“Good things came out of it.”

The Implications of Choosing a Pedagogy of Redemption Rather than of Emancipation in Teaching the Holocaust to Marginalized Students

**Abstract**

This study explores issues related to teaching the Holocaust to students who are marginalized due to race or ethnicity. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers to examine their educational choices when teaching such students who are frequently subject to prejudice and discrimination. It was found that teachers react to their students’ experiences of marginalization by acknowledging their pain while nonetheless obscuring its political implications. These teachers mobilize teaching the Holocaust to reinforce the ethos of personal choice, redemption and equality underpinning the American dream. Seeking to offer hope to their disenfranchised students, these educators present their students with a Holocaust narrative of redemption and triumph. Based on this study, we recommend that the full complexities of the Holocaust’s narratives and persecution should be taught and its injustices recognized in order to mobilize social change. It is suggested that the prevalent pedagogy of redemption in Holocaust studies be replaced with one of emancipation, particularly when teaching marginalized students.

Keywords: teacher attitudes; Holocaust education; student diversity; multicultural education; pedagogical strategies.

# Introduction

Researchers of Holocaust memory in North America in the late 20th and early 21st centuries coined the phrase the ‘Americanization of the Holocaust’ to refer to the ways in which Holocaust narratives have been shaped to conform to dominant tropes in American culture (Schweber, 2004, p. 153). This process has been identified in literature (Graver, 1995; Rosenfeld A. , 2011), in memorial sites (Novick, 1999), and in the media (Mintz, 2001). It has been critiqued as leading to ‘banalization,’ ‘trivialization,’ ‘instrumentalization,’ and even ‘Disneyfication’ of the Holocaust (Finkelstein, 2000; Flanzbaum, 1999; Novick, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1997). However, others have defended this process of drawing lessons relevant to the American experience from the Holocaust, contending that it was necessary for making the Holocaust relevant to diverse audiences (Levy & Sznaider, 2002), and arguing that it is “an honourable task provided that the story told is faithful to the historical event.” (Berenbaum, 1990, p. 20)

 A central venue for this process of Americanizing Holocaust narratives is the educational arena, which has an entire field devoted to Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust (TLH). The Americanization of Holocaust narratives has an influence on important decisions about the curriculum for Holocaust teaching, such as which groups of victims are highlighted, or to what degree the United States is portrayed as responsible for refusing entrance to refugees. Curricular considerations both shape and are shaped by collective memory, thus rendering the teaching of the past a political act (Harris & Clarke, 2011). Americanization of the Holocaust guides pedagogical choices as well. For example, American teachers downplay the atrocities of the Holocaust, focusing instead on the positive power of the individual (Bromley & Gamett Russell, 2015; Samuels, 2007; Schweber, 2008). This approach corresponds to two quintessential American tendencies of “sugar-coating… of gruesome subject matter” (Flanzbaum, 1999, p. 92) and placing “a preponderant emphasis on the saving power of individual moral conduct” (Rosenfeld, 1997, p. 37), thereby favoring what McAdams (2012) terms a “cultural narrative of redemption.”

This study explores TLH with marginalized ethnic minority students, such as immigrants from Muslim and Hispanic countries and black students, all of whom are likely to have experienced recurring prejudice and discrimination in their everyday lives (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). In many respects, these students are “vulnerable learners” (Pratt, 2002), for whom the teacher’s authority and influence can be tremendous. Teaching these students about the Holocaust using a pedagogy of redemption serves as a case study in the consequences and costs of enculturating marginalized students to adopt mainstream American values.

# TLH with Marginalized Students

Abundant research has been conducted throughout the world on Holocaust education, resulting in a recurrent finding that while most educators who engage in TLH are highly committed to the topic (Eckmann, Stevick, & Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2017; Foster, 2013; Gross & Stevick, 2015 ), at the same time, they frequently face challenges such as emotional difficulties, time constraints, lack of knowledge and Holocaust fatigue (Donnelly, 2006; Foster, 2013; Harbaugh, 2015; Kellaway, Spillane & Haydn, 2013; Nesfield, 2015; Pettigrew et al., 2009).

