

Research Article

The Role of Children's Literature in Teaching the Holocaust and Intergenerational Trauma

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of children's literature in teaching about the Holocaust and intergenerational trauma. We explore the role of children's literature in transmitting and preserving the memories of the Holocaust. We also discuss Adorno's essay titled "Never Again: Education after Auschwitz" and the ways he viewed early childhood education as the ideal stage for the type of education essential to address antisemitism. We then discuss the resources provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for selecting appropriate Holocaust literature. We also explore the educational challenge of teaching about the Holocaust to preserve its memory. We conclude by showing how historical fiction is one of the many resources for teaching about difficult or sensitive topics to guard against genocide, trauma, and the Holocaust.

Keywords: children's literature; education; Holocaust; intergenerational memory; trauma

1. Introduction

Literature plays a crucial role in transmitting and preserving intergenerational memory (Darr 2012; Lieber 2005). Researchers view children's literature as inherently intergenerational primarily because most writers are older people chronicling their Holocaust experiences for younger readers (Mateusz and Dorota 2022). Teaching about the Holocaust to young people is seen as a way of fostering a spirit of hope and resilience as well as minimizing the occurrences of genocide and holocausts (Dixon and Christopher et al. 2024; Haffejee 2015). However, scholars also agree that literature is one of the ways for capturing collective memory (Goldstein 2013; Rapport and Graham 2010).

The complexities of teaching Holocaust literature are compounded by the seemingly limitless resources (Moses 2011; Bilewicz 2016). However, teachers must select resources that are historically accurate, developmentally appropriate, and support students' balanced understanding of the Holocaust (Buchanan 2006; Koss and Kathleen 2023). Classroom teachers often use fictional literature in Holocaust instruction, as its imaginative nature can deepen students' understanding of historical events (Shin 2018; Gorrara 2018). However, within the context of the Holocaust, fictional literature must move beyond being potentially "based on a true story" to being rigorously vetted for its historical accuracy and portrayal of the Holocaust, which contributes to students' understanding of one of the most pivotal moments in world history (Cronin 2008; Chakarapoulis 2022; Jailant 2010).

This article begins with an overview of the issue's background and context, followed by a literature review and a synopsis of the theoretical framework and the study's method. A section on key findings precedes the conclusion. This study applies the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's (USHMM) "Teacher Tool: Rubric for Evaluating Resources" to evaluate some of the most popular fictional Holocaust children's literature for grades K-12. Implications are provided to assist teachers in selecting high-quality, accurate, and appropriate fictional literature and in positioning it in Holocaust teaching.

2. Background and Context

After the Second World War, there was a conscious awareness of teaching about the causes of the Holocaust and its impact on the human community (Adorno 2005; Arendt 2009). For Adorno and other scholars, early childhood education was an ideal setting for creating conditions that would minimize the recurrence of events like Auschwitz. The growth of antisemitism in the Global North at the beginning of the twenty-first century led to renewed calls for Holocaust education (Gross 2017; Manca 2024). In the United States, this led to the Never Again Act, a legislation that showed the country's commitment to addressing antisemitism and the Holocaust in educational contexts.

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Many educators and educational institutions face the challenge of determining which instructional materials are appropriate and how to teach about the Holocaust (Alba 2020; Polgar 2018). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides educators with resources and guidance for teaching about the Holocaust (Manca 2021; Timpe 2022). In addition, the USHMM regularly hosts seminars and workshops for educators from across the world. This positions the Museum better to understand developments in Holocaust education from a global perspective.

