

# Strengthening Racial Equality in the United States through History Education

Nino DONADZE\*

## Abstract

The paper discusses teaching one of the fundamental values of American people such as equality through history education. Nowadays this topic is important because of the discrimination cases and the murder of George Floyd that is a demonstration of racism, racial inequality. As stated by the survey of "The Pew Research Center", Black Americans think that the discrimination and murder cases are caused by the legacy of slavery. The article discusses textbooks and curriculums, also an alternative lesson plans which are taught in different states. As a result of the research, I made the following conclusions:

- Considering the Social Studies Standards of different states, slavery, causes of the Civil War and the Civil Right Movements are not taught properly;
- One of the causes of racial inequality is miseducation of children about slavery;
- If students are misinformed about these topics, they will not be taught racial equality.

**Keywords:** Education, history, racism

---

\* Ph.D. Student, American Studies Program, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: [nino\\_donadze032@hum.tsu.edu.ge](mailto:nino_donadze032@hum.tsu.edu.ge)  
SUPERVISOR: Prof. Dr. Elene Medzmariashvili, American Studies MA and PhD programs, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: [elene.medzmariashvili@tsu.ge](mailto:elene.medzmariashvili@tsu.ge)

## Introduction

According to the Declaration of Independence of the United States, one of the values of American people is equality, however, the murder of George Floyd (May 15, 2020) is a manifestation of racial inequality. The case of murder ignited protest in the United States and in other countries as well. Historians think that discrimination and murder cases are caused by the legacy of slavery and its improper teaching in American schools.

## Strengthening Racial Equality through History Education

After the death of Floyd, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. stated: "The battle for the soul of this nation has been a constant push and pull for more than 240 years — a tug of war between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh reality that racism has long torn us apart" (Biden, 2021).

Besides, President Biden said that the murder of George Floyd caused protest that brought people of all races together which has not happened since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. According to the president, in order for all Americans to be equal, laws and policy must be changed (Biden, 2021). Although the president did not talk about the problems in education, as I mentioned above, historians believe that the history of the United States, in particular the Civil War, slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are not taught properly. American schools are focused on teaching mathematics and science, teaching history is paid less attention to (Zak, 2021). Before I discuss how history is taught in different states, we have to see the consequences of the research about racial inequality in the United States.

A year later since the murder of George Floyd "The Pew Research Center" did a research about racial equality in the United States. Most of the black adult Americans believe that the attention to racial inequality increased but it has not changed their lives. Others think that equality for African-Americans is a little or not

at all. Most of Black adults (85 %) believe that the legacy of slavery has influence on the position of Black Americans (Cox & Edwards, 2022).

Reasons of starting the Civil War and Slavery are taught differently in various states. There is no national social studies curriculum. All states and the District of Columbia have their own standards which are different from each other, in some cases the curriculums might be brief and vague. For example, slavery is not indicated in the curriculum of seven states, such as Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, Iowa, Maine, Vermont, Delaware. According to the standards of sixteen states (Utah, Texas, Minnesota, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Indiana, Ohio, New-York), slavery is not indicated as the cause of the Civil War (Duncan, 2020).

In addition, eight states (Alaska, Oregon, Minnesota, Wyoming, South Dakota, Missouri, Main, Delaware) do not mention the Civil Rights Movement in the curriculum. Unlike these states "The Social Studies Standard of Oklahoma" states that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War (Duncan, 2020).

Dr. Tina Heafner, president of the National Council for the Social Studies says that teachers rely on states' standards when teaching and if the curriculums do not address any of the topics listed above then teachers think these topics are not important (Duncan, 2020).

Besides, Heafner thinks that if students do not learn history or civics, they will not have civic responsibilities. History teaches students to understand the world they live in and its complexity (Duncan, 2020).

Thus, I believe that teaching history does not simply mean reading and memorizing facts, history should be taught as an experience and we should always connect the events of the past to the present.

