Race and the Holocaust:
Giving Voice to Diverse Learners

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Abstract
As American student populations grow increasingly more diverse, educators must find ways to promote Holocaust relevancy and honor the voice and experience of learners. While some scholars and educators continue to make a case for a particularist approach to teaching about the Holocaust, a universalist approach is the only of the two to intentionally provide space for diverse groups to find relevancy. This article explores how racial diversity in American classrooms call for teaching that honors the uniqueness of the Holocaust while acknowledging a teacher's own positioning and the experiences of learners. It explains the author's race and connection to Holocaust history and presents a short reflection from a three-week study in Israel. The chapter concludes with considerations for how we might leverage the power of racial diversity to reach greater audiences.

Keywords: race, Holocaust, antisemitism, racial diversity, particularist approach, universalist approach

Allow me to begin at a place I've typically avoided: defending my decision to teach Holocaust history as a Black woman. In 2013, I was invited to speak at TEDxTowsonU: *Crossing the Divide, Finding Common Ground*. My position as a Black educator at a museum focused on Jewish history motivated the invitation. So, I decided to use the platform to address the recurring question: How did you come to work at a 'Jewish history museum'?

I'd never appreciated the inquiry, primarily because I seldom hear it asked of those who don't look like me within the field. I grounded my TEDxTalk in poetry and featured a poem originally written to commemorate a milestone work event. Rather than to deliver the prescribed speech offered to me by the event staff, I drafted and proposed *An Unlikely Voice*, with its focus on my connection to Holocaust history and the relevancy of my voice within conversations that focus on an experience that is seemingly not mine.

> *Elie Wiesel reminds me to tell the world that I remember*
>
> *I hear Dr. Martin Luther King's 'Dream'*
>
> *I've learned that the evil of this world never sleeps*
>
> *That if I don't speak out for others there will be no*
>
> *one left to speak for me*
>
> *I am reminded that this is my story*
>
> *That there is no such thing as a likely voice*
>
> *That I must bear witness*
>
> *That silence can NEVER be my choice…* (Dupas, 2013)

After my recitation, a woman approached me and identified herself as a Holocaust Survivor. She told me she had never shared the details of her tragic experiences with her family but that my poem encouraged her to tell more of her story. In telling my truth, I had inspired her to tell her own. It was an impactful moment, one that reminded me to continue to use my voice as an educator of Jewish history and to do so in the context of my Blackness.

My presentation included the aforementioned poem, the impact of my exchange with the Survivor who'd been inspired by my words, and my response to people who often ask me an iteration of why I work where I do. The question of "why" has always felt intrusive and somewhat combative. Still, in 2013, I began to explain my career path as a combination of curiosity and opportunity.

My journey started as a junior in a high school history class. I was utterly disturbed by the two paragraphs provided on the genocide of Jews, crouched within the larger context of WWII. Immediately, I resonated with the lack of information also taught about my own history, from ancient African history and the slave trade through Jim Crow. The two paragraphs were insufficient for my curiosity. I had burning questions that neither the textbook nor my teacher could answer. The following year, I participated in my current job's youth program, an experience that spiraled into a career of over a decade and a professional connection that now spans all of my adult life. As a result, I have helped to engage thousands of diverse youth, including former students, with Holocaust history.

What binds me to teaching about the Holocaust is its power to speak to and beyond the horrors of Nazi Germany and Nazi ideology. The unconscionable hatred parallels my own

history and the belief that teaching histories like the Holocaust will promote greater tolerance and, ultimately, a more just world. Alongside the question of why, there have been many inquiries about whether I ever wished to teach at a Black cultural institution. Of course, I have. Still, I know that whether I am teaching American Literature, as I did at the secondary level, or Holocaust history in my current position, my race and racial context allow me to bring a unique perspective to the topics I teach.

Teaching the Holocaust

At the high school level, Holocaust education is written into twelve state curriculums ("Where Holocaust Education is Required", n.d.) with numerous educators in other states and throughout the world committed to exploring its complexities with students. At the collegiate level, Holocaust education now holds canonical status, with few, if any, emerging to challenge its place in liberal arts education. Not only have most Holocaust education courses been taught by tenured professors, but most approach its content with reverence and due diligence (Karn, 2012). There is, however, no formalized approach to Holocaust pedagogy. There is much debate over which aspects of Holocaust history to teach and which voice should dominate the narrative. In its guidelines for teaching the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum asks educators, among other things, to avoid comparisons of pain, to take a balanced approach regarding both the use of graphic images and the perspective from which the event is told, and to avoid simulations and other gimmicks believed to recreate experiences faced by its victims ("Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust", n. d.). Like other institutions across the globe,

it actively seeks to lead teachers and professors toward effective methods for approaching a complex and sensitive topic.