Navigating classroom diversity is another challenge, especially in classes with a high prevalence of first and second generation immigrants, ethnic minorities, and students from lower socio-economic strata (SES). In addition to knowledge gaps, language barriers and social problems, including poverty, gang violence and domestic breakdown, these students are likely to have personally experienced social discrimination, marginalization, prejudice and unequal opportunities (Larson, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). As a result, TLH resonates somewhat differently for them. While these students have certainly experienced discrimination and injustice, they are by no means characterized primarily by these experiences. Indeed, the many subgroups collectively referred to here as ‘marginalized students’ each have rich subcultures, hopes and dreams, enormous potential and myriad achievements. Consequently, both the teaching and learning of Holocaust history with these students, for whom many of the Holocausts’ basic underlying forces, such as racism, prejudice and persecution, are part of their daily reality, present unique challenges. While acknowledging that a more comprehensive analysis would also need to include the complex experiences of the students, this study will instead focus on how the teachers perceive these students.

 The first issue to be addressed is how TLH can be adapted to best reach marginalized students. One strategy is ‘business as usual,’ based on the assumption that the makeup of the class need not or should not affect the way a topic is taught (Short, 2000). Other teachers might opt for the completely antithetical strategy of ‘skirting the topic.’ Weighing historically distant atrocities against students’ ongoing sense of competitive victimhood, whether justified or not, and apprehensive that their students might resent the special attention paid to the tragedy of the Jews, some teachers, or even schools, may choose to minimize TLH, especially in periods of heightened ethnic and political tensions (Eckmann, Stevick, & Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2017). For example, in 2018, the principal of an ethnically mixed high school in Florida explained to an enquiring parent that “the [Holocaust] curriculum is to be introduced but not forced upon individuals” since not all of the population served by his school believed that the Holocaust had happened (Oster, 2019).

Between these two poles lie other strategies, among them:

1. *Emphasizing shared values.* Teachers may mobilize TLH to help marginalized students adopt a shared and consensual set of national values. As a ‘common denominator’ tactic, this approach may advance acculturation and mainstreaming, but it also has the potential of minimizing value-diversity.
2. *Making space for additional histories of persecution.* Teachers seeking to avoid alienating students from other cultures may encourage students to share their personal or group heritage experiences of persecution and prejudice. By enabling the students to address the sufferings of their own groups, it is hoped that students will become more receptive to those of others (Gryglewski, 2010). Some educators might choose to teach about the Holocaust as part of a broader Genocide Studies unit.
3. *Emphasizing diversity.* Teachers may use the topic of the Holocaust to discuss the importance of multiculturalism and diversity as part of a broader educational approach covering a ‘politics of identity’ (Taylor & Guttmann, 1994). With this approach, the Holocaust serves to empower students’ ethnic self-expression and to sensitize them to the consequences of attempts to homogenize society racially and culturally. Depending on the ideological and personal tendencies of the teacher, emphasizing diversity in TLH might take the shape of a critical pedagogy, such as Freire’s “pedagogy of emancipation” (2007; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Gover, 2008), which calls for oppressed people to become aware of oppression and take action against it, or a “pedagogy of difference” (Alexander, 2018), which promotes the values of pluralism and multiculturalism.

Data on the question of which of these approaches is used by teachers and under what circumstances is sparse. Some studies indicate apprehension among teachers when teaching the Holocaust to predominantly Muslim or ethnic minority classes. For example, in one study, Australian educators reported experiencing apprehension or concern about teaching the Holocaust, and even skirting TLH altogether, due to anti-Semitic sentiment on the part of Muslim students who “often expressed an admiration for Nazism and Hitler” (Rutland, 2015, p. 81). In another study, British educators reported ambivalent feelings and discomfort when teaching the Holocaust to immigrant students (Short & Reed, 2004). In South Africa, teachers participating in training workshops on the Holocaust tended to compare their suffering during apartheid to the events during the Holocaust, arguing that apartheid was also genocide (Nates, 2010).

