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Holocaust Educational Practices: Reviews and Recommendations

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Holocaust Educational Practices: Reviews and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT: The Holocaust, the most horrific event of the twentieth century, demonstrated the effects of state-ordained genocide. The Holocaust's historical framework emerged from a deep rooted past of racist sentiment that culminated in the organized killing of six million people. Exposing students to constructs of racism, prejudice, indifference, diversity, morality, acceptance, tolerance, and understanding through Holocaust pedagogy can perhaps prevent future genocidal events. Successful Holocaust-based curricula include four main concepts: the placement of the Holocaust as a central event in history, the discussion of values and tolerance, the accurate representation of the Holocaust, and the use of grade-level appropriate teaching methods and materials.

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**ESSAY**

Educating students in grades K-12 about the Holocaust demands a great level of sensitivity from teachers, as well as a keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM], 2005). When interviewing student teacher interns and current educators of Holocaust curricula, Dr. Sheryl Needle Cohn realized their knowledge was limited to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, an inadequate resource for those who are responsible for the education of our future generations. This book discloses only one story pertaining to the Holocaust and thus creates a singular perspective. However, due to its popularity, this story is often the only reference used by teachers. In a survey of Lake County public school teachers and student teacher interns in 2007, Dr. Cohn found that seventy percent of the surveyed educators reduced or omitted Holocaust subject matter from their lessons due to their lack of understanding and discomfort with the subject. However, the teaching of Holocaust curricula is mandated in several states, including Florida, where sample teachers were questioned (Cohn, 2008). Proper teaching about the Holocaust can assist students in understanding the historical, social, political, religious, and ethical factors related to this subject.

The Holocaust as a Central Event in History

Reducing the topic of the Holocaust in common curricula would distort history because the centrality of the Holocaust in history cannot be overemphasized (Totten & Feinberg, 1995, p. 234). Methodology for teaching about the Holocaust should include the placement of the Holocaust as a central focus in the lesson. Too often teaching the Holocaust is appended to teaching World War II, rather than serving as a central topic of study in its own right. Planning should include two key notions: that the Holocaust was not an inevitable historical event and that its influence remains in our present society (Lindquist, 2006). Students should be able to acknowledge that silence towards the maltreatment and suffering of others can unintentionally ignite problems (USHMM, 2005). Recognition of this cause-and-effect process provides understanding of human behavior in the context of world history. Other than self awareness, students are able to formulate an understanding of civic awareness in which they will understand that the Holocaust was not unavoidable. Students can come to understand the effect of unchecked power and world indifference and

its potential influence on a country and ultimately on the world. This lesson will propel students to think critically about current world events and the possible prevention of future genocides (Cohn, 2008; Lindquist, 2008b).

Lessons of Values, Tolerance, and Community

According to Donnelly, the most common approach to Holocaust instruction in 2003 was from the perspective of human rights (2004). Studying the Holocaust exceeds the plain facts of history and politics and encompasses underlying themes such as personal values and tolerance that can be implemented into curricula. Lessons that teach civil rights, respect, and social responsibility in conjunction with lessons of sharing and listening are essential for the emotional development of students of all ages. As a result, such teaching molds students' sense of civic duty and prepares them for future diverse interactions within society.

Research by Yeager et al. shows that the first days of school are instrumental in shaping the patterns of classroom life. To ground themselves in responsible action, students and teachers should begin to explore the multiple meanings of community within the first month of school (1999). Educators should strive to create the sense of a small community within the classroom because school serves as the place where most children cultivate their social skills. As a result, when students learn to respect one another in the classroom, the hope is that they will incorporate such skills outside the classroom. They should be encouraged to write about what community means to them. This technique fosters tolerance as the students share their thoughts on rights, respect, and responsibility in their essays and receive feedback from their peers. Yeager et al. suggests that once students understand what a sense of community means to each of them individually, they will understand that it is their responsibility to support one another. Through this lesson, students can better understand what it means to be a caring citizen.

Expanding the community theme to the secondary school, more abstract discussions can critically explore the aftermath of the Holocaust. The use of Ida Fink's short story *The Tenth Man* (1999) highlights the destruction of the Jewish community, as former residents attempt repatriation. The Florida Atlantic University Center for Holocaust and Human Rights



Education states that narratives such as *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal are appropriate for high school students. When a teacher decides to utilize books for their Holocaust curriculum, it is important that they do not provide their students with a one-dimensional view of the Holocaust. Materials in the classroom should be expansive; teachers can find various lessons on the destruction of the Jewish community within the larger secular communities in Eastern Europe on internet sites such as www.FLDOE.org/Holocaust and www1.YadVashem.org.

