THE EXTENT AND EFFECTS OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years some scholars have worried that the proliferation of Holocaust education in the United States may be leading to "Holocaust fatigue" or to the dilution of the potential pedagogical impact of learning about the event. This article reviews the research on the extent of Holocaust education in the US at the secondary and higher educational levels and the effects that learning about the event has had on students. This research reveals that, although Holocaust education has made remarkable gains, the potential of teaching about the Holocaust may not yet have been realized.

If we consider Holocaust education as an educational movement or pedagogical innovation, its success in the United States has been remarkable; it has been one of the most successful grassroots educational movements in American history. In 1970 the Holocaust was barely being addressed in any public schools, yet by the 1990s several states had mandated Holocaust and genocide study, and a majority of students were at least being exposed to the event. State legislatures have taken a number of different approaches to demonstrate their support of teaching about the event. Currently, the states of Illinois, New Jersey, and Florida directly mandate the teaching of the Holocaust in their public schools. California, New York, and Massachusetts embed the Holocaust in the broader spectrum of human rights and genocide education, and require that teachers address a list of group atrocities in their classrooms in some manner. Connecticut, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington, "encourage" or "recommend" teaching the Holocaust and created commissions to support it. Georgia, Alabama, Maryland, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Rhode Island, and West Virginia also appointed Holocaust and genocide and/or human rights commissions to develop resources and support teachers (Fallace, 2008).

Despite the conspicuous success of Holocaust education at the institutional level, it is difficult to determine to what extent the Holocaust has become just a topic to be covered instead of a more broadly-conceived pedagogical and moral intervention. The founders of the movement certainly designed Holocaust education to be a transformative experience (Fallace, 2005). But in recent years, some scholars (Schweber, 2006; Shawn, 1995) have worried that the proliferation of Holocaust education in America may be leading to "Holocaust fatigue" or to the dilution of the potential impact of the event. As we shall see, despite its successes, the potential of teaching about the Holocaust in the US may not yet have been realized.

TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST IN US COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

A 1992 study by the American Jewish Committee reported that 36 percent of adults and 59 percent of students in the US listed schools as their primary source of knowledge about the Holocaust (cited in Baron, 2003). So at a basic level, schools have done an adequate job of informing Americans about the event. Intuitively, one would assume that Holocaust education would be more pervasive at the level of higher education, because college professors usually have more autonomy over their course content, they are more likely to address controversial topics in depth, and,

according to Peter Novick (1999), they are more likely to be Jewish, a group for which the event has become a central concern. However, the existing research suggests that Holocaust education in US universities has lagged behind that of secondary and middle schools.

Joel Epstein (1989) surveyed Church-related institutions of higher education to determine to what degree his colleagues were teaching the Holocaust and how their students were responding to the instruction. The professors who responded related how they had little to no institutional support for their Holocaust courses; they were taught as electives and were dependent upon the initiative of the individual professors. All of the respondents believed firmly in what they were doing and reported that their classes had a profound effect on their students. Some expressed that their Christian students often became "defensive," "angry," "perplexed," and "shocked" about the role of Christian anti-Semitism in the Holocaust, and had a difficult time reconciling their faith with the German perpetrators and bystanders. The majority of the respondents reported that most students "had been exposed to familiar stereotypes about Jews and encompassed them in their mind set in varying degrees" (pp. 171-2). One professor reported that a student had suggested that the Jews were paying for deicide, and that many of his students were fascinated with Nazi helmets and gadgets. A similar study by Hubert Locke (1989) surveyed 33 American scholars in the field of public administration and public policy to inquire if and how they address the Holocaust in their courses. Only six professors responded that they did in "any substantial way." When asked if they considered the destruction of the European Jewry during the German Third Reich to have any major significance as a topic for teaching or research in their discipline, only 19 responded affirmatively. From this data, Locke concluded that teaching the Holocaust was not a substantial concern in his field of public administration and policy.

Stephen Haynes (1998) conducted a far more inclusive study of the Holocaust in higher education. Based on 90 responses from all types of colleges and universities, Haynes discovered that departments of history were bearing most of the burden of teaching the event. Most of these history departments offered the course as a regular elective offering. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of professors reported using teacher-centered methods of instruction such as lecture and discussion. Like their high school and middle school counterparts, these professors regularly showed Holocaust films such as *Night and Fog* and *Shoah*. Elie Wiesel's *Night* was assigned by about 40 percent of the instructors, followed by Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* as the most-commonly assigned texts.