Other studies have focused on the techniques and efforts made by teachers to connect non-Jewish students of color, immigrants, and other marginalized groups with the topic of the Holocaust, which is not part of their own heritage and which can even be framed as the competing history of a powerful group of whites, the Jews. These studies indicate that the challenges involved in TLH to marginalized students are quite formidable and require a myriad of creative efforts on the part of the teachers. In one such study, Schweber (2003, 2004) identified several creative and even controversial strategies used by teachers to engage such students. For example, Schweber, using detailed class ethnographies, described a teacher who devised an elaborate simulation game, lasting for the entire course, designed to make students of color feel a part of the events of the Holocaust. Schweber describes this effort as reflecting the difference between the *symbolic* (representational) curriculum, which pertains to the subject matter, and the *consequential* curriculum, which is the actual human impact, or transformative power of the program. It is the consequential curriculum which poses the greatest challenges when teaching about the heritage of one group’s suffering to a different group.

 Finally, some studies find that teachers’ expectations and perceptions of their marginalized students do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the students themselves. A large-scale survey of over 1,000 Muslim students in the United Kingdom found high levels of interest in learning about the Holocaust among participants, who were as positive about TLH as were non-Muslim students (Foster, et al., 2016). Commenting on such findings, Stevick (2017, p. 201) suggests that “[teachers’] anxiety may stem less from the actual likelihood of a strong negative response to the subject than from teachers’ lack of confidence that they could handle one appropriately if it occurred.”

To determine what strategies, if any, are used by American teachers teaching in classes with predominantly marginalized students to engage their students with the topic of the Holocaust, this study posed the following questions:

1. How do teachers report teaching the Holocaust in classes where 80% or more of their students are first or second generation immigrants, people of color, and/or belong to low SES families?
2. What are these educators’ attitudes, goals, underlying beliefs, and perceived challenges regarding TLH?

# Method

In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 committed Holocaust educators in South Florida, all of whom had chosen to devote time to attending a workshop on teaching the Holocaust, where they were recruited for this study. While it is understood that this sample cannot be generalized to represent all American teachers, it presumably can provide a nuanced and contextualized analysis of one such set of teachers (Polit & Beck, 2010).

The Holocaust Education Bill (SB 660), passed in Florida in 1994, mandates the incorporation of Holocaust instruction across the curriculum in grades K-12 in all public schools. County school boards in Florida do not dictate how teachers should teach the topic, and most teachers are free to design their own lesson plans within the allotted time frame. This flexibility made it possible to gauge their teaching strategies, which are relatively free of constraints imposed by administrators.

All teachers participating in this study reported that 80-100% of the students in their classes were either black students or first or second generation immigrants, mostly from Cuba, Mexico, the Bahamas and Haiti. Most of the teachers worked in inner-city schools, and others worked in rural locations. Some taught in special schools for immigrant children who had entered the United States illegally, and others taught in adult education programs for immigrants. On average, the teachers estimated that 46% of their students come from low SES backgrounds, as demonstrated by their qualifying for a free school lunch.

Thirty-eight percent of the participants in the study were male, 17% taught primary school students, 23% taught middle school students, and 70% taught high school and adult education students. Some teachers taught more than one of these groups. Their average age was 50.25 (SD=11.95), and their average years of teaching experience was 19.35 years (SD=11.15). The teachers taught about the Holocaust in lessons from various disciplines, most commonly language arts (30%), social studies (27%), and history (25%).

Fifty percent of the teachers interviewed reported belonging to ethnic minority groups themselves, such as Latino, African American and black Bahamian. Among the other 50%, most teachers presented marginalized minority group characteristics, such as a minority faith tradition (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses or Biblical Fundamentalism). Most participants reported being personally and intimately acquainted with stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice in their own lives.

Interviews lasted between one to two and one half hours each, and took place in a quiet setting away from the school. The interviews were constructed as informal conversations, first discussing participants’ reflections on their professional and personal life tracks and then focusing on their TLH in marginalized classrooms.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants also completed surveys designed to elicit their attitudes towards TLH as well as demographic and professional information.

