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2.4 Teaching about perpetrators

Playing devil's advocate

Chapter 30

Playing devil's advocate

Classroom encounters with Holocaust perpetrators

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Abstract

This chapter considers the difficult negotiations that take place when educators introduce the narratives of perpetrators to school pupils in classroom discussions. Through the lens of Holocaust Education, it considers the possible benefits and pitfalls inherent in telling these narratives. It asserts that it is necessary to rehumanize perpetrators if young people are to begin to understand the *human* context of the event. The chapter considers many of the challenges for teachers (and pupils) as they explore the choices and actions of perpetrators. Consideration is given to *when* educators might feel it is appropriate to introduce perpetrator narratives into their schemes of work, taking into account variables such as the age, maturity, and social contexts of their pupils. It offers practical suggestions for educators (such as the use of photographs from the perpetrator's perspective) to help pupils towards a critical understanding of such sources. Finally, a number of case studies of perpetrators are considered. These individuals' stories intentionally provoke discussion around perpetrators' backgrounds, choices, and actions. Finally, the chapter provides web links for further research and information.

What should educators tell children about the perpetrators of the Holocaust? There can be few more contentious questions in Holocaust Education. They must consider carefully how and when the perpetrator's voice might be educationally beneficial in their classroom, which perpetrators to introduce, and how to balance pastoral concerns with giving human and historical voice to the culprits of an event that "has come to symbolize the ultimate expression of evil" in human history ([Short and Reed 2004](#), vii). This chapter puts forward a case for educators *playing devil's advocate* by placing the perpetrator at the center of Holocaust Education, in an effort to re-humanize perpetrators in the service of their victims and our pupils. It will consider the

challenging educational issues around *why*, *when*, and *how* educators might address the complexity of the perpetrator and how teachers can provide their pupils with classroom encounters with the perpetrators that are both educative and safe.

Why should we tell children about perpetrators?

As teachers, we constantly remind our pupils that actions have consequences and that individuals have to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their actions. When teaching about the Holocaust, however, the enormity of the consequences can sometimes paralyze our ability to interrogate the causal actions. Pupils can be left with an over-simplified concept of perpetration, in which the perpetrator becomes a caricatured “bogy man.” Such “comfortable explanations” ([Salmons 2001](#), 35) enable pupils to uncomplicate the perpetrator. This sanitizes the complexity of the perpetrator, does a disservice to their victims, and enables the pupils in our classroom to avoid a nuanced, complex encounter with the perpetrator as an individual. Re-humanizing the perpetrators is an altogether more complicated business. Handing them back their agency suggests to pupils that perpetrators were no less human than they themselves, their friends, or their parents. This involves a multifaceted and challenging examination of the human condition. Teachers need to skillfully support their pupils through this potentially dislocating turn, whilst avoiding inadvertently exposing their pupils to an inappropriately sympathetic understanding of the perpetrator. The introduction of the perpetrator perspective is an essential facet of the complicated mosaic of the event, nonetheless, as its exclusion would present “a false version of history” (Supple 1998, 39).

When should we tell children about perpetrators?

Childhood is a special (and short) time, and educators have to consider their duty of care towards their pupils in deciding when they should learn about the Holocaust. The teacher/pupil relationship is key here in ensuring pupils are pastorally cared for. There is no international consensus about reference to the Holocaust in school curricula or the most appropriate age at which to teach it (see for example, Supple 1998, [Totten 1999](#); [UNESCO 2015](#)). Teachers need to consider factors such as their pupils’ emotional maturity, their understanding of the historical context, their socio-cultural setting, identity, etc. These are sensitivities that collectively represent the child’s personal hinterland, influence their developing worldview, and in turn indicate their readiness to learn (and to begin to understand) about the Holocaust. Teaching might be necessarily very different in different contexts, both transnationally and within regional borders

(see, for example, Rutland's work with Muslim and Jewish pupils in Australia (2010), or Nates's consideration of the complexities inherent in teaching about the Holocaust in post-apartheid South Africa (2010)). In Germany and other collaborative nations, the subject matter necessitates a careful consideration of the nature of collective responsibility within national memory (Kaiser 2014) whilst contextualizing the individual heritages of different pupils and modern events (such as migration). The (complicated) answer is that this might be at *different* ages for *different* children.

How should we tell children about perpetrators?

Teaching about the Holocaust is an exercise in complexity. Pupils can never *fully* understand the perpetrators' actions, but they can move *towards* a comprehension of their actions through a better understanding of the contexts within which they acted. But how can we introduce the perpetrator within our curriculum in a way that pupils can understand? Teachers might turn first to published textbooks, with their neatly packaged chapters on "the Holocaust." Such texts often offer the "comfortable explanations" noted above, making the teacher complicit in the over-simplification of the narrative for the pupils. Teachers need to approach textbooks with a critical eye—engaging with the content judiciously and analytically, to select activities that suit their schemes of work and *their* pupils, mediating between the text and the reader.

