

Ilene R. Berson, Michael J. Berson

TATTERED DOLLS AND TEDDY BEARS TELL TALES OF HOPE AND PERSEVERANCE: DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGIC PARADIGM FOR TEACHERS' USE OF HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY TO ENGAGE YOUNG STUDENTS IN EXPLORING SOCIAL INJUSTICES

Holocaust Education and US State Mandates

Prominent national education organizations in the United States, such as the *National Association for the Education of Young Children*, the *Southern Poverty Law Center Teaching Tolerance*, *Anti-Defamation League*, and *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education*,¹ have made specific recommendations highlighting the need for substantive early learning experiences that explore prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination to combat systemic patterns of injustice. Several US states have legislated requirements for teaching about the Holocaust in the public school curriculum. Currently eight states (California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island) mandate instruction on the Holocaust, and 12 additional states (Alabama, Connecticut, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Washington, and West Virginia) recommend teaching the Holocaust but lack funding to enforce and support implementation.²

Despite these mandates and several attempts to pass national legislation for Holocaust educational requirements in all elementary and secondary schools, adherence to these initiatives has been inconsistent. Nationally, there is widespread recognition that teachers need access to appropriate

curriculum resources, instructional guidelines and training to increase their knowledge of the Holocaust, and enhance the educational experience. Several organizations have undertaken this work, but the focus has mainly been on implementation in the middle grades and high school classrooms. An especially contentious issue involves the five states (Florida, New Jersey, Illinois, California, and New York) where the Holocaust education mandate applies to kindergarten through grade 12. Contradictory guidelines have often confused teachers and raised concerns about the developmental appropriateness of instruction for young children.

In Search of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

When it comes to museums and memorials, there has been discussion and debate about the age appropriateness of Holocaust education. For example, the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* has recommended that instruction in the early years explore the dangers of prejudice and bias rather than the complex history of the Holocaust.¹³ Although *Yad Vashem* also considers age a critical factor in selecting Holocaust content, it suggests introducing the Holocaust to young children through the personal stories of witnesses and survivors.¹⁴ Presenting the Holocaust to children through the individual narratives of people focuses on the descriptions of daily life during the Holocaust from the perspective of a child experiencing the changing reality. This gradual exposure may create a positive learning environment that introduces a complex experience in a way that is accessible to children.

Though the museums offer resources, many teachers are still left with the challenge of teaching a complicated subject without expertise. Several Holocaust educational organizations have risen to meet this demand, but they design most of their learning materials for older students, hindering their outreach to early childhood and elementary classrooms. Provided that teachers have the right tools and resources and use developmentally appropriate language and activities, teaching about the Holocaust can be rich and engaging for children, laying the groundwork for more sophisticated understanding when students move into the middle and secondary years.

Exploring the Use of Video Testimonies in the Elementary Grades

Many elementary educators who wish to teach the Holocaust feel deterred from doing so for several reasons. First, they lack the confidence to develop a Holocaust unit, as they feel they do not have sufficient knowledge of the subject matter to teach it successfully. Second, the complexity of the subject seems overwhelming. Third, and perhaps most important, they worry whether they can present such an emotionally charged subject in a way that does justice to the topic while observing the sensitivities that must be considered in planning a lesson for young children. The focus of our research is on how the personal stories of Holocaust survivors captured in video testimony may assist effective implementation of Holocaust education in early learning and elementary school contexts. We have examined pedagogical paradigms for Holocaust education in the early years and considered the complexities involved in selecting digital testimony from Holocaust survivors for use in early childhood and elementary settings. The intended outcome of this work is to identify strategies to build connections to children's lives today and establish a foundation for a spiraling curriculum, in which young children become familiar with the personal stories of individuals in the Holocaust and get acquainted with the historical terms and context.