As part of a constructivist research framework, we acknowledge our subjectivities as researchers. One of us lives in the United States and three of us do not. Two of us are Holocaust educators and two are not. Culturally and professionally, these emic and etic perspectives interacted when analyzing the material. To manage this interpretive diversity, the data was analyzed using the Consensual Qualitative Research method (Hill, et al., 2005), which involves each researcher scrutinizing the interviews separately to develop a comprehensive understanding of each interview, followed by a comparison of the researchers’ understandings of the interviews to identify shared themes and narrative structures. The educators’ narratives were analyzed for underlying social assumptions and decoded using critical discourse theory and cultural analysis. Inevitably, this analysis reflects our own interpretive perspective, and is but one possible way of interpreting these narratives.

# Findings

An in-depth analysis of the interviews identified five shared themes. They are presented here in the order mirroring a typical process a teacher might undergo, from personally connecting to the subject of the Holocaust (theme 1), to setting goals for TLH (theme 2, with two sub-themes), to drawing students in by appealing to their marginalized status (theme 3), to transmitting the material (theme 4, with two sub-themes), and finally, to evaluating the success of their endeavors (theme 5).

## 1. Personally Connecting to the Holocaust: “I started to see parallels between my life and those of survivors.”

Before they could make the Holocaust relevant to their students, educators had to make it relevant for themselves. Half the teachers in the present study had no personal links to the Holocaust, often encountering the topic only late in their lives. Fifteen of the teachers related to the topic by identifying parallels between their own experiences and those of the Jews during the Holocaust. Being able to relate to the vulnerability of a persecuted minority member and a victim of prejudice generated passion and commitment toward the topic. Mateo,[[1]](#footnote-1) who escaped from Cuba as a small child, leaving his mother behind, offered an example:

 As I got older, I started to see the parallels between my life and the small, please forgive me, very small parallels between my life and our story and that of survivors and of the Jewish experience… On my left arm are scars left from when we arrived in this country. The vaccination shots. OK? When I first arrived. You can tell another Cuban by what we call *La vacuna*, the vaccination and so forth. And it’s faded over the years but it’s still there. And when I go to my students, I show it to my students, I would never draw this comparison; but it’s almost like you were a survivor of Auschwitz, the numbers.

 Note the internal dialectic between Mateo’s desire to identify with Holocaust survivors through his own experience, using such words as “parallels” and “comparisons,” and his wish to preserve the unique status of the Holocaust, leading to discomfort with using his own story (“small, please forgive me, very small parallels;” “I would never draw this comparison”). Ultimately, the desire to identify prevails: “…it’s almost like you were a survivor of Auschwitz.”

Alvina, a black teacher, related that she had experienced prejudice all her life. Her recurring experiences had become a way of connecting with Holocaust victims:

I feel that we are in some way interconnected… Because I think that as a black person in America, there have been times where I don’t think people have seen me as a human being. They’ve seen my color, but they’ve not looked at me as a person. And I think the, when you talk about the Holocaust, and you talk about the persecution of the Jews and what happened to them, they were not seen as human beings. They were seen as ‘less than.’ And I can understand the feeling of being treated like you’re ‘less than.’

In contrast to Mateo, Alvina did not exhibit any difficulties about comparing her own experience as a Black American to that of the Jews in Europe, perhaps because she drew parallels not with what was *done* to those persecuted, but with how it *felt*. She identified with how she imagined it must have felt to be perceived as “less than” and used her own experience to create that sense of empathy for the Jews.

## 2. Setting Goals for TLH: “There is a bigger character goal than just the Holocaust.”

Two central TLH goals reported by the teachers pertained to the vulnerable situation of their marginalized students.

