents opting out of the state-administered exams and is renowned as one of a handful of elementary schools that deliberately centers a curriculum of social justice, creativity, and the arts.

None of what the children played that day was known to school faculty until Genevieve and Rhonda, mothers of the two African-American girls, came to school the next morning enraged over what their daughters told them. “I was a slave today. Today, Joey made me a slave.” Word caught on and spread fast. First grade parents were ignited into a frenzy, an avalanche of feelings, blaming, accusations ensued. While some parents railed against the teacher for not sufficiently addressing the gravity of the subject, others felt slavery had no place in the first grade classroom. While some felt the very mission of the school was to address issues

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¹All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

of race, others felt like the conversation was better left in the domain of parenting. In swift response to the emotional maelstrom, the administrators of LCS sent a conciliatory email to all first grade parents. Acknowledging the fracture that splintered the school community, they apologized for their misjudgment. Slavery, they declared, was too difficult a topic to address in the first grade and thus, developmentally inappropriate for children of such a young age.

It is hoped that readers can take this example into their own teacher education programs and school faculty meetings to query how adults can open up spaces for critical encounters rather than launch accusations when faced with the emotional charge of oppressive histories.

Guided by critical childhood reconceptualists (Farley, 2018; Garlen, 2018; Walkerdine, 2009) and concepts of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 2000; Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), this reflective article explores how adults drew from developmental frameworks and used children as proxies to protect themselves from the complicated conversation of race and slavery. While masked as inappropriate for children, this event, and the reactions that issued from it, can be read for the way that the child figure became a malleable tool of the adult imagination, one that not only embodied the unresolved conflicts of race in the United States, but ignited a collective refusal to reconcile a subject that appeared too discomfiting and shameful to confront. In her chapter, *If the Story Cannot End*, Deborah Britzman (2000) asks what happens in that liminal space when the reception of a traumatic event makes one too vulnerable? What refusals are ignited by teachers, administrators, and parents who are suddenly thrown by their children to deal with the very emotions provoked by a subject such as slavery?

The remainder of this article unpacks this event through several entry points: encountering difficult knowledge in elementary school; the moralization of child development; and the ongoing work

inherent to progressive social justice-oriented schooling. These entry points call forward the complex and varied issues at hand when embracing difficult knowledge in elementary teaching and learning. It wonders if at times the defense mechanisms adults use to ward off the anxieties they feel when confronting events of trauma and shame not only deny the authentic engagement needed in the work of healing, but figures the child as a hopeful symbol of innocence that refuses the adults their pain. As James Garrett (2017) writes, when learning is experienced as a “burden,” it may be powerful enough to make us “not-know, turn away, accuse, correct, and forget” (p. 1), but it may also serve as cause to reverse susceptibility and foreclose on the learning of others, in this case the children (Robinson, 2012). It is hoped that readers can take this example into their own teacher education programs and school faculty meetings to query how adults can open up spaces for critical encounters rather than launch accusations when faced with the emotional charge of oppressive histories.

Difficult Knowledge

On the day in question, Ms. Kate, a White woman who has taught at LCS for three years, chose to read to her class a book entitled, *An Apple for Harriet Tubman*. Written by award-winning historian and former elementary school teacher Glennette Tilley Turner (2006), the first line of the popularly known book reads, “Harriet was born a slave around the year 1820. Her parents, Ben and Rit Ross, were enslaved on the Brodess plantation in Maryland.” One cannot teach about Ms. Tubman without acknowledging the condition of slavery that birthed her abolitionist strength, and though slavery makes its first appearance in the fourth and fifth grade state curriculum,² the sharing of notable figures from United States history,

²Elementary teaching standards that pertain to slavery:

Fourth grade: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM AND A CALL FOR CHANGE: Different groups of people did not have equal rights and freedoms. People worked to bring about change. The

struggle for rights and freedoms was one factor in the division of the United States that resulted in the Civil War. People who took action to abolish slavery (Samuel Cornish, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Albro Lyons, Charles Reason, Henry Highland Garnet, or Harriet Tubman)

Fifth grade: COMPARATIVE CULTURES: The countries of the Western Hemisphere are diverse and the cultures of these countries are rich and varied. Due to their proximity to each other, the countries of the Western Hemisphere share some of the same concerns and issues. (Standards 1, 2); Slavery is abolished in Brazil (1888).

particularly during Black History Month, is common to many lower grade classrooms.