This project builds upon our earlier pilot research in US public elementary schools, which explored how Holocaust survivors' digital testimonies may promote participatory and student-driven learning. The research showed not only that testimonies are relevant for elementary learners but also that the impact on students was significant in many areas, including gains in understanding of prejudice and stereotypes, the role of personal responsibility, of being active citizens and standing up for others, and the value of personal stories in history. The students enjoyed hearing authentic stories and discovering diverse views on topics and issues being studied. They were also highly attentive in class discussions. However, the activity relied strongly on the novelty of the medium, which no doubt contributed to student excitement, but also had a tendency to decontextualize representation of the historical events. Students sought out additional information on their own. We noted

that the desired outcomes were achieved due to the involvement of a highly skilled teacher; however, isolating the pedagogy for diffusion throughout other educational contexts was critical if we hoped to promote the use of digital testimony as an instructional approach in the early childhood and elementary grades for fostering critical historical thinking and critical thinking about contemporary social justice issues. The specialized skills of a veteran teacher showcased the importance of planning and implementation when using oral histories and personal narratives. With a focus on critical inquiry, the teacher facilitated young learners to step into someone else's shoes for a moment and make personal connections between history and their own lives. These intergenerational contacts also featured the continuity of human life. Educators must engage their students in the methods of the historian to make learning more meaningful through processes of inquiry, asking questions, collecting and examining evidence, and reaching conclusions. Planning with scaffolded instruction, inclusion of supplementary readings and resources, and expansion of use of the technological artifacts may further enhance the guided exploration of students in the elementary grades.

The Pedagogic Frame of Social Justice through Critical Literacy

Biases begin to develop in children at a young age. Decades of research indicate that even if adults do not openly discuss intolerant beliefs, children still notice differences and prejudice. If educators choose not to teach or talk about diversity and discrimination, children's notions will go unchecked and likely become further entrenched in their minds. In fact, current research suggests that children as young as three years old, when exposed to prejudice and racism, tend to embrace and accept it even though they might not understand the feelings. So while some educators want to delay introducing Holocaust resources to young learners until they are "old enough" to consider this topic, children are already developing values and beliefs about the world around them.

The good news is that young children often care passionately about justice and injustice, although they may use words like "fairness" and "unfairness".

Moreover, young children are frequently concerned not only with perceived injustice to themselves but also with inequity to others. Bias can be unlearned or reversed if children are exposed to diversity in a positive way. Harnessing young children's desire for fairness and using it as an opening to discuss bias and discrimination is not a hard leap, but it is one that needs to be made explicitly and with instruction.

Educators need to carefully reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors as part of developing competencies in addressing challenging topics with young children. Among the barriers for adults are their own prejudices about people, limited knowledge of history, and beliefs about children's capacity to deal with complicated and persistent problems. However, by remaining open and establishing a foundation on which children can discuss and inquire about difficult issues, educators foster openness in children to confront prejudice and discrimination.

Early childhood and elementary educators believe in a basic principle that if we treat young children as if they are strong, intelligent and kind, they are more likely to thrive and succeed. The foundation for later and increasingly mature understanding is constructed in the early years (Berson et al. 2009: 31; Vasquez 2017: 2). We continually revisit topics because concept formation is never complete. This incompleteness leads children to continually want to learn more, in an attempt to expand their understanding.

In order to have a lasting effect, Holocaust education needs to fit within a social justice curriculum model that addresses themes involving diversity, equity, solidarity, advocacy, dignity, anti-discrimination and activism as counter-narratives to discrimination, conflict, and violence. Through these inquiry-based lessons students develop their social justice vocabulary, a sense of personal identity, and skills in problem identification and decision-making. For young children this involves lessons about responsibility, learning to be honest but respectful to others.

In particular, social and historical narratives offer valuable resources that may help young learners make sense of the world we live in today as they engage with the complex topics of equity and oppression. The benefits of

using testimony in the early childhood and elementary instruction include:

- Development of language, oral language comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving, expression, and listening skills
- Stimulation of students' interest in the world around them, encouraging them to pay attention to what they see and hear
- Active engagement in media literacy
- Fostering open intergenerational communication

Critical literacy plays an important part in teaching children about being reflective, moral, and active citizens in an interconnected global world. Helping students become critically aware requires teachers to integrate discussion of complex and challenging topics into instruction. The use of multiple texts is a common entry to critical literacy (Berson et al. 2017). In testimonies from survivors, students encounter the stories of those who resisted injustice. Developing critical literacy is a long-term process that begins in the early grades and continues through college. Downplaying or ignoring challenging topics in the curriculum may be common, but it is unwise, even with young learners.