### (**2.1) Teaching life skills: “Lessons the kids can take with them.”**

Twenty-two of the teachers interviewed deliberately sought to mobilize the story of the Holocaust to impart practical know-how and life lessons to their students. As Zoe put it: “There is a bigger character goal than just the Holocaust [...] It is probably the single most, best character-building study that you could offer a student.” Mateo juxtaposed Zoe’s character goals with knowledge goals: “Not just the facts or figures. But what are the individual life stories, what is being taught here, what are the life lessons about humanity, about decency, about tolerance? Those are the big issues here that are universal and that’s the importance of Holocaust study.” Ruby, a black teacher, used the story of the Holocaust to teach about character traits such as honesty and loyalty. Martin, a white teacher, recounted that he had been raised in extreme poverty and neglect, and that when teaching the Holocaust, he focused on life skills such as respect for others and for one’s self, as well as practical “techniques for dealing with the anger boiling up inside before it turns into violence.” He explained that he spoke from experience when he translated the lessons of the Holocaust into principles of social behavior: “How to be polite in the supermarket; say kind words to your fellow student or co-worker.”

### (2.2) Producing citizens: “These kids are going to be voting.”

Western values such as equal rights, freedom, tolerance, and democracy are so deeply entrenched in American culture that they are now perceived more like facts than values. However, in reality, these are still culturally-grounded values (Harari, 2014). Marginalized students who may start out with a different set of beliefs about the world are often socialized to embrace these values at school and through the media. TLH plays an important role in this socialization processes. The teachers considered TLH to be an opportunity to produce citizens, using the historical events of the Holocaust to talk about American values and lifestyle. The fact that most of their students were not native-born Americans added to their motivation. For example, José spoke about why it was important to “stand up for your beliefs, to defend yourself and to have that ability to be able to combat discrimination and prejudice.” John told his students:

If you feel that something is wrong in some sort of way… you should do something. Now is the time in your life that you may have the ability to act upon it the most. When you perceive something is amiss, not right, doesn’t square with your sense of morality, what are you going to do about it?

Jake noted: “I teach seniors. These kids are going to be voting [...] They’re responsible for getting some sense of what it means to participate in a democracy.”

These quotes demonstrate how the teachers transferred the subject of the Holocaust from the realm of historical facts and figures placed into the domain of values, prescribed behaviors and moral messages. This process is seen as a way of linking the topic to the students’ lives, but it may also serve as a justification for teaching this topic in the first place. Teachers are telling students: “This is relevant for you as Americans.”

In sum, most of the teachers interviewed chose to emphasize common values and remind students that regardless of where they came from, they were now all Americans and had a responsibility toward their country.

## 3. Drawing Students in by Linking TLH to their Own Lives: “Yesterday it was the Jews, today it’s the Mexicans, tomorrow it’ll be the Muslims.”

Teachers reported facing several challenges when trying to make the Holocaust relevant for their students. The first challenge was the students’ lack of a shared historical background and cultural narratives about the Holocaust. A second challenge was the students’ lack of curiosity about the world around them. According to the teachers, many students exhibited narrow worldviews and high levels of ignorance. Consequently, historical events were of little interest to them. A third challenge was the students’ academic disengagement resulting from poverty, fragile family environments, threat of deportation, and gang and gun violence. These students, according to Michelle, “just live day by day and they have a lot of issues at home and they are not in tune with what’s going on [in the world at large].”

To draw the students into the topic of the Holocaust, teachers created a two-way interface between the Holocaust and the minority status of their students. Twenty-one of the teachers interviewed mobilized and utilized the minority status of their students to involve them in class. They established a connection between their students' experiences of prejudice and the persecution of the Jews during the war.

Some of the teachers were aware that their students felt hostile towards “white, rich Jews.” Susan observed: “When they see someone who's Jewish they say, ‘Oh, that's just like another white person...’ and as bad as that sounds, they just don't, like, they can't relate to that at all.” Her personal solution to this was teaching her students that when Jewish professors had to flee from Europe, it was the historically black colleges that opened their gates to them. This made the students feel proud and connected.

