Colony and State Laws Against the Education of Slaves

**Rationale and Source Context:**

One of the most degrading aspects of slavery was the denial of education, which slaves and masters alike viewed as critical for attaining freedom, dignity, and power. Lack of access to written words as information and as tools dampened many slaves’ aspirations and hampered their capacity for resistance. It was not uncommon for slaveholders during the colonial period to permit or even encourage slave literacy as a way to make the Bible accessible and promote Christianity; schools for slaves could be found in urban centers. However, over time and especially in the 19th century, masters’ attitudes toward literacy shifted as pro- and anti-slavery positions hardened, slavery grew more profitable due to the cotton gin, literacy grew in the
society as a whole – including among slaves – and increasing infrastructure (roads, canals, and trains) made escapes easier. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the fear of slave resistance ran through the slaveholding community; masters worried that slaves who had learned to write could forge travel passes and move as free blacks. In regions where African Americans came to outnumber whites by the early 19th century, as in South Carolina where the ratio was 2:1, rebellions bred terror. Many states responded by passing laws of the type seen in these documents.

The colony of South Carolina’s anti-literacy law of 1740 formed part of "An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province," a set of laws adopted in the immediate wake of the Stono Rebellion of 1739. In this insurrection, the largest and bloodiest in British North America until then, some 20 slaves raided a firearms store and marched southward to Florida demanding “liberty” and killing 23 whites. Their band increased in numbers to over 100 slaves, but they ultimately were overcome by a militia that crushed the rebellion and left roughly 100 slaves dead. The 1740 law attempted – mainly by adding prohibitions for slaves but also by curbing overly harsh punishments by masters – to prevent future slave revolts.

The fear of uprisings (however infrequent such organized revolts really were) remained high as the 19th century saw the profits of the slave system soar and pro-slavery ideology harden. Virginia’s Code of Laws of 1819 shows the trend of laws growing stricter, with ever tighter regulations narrowing the world of the enslaved and stripping even free blacks of their rights. Despite draconian laws, however, a considerable number of slaves still sought opportunities to become literate; historians currently estimate that 7 to 10% of slaves could read and write in the late antebellum period. As the accompanying account by Frederick Douglass shows, slaves showed great determination to gain what they saw as the key to freedom (though few had as many opportunities as slaves like Douglass). And as in his case, literate white children often served as the teachers.

Text Complexity (Grade-Level Edited Text)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATOS</th>
<th>Degrees of Reading Power</th>
<th>Flesch-Kincaid</th>
<th>Lexile</th>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24.40</td>
<td>1570L</td>
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*The readability measures listed here refer to the adapted grade-level edited version of the text, not the original text.

Note: Quantitative measures of text complexity rule out the use of most laws in the fifth grade classroom because of their inherently complex sentence structure. Qualitative evaluation, however, suggests that these legal sources can be accessed by fifth graders. To make this possible, we have preserved their structure as laws (with specialized legal words introducing the main sections) while adapting their internal language to make it understandable to fifth graders.

The accompanying Frederick Douglass source is at fifth-grade level according to quantitative measures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggested Guidance for Teaching Close Reading of Text with Accompanying Materials</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-Reading</strong></td>
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| 1. Help students understand that legal language – the language of laws – sounds different than other styles of writing, in ways that they will explore.  
2. Have students read the texts independently and annotate for understanding. |
| **1st Reading: Key Ideas and Details** |
| 3. Focus on these questions for the first reading of the text:  
a. What does the phrase “great inconveniences” mean in the 1740 Act? (SC1) What does the phrase “considerable evil” mean in the 1819 Act? (V1) (Hint: Some of these words are used in ways that are different from how we use them today.)  
b. How did the law try to prevent slaves from meeting to learn to read and write? (SC2, V2)  
c. In each of these laws, who is punished? Is it the same for both? (SC2, V2) |
| **2nd Reading: Craft and Structure** |
| 4. Focus on these questions for the second reading of the text:  
a. Which words or phrases in these texts identify them as laws?  
b. How are the laws divided? What is the purpose of each main part of the act?  
c. Why do you think the authors chose phrases like “great inconveniences” and “considerable evil” to describe the results of slaves’ reading and writing?  
d. How does the text itself help us to understand the term “unlawful assembly”? (V2) |
| **3rd Reading: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** |
| 5. Focus on these questions for the third reading of the text:  
a. Who do you think wrote these laws? How do you know?  
b. How much of a danger did the authors consider slave literacy to be? How can you tell?  
c. How would you describe the legal style of writing? (exact, official-sounding, hard to read, with long and complex sentences and old or archaic words, with a statement of problem followed by statement of solution/response, use of “all/anyone who x shall y” pattern) |
| **Post-Reading** | 6. Think about what the very existence of a law tells us. Why do people write a law about something? What needs to be happening to make people go to the trouble of passing a law about it?  
7. Why did lawmakers in South Carolina and Virginia feel a need to ban the teaching of slaves? What was at stake? Make inferences about the kinds of events that may have shaped their feelings.  
8. Show students the 17th and 18th century British slave laws from the colony of New York ([http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/869#document](http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/869#document)) to underscore the point that severe prohibitions existed in the North, too. What do the anti-literacy laws have in common with these other codes of forbidden behavior?  
9. Have students read the accompanying adapted account by Frederick Douglass of how, as a slave child, he became educated (during 1828-1831). This passage comes from his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. How does its message corroborate or contrast with the message within the slave codes about slave literacy? |
| **Writing Prompts** | 10. After students analyze the text, assign one of the following writing prompts:  
   a. (Explanatory) Write a paragraph explaining how slaves got around the laws that prevented their learning to read and write. Use evidence from the laws and the Frederick Douglass reading to support your claims.  
   b. (Opinion) Why do you think people have created a special style of language for laws? Introduce your reasons and give details to support them. End with a concluding statement about your opinion. |
Grade 5, Unit 4: The Causes and Consequences of Slavery

