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Teaching about Perpetrators

An Appeal for New Approaches Based on Research in the United States

In January of 2009, the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and the Holocaust Research Centre at the Royal Holloway University of London hosted a conference in Berlin. The conference brought together thinkers from a variety of disciplinary domains in order to consider new academic research on perpetrators of atrocity. As an educational researcher whose work has focused on the Holocaust, I was invited to discuss how people teach and learn about perpetrators.

I've done research on Holocaust education in the U.S. for about 15 years, and while the kind of work I do does not enable me to make grand assessments or statistical generalizations, it does entitle me to imagine what goes on in various classrooms across the country with a small measure of certainty. And if I focus on what different groups of U.S. students were taught about perpetrators as part and parcel of their Holocaust units, a few trends emerge.

In many places, teaching about the Holocaust follows what Sam Wineburg has aptly described as a 'victim-as-curriculum' approach. In the U.S. and Israel, for example, teaching about the Holocaust centres forcefully on the experiences, conditions, and histories of victims, and typically in U.S. schools, those victims are still Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, and the nameless Schindler Jews – none of whose pedagogical vehicles, in the forms of the diary, memoir and film, give us much insight into older conceptions of perpetrators, much less into new ones. But even in schools where teachers use materials to supplement the *Diary of Anne Frank*, Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *Schindler's List*, the conceptions of perpetrators that teachers typically convey are not typically rich or nuanced. A few examples from within different types of U.S. classrooms might help to illustrate this point.

Case 1

The setting is a third grade classroom of a public elementary school (where children are about 8 years old). I have been observing this third grade public school classroom for a week, as the students have slowly entered their study of the Holocaust. Earlier in the year, these same students had learned about the genocide of American Indians, slavery and the Middle Passage, and the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The students have an exceedingly well-respected teacher at the helm; he has taught for over 25 years, is very popular in the community, and teaches about the Holocaust at the third grade because he feels it can inoculate students against racism, hatred and violence. All of the parents of the students in the class, even after the unit has ended, feel that teaching about the Holocaust to their age children was utterly appropriate. "School is not and should not be a playground," is an idea that one of the parents expressed; "A few nightmares for the right reasons are simply part of growing up."

Generally speaking, I was very impressed with this teacher for a whole variety of reasons, including his carefully scaffolded sequence of picture books, his highly inclusive range of teaching activities and the deep affection he cultivated among his students. He was without question a master teacher. He had taught about the Holocaust for a week when one of the students posed a serious question about perpetrators. The teacher was reading David Adler's (1994) book, *Hilde and Eli: Children of the Holocaust*. Recommended for grades 3-7, the book follows the experiences of two victims who end up murdered in Auschwitz. The narration is bleak, the prose is stark, and the content is starker. It was the first really 'hard content' that the children faced, and they sat

enraptured, listening to their teacher read aloud.

One girl in the class had been sitting with a creased forehead for a few minutes, when she finally blurted out a question: “Were the Nazis all mean?” This is the perfect entrée to talking about perpetrators, an authentic question that could have served as a diving board into a deep discussion. “What do you think?” the teacher might have asked. Rather than opening up discussion, though, this teacher closed it down: “The Nazis were pretty much not very nice people.” Though he was quick to add that not all Germans were Nazis, his remarks encapsulated the entirety of his teaching about perpetrators, simplifying and essentialising their all-too-human behavior. The students easily understood their teacher as implying something much harsher and much more dismissive than “not very nice.” As one of the third graders wrote about Nazis in her journal at the end of the unit, “They were very bad people I think.”

When I asked the teacher about the pedagogical choice to oversimplify the perpetrators, he told me that he thought it was developmentally appropriate to do so. The students, by virtue of their youth, tended to think in defined categories so that this explanation for perpetrator behaviour fitted comfortably into their cognitive patterns. Because this was a beginning point and not an end point in the students’ intellectual lives, he seemed to think it was a good enough choice.

Later teachers could ‘complete the picture.’ Perhaps a bit defensively, he also justified his choice on moral-symbolic grounds, asking wasn’t it more important to spend time building empathic bridges with victims than humanising perpetrators of mass murder. Why spend precious curricular time on perpetrators at all, he asked.

Case 2

Though Lubavitch Jews make up only a tiny fraction of the U.S. population, I include a brief portrait of teaching about perpetrators in an 8th

grade girls’ yeshivah because I think that the teacher’s views reflect more than the sanctions of the school in which she taught. The teacher there was state-certified to teach and not Lubavitch herself, and I think of her views as commonly held beliefs, echoing the third grade teacher’s, if grounded in a different philosophy. In this classroom, the teacher taught that the Nazis were incomprehensible. The main text she used was a survivor’s memoir entitled, *There is always a time to die*. The protagonist of the account was Jewish but not ultra-orthodox, which meant that the text was heavily censored so as not to expose the girls to inappropriate material.