During a three-week study at Yad Vashem in 2019, I joined nearly 30 teachers and academics from the US, Canada, and European countries, all grateful to tour Israel and to learn from speakers and educators during a carefully curated seminar. We each had some familiarity and others' expertise on the topic, having studied or taught about the Holocaust for years. The teacher seminar allowed us access to the wide range of materials located in Yad Vashem's archives and Pedagogic Resource Center. It provided opportunities for us to discuss teaching about the Holocaust with educators from all over the world. Outside of lectures that spanned antisemitism, Holocaust chronology, and religious discourse, participants eagerly shared their studies and classroom practices. We discussed several notable authors and films and attested to our frequent access to primary resources, Survivor testimony, and other teacher materials sourced from major institutions worldwide. At the most basic level, everyone demonstrated efficiency in gathering appropriate resources and the propensity for constructing sound Holocaust pedagogy. What was missing from the conversation, however, was an understanding or apparent accommodation for whom we would be teaching.

During this life-changing experience in Israel, I was finishing doctoral research on how preservice diversity training contributes to White teachers' abilities with racially diverse learners. Despite growing diversity in American classrooms, 80% of teachers are White (NCES, 2012). While race has no impact on a teacher's ability to teach content effectively, it can negatively impact the way that teachers perceive students' abilities, implement disciplinary actions, grade,

select resources, and connect with their audiences. Considering the dominant demographic in teacher education, many White teachers are taught in predominantly White settings and enter the classroom expecting to replicate those environments (Barnes, 2016), thus reinforcing Whiteness as a normative category against which other racial groups are measured (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). Chapman (2013) added that privilege is further perpetuated through school curriculum by the absence of racially diverse content and opportunities to examine power and privilege.

While participating in the teacher seminar, I spent much of my time frustrated with the lack of pedagogical nuance that might address how our audiences, some more racially and ethnically diverse than others, relate to, engage with, and find relevancy with Holocaust history. I identified the exclusion of conversations around whether educators considered how their own positioning in their classrooms impacted their ability to reach their intended audiences. In all fairness, this was not the objective of the international seminar. Nevertheless, content alone does not equate to good teaching for any subject matter, including the Holocaust. In pedagogy and andragogy alike, learners of all ages are most interested and engaged when new information connects with the old and creates new meaning in their lives. The question necessarily becomes: "How to imbed Holocaust memory into public consciousness without losing the integrity of the Jewish experience?" (Alba, 2005).

Given the racial makeup of American classrooms and the potential for unchecked privilege within both teacher-student relationships and curricula, it is hard to examine Holocaust pedagogy aside from classroom diversity and an educator's cultural competency. In classrooms where students are marginalized or silenced by a lack of content that mirrors their own lives and

experiences, any content, including lessons on the Holocaust, may present a challenge for students. This is not necessarily due to a lack of empathy or comprehension on the part of the students. Instead, the issue may very well be erasure, wherein many students do not see themselves reflected in the profession or their own cultures reflected in the content they are mandated to learn. Yet, learners of all ages are expected to not only study an event deemed unique and particularist by many but to do so in environments where the same regard may not be given to their own histories. This reality is compounded with the student's potential to voluntarily or involuntarily experience Holocaust history through its universal lessons of human rights and tolerance with teachers who are not equipped to detect those connections in students or to create spaces for them to voice those connections in ways that honor their personal truths.

When we approach a topic like the Holocaust, one with clear examples of state-sponsored persecution, prejudices, and ostracization, we do a disservice to limit the conversation only to select victim groups or to the confines of the historical event when those learning have undoubtedly had or bear witness to relatable experiences. Such pedagogical aims can be deemed biased towards the suffering of one particular group and result in the silencing of others. Teachers must recognize and resist bias and silencing in order to dismantle the unconscious, deeply embedded discriminatory tendencies in American classrooms (Noon, 2018).