Formulate an Accurate Representation of the Holocaust

When developing curricula for landmark events in history, educators must consider the necessity of accuracy in the classroom. Students depend on their teachers for the majority of their knowledge in school, supplemented by the teacher's application of their provided text, the teacher's choice of graphic materials, and the teacher's choice of class lessons. It is possible to educate students in an accurate manner without the use of graphic images of death and deprivation. Lessons addressing concentration camps and the final solution should be left for discussion in high school (University of South Florida [USF] 2005). Instead, educators can utilize other methodology suitable for a child's development that pertains to Holocaust-related themes. From kindergarten to grade two, students are able to learn about themes such as cooperation and belonging, understanding, and appreciating differences in others. From grades three to five, students can build on their lessons to evaluate customs and values of groups. Students can then approach the next level in grades six through eight, in which they are able to comprehend and respond to unfairness and danger while displaying courage and resourcefulness. Finally, in grades nine through twelve, students should analyze human behavior and historical processes by identifying causes, forms, and effects of discrimination and likewise setting standards for responsible action (Cohn, 2008). These psychosocial themes, with an accurate portrayal of concepts underlying the Holocaust's existence, will simultaneously enlighten students about the Holocaust, while teaching them pertinent lessons for their development into moral citizens (Buckley, 2004).

Language Precision, Textbook Distortions, and Current Events

According to David Lindquist, teachers serve as catalysts for their students' understanding of Holocaust curricula. Since this event in history is complex and sensitive, a temptation arises among educators to generalize and consequently distort facts (2006). For example, describing concentration camps as killing centers would be incorrect since not all camps were in fact death camps. It is in the best interest of students that educators strive for precise language in the classroom. Another example is distinguishing between collaborators and bystanders and between guilt and responsibility, which is best introduced at the secondary grade levels (USHMM, 2006). Teachers should avoid stereotypical descriptions; regardless of the fact that all Jews were targeted by the Nazis during this time, experiences of Jewish citizens at this time were not identical (Russell, 2005). Qualifying terms such as *sometimes* and *usually* should be used to show that although a cultural group may share common beliefs and customs, their experiences during this tumultuous time were not uniform (Cohn, 2007).

Unfortunately, sections pertaining to the Holocaust in some popular textbooks provide inaccurate information due to omissions and distortions of data (Russell, 2005). According to David Lindquist, an unnamed popular textbook states that American troops liberated Nazi death camps in Germany. This fact is misleading for three reasons: most concentration and extermination camps were located in Poland, Russian troops also liberated camps on the Eastern front, and the Nazis abandoned many camps by the time the allies arrived. Although some textual inaccuracies are obvious, some are harder to decipher because they distort the historical record. Stories of heroes who risked their lives to aid Holocaust victims provide students with a role model exemplum; however, in reality, only a small portion of those not affected by the Holocaust helped to rescue victims. Therefore, overemphasis on such heroic tales illustrates an imbalanced image of the Holocaust (Lindquist 2008a; Totten 2002; Cohn 2008).

Much secondary-level Holocaust curricula is textbook-based. Such one-dimensional reliance can depict genocide as an event of the past rather than as a fluid incident that reaches into the present (Lindquist 2006). Current news sources such as television, cable



media, papers, magazines, and the internet can connect twentieth-century European genocide to twenty- and twenty-first century genocides, such as those in Bosnia, Darfur, and Rwanda.

Historical Truth versus Historical Fiction and Anecdotal Non-Fiction

Historical accuracy becomes critical when teachers use literature in their methodology (Lindquist, 2008b). Although literature is an excellent supplement to the understanding of the Holocaust in common curricula, it is essential for the works to accurately depict the topic. For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is the most commonly used work in middle-school anthologies. The book pertains to the Holocaust; hence, the book is Holocaust education for many students. Anne's representation is not reflective of all Holocaust victims, and so utilizing her story alone illustrates the false idea that all victims had similar fates (Lindquist 2008b). The use of anecdotal survivor testimonies combines subjective memory with historical fact and paints vivid pictures of a horrific epoch for the reader. One such survivor testimony is told in a well-written book for ages twelve to adult entitled *Rescued Images: Memories of a Childhood in Hiding* by Ruth Jacobsen. The book depicts the unique experience of a child in hiding, the minority of righteous citizens who protected her, the unimaginable fate of her parents, and ultimately, Ruth's successful current life (2001). As an artist, Jacobsen's collages of shattered artwork infuse her emotions within the book and provide an added revelation to her psychological trauma. Robert Fisch's memoir *Light from the Yellow Star* depicts his personal struggle in a Nazi camp (1996). He offers a historical narrative that, similar to Ruth Jacobsen's book, contains artistic imagery. This use of anecdotal non-fiction represents a survivor's unique experience against the background of historical facts studied by students. Further teacher resources are available from the Yellow Star Foundation <http://www.yellowstarfoundation.org/index.htm> (2009).

Developmentally Appropriate Methods

A student's level of maturity can depend on more than age; it is therefore the teacher's responsibility to be sensitive and attentive to the development of each of his/her students when preparing to discuss the Holocaust. Through systematic observation, assessment and instruction, elementary and secondary-school teachers will determine what is and what is not appropriate for their students. Professional judgment

should be exercised when teaching about genocide and intolerance because young children should not be subjected to images of horror that could potentially destroy their worldview of hope and peace. Upon understanding their students' varying cognitive levels, teachers will be able to decipher which supplemental resources to use in order to formulate appropriate curricula and thus to prevent harm to their students (Caporino and Rudnitski, 1999).