Leona Kanter (1998) conducted a thorough study of college textbooks in Sociology, Political Science, Western Civilization, and American History. In Sociology textbooks the number of lines devoted to the Holocaust ranged from 0-40. Kanter was appalled by the neglect of the topic in her discipline, which did the poorest job of addressing the implications of the event. "As a group," she reported, "these books failed to take advantage of the Holocaust as a way of understanding the link between social structure and social consciousness." As expected history texts offered far more coverage of the Nazi assault on the European Jews; they included between 0-175 lines. Ultimately Kanter concluded that "college students can complete survey courses in both world and American history with only a minimal confrontation with the Holocaust and then often in the form of a troubling photograph which may or may not gain their attention" (p. 44). Kanter's study, along with the others, confirm that, despite the rise of interdisciplinary Holocaust studies at certain institutions and the interdisciplinary units designed for middle and high school students, at the level of higher education the Holocaust was largely being left to the departments of history to cover.

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TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST IN US SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Holocaust education at the high and middle school level, at least in certain regions, has been more successful than higher education. A 1987 national history survey found that, although only 32 percent of 17-year-olds could place the Civil War in the correct half-century, 76 percent could identify the term "Holocaust" as reference to the Nazi genocide during WWII (Ravitch and Finn, p. 49, 61). In 1998 the New Jersey Holocaust Commission, which had mandated the teaching of the event four years earlier, reported that 93 percent of it schools had assimilated the topics of Holocaust and genocide into their curriculum (Llorente, 1998). A 2003 follow-up study surveyed 93 school principals about their school's adherence to the New Jersey mandate. However, according to the surveyor, a little over half of the schools demonstrated an "acceptable" level of implementation. New Jersey Teachers reported using

resources and materials from Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) Foundation of Brookline, Massachusetts, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), and the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, as well as using popular texts such as *Diary of Anne Frank*. Reading assigned texts and engaging in class discussions were the two most common instructional strategies. Most schools also reported going "beyond teaching only the historical facts to examine the role of prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and racism" (Donvito, 2003, p. 196).

Although state mandates, the content of textbooks, and the amount of teacher training all impact the extent to which the Holocaust will be taught, the most influential factor is teacher's Holocaust profile (Mitchell, 2004; Ellison, 2002). In other words, teachers with a personal interest in the event are more likely to do research, track down resources, and enthusiastically attend Holocaust workshops than those have no intrinsic interest in the event. Teachers with personal interest are more likely to attend workshops by educational organizations such the USHMM and FHAO (Mitchell, 2004; Linquist, 2002; Donoho, 1999). FHAO and the USHMM are clearly the two most pervasive forces in Holocaust education in the US at the secondary level. This is interesting because the two organizations offer somewhat conflicting approaches to teaching the event. FHAO supports an agenda of social justice and social activism, and frames the Holocaust in a progressive manner that will further these goals. On the other hand, the USHMM places more emphasis on the particularities of the Holocaust and seeks to impart an appreciation of the historical and definitional uniqueness of the event by focusing on anti-Semitism and engaging directly with survivor testimonies (although the museum also provides materials on other victims). Both organizations receive funding from the federal government, and both support grassroots efforts to improve and spread Holocaust education (Fallace, 2008). Teachers do not seem to be cognizant of these subtle differences between the two organizations, and many ambitious teachers have attended professional developments sessions for both (Mitchell, 2004).

The research suggests that generally Holocaust education at the secondary level in US seems to be most popular in two areas—suburban districts with substantial Jewish populations and urban areas with high nonwhite ethnic populations (Ellison 2002; Holt, 2001). The Holocaust is relevant to both these areas, but for different reasons. Obviously, areas with high Jewish populations are more likely to have teachers with significant Holocaust profiles, who have greater knowledge and interest in the event. Teachers of inner city minority students teach the event as an indirect way to deal with the prejudice and discrimination that their students experience on a daily basis (Ellison, 2002; Schweber, 2004; Fine, 1993a). The context of the school, to a large degree, seems to impact the pedagogical approach. Teachers with large Jewish populations seem to emphasize the particular aspects of the event. On the other hand, teachers with either high minority ethnic populations or with ambition goals of furthering social justice seem to employ a more progressive approach (Ellison, 2002). Of course, there are certainly exceptions to this pattern (see Schweber, 2003; Brabeck, et al, 1994).

