

Introducing Children to Holocaust Literature: A Developmental-Psychological Approach*

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Holocaust and Remembrance

Librarians, along with teachers, parents, grandparents, and psychologists are educators. As educators, we often ask whether we should teach our children about the Holocaust, and if so, when? Introduction of the factual evidence of the Holocaust to young Jewish children serves a multitude of purposes—some cathartic, most historical, educational, religious, and cultural.

How can we translate to our naive, innocent children the inconceivable, the atrocities, and the depth of mankind's inhumanity? A walk through Yad Vashem, the ultimate resource on the Holocaust, leaves many adults with a deep sense of loss and feeling of disbelief. This institution serves to remind us of the realities which we so often try to deny or forget subconsciously.

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize Laureate, has written extensively about the Holocaust in order to ensure that humanity will never forget, that younger generations will never fail to remember. For Friedlander, the Israeli historian, "Judaism is in part the constant retelling of a story, so memory is part of the essence of Jewish tradition" (quoted in Miller, 1986).

The Psychological Approach

While the ideals, religious beliefs, collective memory, and collective history of the Jewish people must be transmitted, at the same time, we must consider the child's psychological structures and his capacity to absorb information.

It is not very difficult to get verbal children to repeat a given piece of information in a rote fashion, but it is often much more diffi-

cult to have them truly assimilate and conceptualize this information. A thorough understanding of the principles of intellectual and cognitive development is therefore imperative before providing youngsters with Holocaust literature.

In taking this developmental-psychological approach, it is of critical importance to remember that: (1) children progress through the various stages of cognitive development at different rates; (2) their thinking processes are very different from adults'; and (3) behind every "intellectual human being" is a child with feelings, emotions, and perceptions. Whether these perceptions are accurate is inconsequential; the introspective world of the child—the world as the individual child sees it—must be the point of departure for the educational process.

Developmental Stages in Children

It is useful to understand Piaget's (1952; 1970; 1985) conceptualization of the child's intellectual stages and cognitive developmental changes. According to Piaget, cognitive understanding and development are based upon successive, qualitative changes in the child's cognitive structures and framework. Cognitive development occurs in an orderly progression and is cross-cultural.

During the *sensorimotor* stage (birth to approximately age two) of development, cognitive understanding is extremely primitive and related to actions upon the environment. The young child's actions gradually become more intentional and integrated into cognitive patterns.

From this early perceptual level, the child progresses into the *preoperational* level (often referred to as the preoperational and intuitive stages) (age two through seven), where the child readily develops language, the beginnings of conceptual thought, and reasoning. The beginnings of thought processes are marked by a lack of ability to classify things in the environment and a gradual awareness of conservation, i.e., that objects do not change in terms of the properties of mass, weight, and volume even when the shape is modified.

This stage of development is followed by the *concrete operational* stage (age seven to eleven), when children begin to develop logical thinking processes—the ability to "think" out problems previously "worked" out. These logical thought processes are, however, highly dependent upon concrete problems and immediate experiences.

In the final stage, *formal operations* (from approximately age eleven), the child acquires the ability to apply hypothetical, logical solutions to a variety of problems. This shift in the thinking process is particularly crucial for conceptualization, the attainment of logical rational strategies, and the comprehension of theoretical or ideological principles.

Concomitant with formal operational thought is the use of *metacognitive* thought. There is an important shift in the older child and adolescent's ability to think about their own thinking and the thought of others. Egocentric thinking—the inability to take another perspective—disappears. Internal subvocal dialogue allows the adolescent to acquire new insights without the necessity to test each solution in a concrete fashion (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1987).

This represents a brief overview of Piaget's developmental framework; the interested reader can explore these ideas in greater depth (e.g., Ginsburg & Opper, 1969; Piaget, 1983). Other developmental theories on children's thinking and behavior can also be applied, e.g., S-R (stimulus-response) Theory (Skinner, 1953), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Psychoanalytic Theory (Freud, 1935; 1947).

Conceptualization of Death

Until fairly recently, books designed for children dealing honestly and realistically with the topic of death were relatively rare (Rudman, 1976). While considerably more material is available today, most education professionals, as well as parents, still experience great difficulty in dealing with this topic. We attempt to deal with the concept of death in an abstract manner—the most concrete example generally being grand-

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parents—but when a parent or peer dies, it is a traumatic experience for school personnel. This results in either inappropriate actions being taken or subconscious denial with nothing done. While death in a general framework is much easier to deal with than personal loss, the magnitude and implications of the Holocaust are threatening, and often require defense mechanisms.

Given the developmental framework, unless we concretize war and death, it is extremely difficult for children to truly understand and conceptualize the issues until they reach the stage of concrete operations (approximately age seven). Children will certainly grasp the enormity of the act of the Holocaust, given the fact that pre-concrete operational thought is more concerned with the gravity of the act than the conceptualization of the deliberate elimination of a race. But the greater issues of man's inhumanity to man, an attempt to destroy a people because of their religious beliefs and cultural heritage, the countless slaughter of millions who virtually refused to resist, the attitudes and conditions that led to the most horrific conflict in world history, and the disbelief that the entire world stood by for so long before acknowledging the realities of the Holocaust is well beyond a young child's conceptual framework. Basic acknowledgment of the events is a precursor to conceptual understanding; but formal operational thought processes, found only in children approximately eleven years of age, are prerequisites for complete understanding. Because of the enormity of the act and its inconceivability in a free democratic society, the child will require multiple exposures, books with concrete referents, numerous pictures, and much discussion.

Special consideration should be given to books which take a child's perspective in telling the story of the Holocaust. A child can readily relate to another child's/adolescent's predicaments. This accounts for the enormous appeal to children and adolescents of the *Diary of Anne Frank* as opposed to the lack of popularity of Holocaust material which takes a documentary approach.

Books, films, and other literary media provide concrete points of departure for discussion. Rather than producing a single ideological perspective, books can provide a variety of perspectives.

It is essential that librarians actively listen (Ginott, 1969) to the questions children ask. When children come with special problems, concerns, and interests, the response should not merely be directing them to a particular section of the library or handing them several books, but rather to provide the child with some overview of the material and be readily available for questions and discussions. In reading about a child or family who lived through the Holocaust, young children will have numerous questions which most often remain unanswered. The central theme of a Holocaust book may be easily overlooked and missed without appropriate discussion. Additional questions may arise days, weeks, or even months after the book has been read or discussed.

The Emotional Aspect

As educators, we must go beyond the mere transmission of information and the identification of the appropriate resource material. How can one discuss the Holocaust in the same matter-of-fact manner as other school subjects? In a particularly poignant note, Ginott (1972) quotes the contents of a letter sent by an administrator addressed to all the teachers of a private school on the first day of the school year:

Dear Teacher:

I am the survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help these students become human. Your efforts must never produce monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

(Ginott, 1972, p. 245)

Reading and writing are important only if they serve to make our children more humane. A mere discussion of the factual evidence of the Holocaust loses its place in our history and part of our collective unconscious. Our role is not merely the transmission of information, but the sharing of our feelings, emotions, thoughts, and behavior. While a better understanding of the child's

cognitive processes provides a good framework for helping young people learn about the Holocaust, it is only adults who can comprehend its true gravity and significance for a people, for mankind.

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