Engagements with slavery are crucial to the disruption of pedagogical practices that “paste over the contradictions of society” (McCarthy & Sealey-Ruiz, 2010). “As the engine that drives the ship of state’s national and imperial project,” (Sharpe, 2016) slavery sits at the heart of both historical explanation and present-day hierarchies of class, gender, and ableism. “In the wake,” writes Christina Sharpe, is “to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up, produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery” (p. 8). Yet the first treatment of slave history in the state curriculum is found, not with historical context, but with attention to those individuals who took action to abolish it. As what Hasan Kwame Jeffries (cited in Delacroix, 2019) calls “an afterthought or footnote,” this decontextualization of abolition defends against questions of loss, even implication, as the idealization of the hero serves to transcend and redeem the painful history that undergirds their deliberate action.

Converting healing into an act of deliberation, educational discourses tend to regulate the argument by universalizing language and aiming for resolution or consensus, rather than sitting with affect and emotion as the mode of explanation itself.

What difficult knowledge opens up is a space where the complex residuals of traumatic histories are seen as emergent, discursive, and repetitively then and now (Garrett, 2017). No matter the social position, difficult knowledge provokes an internal history that may be impossible to know of the other, an upheaval of shame, loss, and vulnerability felt even by those not directly affected through lineage. Such felt experiences can either ignite an urgent response or provoke us to turn away. In education, the teacher’s emotional world affects what counts to them as knowledge and influences how such curriculum becomes translated: slavery as a narrative of hope, as a subject of devastation, or not even taught at all. Moreover, the uncertainty of reading into the suffering of another is tied to the

possibility that we, as teachers, have failed our students, that their inability to evidence compassion may be a symptom of our own incompetence and inadequacy.

Difficult knowledge, then, raises questions over who stakes claim to feelings by acknowledging the myriad of senses at play, including that of refusal, reversal, and willful ignorance. While the heroification of figures such as Harriet Tubman is often justified as developmentally appropriate, her characterization as a model for individual morality presents a fantasy that rescues both Tubman and the reader from the violent reality of her enslaved life (Britzman, 2000). Too difficult for some to bear, there is no redemption from a history of enslavement, just the persistent willingness to confront one’s discomfort and fragility, particularly at times when desires to live without conflict are suddenly overturned. In classrooms, conflicts, both psychic and relational, are often repressed by elegant models for teaching or oversimplified notions of safety and effectiveness. As difficult as they can be, conflicts engage us with feelings that are central to our understanding of self and others. They are fertile grounds for harvesting meaning, a place to attend to injustices and recognize our inner struggles.

In this pedagogical scene, the intense eruption of emotions was followed by a reconciliatory apology that was sent from one computer to another; the apology now a stand-in object responsible for healing the open wound laid raw and aching. Foreclosing on the possibility of dialog, the apology made clear there would be no future meetings. Acknowledging how encounters reopen “the prior histories that violate and fix others in regimes of difference,” Sara Ahmed (2000) is quite transparent about the difficulties that such inter-embodiments require. “The face to face meeting,” she writes, “is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is antagonistic” (p. 8); it is among embodied beings that hesitate between what occurred on the playground and broader historical relationships of power that have endured and circulated into this very moment. It is an encounter that involves living within our own selves, yet also in each other’s knowledge of us, with stories already known and those being made as we engage with difference.

Yet from the ruins of Western scientism, contemporary schooling seems one large project of extracting meaning from messy uncertainties. With objectives, evaluations, and data signaling *par excellence* in education, neoliberal reforms may actually

protect adults from what they do not want to know about the world (Taubman, 2017). Over thirty years ago, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) cautioned our reliance on the repressive myths of rationalism, how such assumptions turn us into cognitive subjects who can somehow will ourselves into critical ways of being. Converting healing into an act of deliberation, educational discourses tend to regulate the argument by universalizing language and aiming for resolution or consensus, rather than sitting with affect and emotion as the mode of explanation itself.

If we accept the limits of pure reason, we can express the paradoxes and ironies of racial understanding in ways that engage emotionally rather than by intellectual force (Alcorn, 2011). With affective concern, “what is most painful” says Jacques Derrida (cited in Britzman, 2000), “is that the painful is not painful for others, thereby risking the loss of its value” (p. 38). The first grade children playing in the yard opened a floodgate of unruly conflicts into the ongoing adult relationships at LCS. Not only do we see how quickly adults moved to resolve the internal pain that issues from the traces of traumatic history, but how a disruption in the continued silence around race exposes the intolerance adults have to engage that liminal gap between what we do and do not want to know. In this next section, we consider the figuration of the child as a product of adult desires and undesirabilities, then introduce what it might look like to teach about slavery to young children.