Overall, teachers at the university, secondary, and middle school levels all seem to be relying heavily on three resources: Elie Wiesel's *Night, The Diary Anne Frank*, and *Schindler's List* (Mitchell, 2004; Donvito, 2003; Ellison, 2002; Haynes, 1998). So, despite the numerous books, films, and memoirs published on the event and the extensive efforts by local, regional and national Holocaust-related organizations, the major content and lessons of the Holocaust may simply be boiled down to these three major sources.

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THE EFFECTS OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION ON SECONDARY STUDENTS

Due to its proximity to the Harvard Graduate School of Education and its addition to the National Diffusion Network of exemplary educational programs, FHAO has been the most studied Holocaust curriculum in the US. An early study of the curriculum by Lieberman (1981) found that students who were taught the unit increased significantly in their interpersonal understanding as well as factual knowledge about the event. A comparative study by Glynn, Bock and Cohen (1982), which researched the effects of Holocaust curricula in New York City, Philadelphia, Great Neck, NY, and FHAO confirmed these findings. The researchers found FHAO to be the most effective of the four in terms of learning lessons from the event and understanding its factual and historical components.

However, they reported that there was no significant change in students' moral reasoning as a result of the learning about the event. On the other hand, Brabeck et al. (1994) found that FHAO significantly increased eight-grade students' moral reasoning, and a study by Bardige (1981) reported that the curriculum increased students' social awareness and frequency of reflective thinking. In addition, Shultz, et al. (2001) found that students of the curriculum increased relationship maturity and decreased racist attitudes and self-reported fighting behavior. However, there were only minimal gains in moral reasoning.

Melinda Fine (1993a, 1993b) published a pair of ethnographic studies on the implementation of FHAO in inner-city schools. She argued that the curriculum fostered democratic deliberations and created a climate "wherein students were able to recognize that there were a variety of viewpoints, identities, and interests in the world, all of which have some social grounding, and all of which must be understood if not necessarily accepted" (1993a, p. 786). A qualitative study of FHAO by Boix-Mansilla found that most students were able to distinguish between the different historical conditions surrounding the Nazi and Rwandan genocides, the incremental steps involved in both, and actions and dilemmas faced by individual rescuers and victims. However, with few exceptions, "students failed to recognize the constructed nature of the very accounts on which they were grounding their hypotheses and interpretations about contemporary Rwanda" (p. 410). That is, according to Boix-Mansilla, the students failed to appreciate that "narratives are humanly constructed, that they embody particular worldviews, that they are written with a contemporary audience in mind, that that they seek to be faithful to the life of the past" (p. 410). This objective extended beyond (or avoided) a concern for moral development and instead focused on the cognitive development of disciplinary thinking—that is the ability to think like a historian. This reflects a general shift in interest in recent years among American researchers away from the moral outcomes of Holocaust education to a more cognitive focus.

Similarly, Simone Schweber's (2004) study of a California teacher confirmed that the FHAO curriculum failed to convey important aspects of historical context. By focusing on the affective elements of the Holocaust, the teacher left his students ignorant of important historical facts. As a result, Schweber reflected, the Holocaust was "discussed as a symbol rather than understood as events" (p. 57-8). In another case study Schweber (2004) studied an instructor whose main objective was to cover as much information about the Holocaust as he could. This approach, Schweber suggests, effectively transmitted the factual knowledge of the event, but he "razed complex moral/historical terrain" (p. 17). A similar outcome occurred with another teacher, whose Holocaust unit concentrated on a series of dramatic reenactments that Schweber described as "emotionally rich…but intellectually thinner than it might have been" (p. 140).

In another provocative study, Schweber (2007) researched the Holocaust being taught in a third grade classroom. She was weighing in on a debate between Totten (2002) and Sepinwall (1999) about the appropriateness of teaching the event to such young children. Overall, Schweber was impressed by the ability of the students to distinguish between real and fictitious violence and, to an age-appropriate degree, be able to sympathize with the victims. Unlike the many other teachers Schweber studied, this one had depicted the Holocaust accurately by covering the hasher aspects of the event adequately and ending the unit on a non-redemptive note. However, despite the successes of the unit on a factual level, Schweber agreed with Totten that the emotional effects of the Holocaust were too much for these young students to handle.

"Basic understanding of the concept of totalitarianism, conditions present for the concept to occur and strategies used by totalitarians to gain power."