Most of the teachers interviewed were very familiar with their students’ harsh living circumstances. In Jennifer’s case, it was the illegal status of her students’ parents that created the link to the Holocaust:

In my area a lot of their parents are not, umm, legal; they are actually illegal… and it’s a real fear for them that their parents might be taken from them. So in that instance, it would be a perfect way to say you know…I am going to present this piece of literature that has to do with just this, the fear of being separated from family.

The order is important here: Jennifer mobilizes the students’ apprehension to connect them to a text about the Holocaust. She is seeking not a conversation about the injustice of immigration laws, but a vehicle for drawing the students into the subject matter. Other teachers explored different themes of ‘otherness’ in their efforts to make the Holocaust relevant to their students. Emma, for example, opened her TLH unit by sharing a personal story with her students:

I have dyslexia, a learning difference, and I have been very discriminated against because of that. When I went to high school, you were just considered stupid, so I was out in the stupid category, was told I could never go to college, would never learn anything, I wouldn’t learn to spell, I would never write. I was told all of these things that were so untrue. And that helps me understand discrimination on that level… I think they need that story, they need to know that there was someone that was put down and stomped on but marched forward anyway, you know?

Emma, who works in an inner-city school, is white, has never been an immigrant, and comes from a better area of town than her students. Her effort to draw her students into the topic of the Holocaust was tied to her goal of creating a bond with her students based on their shared experiences of discrimination. “Don’t see me as one of the privileged ones,” she seems to be saying, “I am no different than you.”

## 4. Transmitting the Material through a Pedagogy of Redemption: “This is the land of opportunity.”

Fifteen of the teachers used the Holocaust to familiarize their marginalized students with key elements of the American ethos: growth and improvement, the promise of happy endings, personal and cultural redemption, the freedom to make choices in any given situation, appreciation for the self-made person, and the belief that the United States is a place where everyone is equal. As one teacher explained: “they didn’t grow up like I did, you know [...] and they’re coming from a completely different culture. They don’t know the same kind of common cultural mythology that normal, you know, most Americans grow up with.” Note how American values are described here as ‘normal,’ implying that those of others are not. This underlying unquestioning sense of American values being ‘the right ones’ may explain why a majority of the teachers we interviewed considered TLH an opportunity to introduce students to two major American tropes:

### **(4.1) Marketing hope: “Something good can come from tragedy.”**

Aware of the hardships their students faced and sympathetic toward them, many of the teachers interviewed encouraged their students to believe in their ability to change their situations, and to draw on the story of the Holocaust for inspiration. For these teachers, the Holocaust was a story of redemption that could empower the students by offering them hope. This is how Douglas introduceds the unit on the Holocaust to his students:

Something good can come from tragedy… we’re going into a dark place, but we’re going to, we’re going to come out of the dark place… that we visited, but good things did happen there. The Jewish people continue, they continue on and… [there were] many births in the DP camps after, and you know how many marriages? So, it’s not all this “Oh, it’s horrible and dreadful.” Yes, it was, but good things did come out of it, you know. They survived. They survived and they continue to prosper. To prosper, to have more children. Hitler didn’t win.

David’s conviction, even urgency, about presenting the Holocaust as redemptive is evinced by his repetition of certain key words: good, continue, survived, prosper. The story of the Holocaust, in a sense, draws it educational legitimacy by virtue of its ending: “Hitler didn’t win.”

José likes to share stories of survivors, because it teaches students that “by combining hope, faith and courage to work on whatever difficulties life throws your way, you can rise.” Note the emphasis on the individual’s own responsibility, rather than on rights to which they may be entitled.

Mercedes teaches in a special school for recently-arrived illegal immigrant children. Her young students remain with her for only several weeks, until their papers are sorted out and they can join family or friends already settled in the United States. These students often do not speak English, and some have had no education. Still, in the short time when she has them, Mercedes chooses to teach them about the Holocaust:

[Students feel] like, I’m stuck here, you know, and there’s no way out, um, and I think when they saw that, you know, other people have gone through suffering and have gone through incredible loss and things and then you can still move forward, I think that was very inspirational for them. It gave them hope I think. These are similar children [*to Holocaust victims – the authors*] that are coming from a very different situation. A lot of them are orphans, a lot of them — their parents have died or they don’t even know where they are, and we're trying to show them that there’s hope, you know, because the Holocaust really is a story, it’s a terrible story but it’s also about hope, about re-birth in a certain way, you know, about how in spite of all the odds being against you, you can survive and you can move on and you can live your life. Because this is the land of opportunity.