One developmentally appropriate book is Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches and Other Stories*. The story of the sneetches teaches against discrimination as a society of yellow creatures, some with and some without green stars on their bellies, ultimately learns that they are really more alike than different, and are able to become friends (Geisel, 1961). Employing books such as *The Sneetches* for ages two through eight introduces underlying moral themes that thus provide a basis for future education and understanding of the Holocaust (Cohn, 2008).

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2005) stresses that teachers should not mention the term Holocaust prior to the fifth grade and therefore, the use of novels should be implemented in grades in which students can tolerate the length of novels as well as the situations presented within them. C. H. Bishop's chapter book *Twenty and Ten* is a good example of appropriate length (76 pages), content (German-occupied France), and fifth-grade vocabulary. The author tells the story of Jewish school children in hiding without ever using the word Holocaust.

The Use of Films to Teach the Holocaust

As with literature, films can be used as a supplemental resource to provide insight into the Holocaust. Teachers often utilize horrifying images of the Holocaust in an attempt to bring "realism" to their class; however, when using such methodology, it is important to understand that the source needs to be suitable to the cognitive and emotional development of a child (Lindquist, 2006; Cohn, 2008). For example, not all students will be able to tolerate films recommended for Holocaust curricula such as *Schindler's List* (Freiberg, 2006; Russell, 2005). However, middle-school students can relate to the sensitive film *Paper Clips* (2004). This film documents the academic and emotional journey in the Paper Clips Project, in which eighth graders at Whitwell Middle School in Tennessee collected a paper clip for each



estimated victim killed during the Holocaust. More than six-million paper clips were collected by these students, tragically representing corresponding lives lost; by doing this, students were able to understand the concept of six million deaths. This film promotes empathy among students as they are able to relate with students in the film and successfully educates about the Holocaust without developmentally inappropriate additions.

Student initiated group activities

Students of all grade levels should be actively engaged in the learning process through the use of small groups. In lieu of constant teacher-to-student interaction, educators can utilize student initiated group projects for guided discovery learning. Teachers should help students choose developmentally appropriate books on the subject of the Holocaust that they will be able to read, comprehend, and share with their peers. The use of small group literature circles allows for independent critical thinking. Furthermore, peer support serves as an emotional buffer to this difficult subject matter (Cohn, 2008).

Another hands-on critical thinking student project is the Suitcase activity, in which teachers ask students to decide what they would pack if they had only one hour to move. To ensure that students see the connection between this activity and the overlying lesson, teachers should explain how Jews were forced to pack their belongings and leave their homes to immediately report to ghettos or collection stations for transport to concentration camps during the Holocaust (Cohn, 2008). This method allows educators to relay a historical lesson and to teach empathy by encouraging children to imagine themselves in the place of others (Buckley, 2004). An effective resource to incorporate in this activity is Hana's Suitcase by Karen Levine. Hana's Suitcase is a true story that takes place on three continents over a period of about seventy years. It brings together the pre-war experiences of a Czechoslovakian family, a Holocaust survivor in Toronto Canada, and a young museum educator in Tokyo, Japan (Levine, 2002). This work features characters with which students can readily identify. In this book, the children's museum curator, Fumiko Ishioka, searches for artifacts she can use to teach her students about the Holocaust. Like Ishioka, teachers can incorporate the use of artifacts in their discussion of the Holocaust to empathetically engage students. Going Global on the Internet

Discussions of varying world locations can be confusing to students. When introducing geographic locations such as Poland, Germany, and Russia, students may not have sufficient knowledge of world geography to understand the Holocaust history lesson (USHMM). An engaging way to increase students' knowledge of world locations would be to use internet interactive global resources to show where the Holocaust occurred. Teachers and students can employ online mapping systems such as Google Earth, by which they can view multiple maps simultaneously (<http://earth.google.com>). Once students comprehend where the Holocaust occurred in the world, teachers can compare that area to their current school location. This particular activity somewhat reduces student anxiety, yet maintains empathy with children throughout the world who are victims of genocide.

Museums as Resources

Berger encourages visiting a Holocaust museum as a way to offer a more concrete learning experience to students. Museums balance the lesson of intolerance and the history of the Holocaust with pictures and artifacts students can see and touch (2003). Students leave with vivid, mental images of the Holocaust, sparking their desire to ask questions and express their feelings. When school budgets prohibit field trips, museums can provide traveling teacher trunks, filled with customized and grade-level educational materials (Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center [HMREC], 2008). Virtual museum tours are also available online through museum websites. Links to these sites can be found on the Holocaust project website, <http://education.ucf.edu/Holocaust> (Cohn, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The Holocaust was a watershed event in human history. Reasons for implementing Holocaust curricula in primary and secondary education are abundant. It allows students to understand prejudice and racism. Students begin to comprehend consequences of the silence and indifference of others. Holocaust education connects students to present desired American values of responsibility and citizenship (Buckley, 2004). Complex in nature, teaching about the Holocaust can frustrate and intimidate educators and cause them to possibly subdue or omit such material in the classroom. However, when proper methodology and materials are



employed, the Holocaust serves as a catalyst for the education of historical, social, political, religious and ethical factors that influence the lives of students of all grade levels.

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