Beyond overall assessments of FHAO and other curricula, researchers have focused on the impact that the teacher has on the framing of the event and its reception by students. A recent ethnographic study by Jeremy Stoddard (2007) depicted a teacher in Michigan who relied heavily of film to teach the Holocaust. After viewing and discussing the films, *In Memory of Millions*, *The Wave, Swing Kids*, and *America and the Holocaust*, the high school students' essays exhibited "basic understanding of the concept of totalitarianism, conditions present for the concept to occur and strategies used by totalitarians to gain power" (p. 208). However, the students fell short of appreciating the complex social and historical issues that surrounded the event. Nevertheless, Stoddard concluded that, "fiction and documentary film act as powerful tools for engaging students in developing historical empathy" (p. 210).

Schewber and Irwin (2003) explored how the Holocaust was taught at a fundamentalist Christian school. Instead of focusing on the role of Christians in orchestrating or tolerating the persecution of German Jews, the teacher used the Holocaust to teach students about persecution

"that we, as Christians may someday face" (p. 1700). Rather than trying to inspire students to take action on behalf of social justice or genocide prevention, the teacher aimed to strengthen her students' Christian identities, an objective she successfully achieved.

Similarly, Schweber's (2008) study of the teaching of the Holocaust at an Orthodox Jewish school for girls confirmed that fundamentalist faith, whether it be Christian or Jewish, prevented open-ended inquiry into the event by providing predetermined answers and/or mystifying the secular events of history. Like the Christian teacher, the Orthodox Jewish instructor taught the Holocaust to reaffirm her students' religious identities, not to convey specific moral lessons or to inspire social action. Over the course of the unit, students directed numerous questions at the teacher, which she deflected with particularist claims about the incomprehensibility of the event. The question of 'why,' Schweber pointed out, so central to the disciplines of history and the social sciences, was considered superfluous.

The effects of religious belief in the framing of the Holocaust was even more pronounced in Spector's (2007) provocative study of students in two Midwestern public schools who had just read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The majority of these students (69 percent) used religious narratives of supernatural intervention to impose order on the events of the Holocaust in one of three ways. First, some students suggested that both God and Satan were historical actors engaged in a struggle of good an evil; Hitler embodied Satan, and God ultimately saved the Jews by stopping the extermination before it achieved it ultimate goal. Second, students expressed how there were certain ways in which individuals should act, and if they do not, there may be supernatural consequences. Third, students employed narratives of "the cross" in relation to Jesus—that He was either suffering at Auschwitz alongside the Jews, or that the Jews were being punished for their rejection of Him. Overall these narratives, according to Spector, blamed the victims for their suffering, moved cause-and-effect from the natural to the metaphysical realm, and justified God's lack of intervention in the event.

In another study of student responses to the Holocaust, Wegner (1996) analyzed the essays of 200 eight-graders, who responded to the prompt, "What lessons from the Holocaust are there for my generation today?" The vast majority of responses addressed moral prescriptions about what students should not be doing. The most popular response (82 percent) was to not allow the Holocaust to happen again. The second most common lesson (64 percent) was not to dehumanize others. The third most common response (60 percent) was not to be a bystander.

This research suggests that the lessons of the Holocaust are not necessarily obvious or convergent. The teacher can easily shape the content and lessons of the event. Teaching about the Holocaust, even in great depth, can but will not automatically lead to greater tolerance, historical understanding, or civic virtue. Nevertheless, under the right circumstances learning about the Holocaust can have a number of positive and measurable effects on students' moral and cognitive growth.

CONCLUSION

Content about the Holocaust is now firmly embedded in the American curriculum. Nearly every major city has some kind of Holocaust museum that creates and distributes educational materials. For almost two decades, the USHMM has trained hundreds of teachers through its summer internships and teacher workshops, and over the years the FHAO Foundation has trained thousands of teachers and distributed educational materials to many more. In addition textbooks cover more material about the Holocaust than ever before, and those states with history standards often list the Holocaust specifically. Although much of it is dated and local, the research presented above demonstrates that the Holocaust is being taught in a number of creative contexts and through a diverse range of approaches throughout the country.

However, the research also suggests that spending a few days or even weeks teaching the Holocaust may not have a long-lasting impact on students. Spending an entire semester on the Holocaust can be more meaningful, but even then, transforming the embedded cognitive and affective structures of the mind is a long, slow process, and it results from numerous encounters both inside and outside of the classroom. For this reason, Holocaust education needs to be viewed as a component of the overall goals of secondary and higher education, not merely as an end in itself. Ultimately, much more research is needed on the long-term effects of learning about this important event.

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