Worldwide, there is a growing manifestation of hate crimes, conspiracy theories, and rampant Holocaust denial and distortion, further substantiating the need for educational institutions to focus on the rise in antisemitism in the United States (U.S.) and abroad (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] & Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2018, p. 3). Antisemitism is one symptom of a world plagued by divisive, extremist beliefs of group identity in which sameness is equal to safety that is protected by violent intolerance of groups deemed to be inferior. The U.S. is one of many nations suffering the effects of antisemitic attitudes and violence (Blout 2024; Ledehenler 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching about the Holocaust to Children

Literature, as it were, becomes a way to teach not only about the Holocaust but also to impart values (Chakarapoulis 2022; Sarog 201). Drawing on the disciplines of literature, psychology, and philosophy, Adorno observed that “education seeking to prevent the repetition (of Auschwitz) must concentrate on early childhood” (2005, p. 193). Adorno contended that personalities are formed in early childhood. As such, teaching about the Holocaust might have a bearing on shaping children’s personalities. Researchers view Holocaust literature as impacting children’s social psychology (Bonacorsi 2019; Driel 2017). Adorno was a connoisseur of the arts in general, including literature and music (Coker 2023; Nester 2024). Indeed, members of the Frankfurt School were familiar with some of the most well-known writers of the day, including Samuel Beckett (Sabouri and Firouzeh et al.; Cotroneo 2021).

Teaching about the Holocaust poses several challenges (Brugar et al., 2019; Sacerdoti 2016). However, the curriculum and pedagogical applications of Holocaust literature are rarely unquestionable (Cronin 2008; Karn 2012; Bonacorsi 2019). Several bodies, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), oversee Holocaust education (Carrier and Fuchs et al. 2015; Kyriaki, 2021). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides guidelines for children’s literature and resources for educators and the general public.

2.2 Adorno and (Never Again: Education After Auschwitz)

‘Never Again: Education after Auschwitz’ is considered one of Adorno’s critical examinations and analyses of the role played by the German educational system in creating conditions that led to the Holocaust. According to Adorno, a study of education during the Third Reich would make it possible for Germans to know the symptoms that ultimately led to the Holocaust (Catlin 2023; Ferrari 2024). For Adorno, what was problematic about German education, especially after the Nuremberg laws, was its intentional antisemitism (Blanchard 2026; Fisher 2023). It was within the educational system that the image of the Jew as unfit for living and getting the same education as German students was nurtured and codified into law (Catlin 2023, Ferrari, 2024).

After witnessing the magnitude of the Holocaust, Adorno called for a philosophy and practice of education that would prevent anything like the Holocaust from ever occurring again. The ideal place for such an education was in early childhood. Adorno observed that “education seeking to prevent the repetition must concentrate upon early childhood” (Adorno 2005). While Adorno stressed the importance of introducing antisemitic education in early childhood, he also highlighted its importance to the general public and cultural institutions.

2.3 Museums as a Source of Holocaust Educational Resource Material

Worldwide, Holocaust Museums provide educational resources for students and people interested in learning about the Holocaust (Manca and Martin et al. 2022; Wussow 2024). Holocaust Museums can be found across Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In the United States, one of the most well-known is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Never Again Education Reauthorization Act of 2023 delegated to the USHMM the task of developing Holocaust educational materials for use in primary and secondary schools in the USA.

In whichever geographical region they are located, Holocaust Museums exist as witnesses to the historical occurrence of the Holocaust, and thereby counter efforts to deny or distort the Holocaust (Stiassny 2022). In numerous instances, such museums are the result of coordinated efforts among philanthropists, government agencies, and educational institutions (Ambrosewicz 2018).

Some Holocaust museums have preserved digital archives or recordings of interviews with survivors, while others have actual footage of the concentration camps (Kingsland, 2024; Radonic, 2021; Reading 2003). Because museums are public spaces, they also provide opportunities for all people to learn about the Holocaust and virtual or digital interaction with the testimonies of the survivors. Although operating independently, most Holocaust museums adhere to international standards (Manca, 2021; Palikidis 2026). Holocaust museum standards have existed for a long time and have been updated to reflect safeguards for the digital generation in the age of artificial intelligence (Guetta 2021; Sofokleous 2021). The virtual world and other forms of Holocaust material, like literature and movies, are good sources of information about the Holocaust (Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2023).

2.4 Using Historical Fiction to Teach about the Holocaust

There are several advantages in using historical fiction (Shin 2018; Tegmark 2012; Classen and Wulf 2009). Such fiction captures events that are culturally and historically important. Oftentimes, they tug at public memory and preserve unique words and languages (Tegmark 2012). Shoah, for example, conveys the Holocaust in a singularly unique way (Winter 2007). In so doing, historical fiction also invites the reader to engage with the uses of memory. In many ways, historical fiction shows that cultural memory can straddle history and fiction (Casanova 2008; Baer and Natan 2015).