Teaching Young Children Using Testimony

Early childhood and elementary educators frequently read stories to children to provide them with opportunities to enhance their communication skills, social literacy, and community engagement. Storytelling also supports young children's learning and development. Testimonies offer a form of oral history that allows children to make more direct connections between the information they are hearing and the experience of the narrator. Oral histories provide children with an opportunity to match facial, vocal, and physical expressions. This kind of listening and communication creates a level of empathy and unity around the topic.

The use of testimony in teaching about the Holocaust has long been a practice, relying on resources such as memoirs, diaries, and audio recordings. First-person accounts provide a window into the experience of those who lived the historical events in the pages of textbooks. Using oral history allows

students to become the principal investigator, extracting meaningful information that will prove relevant to their lives (Haas et al. 2015: 108).

Use of video testimony in early childhood and elementary classrooms aligns with a humanistic approach that explores the Holocaust through personal stories. In the early grades these stories sensitize children to bias, diversity, discrimination, and social justice. Although adults often avoid these complex topics with children, research affirms that first-hand accounts provide invaluable evidence for historical inquiry (Waring/Torrez 2010: 304) by offering unique insight to an event or memory through the perspective of an individual.

Introducing video testimony in the early years may take many forms. A diverse complement of strategies offers teachers the flexibility to optimize learning for young students. Research-based teaching strategies involve scaffolded instruction, activation of prior knowledge, engaging students in making predictions, teacher modeling, “think-alouds”, guided questioning to foster application of concepts and analysis, and summarization of information acquired for comparison and contrasting with other data sources (Berson/Berson 2014: 51). The introduction of video testimony should also reflect the qualities of powerful and purposeful teaching and learning that are meaningful, integrative, challenging, value-based, and active (Berson et al. 2009: 31).

Preschool and primary-age students often have difficulty understanding that their lives today are different from those of people long ago (Morgan/Rasinki 2012: 590). It can be challenging for students to understand concepts of historical time, and young learners tend to analyze information from the vantage point of their own personal experience and time frame. The past is an abstraction, and as events and people from long ago feel far removed from children’s current lives, making meaning from primary sources is a challenging task for young learners.

In the early years, the focus is on establishing a foundation for historical inquiry through scaffolded analysis of video testimonies. Young learners have limited prior knowledge of historical events, people, and time periods, so

the introduction to testimonies provides a context to help them construct a foundation for exploring events and people's experiences. In other words, the lessons are distinct from a study of the history of the Holocaust and instead highlight lessons that can be learned from people's experiences. The digital testimonies provide a human link between students today and older generations. Focused analysis may be guided by a scaffolded process that helps children to listen carefully, ask questions, and identify topics for further investigation. 16

However, not all testimonies are well suited to young learners. For testimonies to be meaningful, students must make personal connections before they can develop any historical understanding. To foster connections to self, students' prior experiences and learning need to be activated with relevant content that relates to their current lives. Analysis of the testimonies must focus on familiar representational and ideational structures, including events, objects and participants. Comparing their own lives to those of children long ago, observing changes in their communities, and listening to oral histories that feature familiar objects, images, sounds (i.e., toys, experiences in school, etc.), young learners may begin to understand the representation of distinct time periods and cultural traditions.

Connecting young learners to the past is always a challenging endeavor. Making linkages to the Holocaust adds multiple layers of complexity. Using Holocaust testimony that is carefully selected and developmentally appropriate is essential in working with primary grade learners. The selection of testimonies should highlight stories of human courage and the struggle for dignity. Stories in which the protagonist survived or testimonies featuring acts of human kindness demonstrate the existence of positive human values amid atrocities.