A key area of this mediation must be with the photographs plentifully populating the pages of most classroom textbooks. Teachers need to be aware that often these images are inappropriate—they present victims in humiliating situations or show images of graphic violence that are both dehumanizing for the victims and shocking for the viewer. Whilst these images tell us little about the victims, they do offer (perhaps inadvertently) an insight into the perpetrator. We should invite pupils to consider *who* the men and women behind the lens were and what they reveal of themselves through their gaze (Crane 2008). Teachers should encourage their pupils to look critically at photographs, giving them the tools to interrogate their provenance in an effort to hand back humanity to both the victim *and* the perpetrator. Pupils should ask *why* this photograph has been taken, *who* took it, what *purpose* it serves, and what it tells us about the perpetrator (whilst remaining vigilant of their responsibilities towards the victims depicted)? One key resource here should be *The Auschwitz Album*, which contains almost 200 photographs portraying the daily workings of the camp, while also providing a unique insight into the (invisible) intentions of the perpetrators behind the lens (online links to this and all other

resources and individuals mentioned below can be found in order of appearance at the end of this chapter). Photographs collected by former Auschwitz senior SS officer Karl-Friedrich Höcker offer a more personal perspective—showing various members of the Auschwitz camp staff “off duty” (particularly on visits to the SS resort at Solahütte). These albums present the perpetrators as complex figures—people who deceived, stole from, and murdered their victims, all the while enjoying time off with colleagues, taking day trips eating blueberries, etc. Collectively, they offer a version of the perpetrator that is inhuman, yet very human. By considering the perpetrator as a human being, historically literate pupils can begin to consider how this event was *humanly* possible.

Perpetrators *were* human beings, with pre-war lives that were for the most part unremarkable. Their lives epitomize Arendt’s “banality of evil” (1965, xiv); her work can be explored further with older students. Teachers should engage pupils with individual stories to help them comprehend the complex nature of perpetration. They might study the life of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (whose family lived in a villa on the perimeter of the camp) or Adolf Eichmann (whose unremarkable school career led him to become a traveling salesman briefly before joining the Nazi Party). Similarly, Irma Grese (a notorious SS guard at several camps) was not educationally accomplished and her blind obedience might engage pupils in considering human vulnerability to extremism and the lure of Nazi ideology. In case these individuals leave pupils believing that perpetrators were *all* unintelligent, the academic achievements of Joseph Goebbels (who earned his PhD and was widely published in academia prior to the war) or Josef Mengele (who had earned both a medical degree and a PhD in physical anthropology) will challenge these misconceptions. The life and career of Amon Göth (commandant of the Kraków-Płaszów concentration camp) illustrates the cruelty victims suffered at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators (he was Austrian). Testimony from survivors (such as Helen Jonas-Rosenzweig) attest to this, while his daughter (Monika Hertwig) and his granddaughter (Jennifer Teege) offer further perspectives on the legacy of a perpetrator’s family (which might be relevant for pupils who are addressing their own difficult heritages). The trials and subsequent convictions of Sobibór guard John Demjanjuk and Oskar Gröning (“the bookkeeper of Auschwitz”) raise further questions for pupils around culpability, post-war justice, and forgiveness.

Other narratives are more complex, perhaps blurring the lines of “perpetrator,” “collaborator,” and “rescuer.” Wilhelm Hosenfeld was a captain in the German Army during the war who was also known to have assisted several Jews and Poles (most famously the pianist, Władysław Szpilman). Pupils might consider how his service as a Nazi officer made him culpable of complicity in war crimes, despite his actions as a rescuer. Similarly, a study of Oskar Schindler’s life reveals the dichotomy of a Nazi Party member and profiteer, turned savior of 1100 Jews. Both illustrations enable a teacher to “play devil’s advocate” in provoking discussion around the complexity of a character’s flaws and virtues.

Playing devil’s advocate—some reflections

Knowledge of the inhumanity of mankind cannot be ignored, nor can it be unlearned. Introducing the perpetrator in the classroom leaves pupils with two challenges: to understand *how* these people could act as they did, and to come to terms with *how they can live* in a world where such people exist. This will provoke complex discussions around choices, actions, and culpability. Teachers need expertise in their subject knowledge and their practice to be able to marshal these conversations, to provide answers, and to support pupils’ learning. Working collaboratively, they can explore the Holocaust and its complexity through cross-curricular classes in literature, art, religion, or geography, for example. Perpetration of the Holocaust did not happen in isolation, and neither should teaching (or learning) about it.

Exclusion of the perpetrator from a study of the Holocaust would be as significant an omission as it would be to ignore the diversity of pre-war Jewish life, Jewish resistance, or the history of antisemitism. Teaching about perpetrators is challenging pedagogically, morally, personally, and politically. Pupils need to understand the roots of perpetration and the conditions that give rise to its genesis in society. Only then can they comprehend the “banality” of perpetration not as an abhorrence, but as a consequence of indifference, ignorance, extremism, and prejudice. It is something to be confronted and challenged and to be exposed in the light of interrogation. It is only through playing “devil’s advocate” that teachers can help their pupils towards this inoculating understanding.

Further Information:

The Auschwitz Album

https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/index.asp?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI8qilytfJ3AIVqrvtCh3bZwyiEAAYASAAEgIpx_D_BwE

Karl-Friedrich Höcker's album

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007434>

Rudolf Höss

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/hoss_commandant_auschwitz_01.shtml

Adolf Eichmann

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007412>

Irma Grese

<https://www.historytoday.com/lauren-willmott/real-beast-belsen-irma-grese-and-female-concentration-camp-guards>

Joseph Goebbels:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Goebbels>

Josef Mengele:

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007060>

Amon Göth:

- Interview with survivor Helen Jonas-Rosenzweig:

<https://www.ushmm.org/confront-antisemitism/antisemitism-podcast/helen-jonas>

- Interview with Göth's daughter, Monika Hertwig:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQRq4ljb48g>

- Interview with Göth's granddaughter, Jennifer Teege:

<https://stmuhistorymedia.org/he-would-have-killed-me-the-story-of-jennifer-teege-granddaughter-of-nazi-commandant-amon-goeth/>

Oskar Gröning:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43376105>

John Demjanjuk:

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007956>

Wilhelm Hosenfeld:

<https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/hosenfeld.html>

Oskar Schindler:

https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/schindler.html?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4cC84d3J3AIVrArTCh2KcgFgEAAAYASAAEgIkbnD_BwE

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