

Responsible Teaching of the Holocaust

The Holocaust is a challenging subject to teach. The complexity of its history and the emotionally sensitive nature of the material may present difficulties, but the rewards are worth the effort. Many students find the study of the Holocaust to be compelling and it contains important lessons for our times. As a result, the decisions you make about what material to include and what methods to use will have significant consequences, not just for the success of your unit, but also on your students' personal and academic development. It is of critical importance to consider the rationale for teaching about the Holocaust, so that your activities will support your goals. There are several excellent reasons worthy of consideration:

- The Holocaust is an extraordinarily well-documented and significant chapter in the history of the modern world. To exclude it from the curriculum would be a gross distortion of history. Neglecting to teach about the Holocaust would also support the Nazi goal of eliminating their victims (in this case, from our memory and study).
- The way people acted during the Holocaust reveals much about human behavior in general. This holds true for the good and the heroic, as well as for the evil or indifferent. It also holds true for the present, as well as the past.
- The Holocaust reveals the dangers inherent in all forms of prejudice and discrimination. Learning about the Holocaust can prepare students to study and understand problems that have existed in our own history and society. It can also help strengthen their resolve to confront those problems in a straightforward and positive way.
- Learning about the Holocaust can help students gain a fundamental respect for human rights and for the dignity of all people. It can help them see that diversity among people is a source of strength, not a weakness. It can also help students recognize that diversity does not negate the common bonds of humanity shared by all.
- Students may learn through their study of the Holocaust that each person is responsible for his/her own actions, and that everyone is capable of having an impact on the people and events that surround them.
- The Holocaust was implemented by a Nazi regime that also sought to suppress political opposition. Hopefully, this will impress upon students the necessity of supporting and safeguarding our own democratic values and institutions.
- Holocaust education is a required part of the curriculum. In April 1994, the Florida Legislature mandated the study of the Holocaust in Florida public schools. The language of this mandate is quite specific in expressing the legislature's intent. A copy and explanation of the mandate can be found in the next section of this guide.

In addition to understanding the rationale for Holocaust education, it is equally important to understand how to teach about it responsibly. Teaching about the Holocaust demands responsibility in four distinct areas: responsibility to students, to the community, to the victims, and to historical truth.

Responsibility to Students:

Learning about the Holocaust should be beneficial to the intellectual, emotional, social, and moral development of students. This goal should inform every decision you make regarding the content of your unit and the methods you use to teach and evaluate. The following suggestions may provide some guidance:

- Encourage students to use their study of the Holocaust to examine issues of contemporary relevance, both societal and personal.
- Encourage students to resist and reject attitudes of prejudice and to value people as individuals.
- Help students to value diversity rather than be threatened by it.
- Engage students in activities that encourage higher level thinking skills.
- Create affective as well as cognitive goals.
- Give students plenty of opportunities to respond creatively to what they have learned.
- Avoid using graphic images and descriptions of Nazi brutality for shock value. Although graphic photos and accounts have documentary value, their indiscriminate use can have negative consequences. On one hand, they appeal mostly to prurient interest and on the other, they may traumatize sensitive students. In either case, the end result is a desensitizing effect that distances students from an empathetic understanding of the victims.
- Don't try to replicate the experiences of victims through simulation activities. Instead, seek to evoke empathy through recognition of common ground. (Note: Simulations tend to trivialize the experiences of the victims. If a simulation could be created that would accurately recreate Holocaust experiences, it would be so traumatic that it would be inappropriate as an educational activity.)

Responsibility to the Community:

One of the goals of Holocaust education should be to inspire students to see themselves as members of an inclusive community. Holocaust education should therefore be characterized by the following traits:

- It should play a role in preparing students for responsible citizenship by teaching respect and concern for others.
- It should unite people, rather than divide them into competing groups.
- It should help students be more attentive and sensitive to other histories of persecution that they will study in school (and also those they may not).
- It should respect the right of people to define their own identities, not seeking to impose group identities arbitrarily as the Nazis did.
- It should foster an appreciation for the democratic values and institutions that support a free society.

Responsibility to the Victims:

Nazi ideology did not recognize the Jewish people as members of the human family. They portrayed them through propaganda as sub-human. They created policies that denied them basic human rights and dignity. They characterized the killing program as a health measure analogous to the eradication of a disease. In light of this reality, one of the main goals of Holocaust education must be to restore to the victims recognition of their humanity. Holocaust education must:

- Teach that Nazi anti-Semitic and racist ideology was not just harmful, but that it was also factually incorrect.
- Show that specific Nazi stereotypes and accusations that portrayed Jews and other targeted victims as a threat to Germany were not true.
- Recognize victims individually and collectively as human beings.
- Reject the temptation to blame the victims for their predicament.
- Honor the memory of the victims by seeing them primarily as people with complex and multi-faceted lives, not merely as victims.
- Acknowledge that the victims did resist the Nazis (using the methods that were possible and seemed to make the most sense at the time).
- Allow the victims voices to be heard through oral and written testimonies.

Responsibility to Historical Truth:

Over the years, a number of myths have arisen regarding the Holocaust. Some of these have attained widespread acceptance with the general public. Perpetuation of these distortions, or failure to debunk them, will seriously hinder the ability of teachers and students to derive meaningful lessons from study of the Holocaust. In order to avoid misconceptions:

- Respect the complexity of this history. Avoid over generalizing about events or groups. A variety of factors made the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust possible. A single explanation is not sufficient. There is no such thing as all Germans or all Jews. All perpetrators did not act from the same motives. All Jews did not experience or respond to events in the same way. Accurately portraying this complexity helps students to reject stereotypes.
- Teach about the victims of the Holocaust who were not Jews, but avoid trying to compare victimization. While it is useful to show why the Nazis targeted various people for persecution, it is not appropriate to compare the suffering of victims by group. All victims suffered. The position and treatment of the Jews was unique because of the place they occupied in Nazi ideology, not because their suffering was qualitatively different.
- Teach about the people who resisted the Nazis and those who became rescuers. Though they did not constitute a high percentage of the overall population, their actions illustrate that humane, courageous, and civilized behavior was possible under Nazi rule.
- Avoid stereotypes that "demonize" the perpetrators (or to a lesser extent, the bystanders). Demonizing the perpetrators removes their actions from the realm of choice, thus making it difficult to learn lessons from their experience.