Moralizing Child Development

Discourses on childhood are commonly understood through developmental frameworks based in cognitive psychology (Burman, 2008; Farley, 2018; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). In most teacher education programs, prospective teachers are required to take a child psychology and cognitive development course that covers the seminal works of Jean Piaget and his notion of maturation and inductive reasoning. Over the decades, and even as Piaget’s reliance on closed and sequential stages has been greatly criticized for its rigidity, teachers and teacher education programs continue to rely on developmental psychology as the means through which adults predict the capacities of children to understand complex ideas, systems, and structures (Walkerdine, 2009). In these discourses, the child is often framed as biologically determined, linearly developing, and thus, requiring a specific kind of adult guidance and intervention.

Constitutive of the emerging disciplinary fields of the nineteenth-century (e.g. physiology, eugenics, neuroscience, social science), including racist evolutionary theories of intelligence and civility (Lesko, 2012; Winfield, 2007), the child figure continues to be inserted into such developmental hierarchies as a “quasi-human” category that is at once vulnerable and determined (Sonu & Benson, 2016). This makes the child subject a remarkably malleable and inventive figure of the adult imagination, one that is distinctly tied to historically produced discourses, as well as societal hopes, unfulfilled dreams, and adult moral anxieties (Castaneda, 2002; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). While the child was once considered innocent and without corruption, a neo-Rousseauian notion that applied to the White bourgeois classes, they suffered the reputation of *tabula rasa*, a less evolved being whose lack of knowledge and direction necessitated intervention. At the intersections of hope, future, morality, and innocence, the child plays a unique and constitutive role in the making of the adult world, and has become a resource for wider social, political, and economic projects that further distance them from being seen for their own subjective experience.

The field of reconceptualist childhood studies acknowledges the constructedness of the child figure, its centrality across a number of discourses, and challenges notions of innocence by honoring their inner workings as worthy and their expressions as sophisticated understandings and curiosities (Davies, 2014). This conceptual turn in childhood studies shifts away from what the child is (in)capable of knowing, including what is developmentally inappropriate, and instead, moves toward questions about the child’s expression of the world and what events like playing slavery tell us about the inhibitions and difficulties of the adults who try to contain them. As noted by Julie Garlen (2018), constructions of childhood innocence and morality hint toward deeper emotional investments that operate as specific forms of social exclusion. These efforts disrupt the cultural devaluation of children in society while demonstrating how race relations come to be regulated by historically uneven distributions of childhood innocence (Bernstein, 2011), upholding Whiteness at the expense of those who may not be considered children at all (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Scholars in reconceptualist childhood ask how the child serves instead as a surrogate for the panics harbored by adults who in this case almost immediately transform child’s play into debate over the constitution of race and slavery in school

curriculum. In the early childhood classroom, reenactments and role plays are not literal stagings, but rather ways for young children to step into the positionality of others and act out different views and needs. Through play, children negotiate various roles, agree on common themes, and use language to test out new social relations. With clear links to meaning-making, Nilsson, Ferholt, and Lecusay (2018) argue that learning in the early years actually emerges from exploration and play rather than as a result of formal instruction. The imaginative practices of play, then, are not to be considered natural, unfettered, and characteristic of childhood (Cook, 2016), nor are they in opposition to the adult-dominated domains of reality and development. Instead, play offers the child a social scene to explore the world by capturing in motion their observations, offering them the ability to imagine what could have been and what other ways the world might be.

Yet with remarkable speed, questions about what the children intended to do with this game became less important than allaying the emotional force of the situation. The children in this event became the invisible figures upon which adults—parents, teachers, and administrators—enacted their frustration and worries. Assuaging the tension by saying matter-of-factly that slavery is “developmentally inappropriate” foreclosed a conversation that could have potentially enhanced the school’s commitment to talking about issues of justice and oppression, activism and transformative change.

Contextualizing the Teaching of Slavery

This article did not intend to focus on the teaching of slavery in the lower elementary grades. But if our wish is for students, and ourselves, to learn something from bearing witness to traumatic histories, to see such experience as related to our own, to consider the psychic difficulty of learning from and about profound loss, then it would be important for teachers and teacher educators everywhere to think about how they and their school would respond to a child inquiring about slavery. Given the obvious limits of this article, I consider how racial literacy frameworks can offer insight into how we might think about broaching slavery with young children. It is by no means a “best practice,” if there ever was such a thing, but thoughts drafted in hindsight of a situation that will demand much more careful attention in the future.

Racial literacy (Epstein & Gist, 2013; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2012) is the ability to recognize a full range of racialized hierarchies in

order to discern how racism filters the way we read the world. It involves three key tenets: (1) making visible the complex ways that racism operates historically and today, (2) attention to the way that race plays out psychologically and interpersonally, and (3) addressing issues of race directly as they occur. How can we think about the teaching of slavery to first graders through this framework?