Historical fiction is any work of “realistic fiction set in a time remote enough from the present to be considered history” (Short et al., 2018). Historical content, especially nonfiction, can present factual information in ways that are irrelevant, unbelievable, or

uninteresting to students (Short et al. 2018). Conversely, works of historical fiction capitalize on students' inherent interest in fiction as a vehicle for storytelling that helps them make sense of historical content (Dwyer and Martin-Chang 2023; Short et al. 2018). The nature of historical fiction enables storytelling elements to make historical content more palatable and developmentally appropriate for students. The use of characters, settings, and events, all of which are historically derived, can help students build historical background knowledge (Short et al. 2018). By reflecting on the experiences of characters and connecting them to their own lives, students can analyze the impact of historical context while deepening their knowledge of historical events, people, and places.

In the United States K-12 institutions, the use of historical fiction in instruction is a natural way to address both ELA (English Language Arts) and social studies standards, with the potential to increase student learning in both content areas (LaCrix et al. 2024). However, teachers need to consider how historical content has been dramatized critically. Teachers have a responsibility to ensure they balance students' interest in fictional texts with the development of an accurate, comprehensive understanding of historical content (Tarratt et al., 2017). This responsibility for teachers to balance creativity with accuracy is perhaps the greatest when using historical fiction in Holocaust instruction.

2.5 The State of Holocaust Education in the United States

Partly due to the resurgence of antisemitism and Holocaust denial, the United States passed the Never Again Education Act in 2020 and reauthorized it in 2023. The legislation gave the USHMM the mandate to provide resources for Holocaust education. The legislation's wording closely resembles the title of Adorno's essay on education after Auschwitz. Adorno consistently argued that education's preeminent role should be to combat the development of attitudes and mechanisms favorable to fascism, with the goal of all teaching being to ensure "that Auschwitz not happen again" (Adorno 2005).

Antisemitism, as with other forms of hatred and discrimination, undermines efforts for international peace and creates the "toxic climate needed for extremism, terrorism, and criminality to thrive" (UNESCO and OSCE 2018). Like Adorno, historians, educators, politicians, and policymakers alike have called on education as one avenue for addressing antisemitism in the U.S. and abroad (The White House 2023). Holocaust education has been federally mandated in the U.S. (Public Law 2020). However, less than half of U.S. states have adopted explicit Holocaust education standards, meaning students in over half of the U.S. are not mandated to receive Holocaust education beyond the few days it is covered in their social studies courses. At best, antisemitism, prejudice, and distortion of the Holocaust are being studied in less than half of U.S. schools (Brittingham, 2019).

Further, there are significant challenges faced in implementing the Holocaust curriculum. Many states provide teachers only with links to resources, not specific curricula, resulting in inconsistent Holocaust education nationwide. Holocaust education is primarily left to the choices of classroom teachers who are tasked with following "suggested" guidelines and selecting from a series of recommended resources. This results in teachers' rationales, not state or national standards, determining how the Holocaust is taught to students. This article explores the sociopolitical justifications for teaching the Holocaust, current pedagogical approaches and challenges to Holocaust education, and recommendations for the pedagogical and empirical future of Holocaust education.

3. Methods

This paper used a textbook analysis to examine a selection of children's literature recommended by the USHMM. Children's literature has often been used to study Holocaust education and intergenerational memory (Giambastiani 2020; Krasny 2012). Textbook analysis is a method used in many content areas, including the Holocaust (Ailincal 2020; Cauvin 2021). Scholars contend that writing and teaching about the Holocaust present several challenges, especially if the subject may revive trauma (Goldstein 2013; Jablon 2004). At the same time, other scholars welcome the liberties that writers can take in narrating the Holocaust if what is narrated can be found in representative literature.