I agree with the idea that there are problems in education, in particular teaching history improperly. I think, if students do not know about the real life of slaves or about the real reason of starting the Civil War,

they will not learn equality. An article of the New York Times Magazine which is about the murder of George Floyd, one of the African-American journalists wrote that she wanted to join the fight too. She was disappointed because her country did not always live up to its ideas of equality and justice. Those are the fundamental ideas of the United States (Proulx, 2020).

Why is teaching the Civil War important? Shelby Foote, a researcher of the Civil War mentioned that The Civil War defined American people - good and bad things. It was the crossroads of Americans being (Kacharava, 2016, p. 38).

In addition, Ibram X Kendi who is an author, historian, professor and anti-racist activist criticizes American textbooks such as "American Pageant" (16<sup>th</sup> Edition) which is one of the most popular textbooks in the United States and "Texas History" (Duncan, 2020).

Kendi says that there is a map in "American Pageant" where African people are listed as immigrants alongside Germans, English, Dutch, etc. Africans were not immigrants, they were brought to America by force (Kennedy & Cohen, 2015, p. 85).

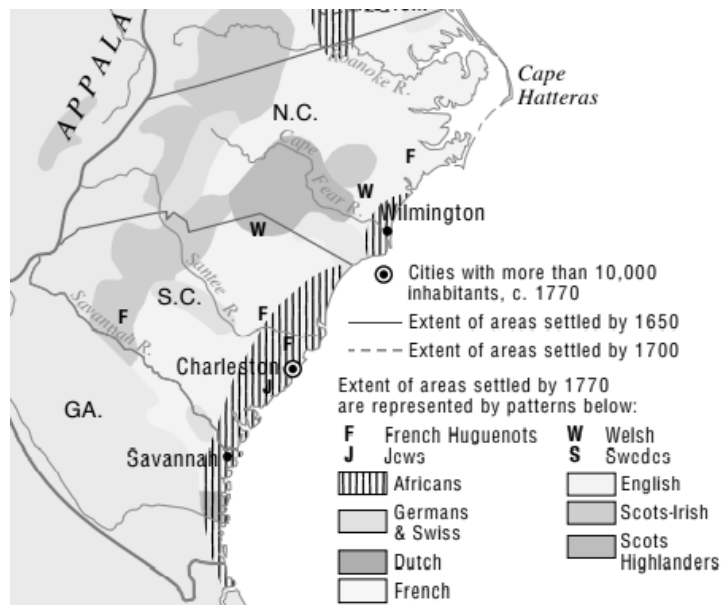


Figure 2 (Immigrant Groups in 1775)

Besides, Kendi says that in the textbook there is a word "mulatto" which is a racist term (Duncan, 2020).

In Texas, as a state of the Confederacy, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students are taught "Texas History". There are illustrations in the textbook which do not show

severe life of slaves, but rather working in plantations. Figure 3 is accompanied with information that settlers brought slaves to help them and do chores (McDougal, 2014, p. 198). Unlike this information, the reality was different, slaves were forced to do jobs.

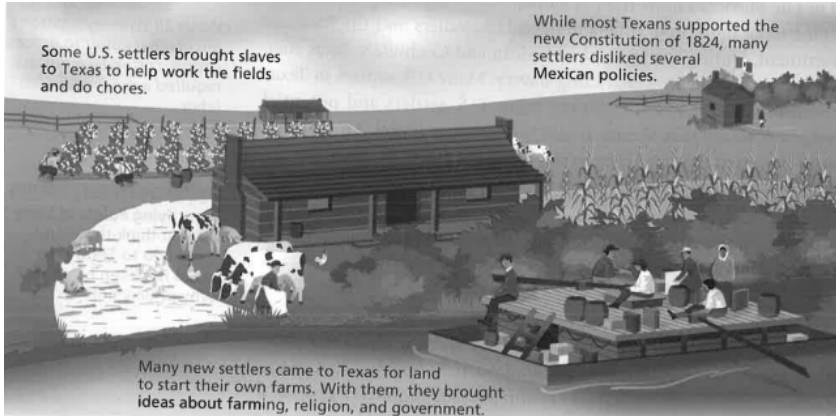


Figure 3 (Slaves in Texas)

