

Making Generalizations (teacher version)

In “Making Generalizations,” students are asked to read the following statements and either agree or disagree with them based on their reading of the excerpts from the narratives of Jacobs and Keckly and other knowledge they may have about childhood slavery. They must provide support for their answers and think about how they inferred them from what they learned in the reading. They are also asked if other knowledge about childhood in slavery contributed to their answers. Below you see both the questions that students are asked in “Making Generalizations” and instructional notes.

1. Most slave children began working very early in their lives.

In Keckly’s narrative, she recounts working as early as four years of age, while Jacobs describes a childhood without burden. This is a case where the two sources are in conflict. Students need much more information in order to make this generalization. In fact, overwhelming evidence shows that enslaved children generally began working very early in their lives.

2. When slave girls worked in their owner’s homes, they often sewed or knitted.

In the excerpts from the narratives of both Jacobs and Keckly, they sewed and/or knitted in the homes of their owners. In this case, the two sources are in agreement with each other. Moreover, they also reflect evidence found in other sources about nineteenth-century woman and young girls in general, and slave girls in particular. Even though these two sources are in agreement, and in this case the statement is true, students should still be cautioned against broadly applying information gleaned from only two sources.

3. Most slaves could read and write.

In the excerpts from the narratives of both Jacobs and Keckly, they demonstrate the ability to read and write. Many students will come to this lesson plan with the general understanding that enslaved people were not literate. They will be presented with evidence of two former slaves who could read and write. Here they will face conflicting evidence. And, in fact, Keckly and Jacobs were in the minority among the slave population in their literacy. Fearing that bondsmen and women would be incited to rebel through reading abolitionist (or other) literature, slave owners and the wider public considered it very dangerous for slaves to be literate. Yet, slaves generally valued education and wished to be literate. Many slaves learned from each other and went to great lengths to learn to read and write because they associated literacy with freedom.

4. It was common for slave families to be separated from each other.

In the excerpts from the narratives of both Jacobs and Keckly, they recount stories of being separated from their families while in bondage. Here, the narratives of the two former slaves support each other and also match the understanding students will probably already have of the institution of slavery in general. Even though these two sources are in agreement, and in this case the generalization is true, students should still be cautioned against broadly applying information gleaned from only two sources.