Table 1. Children's books used as data for this study

Title	Author	Publication Date	Lexile Level	Grade Equivalent
The Cats in Krasinski Square	Karen Hesse	2004	AD 930L	4/5
Number the Stars	Lois Lory	1988	670L	3/4
Benno and the Night of Broken Glass	Meg Wiviott	2010	AD	3
The Doll with the Yellow Star	Yona Zeldis McDonough	2003	830L	4/5
The Yellow Star: The Legend of the King	Carmen Agra Deedy	2000	AD780L	4/5
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas	John Boyne	2007	1010HL	5/6/7/8
The Book Thief	Markus Zusak	2006	730L	3/4/5
Catherine's War	Julia Billet	2020	AD	4/5/6/7/8
The Librarian of Auschwitz	Antonio Iturbe	2017	940HL	6/7/8
Anna and the Swallow Man	Garviel Savit	2016	1160HL	11/12
Schindler's List	Thomas Keneally	1982	1150HL	11/12
One Yellow Daffodil: A Hanukkah Story	David A Adler	1995	600L	3/4
Lauren Yanofsky Hates the Holocaust	Leanne Lieberman	2013	740L	3/4
The Jewish Dog	Asher Kravitz	2015	HL800L	4/5

Lexile Code Meaning

AD	Adult Directed (better read aloud than independently)
NC	Non-Conforming (age-appropriate content good for high ability readers)

HL

High-Low (content to engage older students with lower-level reading)

4. Key Findings

4.1 Literature and Education as tools for combating Antisemitism in the United States

The U.S. continues to experience unprecedented rises in antisemitism. The highest level of antisemitic violence in U.S. history was reached in 2022 (Center for Antisemitism Research 2023), with a documented 36% increase in antisemitic violence, up from 2,717 incidents to 3,697 incidents (Center on Extremism 2023). This rise in antisemitic violence was accompanied by an increase in white supremacist activity and propaganda, which increased in communities, college campuses, and K-12 schools (Center on Extremism 2023). Further, it was determined that 85% of Americans believe at least one anti-Jewish trope, up from 61% in 2019, and 21% of Americans believe six or more tropes, up from 11% in 2019 (Center for Antisemitism Research 2023). Young adults ages 18-30 are documented to hold more antisemitic attitudes than older generations, indicating antisemitic attitudes and violence are increasing with younger generations, as is Holocaust denial and distortion (Center for Antisemitism Research 2023).

4.2 Holocaust Education Standards and The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

As with many other nations, including Germany (Vitale and Rebecca 2019), the U.S. has passed national mandates requiring Holocaust education, and some states have adopted their own standards to specify in-depth Holocaust instruction further. In May 2020, Congress passed the (Never Again Education Act 2020) that committed the U.S. to utilizing education to combat anti-democratic ideals and preserve the memory of the Holocaust. It also authorized the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to develop curricular resources and professional development for teachers in Holocaust education, thereby making the USHMM the preeminent center for Holocaust education research in the U.S. (Never Again Education Act 2020; The White House 2023). More recently, in May 2023, the White House published “The U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism” (2023), the Biden administration’s four-pillar approach with strategic goals to combat antisemitic beliefs and violence. Pillars 1 and 3 relate to countering antisemitism in K-12 schools. Pillar 1 was created in response to the appalling lack of Holocaust knowledge among Americans, calling on K-12 schools to address this deficit by increasing instruction on the Holocaust, its antisemitic foundations, and Jewish-American heritage in the U.S. Pillar 3 addresses the presence of antisemitic discrimination in K-12 schools and college campuses. Taken together, the goal of national initiatives such as these is to utilize instruction on the Holocaust as a historical event to emphasize the past and present landscape of discrimination and encourage “upstander” rather than “bystander” behavior (Katz 2022; UNESCO 2018).

In addition to national mandates, many individual states have recognized the need to leverage Holocaust education as a tool in combating prejudice and the violence that often accompanies it (UNESCO 2018). Many states inherently mandate instruction on the Holocaust through their social studies courses, World and U.S. History (The White House, 2023). Adopting explicit Holocaust education state standards allows states to specify the nature of Holocaust education further to help make students resistant to extremist ideology by building critical thinking skills, democratic ideals, and national and international awareness of the manifestations of prejudice (UNESCO 2018). The USHMM reports that 23 states have taken additional steps to pass explicit Holocaust education standards: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023b).