Figure 4 does not reflect the reality either. This photo is accompanied with a commentary and a task – the life of slaves. Cotton harvesting was the main job of

slaves in Texas. Students are asked the following question - what other characteristics of slaves' life do you see in this photo? (McDougal, 2014, p. 361)



Figure 4 (Life of Slaves)

Students are informed that some people opposed slavery because it was not a moral act, one person should not possess another one. Slaves were sold and bought as a property. However, such an important value as equality is not mentioned in the book. At the end of the chapter students are asked to summarize the topic and describe main arguments against slavery. Final task is writing and critical thinking. Students should write a letter to his/her friend and explain why they oppose slavery. While writing the letter the living conditions and treatment to slaves should be considered (McDougal, 2014, p. 363).

Sometimes slaves escaped from their holders and if they were caught, slaves were severely punished in order to warn others (McDougal, 2014, p. 362). The harsh life of slaves is not described in this chapter or shown in the illustrations which means that students will not know that slavery was a harsh part of the history of the United States therefore, I think, they will not learn the fundamental value such as equality.

Unlike other states in Massachusetts as a state of the Union, students are taught that slavery was a cause of the Civil War and the struggle continued to the 20<sup>th</sup> century for civil rights for all people (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education, 2018, p. 18). One of the aims of the framework is to strengthen equality. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> grade and high school students are taught slavery with primary sources. For 5<sup>th</sup> grade students one of the lessons is about "Early Colonization and Growth of Colonies". Students should answer the key question - for whom was North America a land of opportunities? Students learn the life of the enslaved and free African-Americans, also, learn about early leaders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, etc. who were slaveholders. Activities which are mentioned in the curriculum are analyzing the purpose and points of view of each source, also, they should distinguish opinions and facts from each other (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018, pp. 72-73).

As I mentioned, students are given primary sources, such as Colonial Williamsburg: History of Citizenship, George Washington's Mount Vernon: Slavery, Slavery at Monticello: Paradox of Liberty. Teachers and students are provided primary sources because a book is a one point of view. For example, on the website of Colonial Williamsburg students find information about slave trade and their legacy, narrative about the life of some slaves (Colonial Williamsburg, 2022).

Another resource is about the slaves who lived in Vernon. Despite the fact that Washington owned slaves, he was the only „Founding Father“ who freed them. In 1786, Washington mentioned that he had a desire to see some plan adopted by the legislature that would have abolished slavery (George Washington's Mount Vernon, 2022).

The third resource which is called Paradox of Liberty provides information about enslaved families who lived in Monticello and the attitude of Thomas Jefferson towards slavery. He thought that it was an "abominable crime", despite this fact, he was a lifelong slaveholder. Jefferson made actions against slavery when he introduced a law banning the importation of slaves. Later, he published "The Notes on the State of Virginia", he proposed a plan about emancipation,

despite his antislavery actions, he said nothing publicly. Besides, students are provided "The Declaration of Independence" as a primary source which is accompanied with a text that one of the principles of declaration is equality, but it did not include one-fifth of American people (Monticello, 2022).

In addition, 5<sup>th</sup> grade students study the Civil Rights Movement that expanded equality in the United State. Students should read Martin Luther King's speech – "I Have a Dream". Students should discuss and compare two speeches of June 23<sup>rd</sup> and August 28<sup>th</sup> (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018, p. 78).

In summary, it can be said that the curriculums of Texas and Massachusetts are different from each other. Because of miseducation of students, "The Texas State Board of Education" has decided to revise the Social Studies curriculum (Houston Public Media, 2022).

Besides the standards of different states, there is an alternative curriculum. In August 2019, "The New York Times Magazine" published "The Project 1619" which is dedicated to the anniversary of the first enslaved Africans who were brought to Virginia. The project is a special issue of the magazine and it aims to reframe the history of the United States. The project includes eighteen essays. The first essay is written by Nikole Hannah-Jones, a journalist of the magazine. In her essay, she criticizes Thomas Jefferson and "The Declaration of Independence", she mentions that the values which are written in the declaration do not apply to the whole nation. She thinks that black Americans shaped democracy and are real "Founding Fathers" (Jones, 2019). The author got Pulitzer Prize for this project. The project was criticized but not because it pays much attention to the legacy of slavery, but the view of slavery is historically limited. However, some historians think that analyzing history in a new way is good and understanding of the past is not frozen (Gasman, 2021).