Key Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 2</th>
<th>current</th>
<th>(adj.) of the present time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>considerable</td>
<td>(adj.) much, a large amount</td>
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<td></td>
<td>unlawful</td>
<td>(adj.) against the law; illegal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>assembly</td>
<td>(n.) gathering or meeting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>such</td>
<td>(ad.) those particular (“such slaves”)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>deem</td>
<td>(v.) to consider</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 3</th>
<th>Whereas</th>
<th>(conj.) “Because it is true that”</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Act</td>
<td>(n.) law or decision of a legislature or ruler</td>
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<td></td>
<td>code</td>
<td>(n.) a collection of laws relating to a particular area of life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>pound</td>
<td>(n.) unit of British money</td>
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<td>Negro</td>
<td>(n.) term used historically for person who descends from Africa</td>
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<td></td>
<td>mulatto</td>
<td>(n.) child of one black parent and one white parent (or whose ancestry is a mixture of black and white)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>lash/lashes</td>
<td>(n.) blows with a whip, given as a punishment</td>
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Additional Resources:

Currency converter: [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com) (£100 in 1740 = approx. $18,600 in 2013)
Mass Moments: First Slaves Arrive in Massachusetts
[http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=64](http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=64)
The Slave Experience: Education, Arts, and Culture (Historical Overview)
[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history2.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history2.html)
The Stono Rebellion (from Africans in America, PBS):
[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p284.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p284.html)
Colony and State Laws Against the Education of Slaves

South Carolina Act of 1740

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia (1819)

Colony and State Laws Against the Education of Slaves

South Carolina Act of 1740

1. Whereas teaching slaves to write may lead to great inconveniences;
   
   Be it passed that anyone who teaches any slave to write or asks a slave to write shall each time pay the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.*

*equivalent to about $18,600 in 2013

The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia (1819)

1. Whereas it is common in many places for slaves to meet at religious meeting-houses in the night, or at schools for teaching them reading or writing, which if not stopped may cause considerable evil to the community;

   Be it passed: That all meetings of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing with such slaves, at any meeting-house or school for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, for any reason, shall be deemed an unlawful assembly. And any officer of the law may have permission to enter the house to arrest or send off such slaves, and to punish them with up to twenty lashes.

My Bondage, My Freedom
Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass describes events from 1828-1831, when he was 10-13 years old and enslaved in Baltimore.

Nothing appeared to make my poor mistress more angry than seeing me, seated in some nook or corner, quietly reading a book or a newspaper. I have had her rush at me with fury, and snatch it from my hand. Her anger was something like what a traitor might feel on being discovered in a plot by some dangerous spy.

I was most carefully watched in all my movements. If I remained in a separate room from the family for a while, I was sure to be suspected of having a book. Then I was at once called upon to explain what I had been doing. All this, however, was entirely too late.

Determined to learn to read at any cost, I hit upon many ways to accomplish this goal. The main way, and most successful one, was to use my young white playmates in the streets as teachers. I used to carry almost constantly a copy of Webster’s spelling book in my pocket. When I was sent on errands or allowed to have play time, I would step aside with my young friends and take a lesson in spelling. I usually paid the boys with bread, which I also carried in my pocket. For a single biscuit, any of my hungry little playmates would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread. Not everyone, however, demanded payment. There were some who enjoyed teaching me, whenever I had a chance to be taught by them.

http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html