While it is encouraging that 23 states have adopted explicit Holocaust education standards, it is equally discouraging that the majority of U.S. states do not mandate such instruction. In the remaining 27 states, the instruction students receive on the Holocaust may be limited to merely a few days of instruction on the Holocaust as a historical event, potentially occurring only three to four times throughout their entire K-12 education. Thus, the majority of U.S. students may not receive instruction that fosters critical and reflective thinking on the causes and effects of the Holocaust in the past and into the modern era. Our nation, in turn, often relies on teachers whose personal convictions led them to teach the Holocaust in ways that go beyond their state’s social studies standards.

Researchers in Quebec began to question the motivations of teachers who choose to teach the Holocaust when their curriculum or standards do not mandate it, as well as the pedagogical methods and curricular materials utilized (Moisan and Sivane et al. 2015). The instruction of these teachers was often still limited to the Nazi’s role in the Holocaust. It did not help develop students’ analytical understanding of antisemitism, genocide, scapegoating, etc., or how genocides and discriminatory ideology continue to manifest as violence today. Their “textbook approach” (p. 263) often consisted of a few activities and note-taking that did not lead to deep historical thinking. Unfortunately, similar instruction is likely the reality of Holocaust education in the U.S. in states without, or even with, Holocaust education standards. The challenge of the Holocaust education curriculum is multifaceted and filled with different beliefs as to what and how the Holocaust should be taught. States’ failure to endorse and provide specific curriculum and professional development on Holocaust education makes such instruction primarily subject to teachers’ personal and pedagogical beliefs about Holocaust education, creating a disunified state of Holocaust education in the U.S.

4.3. The Nature of Holocaust Education Curriculum

The Holocaust is a topic often covered at various points throughout secondary schools (6th-12th grade) in the social studies curriculum, making textbooks one of the main avenues through which students learn about the Holocaust (Bromley and Susan 2010; Lindquist 2009). Holocaust coverage in textbooks has gradually shifted from presenting the Holocaust as simply a historical event to a violation of human rights in the modern world (Bromley and Susan 2010). However, although addressed in social studies textbooks, none of the major textbook publishers (e.g., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Pearson, Holt McDougal, Glencoe, McGraw-Hill, Scholastic, etc.) produces a stand-alone Holocaust textbook for use in K-12 Holocaust studies courses or to meet K-12 Holocaust education mandates. Subsequently, teachers and school districts must either use materials (e.g., books) intended for more adult audiences, which is potentially problematic due to the advanced nature of adult material (USHMM, 2023a), or create Holocaust instruction that is a patchwork of different resources.

Many states lean on Holocaust institutions for curricular resources in teaching the Holocaust, such as the (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a), (Museum of Jewish Heritage 2023), (Echoes and Reflections 2023), and (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2022). Most states and districts, rather than providing specific Holocaust education curricula, endorse the use of the USHMM resources and guidelines (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a), leaving teachers to essentially pick and choose what resources they would like to use to meet their state's Holocaust education standards or, in the absence of such standards, to teach the specific aspects of the Holocaust (Stevic, 2014).

4.4. Approaches to Holocaust Education

(Moisan and Sivane et al. 2015) proposed four main approaches to Holocaust curriculum and instruction: the historical approach, the ethical approach, the human rights approach, and the intercultural/antiracist approach. The historical approach emphasizes teaching the context, causes, effects, and events in the Holocaust to help students understand the “how” and “why” of the Holocaust (p. 251). The ethical approach emphasizes critical reflection on the Holocaust's values and ethical issues (e.g., tolerance, freedom, justice; p. 251). The human rights approach leverages some of these ethical values while giving an increased focus to viewing the Holocaust as a genocide and analyzing the human rights violations that occurred. Finally, the intercultural/antiracist approach centers on viewing the Holocaust as a violent manifestation of racist ideology and helping students develop an awareness of how the mechanisms of racism may manifest in modern society. These four approaches are not mutually exclusive, and Holocaust education can include multiple approaches (Flennegard, 2021). Holocaust education would be enriched by utilizing all four approaches to ensure comprehensive Holocaust instruction.