Unlike historians, politicians thought that the project was dangerous for the country because of its misinterpretation of history. Teaching the project was prohibited in some states. The letter that was sent to US Secretary of Education by Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority Leader, mentioned that the project reflected only flaws of the nation and divided the society (Gasman, 2021).

Despite of the criticism, the curriculum is used in 4,500 classrooms and students are engaged with the different resources. In order to understand what the curriculum teaches, I will discuss one of the lesson plans, which is used in Washington DC. The learning period lasts from 5 to 6 weeks for 6-12 grade students. There is a big amount of information that students learn, they are provided primary sources, podcasts, etc. (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

During learning, students should answer several questions – how can it be defined or redefined the influence of slavery in America? How enslavement shaped the history of the United States? Also, there is commentary that slavery should not be taught apart from American history. Last question is about the impact of slavery on the present (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

During the first week students read “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones and listen to some episodes from “The Project 1619” podcast. Podcasts are about the economy that slavery built, about black music and the role of Black Americans who made the idea of democracy true. Students should participate in conversations and answer questions – how they learnt about slavery for the first time and what is its lasting legacy, also, they discuss the contributions of African-Americans to the society (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

In addition, during the first week students read Digital History – “A Life Cycle of Slaves” including birth, relations with parents, marriage, living with husband or wife, old age and death. The first source is about Frederick Douglas who was born a slave. Unlike white children, he could not say his age because Douglas did

not know many things about his birth (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

The text is a part of his autobiography, he tells that he was separated from his mother and Douglas had seen his mother four or five times during the lifetime. His mother was able to see her son at nights and she went back to the field to work, if she would not have got back on time, the slaveholder whipped her. Douglas thought that his mother’s suffering ended when she passed away. At that time Douglas was about seven. At the end of the story there is a key question – how did the life cycle of free and enslaved Africans differ from each other? (Pulitzer Center, 2022)

Another story is about a woman who had an infant, at that time slaveholders sold their slaves’ children. The woman could not give up the baby and decided not to let the Master sell the child. The woman killed her baby. Students are asked if they blame the woman, slave owner or the system of slavery (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

Another activity that students should do is writing a collective poem. The knowledge that students get about slavery helps them to create poetry. The topic of the lesson is “Poetry of Defiance: How the Enslaved Resisted”, students are provided several examples of resistance such as running away, resistance at work, revolt, etc. the additional resources of the lesson are lyrics of the songs which are known as “Negro Spirituals”. Students should analyze each phrase of the songs and real moral of them (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

The lesson plan includes “The Civil Right Movement” too, students answer if the movement of 1960s was successful in ending racial equality. I think, the final lesson is very important, because students connect the past to the present – the murder of George Floyd and they compare the Civil Rights Movement to the current protest – “Black Lives Matter”. Similarities and differences should be found by students, also, they discuss if there is the conflict between the police and African-Americans nowadays (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

After reading the article which is published by the Brown University about George Floyd's death, students are asked to make an interview with a person who participated in the protest to overcome racial inequality and introduce it to other students (Pulitzer Center, 2022).

Mary Frances Berry, American historian, professor and writer talked about the problems of teaching history, she mentions that what students learn is depended on a state and she gives an example of Louisiana where some students do not even know that one of the causes of the Civil War is slavery. There is no national curriculum because the Federal Government cannot mandate standard in every state, the Constitution does not permit it, but there is "The

## **Conclusion**

The result of the research is that American students are misinformed sometimes which is proved by history textbooks and the Social Studies Standards of some states. Both Massachusetts Social Studies Standard and alternative lesson plans such as "The Project 1619 Curriculum" teach real life of slaves and their legacy. I do not agree with the opinion that African-Americans are real "Founding Fathers", because the contributions of Thomas Jefferson and other "Founding Fathers"

National Endowment for the Humanities" which can create a plan about teaching Black History. But Black history should not be taught separately because it is a part of history of the United States (Zak, 2021).