One of the first scholars of African-American history was author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson. With a belief that no Black history should begin with slavery, he suggests to first uncover the largely absent or distorted history on the African continent, including not only its art and music, but its intellectual, scientific, and literary advancements (King & Brown, 2014). Careful not to fall into stereotypes and the proverbial mistake of Africa as a country (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011), the Boston University African Studies Center advises teachers to select specific locations of study, honoring the vast cultural differences that exist both across and within its 54 nations, and to build connections that are both continental but also cross-comparative.

Yet, instead of seeing the topic of slavery as an overwhelming subject better left for later, teachers can see small conversations as the beginning of developing a critical racial literacy that helps children recognize racism as an enduring relationship that is both physical and structural, historical and present.

Teachers can refuse attempts to close slavery as an event of the past by helping students locate the permutations of institutional racism established in its aftermath. In elementary schools, students are taught about the end of slavery and the fight for freedom despite having no background on the institution of slavery itself. In their analysis of over 410 slavery-themed children’s book, Bickford and Rich (2014) found that slaves secured freedom in every single children’s book except for two; 75% included successful slave escapes and 20% ended in the Civil War. Less than five books showed slaves who lived

their entire lives in slavery, a gross misrepresentation and underestimation of its perniciousness. Even if the standards suggest a focus on abolitionist movements, abolitionist figures such as Tubman cannot be disentangled from the difficult conversation of slavery.

Yet, instead of seeing the topic of slavery as an overwhelming subject better left for later, teachers can see small conversations as the beginning of developing a critical racial literacy that helps children recognize racism as an enduring relationship that is both physical and structural, historical and present. The Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Magazine (2019) deliberately focuses their *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery Framework* on the honest portrayal of slavery for young children. Key essential knowledge in grades K-2 include: meanings of freedom; definitions of enslavement; the culture and traditions of both Indigenous and African peoples before, during, and after enslavement; concepts of labor and profit; imbrications of racism; as well as individual and collective resistance. Each key concept comes with lesson ideas and resources for use in the early elementary classroom.

We should acknowledge that children as young as age four are not only able to discern racial difference, but have begun to internalize the ways in which societal norms privilege white bodies over others. In a 1947 experiment, Clark and Clark (1950) demonstrate how young Black children ascribe negative attributes, such as bad, to Black dolls and document their emotional distress at having to identify themselves as such. A racist society, they conclude, damages the self-esteem and worth of even our youngest children. Racism, according to Ibrahim Kendi (2016), is any concept that regards one racial group as inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. To develop racial literacy, teachers can speak with children about the ways that people in society are either privileged or devalued based on false signifiers such as skin color, and how this belief gives power and profit to one group at the expense of another.

Appropriateness in the Progressive School

A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance. (Baldwin, 1976/2018, p. xvii)

The roots of progressivism are often found in John Dewey's principles of schooling and society developed in the late-nineteenth century. With a

belief in the dialectical role of school to a well-functioning democracy, Dewey conceived of learning as reflective of society and therefore, central to its making. Today, progressive schools, such as LCS, are often characterized by the degree to which they use curriculum and pedagogy to uplift culture, emotion, diversity, and child inquiry. Yet, as anyone in education knows too well, schools are anything but monolith. They are moving and changing assemblages of embodied histories set within inherited structures of schooling. They are always alit with new policies, practices, and encounters with difference. No matter how seemingly aligned everyone may seem, each individual is approaching their work in singular and unique ways (Ahmed, 2012). Therefore, it is not the school that is necessarily progressive, but the coming together of individuals that in some way recognizes the other as similarly attuned to the principles of progressivism. I belabor this point because the naming of schools as one thing draws the false and dangerous assumption that progressivism is something that can be achieved instead of a relationality that consistently requires work.

The events sparked by the children playing slavery set into motion a reconfiguration of what progressivism means for the adults at LCS. Lines have been redrawn, and parameters marked anew. Of course, nothing here is concrete, but the decision to make both Harriet Tubman and the topic of slavery "inappropriate" has presented a deep and difficult shake up that the faculty and parents of LCS would fare well to debate. This was not the first time an event by the children forced a literal halt in the flow of things, and nor will it be the last. What does this resistance signify about the adult's capacities to engage difficult knowledge? What meanings of childhood are reinforced by this response? How do the children understand the permutations of race and slavery in their lives? What are the contested spaces between innocence and teaching? Asking these kinds of questions is precisely what it means to be progressive: not the performance of a reputation or the abjection of difficult histories, but an engagement with the ongoing and often very complicated conversation about what it means to be progressive in the first place.

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