In addition to these approaches to Holocaust education, it is also associated with movements to promote civic education and encourage democratic participation among K-12 students (Achilles and Hannah 2021; Bowen and Brian 2020; Katz 2022; Lee and Molly 2021). The intent of associating Holocaust education with civic education is to help students develop empathy, acceptance, and respect for diversity as they learn about the Holocaust and from the Holocaust (Cowan and Henry 2017; Katz 2022). While Holocaust education may be a predictor of citizenship values, upstander behavior, and support for civil liberties and human rights (Bowen and Brian 2020; Lee and Molly 2021), Holocaust education may have no impact on students' empathy, tolerance, or civic attitudes and may decrease religious tolerance (Bowen and Brian 2020; Lee and Molly 2021). These conflicting implications may be a function of the misconception that merely teaching students about the Holocaust as an event equates with developing the moral and prosocial values needed to combat prejudice (Suisa 2016; Totten and Karen 2005). Thus, the pedagogical and curricular decisions made throughout Holocaust education may have the potential to create critical, transformative learning experiences or to reinforce and perpetuate prejudiced thinking.

4.5. Pedagogical Choices in Holocaust Education

It is difficult to find commonalities in the pedagogical choices made in teaching the Holocaust, given the differing standards and perspectives assumed in each classroom, U.S. state, and nation. Regardless of the approach taken, Holocaust education is conceptualized primarily as transformative education and authentic pedagogy (Aalai 2020; Achilles and Hannah 2021; Totten and Karen 2005). Within the context of Holocaust education, transformative, authentic pedagogy prompts students to engage in critical reflection that changes their worldview as they develop a deeper understanding of how the Holocaust parallels discrimination and oppression in the modern day (Aalai 2020; Achilles and Hannah 2021). Transformative teaching of the Holocaust requires a balanced combination of teaching historical content to help students make sense of the contextual factors that allowed the Holocaust to occur, as well as creating a psychologically safe space for students to reflect on the emotional aspects of learning about the Holocaust and persistent antisemitism (Kempner 2023; Totten and Karen 2005). Textbook readings, document readings, images, movies, videos, and survivor testimonies are often found in Holocaust instruction (Gouws 2019; Lindquist 2006; Moisan and Sivane et al. 2015; Suisa 2016; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a). However, Holocaust education is entering a new era in which providing students with opportunities to meet survivors in person is becoming more difficult (Marcus and Rotem et al. 2022). The world is shifting from live to virtual survivor testimonies, changing the nature of instruction. Survivor testimonies have long been regarded as a way to make the Holocaust “real” for students (Marcus and Rotem et al. 2022) and make the “unthinkable thinkable” (Suisa 2016). K-12 schools and Holocaust institutions must adapt and ensure comparable levels of engagement, interaction, and impact when using virtual survivor testimonies (Marcus and Rotem et al. 2022; Sorin and Ute 2017). Likewise, the tense sociopolitical climate in the U.S. and abroad, which is riddled with issues of democracy, justice, and power, shapes perceptions of politics and influences how states, districts, and teachers choose to teach the Holocaust to K-12 students.

Many of the challenges of the Holocaust education curriculum lie in the complexities of confronting the magnitude and severity of the Holocaust as a whole (Gray 2023, Hyer 2007). Holocaust education is not a mere learning of facts; it is an emotional experience of coming to terms with the atrocities humankind is capable of (Gray 2023; Sorin and Ute et al. 2017; Kempner 2023). Teachers must be prepared to address the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and ethical aspects of Holocaust education, ranging from navigating feelings of empathy to appropriately addressing stereotypical and antisemitic comments (Kempner 2023; Zembylas and Loizos et al. 2020). There is also an overarching risk of oversimplification and sentimentalization of the Holocaust that is present in all curricular decisions made (Zembylas and Loizos et al. 2020). This challenge requires great detail to create a Holocaust curriculum that builds higher-level content knowledge and critical thinking while addressing misconceptions and prejudiced thinking (Gray 2023). Further, considering the increasing presence of Holocaust denial and distortion, the Holocaust must be accurately depicted in textbooks and curricular material, and teachers must be mindful of the varied ways the Holocaust is conceptualized by resources (Lindquist 2009).