The girls were reading about Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, those who were socially prominent or wealthy before the war, being shot as they stood in their nightclothes. For the girls, this reading marked their first encounter with gruesome details of death. “Were they killed because there was no room [in the ghetto]?” asked one girl, and a flurry of discussion erupted in response: “Because they were German!” one girl yelled in explanation. “Because they were Jews!” another yelled out. “Don’t say ‘because.’ There was no because,” the teacher intoned heavily, closing down the discussion. In so doing, she avowed her sense that the supplying of reasons was more than unnecessary; it was almost offensive, as if reasons implied justification rather than explanation.

Not surprisingly, the absence of explanations showed up in the students’ responses at the end of the unit. As one girl put it when asked how she explained perpetrator behavior, “I mean, this comes up all the time. Everything you hear that the Nazis did, you can just say, ‘How’ to. How could they do these things that a normal human being couldn’t bring themselves to do? I will never understand how they did what they did.” For these Lubavitch girls, such a statement of incomprehension was almost a moral requirement.

This discourse of the incomprehensible Nazis served two purposes. On the one hand, it insulated them from the possibility of being at all like perpetrators themselves, and on the other hand, it did so through a familiar

language. These girls were used to thinking about God as being inscrutable, unknowable, and beyond the human capacity for reasoning. Like God's intentions, this history was and would remain incomprehensible. In this way, actually, God's role in this history could go unquestioned. Like God's intentions, this history was simply to remain mysterious.

The starkness of the moral divide that the teacher etched reified the girls' righteousness and supported their narrow-mindedness. If in the first case – of the third grade classroom – the teacher was protecting the innocence of young children, in this case of the Lubavitch classroom, the teacher might be said to have been protecting the insularity of these adolescents' worldviews.

Case 3

As at the Lubavitch yeshivah, 8th grade was considered the right time to expose evangelical Christian students to the horrors of the Holocaust. (At approximately 13 years of age, these students would begin high school the next year.) And as at the Lubavitch yeshivah, the kids at this school learned about the Holocaust mainly through the memoir of a like-minded writer, in this case, the believing Christian, Corrie ten Boom, who authored the memoir, *The Hiding Place*.

Because this was the main text the students read, they ended up with quite a warped sense of Holocaust history. Belief figured so prominently in their own lives and in ten Boom's memoir that they considered it all-important during the Holocaust as well. The students ended up thinking, for example, that during the Holocaust, Jews were murdered on account of their beliefs. When asked how perpetrators were able to execute atrocities, one student explained it this way, "I believe the Nazis were atheists ... They didn't believe there was a God, or it was just your life, and that was it basically." In other words, to become perpetrators, people either had to be atheists or had to dismiss the possibility of an afterlife, which for this student, was a certainty that included eventual judgment. Since ten Boom was persecuted as a

fundamentalist Christian, the possibility that Nazis were Christians of any sort was ruled out for most of these Christian students.

During class one day, the teacher asked if any of the students, had they lived 'during Corrie's time,' thought that they would have hidden Jews as Corrie had. Would they have gotten "involved in standing up against the Gestapo?" 'No's' and soft laughter filled the room. When called upon to explain, the students said things like, "I'd be a good citizen," and "I'd follow the law." The teacher was clearly disturbed by these responses, and she pushed her students to clarify:

"Would you follow God's law or the Gestapo law?" she asked.

"I'd try to do both," one student answered.

"Is there any way to follow both?" another student asked.

"Do you think there is a way to follow both?" the teacher volleyed back.

"If you were schizophrenic?" answered a student, prompting giggles.

I interpret this exchange as being made possible by the constant assertion of God's control over events. The sense that God's plan was constantly in motion and that God directs history forcefully, I think, gave the students a diminished sense of moral obligation to act in their world. After all, if all events follow God's plan, regardless of what one chooses to do, why act in ways that risk one's safety? These students were simultaneously unwilling to consider becoming rescuers and unable to imagine themselves as perpetrators, since regardless of their behavioral choices, they were secure in their knowledge of being 'saved' and being headed to heaven after death.

Case 4

Public high schools in the U.S., like their elementary and middle school counterparts, are decentralized. That is, states govern content, and districts within states are also powerful. Within high schools, social studies content can vary tremendously. Teachers have great autonomy in deciding how to teach (even if state-based content

examinations have encroached on the decisions over what to teach).

I highlight this point because it's important to recognise that oddly, it may be more reliable to generalise about schools within particularist traditions (such as fundamentalist Christian schools and ultra-orthodox Jewish schools) than it is to generalise about public schools in the U.S. From region to region, state to state, track to track and classroom to classroom, very different kinds of moral lessons about the Holocaust are being taught.

With that caution in place, I'll describe, very briefly, one of the more radical pedagogical experiments I've observed, wherein a teacher enacted a long-term simulation in her class, in which the students were assigned to 'play' the parts of Jews. The teacher represented all perpetrators, a choice with many intended and unintended consequences. She dictated all the narrative action in the simulation, deciding who in the class ended up ghettoised, who got to emigrate, who had to do what in order to "survive," etc. The simulation, overall, was fascinating.