Centering the Experiences and Needs of Diverse Learners

The educators I encounter overwhelmingly demonstrate a passion for ensuring students learn about the Holocaust. Undoubtedly, some educators and facilitators are so uncertain of what and how to teach about the Holocaust (Bromley, 2013; Lindquist, 2007) that they determine where

others can draw parallels. It is possible to explore the global reach of the Holocaust with respect for its unique context. A careful study of the Holocaust can accomplish this if we help our students explore the facts against a backdrop informed by their own experiences and ideals. Outside of relaying facts, the teacher's principal task is to insist that students develop and test a set of moral principles that they can employ for this purpose. If historical studies omit this, we must relinquish any claim that our pedagogy holds the potential for deep and lasting personal transformation. Educators must, therefore, be ready to activate students' consciences without overloading them with inappropriate and unwanted trauma or guilt (Karn, 2012). The additional skills and foresight needed to connect the history to universal themes and experiences lead to additional pedagogical complexities.

Balance is required to keep Holocaust history relevant and accessible to all audiences. All groups across racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or sexual differences seek equality. Each also faces a common dilemma: a balance between asserting equality as their universal right within democracy and preserving and defending the particularities and differences of the group’s identity (Goldberg, 2017). A similar theory can be applied to the study of the Holocaust and conversations around Holocaust pedagogy. There is a long-standing debate about its universality and the potential parallels drawn to other oppressive and genocidal events across the globe, alongside a strong argument about its specificity and the importance of context for understanding the event and the unique circumstances that led to it. However, the significant uniqueness of the Holocaust has gradually shifted and emerged as an enterprise to check the repetition of the worst people have done (Rosenbaum, 2009).

Racially conscious teachers will likely demonstrate expansive thinking in their classrooms (Haynes, 2017). Likewise, teachers who have cultural competence engage in culturally responsive teaching. Their practices aim to align with the cultural heritages and educational practices of students from diverse backgrounds (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). They use culture as a motivator for students and find meaningful ways to incorporate their student's culture and community into classroom lessons. Meeting the unique opportunities and challenges of diverse classrooms requires teachers to be equipped to initiate and effectively engage students in conversations about issues they face in the world around them. This approach does not require teachers to draw parallels between tragedies or ignore the primary targets of any particular history. Instead, it is their invitation to diversify content and to acknowledge connections within different histories in ways that drive students to recognize the human vulnerabilities that lead to inhumane actions and the responsibility we have to one another to both honor history and work to lessen the probability that certain events recur.

Since 1992, the German government has required Holocaust education in all secondary schools and has modeled one thing exceptionally well in its approach. It has shifted pedagogy in response to its increasingly diverse student audience. With the recent influx of immigrants and refugees from predominantly Muslim countries, educational leaders are considering the context students bring to their classrooms and the study of the Holocaust (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). Education leaders have acknowledged that some students bring a significantly different understanding of the facts of the Holocaust, with some describing it as a conspiracy or battle between equal aggressors. Here, we see a shift in pedagogy that pays respect to the audience in

ways that many classrooms ought to. Ignoring students' experiences and socio-political beliefs serves to hinder, even limit, Holocaust Education. Finding pathways to draw learners to the Holocaust promotes education beyond historical fact and allows students to explore the powerful lessons it carries.

Only one-third of American students recognize the term Auschwitz (Zauzmer, 2018). Historical terms help us remember past events, analyze the mechanisms behind historical events, and develop competence that leads to historical consciousness or awareness (Boschki et al., 2015). As history recedes in time and we lose more Holocaust Survivors, many Jewish museums and cultural centers explore ways to connect the history to new audiences who potentially know less and less about the Holocaust. In 2005, the Sydney Jewish Museum explored how to embed Holocaust memory in the public consciousness of Australia. It aimed to maintain the integrity of the Jewish experience while retaining relevance in the diverse and ever-changing landscape of Australian life (Alba, 2005). Those who enter the institution help to drive the resources it produces and the stories it tells. The same has to be true for the classroom and those who teach the Holocaust. Their critical thinking ability is lessened when others attempt to police their associations. While terms are undoubtedly important to the factual recollection of history, a student's associations with the term Auschwitz, for example, will indicate whether they add critical thought and or value to its understanding. If their understanding of Auschwitz is predicated on their familiarity with Japanese internment or Residential Schools for indigenous groups in America, so be it.