We describe a few examples to help illustrate the use of Holocaust testimony in teaching young children as well as pedagogic applications. The first example draws from the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies* at Yale University and uses the digital testimony of survivor Rachel G. She describes being forced to wear a star and as a result being ostracized from play by other

children. ¹⁷ By addressing the familiar content of playing with friends and exclusion in peer groups, her story has the potential to resonate with young children today. Focusing on the childhood act of play, young learners can easily make a cognitive connection to the event even though it took place long ago. Before presenting the Rachel G.'s testimony, we would read the Dr. Seuss children's story *The Sneetches* (1961). The story tells the tale of two groups of fictitious creatures, star-belly and plain-belly sneetches. They look the same with the exception of the star on the bellies of one of the groups. Both Rachel's story and *The Sneetches* look at the discrimination that exists between two groups and its effects. Although Rachel's edited testimony is 21 minutes long, we would only use the first 40 seconds:

"I was born in Brussels, Belgium, January 8 1934, and I had a very happy childhood until the Nazis came in. Everyone was wearing a star. Everybody was looking at us, of course. And when I wanted to have a good time and play with the other kids I would take off the star, and my mother would yell and scream, and she would say, 'You cannot do this. You cannot do this. You are a Jewish little girl and you must wear the star, that's what they want, that's what they want.' I remember just she telling me that, and I said, 'But the kids don't want to play with me if I wear this.'" (Interview Rachel G. 2009: TC 0:12–0:55)

After the children have listened to the story and the testimony, we would engage them in a discussion about the central messages of discrimination, guiding them in identifying examples of how social exclusion affected Rachel and the Sneetches. Through Rachel's story of long ago, children can understand that even though life changes, people continue to share some of the same emotions and feelings. Developing empathy and considering the unfairness of treatment may help young learners develop a sense of agency that they can learn from the past to inform their behaviors in the present.

Coupling testimonies with children's literature also highlights the subjects of struggle, survival, and revival. There are numerous stories of dolls and teddy bears that inspired hope and perseverance in the face of adversity during the Holocaust. *Three Dolls* ¹⁸ by Irit Abramski (2007) tells the personal

stories of Claudine and her doll, Colette, in France; Eva and her doll, Gerta, in Hungary; and Zofia and her doll, Zuzhia, in Poland. Their personal accounts present the Holocaust through the eyes of three young Jewish girls – whose dolls became their treasured companions in the face of constant danger. Over time, their dolls became more than mere toys, for the dolls helped these children cope with their ever-changing reality during the war.

We have paired *Three Dolls* with the testimony of Inge Auerbacher, who shares how she protected her doll and how the doll served as a source of comfort for her.

“My name is Inge Auerbacher, and I’m a child survivor of the Holocaust. I went into Terezín at age 7. I wanted to hold on to something from home. I mean, they took away everything when we arrived in the camp. The most important thing was to keep something from home, when things were still good, and that was my doll. She meant everything to me.” (Testimony Auerbacher 2014: TC 0:00–0:28)

Similarly, *Otto* by Tomi Ungerer (2010) is a powerful autobiography of a bear that survives the Holocaust. Paired with Sophie Turner-Zaretsky’s testimony about her teddy bear, the two resources highlight children’s treasured possessions as symbols of adversity and resilience. Sophie was hidden by a Christian family, and the teddy bear became her closest friend, her confidante and source of comfort.

“This teddy bear came with me to England. And the teddy bear ended up having ... my aunt made him a little coat. She sewed it by hand from some other piece of clothing that was being discarded. And my great-aunt, with whom we lived, used to crochet and she did a little cap. I don’t think she did it for the bear, she must have been testing some yarn or something, but anyway, it fit just on his head, so he had a hat and a coat. And he looked a little bedraggled and a little, you know, like a refugee. This is why we, we named him ‘Refugee’ because he looked a little down-and-out. Just like the rest of us.” (Testimony Turner-Zaretsky 2003: TC 0:00–0:40)

Conclusion

Teaching young children about the Holocaust through testimony means much more than detailing specific historical events. It is important not only to learn about the history of the Holocaust but also to address the broader lessons and questions it raises. Instruction of this compelling topic in American schools today plays a critical role in facilitating students' "investigation of human behavior"; fostering "an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping"; and examining what it "means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions" (Florida Department of Education 2017). Even young children may expand their thinking skills by grappling with these social justice issues. However, educators need guidance on how to help young children explore injustice within a historical and contemporary context. This article provides a starting point for exploring digital testimony as intriguing remnants of history that can support young students' active learning and intellectual curiosity. When early childhood educators introduce young children to oral narratives of survivors, they open the door to rich archives and high quality resources that may stimulate historical inquiry and critical thinking, as well as provide a foundation for more in-depth Holocaust education as learners get older. However, teachers must be intentional and purposeful in the selection of resources and pair them with other informational texts to build upon students' background knowledge and foster excitement for learning about the past. Meaningful integration of digital testimonies into teaching and learning in the early childhood and elementary classrooms may promote students' multi-literacies as they explore informational texts, but successful implementation with young learners requires research-informed and developmentally appropriate strategies.