The students, mostly poor African-American kids who understood violence from their own life experiences, were utterly engaged. They showed up to class; they participated fully; they learned a tremendous amount. For the purposes of a discussion of perpetrators, however, what matters is that the students learned to identify with the victims they were role-playing only. They only engaged the idea of perpetrators as imagined victims of them, not as possible agents themselves. Like the girls at the Lubavitch school, like the third graders who weren't about to grow up to be 'bad guys,' and like the Christian students who thought that perpetration requires atheism, the implication here was that these students could never be perpetrators.

And this, of course, is one of the themes that seems to unite these very different schooling levels and types of classrooms: the conviction that as Americans, we could never do such things. The metanarrative of 'freedom and progress' that

laces through American history textbooks and buttresses our general belief in American exceptionalism also quashes the possibility of our being perpetrators. It's simply un-American.

There are exceptions to this trend. There are, of course, teachers who teach about perpetrators with grace and depth, who delve into the history of anti-Semitism and the construction of racism, who explore how people – or at least the vast majority of us – can be convinced to act immorally under the right constellation of circumstances, pressures and convictions. Most teachers teaching about the Holocaust, however, if they teach about perpetrators at all, teach only indirectly about them – and yes, usually as that, about them. It is rarely about us and our own agency, our capacities to act as perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders.

Conclusion

Like this portrait of U.S. education, I know that Israeli education, though it focuses on very different Holocaust icons, tends to be similarly perpetrator-averse. In the trips that Israeli school children and military units take to tour Poland, and in the curricula that are used in both religious and secular schools, students are positioned to identify with victims of the Holocaust only. My claim is that this needs to stop, in Israel and the U.S.A. and anywhere such teaching occurs. It behoves no one to teach generation upon generation of students that they are potential victims. In Israel, such convictions can seem to justify an unchecked militarism. In the U.S.A., much of the population doesn't even recognise militarism as such.

I do not mean to suggest of course that Holocaust education alone explains American foreign policy under ex-president George W. Bush or the Israeli war on Gaza that marked the end of his presidency. Holocaust education, under the best of circumstances, is simply not the only form of moral instruction at our disposal.

But as naïve as it may sound, I do believe in the power of education, and I can't help thinking hopefully about what Holocaust education could actually do if it were harnessed to new conceptions of perpetrators – or even simply to *human* conceptions of perpetrators – the conception of perpetrators espoused at the conference recently hosted in Berlin. Perhaps

such a shift would enable a new generation of students to challenge the national narratives that mask our culpability as perpetrators in history. In short, this new vision of Holocaust education, it seems to me, might help us remember what really matters in this world: **our own humanity.**

L'enseignement sur les auteurs de crimes Pour de nouvelles approches basées sur la recherche aux Etats-Unis

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Dans bien des cas, l'enseignement de l'Holocauste applique ce que Sam Wineburg a qualifié avec à-propos d'« approche orientée vers les victimes ». Aux Etats-Unis et en Israël, par exemple, cet enseignement est systématiquement centré sur les expériences, les conditions et l'histoire des victimes ; dans les écoles américaines, ces victimes sont traditionnellement Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel et les nombreux juifs anonymes de Schindler. Mais aucun des supports pédagogiques associés à leur histoire – journaux, mémoires ou films – ne

nous éclaire réellement sur les anciennes conceptions des auteurs de crime, et moins encore sur les nouvelles. Or, même dans les écoles où les enseignants utilisent d'autres supports pour compléter le Journal d'Anne Frank, le livre *Night* d'Elie Wiesel et le film *La Liste de Schindler*, la conception des auteurs de crimes que transmettent classiquement les enseignants n'est ni très riche ni très nuancée. Les quelques exemples donnés dans cet article, qui sont tirés de différentes écoles américaines, aident à illustrer ce point.

Unterricht über Täter Ein Aufruf zu neuen Ansätzen aufgrund der Forschung in den Vereinigten Staaten

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Vielorts folgt der Unterricht über den Holocaust dem Prinzip, das Sam Wineburg zutreffend als Ansatz mit ‚dem Opfer als Lehrplan‘ beschrieben hat. In den USA und in Israel konzentriert sich beispielsweise der Holocaust-Unterricht nachdrücklich auf die Erfahrungen, Lage und Geschichten von Opfern, und in US-amerikanischen Schulen sind diese Opfer weiter Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel und die namenlosen Schindler-Juden, und keines dieser pädagogischen Werkzeuge – in Form von Tagebuch, Erinnerungen und Film – vermittelt

uns viele Einsichten in ältere oder gar die neuen Täterkonzeptionen. Aber selbst in Schulen, in denen Lehrer als Ergänzung zum „Tagebuch der Anne Frank“, Elie Wiesel's *Die Nacht* und „Schindler's Liste“ andere Materialien einsetzen, sind die von ihnen vermittelten typischen Tätervorstellungen normalerweise nicht facettenreich oder nuanciert. Einige wenige Beispiele aus verschiedenen US-Schulen können vielleicht als Illustration für diesen Punkt dienen.