The Universality of the Holocaust

The Holocaust is a dark history rooted in an inexplicable hatred, indifference, and murder of countless victims, namely millions of Jews. State-sponsored persecution and murder, alongside the action and inaction of many others, including neighbors, led to the death of six million Jews and millions of others deemed Nazi enemies of the state. Insofar as we should not forget it, we must not ignore the echo of its lessons and all they reveal about man's inhumanity to man. Over 75 years since its end, the Holocaust has emerged as a global tool for teaching human rights, tolerance, and acceptance themes. It is a very specific and powerful example of what happens when these fail (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). From its vast resources and the sheer breadth of its reach, scholars can extract particular stories about how diverse groups have been impacted by Nazi ideology. Courses, lecturers, and authors alike delve into such conversations of the

Holocaust that focus specifically on women, LGBTQ, Afro-Germans, and a myriad of others. While this has not always been deemed best practice, there is growing evidence for the power of a globalized understanding of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust cannot be seen as only a Jewish issue (Karn, 2012) if we wish for it to be relevant to all. Visitor demographics at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reveal that 90% of its visitors are non-Jewish. Whether by choice or gentle nudging, diverse groups interact with Holocaust history. The same is true for diverse students in American classrooms. Because the Holocaust is regarded as the epitome of calculated human destruction, the event needs to be taught to an increasingly culturally and religiously diverse student population with relevance, sensitivity, and reflection (Vitale, & Clothey, 2019). Learners and audiences alike will make personal and shared connections to the events of the Holocaust. The implicit or explicit refusal to honor those realities is a form of silencing.

The act of silencing stands counter to the stated desire to ensure that this particular history does not fade from the minds of current and future generations. To press a bit further, denial or silencing of potential parallel narratives can be considered an act of psychological and emotional violence. Anyone relating to a tragic history because of personal or generational trauma has established an emotional connection to that event. However, classrooms and museums do not always create space for those experiences to be given a voice. Ultimately, this limits inclusion. In many cases, silencing is retraumatization, thus continuing the circle of harm and impairing recognition, processing, and integration (Kinouani, 2020). The Holocaust must be taught as a watershed historical event, forever shaping the history of Western civilization and as a cautionary example of unchecked extremism (Vitale & Clothey, 2019).

Race and the Holocaust

There is an undeniable connection between the Holocaust and race. *Race* is a social construct intertwined in the categorization of people victimized under Nazi Ideology. It is the grouping of people by their differences that we also see at play in genocides and other forms of persecution that predate and follow the Holocaust (Hodson & Earle, 2017). While recognizing that antisemitism is unique to Jews, a statistical phenomenon of generalized prejudice shows a correlation between antisemitism and other forms of racism and intolerance. Those more prejudiced against Jews were also more prejudiced towards other marginalized groups (Hodson & Earle, 2017). Not only are people across racial and ethnic lines finding meaningful ways to connect with the experiences of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust, but there is shared victimhood from the perspective of perpetrators of racism and antisemitism. An educator's failure to highlight this truth does not erase the lived experiences of those who will connect to Holocaust history in unique and organic ways. However, it is a missed opportunity to affirm a learner’s connection and to use such moments to expand the understanding of others. For non-Jewish audiences, the Holocaust is a seemingly distant history with the power to speak across race and religion.

Ensuring the reach and the relevancy of Holocaust education requires comprehensive teacher training, continued professional development opportunities, resources that acknowledge and accommodate the rising cultural pluralism of the classroom, and consistent messaging across educational tracks. (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). The silencing of other stories harms individuals and isolates entire social groups by reproducing an unequal social order (Kinouani, 2020). In February 2019, I participated in a panel discussion titled Race and Society in Nazi Germany and

the Jim Crow South. The discussion explored the encounter between two groups targeted by racial oppression, brought together by war and racism: Jewish refugee scholars and Black students at the Historical Black Colleges and Universities where the scholars taught. During the Q&A segment, an audience member asked us to share our thoughts on moving as a society toward a greater understanding wherein we can have more conversations that bring together diverse groups to speak about the Holocaust and its parallels to other histories. I shared with her that one sure way was to intentionally remove the idea of a dominant voice in Holocaust education. When we empower diverse groups to not only see themselves in Holocaust history but also to emerge as scholars and experts in the way that we see cross-culturalism in the teaching and discussions of other histories, we make room for more individuals to carry lessons of the Holocaust into places where it seemingly had no relevance before.

My exploration of why I teach the Holocaust has inspired me to consider who can and should teach Holocaust education. In addition to the research on what should be taught, perhaps educators, practitioners, and members of museum communities ought to explicitly examine the why of Holocaust educators. Alongside the desire to expand the reach of Holocaust education is the need to ensure that it is handled responsibly and competently for its global reach. We need more Holocaust educators to examine why they teach the topic, whom they teach, if they are equipped to take the charge, and what ways they have and continue to work to broaden conversations to promote the inclusion of voice and experience. After all, Holocaust education demands something extraordinary of those who teach it (Botwinick, 2001; Lindquist, 2007).

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