Facing the unbearable grief and hardship of her young students, separated from their families, Mercedes searched for sources of hope and comfort. It is ironic that she found them in the Holocaust of all places, considering that 63% of the pre-war Jewish population in Europe did not, in fact, survive. Note also the way Mercedes’s narrative shifted between European and American soil, creating an equivalency between them: “The Holocaust really is a story... this is the land of opportunity.” This method may attest to the powerful role of narrative framing in education.

Charles teaches adult education to newly arrived immigrants, many of whom are unemployed, with few prospects for advancement. From all the possible topics available, Charles, too, chooses to teach about the Holocaust:

I’m using [the Holocaust] to make students aware that other people have gone through a lot more than what you've gone through. Uh, when we talk about the Holocaust and WWII… they can see that yes, you’ve had hard times, people have had hard times also and have survived and risen from this. And I make it a life lesson… the takeaway message is that people can be down but still rise up, and when I look at their current situation, saying OK, you’re down now, but you can rise up… the sky is the limit, despite all these huge obstacles.

The ‘happy endings’ offered by the teachers related not only to individuals. On a group level, some teachers regardthe Holocaust as a reflection of the victory of the Jewish people, and of its incredible resiliency. For example, Zoe reported:

For me, in the end, one of the things that made the kids happiest, if there’s a happy outcome, is the idea that in the end, where did it all end up? I, here’s a vindication, here’s a group of people that tried to completely annihilate another group and instead it helped to generate and precipitate the establishment of a Jewish state, and isn’t it wonderful… So, you know, for them it was a light at the end. It was the phoenix rising from the ashes.

### **(4.2) Reproducing a narrative of personal choice: “Everybody has a choice.”**

Teachers conveyed the message to their students that anyone, in any given situation, has a choice. Emma’s message was that anyone can choose whether to be a victim or to prevail: “I was always telling my kids that no matter where you came from, you can be whatever you want to be… don’t let anything else hold you down.” Mercedes would tell her students: “You can have the worst beginning, but that doesn’t define your ending. That doesn’t define the rest of your life.” Douglas shared a similar message: “We’re going to be tested, we’re going to be tested, all of us will be tested as human beings, on our choices.

 Upon reflection, Valerie appeared to recognize the difficulty in presenting the Holocaust as an arena of choice, but ultimately reaffirmed the concept nonetheless:

Well, obviously the victims didn’t have choices, but you know that we have choice. And that people in history also had a choice. Are they going to do this evil today, or not going to do this evil? In our own lives, we have to make those choices too. You know, are you going to stand up for someone who’s being bullied?

It is worth dtake on certain “”

## 5. Evaluating TLH as being Effective: “It makes a difference in their lives.”

A final theme shared by the teachers was their excitement, even eagerness, about teaching the Holocaust in their multicultural classes. They welcomed what they considered to be a huge responsibility, especially since most of their students were unlikely to receive any further education about the Holocaust in the future. For the most part, students were described as “riveted” and “fascinated.” Teachers reported that even the most disruptive students quieted down when the Holocaust was discussed. Zoe described how the students’ fascination with the Holocaust translated into behavioral change:

It is an absolutely hypnotic topic [...] I was just amazed at the difference it has made in students. To me it was very—a pivotal character- building event in their lives. if you ever needed any rationale beyond that to teach it, boy, this is it, because you see the difference it makes in their lives. They’re just different with one another. They are more tolerant, more gentle, more thoughtful in their reactions to each other. Um, the parents told me they would get the same feedback about the way they treated their siblings.

Zoe’s description of the effects of teaching the Holocaust sound almost mystical, as she used words such as “hypnotic,” “amazed,” and “pivotal” to describe the changes students underwent. In expressing her real rationale for teaching the Holocaust, she shared that even siblings got along better following this course.