Holocaust institutions, such as the (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a) and (UNESCO 2018), have outlined clear guidelines for addressing challenges in Holocaust instruction, such as contextualizing the event, avoiding simple answers, and clearly defining the Holocaust. These guidelines help analyze the challenges of Holocaust education and assist teachers in assessing the value of specific learning experiences in developing students' critical understanding of the Holocaust (Totten and Karen 2005). For example, teachers are implored to avoid using simulations and role-playing activities to help students understand the pain and

suffering experienced by victims, as these activities are often inappropriate (Totten and Karen 2005; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a). Fictional texts and dramatic films, such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, should be avoided in favor of more authentic documents that expand beyond *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Lindquist 2006; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a). Crossword puzzles, word finds, creating models of concentration camps, and excessively graphic images are also discouraged as learning activities frequently used in Holocaust instruction (Lindquist 2006; Totten and Karen 2005; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a). Moreover, conversations on the incomprehensible statistics of the Holocaust should be personalized with testimonies to ensure students do not lose sight of the personal experiences behind the statistics (Gouws 2019; Lindquist 2006; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023a).

A substantial challenge in reducing teachers' use of questionable, inappropriate learning activities is that many curriculum guides provided to teachers include such resources. Further, if teachers are not provided with Holocaust resources and guidelines from their state or district, they may engage students in many of these problematic activities without realizing they are doing a disservice to the Holocaust and their students (Totten and Karen 2005). The presence of great teacher autonomy in teaching the Holocaust is promising in that teachers can be provided with guidelines and resources to teach the Holocaust appropriately. However, the quality of Holocaust education hinges on the teacher's ability to make appropriate pedagogical and curricular decisions.

4.6 Teacher Rationale: The Biggest Challenge?

The underlying concern in all these curricular challenges is that much of Holocaust education lies in teachers' choices and rationales, not in state- or nationally mandated instruction (Firmansyah 2021; Novis-Deutsch 2024). That is, the lack of a specific Holocaust education curriculum, standards, and professional development leads teachers and their rationale for teaching the Holocaust to be the primary factor in determining what is and is not taught. Simply endorsing the use of resources (e.g., by the USHMM) provides teachers with various curricular materials to choose from, which may or may not align with state Holocaust education standards. However, teachers who possess biases themselves may intentionally or unintentionally select materials that support their own perceptions of the Holocaust (Bilewicz and Marta et al. 2017; Carrier 2012). Likewise, teachers with misconceptions or a lack of knowledge of the Holocaust may not be well-informed in selecting the curricular materials needed to support critical, transformative learning in students. They may be unable to "weigh the value of using certain pedagogical strategies and activities" (Totten and Karen 2005). This is further compounded by the lack of Holocaust education standards in 27 states whose teachers are only guided by lofty national mandates for Holocaust education (Never Again Education Act 2020; The White House 2023) and whose states and districts do not provide them with Holocaust education resources. Thus, the presence of great teacher autonomy in teaching the Holocaust is a double-edged sword with the potential to combat or support the increasing rates of antisemitism, Holocaust denial, and distortion in the U.S.

4.7 The Challenge of Intergenerational Memory

For survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants, the Holocaust became a historical and life-changing event that marked many generations. Those who study critical theory observe that there have been at least three generations of the Frankfurt School, each committed to examining the causes and impact of the Holocaust (Honneth 2009; Jay 1996). Members of the Frankfurt School dispersed worldwide and often created institutions dedicated to the study of the Holocaust. Their recollections of the Holocaust were from different regions of the world and different cultural contexts. Many of them worked in educational institutions, and their research focused on the Holocaust and antisemitism (Fromm 1990; Wallyraven, 2014).

For others who were not necessarily academics by profession, there were other means of transmitting Holocaust memories from one generation to the other (Hale, 2020; Teo, 2015). Holocaust fiction became a new genre and rapidly expanded beyond Europe and North America, especially as survivors found refuge in different parts of the world, including Africa and South America (Schloss 2023).