After the murder of George Floyd, American citizens took down monuments of white historical figures who had racist past. The professor thinks that the statues of the people who had a great contribution for the country should not be torn down and monuments of black Americans who had contribution too should be added. Bad parts of the history should be taught in order not to repeat them. I agree with the opinion that the past should always be connected to the present and to teach history as an experience (Zak, 2021).

should not be ignored. At the same time the contribution of African-Americans should not be forgotten and taught separately, because Black History is a part of the US History.

In addition, I agree with American historians that creating common curriculum will solve problems in teaching history. Also, there is an opinion that Social Studies Standards of the states might be changed by "The Project 1619 Curriculum" in the future.

## References

Biden R. J. Jr. (2021) Remarks by President Biden on the Verdict in the Derek Chauvin Trial for the Death of George Floyd. Retrieved April 23, 2021, from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-verdict-in-the-derek-chauvin-trial-for-the-death-of-george-floyd/>

Colonial Williamsburg. (2022). Slavery and Remembrance. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from: <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/>

Cox, K. & Edwards, K. (2022). Black Americans Have a Clear Vision for Reducing Racism but Little Hope It Will Happen. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2022/08/30/black-americans-have-a-clear-vision-for-reducing-racism-but-little-hope-it-will-happen/>

Duncan, J. Z. & Christopher, L. S. (2020). 50 states, 50 different ways of teaching America's past. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-history-how-teaching-americas-past-varies-across-the-country/>

Gasman, M. (2021). What History Professors Really Think About "The Project 1619". Retrieved September 20, 2022, from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marybethgasman/2021/06/03/what-history-professors-really-think-about-the-1619-project/?sh=5f7c51d37a15>

George Washington's Mount Vernon. (2022). George Washington's Will. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from: <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/george-washingtons-will/>

Houston Public Media. (2022). Texas State Board of Education to Delay Revisions to Social Studies Standards. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from:

<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/education/2022/08/31/432048/texas-state-board-of-education-to-delay-revisions-to-social-studies-standards/>

Jones, N. H. (2019). The Idea of America. 17. Retrieved September 29, 2022, from: <https://1619education.org/about-1619-project/teaching-1619-project>

Kacharava, V. & კაჭარავა, ვ. (2016). ჩემი სამყარო #11. ამერიკის სამოქალაქო ომი. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from: <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/my-world/11>

Kennedy, M. D. & Cohen, L. (2015). The American Pageant 16<sup>th</sup> Edition Textbook. Chapter 5. United States: Cengage Learning. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from: <https://loscosapush.weebly.com/american-pageant-16th-edition.html>

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2018). History and Social Science Framework. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from: <https://search.doe.mass.edu/?q=social%20studies>

McDougal, H. Texas History. (2014). United States: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Retrieved March 18, 2021, from: <http://worleytxhistory.weebly.com/textbook.html>

Monticello. (2022). Jefferson's Antislavery Actions. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from: <https://www.monticello.org/slavery/paradox-of-liberty/thomas-jefferson-liberty-slavery/jeffersons-antislavery-actions/>

Proulx, N. & Schuller, K. (2020). Teaching Ideas and Resources to Help Students Make Sense of the George Floyd Protests. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/learning/lesson-plans/teaching-ideas-and-resources-to-help-students->



[make-sense-of-the-george-floyd-protests.html#link-2f85c238](https://www.pulitzercenter.org/education/what-is-the-lasting-legacy-of-slavery-in-the-u-s?link=2f85c238)

Pulitzer Center. What is the Lasting Legacy of Slavery in the U.S.? Retrieved August 20, 2022, from: <https://1619education.org/builder/lesson/what-lasting-legacy-slavery-us>

Zak, L. (Anchor). (February, 20, 2021). CBS News [Television Broadcast]. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6lPKE\\_Bbn4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6lPKE_Bbn4)