REFERENCES

- Auerbacher, I. (2014). Preserving the Proof [Video File]. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il_nXAQavlg, accessed 7 September 2017.
- Abramski, I. (2007). *Three Dolls*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies.
- Berson, I. R., Bennett, L., & Dobson, D. (2009). Powerful and Purposeful Teaching in Elementary Social Studies. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 22(1), pp. 31–33. Co-published in *Social Education*, 73(5), pp. 252–254.
- Berson, I. R., & Berson, M. J. (2014). Developing Multiple Literacies of Young Learners with Digital Primary Sources. In W. Russell (Ed.), *Digital Social Studies*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, pp.45–60.
- Berson, I. R., Berson, M. J., Dennis, D.V., Powell, R. (2017). Leveraging Literacy: Research on Critical Reading in the Social Studies. In Manfra, M. M., Bolick, C. M. (Eds.). *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research*. Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 414–439.
- Florida Department of Education. (2017). *FS 1003.42 Required Holocaust Education Mandate Public School Instruction*. <http://www.fldoe.org/policy/task-forces-committees-commissions/task-force-on-holocaust-edu/fs-1003-42-required-holocaust-edu-mate.stml>, accessed 7 September 2017.
- G., Rachel. Edited Holocaust Testimony. 27 August 2009. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library [Video File]. HVT-8062. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrlWU0l9QmE>, accessed 7 September 2017.
- Haas, B. J., Berson, M. J., & Berson, I. R. (2015). With Their Voice: Constructing Meaning with Digital Testimony. *Social Education* 79 (2), pp. 106–109.
- Morgan, D. N., & Rasinski, T. V. (2012). The Power and Potential of Primary Sources. *The Reading Teacher* 65 (8), pp. 584–594.
- Seuss (1961). *The Sneetches and Other Stories*. New York: Random House.
- Turner-Zaretsky, S. (2003). Oral History. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections [Video File]. https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_oi.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=4992, accessed 7 September 2017.
- Ungerer, T. (2010). Otto. *The Autobiography of a Teddy Bear*. London: Phaidon.
- Vasquez, V. M. (2017). *Critical Literacy across the K-6 Curriculum*. New York: Routledge.
- Waring, S. M., Torrez, C. (2010). Using Digital Primary Sources to Teach Historical Perspective to Preservice Teachers. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 10, pp. 294–308.

1 See <http://www.naeyc.org/anti-bias-education>, <http://www.tolerance.org>, <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources>, and <http://www.receiveinternational.org>, all accessed 7 September 2017.

2 Legislative mandates in the United States are detailed in the recent proposed version of the Simon Wiesenthal Holocaust Education Assistance Act available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1474>, accessed 7 September 2017.

- 3 See <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/age-appropriateness>, accessed 7 September 2017.
- 4 See http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/learning_environments/testimony.asp, 7 September 2017.
- 5 Burnett, James H.: Racism learned, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2012/06/09/harvard-researcher-says-children-learn-racism-quickly/gWuN1ZG3M4oWihER2kAfdK/story.html>, accessed 7 September 2017.
- 6 Example analysis tools are available from the Library of Congress at http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Oral_Histories.pdf and the National Archives at https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/video_analysis_worksheet_novice.pdf.
- 7 It is stated at the beginning of the video: “The following is not intended for children under the age of twelve (...) and should be viewed with teacher support and supervision.” For the reasons given in this article we are in favor of showing the testimony’s excerpt with supervision also to young children.
- 8 *Three Dolls* is available from <http://secure.yadvashem.org/store/product.asp?productid=363>.