4.8 Multiple Sources for preserving and transmitting Holocaust Memory

There are several ways to preserve and transmit intergenerational Holocaust memory, most of which involve some form of narration. Each form strives to retain the presence and reality of the trauma experienced by Jews (Wansink and Sanne 2018; Kuchta 2025). In addition to historical fiction, other sources include museums (Kuchta 2025), and movies (Baron 2023; Kubiszyn 2023).

Each source of transmitting and preserving Holocaust memory has its advantages and disadvantages. However, the key issue is that each source tries to capture the Holocaust experience. The depiction of the Holocaust in movies and literature is unlikely to generate consensus, hence the need to utilize multiple sources, including, when possible, Holocaust survivors. Although initially limited to North America and Europe, Holocaust literature and memorials are now global. Other possible sources for studying or learning about the Holocaust include Holocaust Remembrance events and theater dramatizations (Chew 2009; Smette 2019).

4.9 Future Directions

Directions for the future of Holocaust curriculum must account for the pedagogical and empirical components of Holocaust education. Aside from the USHMM resources, the lack of Holocaust curriculum materials governmentally endorsed and created specifically for K-12 students, as well as the overwhelming lack of such resources being consistently provided to teachers, is the most substantial need in the field of Holocaust education (Marcus et al, 2022). It is advisable to create a comprehensive, stand-alone Holocaust curriculum for K-12 grades that accurately teaches the Holocaust (Lindquist 2009) and is developmentally appropriate and aligned with state Holocaust education standards (where adopted). Regardless of the provision of the Holocaust education curriculum and the presence of state Holocaust education standards, all teachers need consistent, explicit professional development on Holocaust education, such as by the USHMM, since it is endorsed by national mandates (The Never Again Education Reauthorization Act 2023). Doing so will ensure teachers are trained to select and implement the learning experiences, pedagogy, and curriculum needed to help students attain a critical, reflective understanding of the Holocaust (Aalai 2020).

5. Conclusion

For survivors of the Holocaust, there was a strong belief that education had the potential to combat and eliminate antisemitism and the conditions that led to the Holocaust. While Adorno stressed the importance of early childhood as the ideal stage for teaching children about tolerance, he also highlighted the need for general cultural awareness of symptoms that might lead to a recurrence of the Holocaust. Research indicates that antisemitism and Holocaust denial continue to grow in highly literate and technologically advanced societies in the Global North (Goossen 2021; Lange and Kerstin 2021).

The post-World War II era has committed to ensuring the atrocities of the Holocaust never occur again, yet worldwide, there is an increase in division and violence based on prejudiced beliefs (Marom 2026; Simonsen 2019). Much like Germany, the U.S. has its history of racial injustice that shaped and continues to shape “who is alive today, and who is not; who is in power today, and who is not; whose concerns matter, and whose do not” (Achilles and Hannah 2021). The future of democracy, freedom, and global stability will be determined by the choices of future generations (Achilles and Hannah 2021). There has never been a greater need for educational institutions to commit to Holocaust education as a way to combat prejudice, extremist beliefs, and violence (The White House 2023).

All people, including teachers, are uniquely positioned to influence the hearts and minds of students worldwide by leveraging Holocaust education as a standardized approach to shaping students into responsible citizens of their nations and the world (UNESCO 2018). However, the inconsistencies between Holocaust education standards and the Holocaust curriculum might have contributed to a disunified state of Holocaust education. This is further compounded by the potentially problematic autonomy given to the rationales of teachers in implementing Holocaust instruction, especially in places where minimal Holocaust curricular resources are provided. If Nazi education and the Nuremberg educational decrees were instrumental to the conditions that led to the Holocaust, perhaps education-halbbildung can also lead to a cure (Abengana 2017; Bellman 2017; Veri, 2018). Historical evidence indicates that it is easier to educate and legislate toward hatred and destruction as opposed to love and community building. Although they attributed the rise of antisemitism and the Holocaust to the German educational system, members of the Frankfurt School did not abandon hope in the transformative and redemptive potential of education. A commitment to implementing accurate, critical, transformative Holocaust education has the potential to ensure that Never Again remains a universal categorical praxis.

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