None of the teachers interviewed were apprehensive about teaching the Holocaust. Despite being acutely aware of the challenges that their students faced in their everyday lives, the teachers felt confident about asking them to focus on the hardships of a foreign people on a distant continent that occurred 70 years ago. They were eager to teach the Holocaust to any age group and at any level or mental capacity, including students in special education classes and adult education programs, and even immigrants who had recently crossed the border. A handful of these teachers deliberately chose tactics intended to shock the students, which one teacher described as “putting them through the emotional wringer.” Teachers perceived their students to be emotionally resilient, either because of the personal hardships they had personally endured or because of exposure to violence on social media. As Sophie explained:

Something has given them some sort of exposure before they get to my class, that makes them just hungry for that information. It could be, you know, the idea that their parents and grandparents went through some sort of persecution, whether it was in Cuba or Nicaragua, and they relate to it.

For some of the teachers, the ultimate proof of success came when their students cried. Mercedes described with great enthusiasm her students’ emotional reactions when she brought an elderly Jewish survivor to a class of tough inner-city girls:

And when he starts it was just, everybody’s eyes opened and then they were just glued and he starts telling his story [...] and they start asking him, you know: “Did you lose family?” and he goes: “Yeah, yeah,” and then these girls are crying and these are *very* tough kids, these kids that are used to living under conditions that we’re not used to, and, and they’re just crying and they’re asking him “Talk to us some more, Jeff, tell us.” And I'm just like, my mouth is, you know [drops her jaw; laughs] and I’m like, “Oh, my gosh.”

Mercedes’s account offers another confirmation of the perceived transformative power of the Holocaust. As with Zoe’s description of siblings (unnaturally) getting along, here, too, the mythical battle of good versus evil lying at the heart of the Holocaust is perceived to have a powerful educational impact strong enough to transform even the most challenging students.

# Discussion

In April 2018, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (the Claims Conference) conducted a representative survey among young American adults. This survey found critical gaps in awareness of details or even basic knowledge of the Holocaust. For example, 49% of the surveyed millennials could not name a single one of the over 40,000 concentration camps and ghettos in Europe during the Holocaust. Against this backdrop, it may be obvious why American teachers feel the urgent need to inform immigrants and ethnic minorities of the events that took place during the Holocaust. Nonetheless, this paper focuses not on *why* teachers do this, but *how*.

The present study considered the ways in which teachers in South Florida negotiated the American ethos and values when teaching about the Holocaust to students from marginalized minority groups. We found extensive Americanization of the Holocaust in these multicultural classrooms. Earlier in this paper, we suggested possible strategies for TLH with marginalized students: business as usual; skirting the topic; emphasizing cultural values; encouraging personal narratives and emphasizing differences. Most of the teachers interviewed chose to emphasize cultural values. They responded to their students’ personal experiences of marginalization by acknowledging their pain yet minimizing or obscuring its political implications. Teachers mobilized TLH to reinforce the ethos underlying the American dream; that responsibility for change lies with the individual and that all can be redeemed.

Contrary to our expectations, the educators studied did not exhibit any apprehension about teaching the Holocaust to marginalized minority students. In addition, they did not report any competitive victimhood struggles among their students, nor did they experience hostility among students towards the topic. Rather than minimizing the topic, these teachers expanded the scope of TLH, using it as a vehicle for arousing the students’ interest and gaining their attention. In this, our findings differ from those of researchers outside of the United States, who have found apprehension, concern, and ambivalence among teachers of the Holocaust in classes of minority students (e.g., Rutland, 2015; Short and Reed, 2004). What, then, made these teachers in South Florida so eager to teach the Holocaust in their classrooms?

One reason may lie in the issue of class management. Because the Holocaust is a fascinating topic, it can serve as a powerful means of sustaining the students’ attention and minimizing behavioral problems. Another motivation may be that in an era of standardized tests, where there is little opportunity for value-education, Holocaust study offers such an opportunity, which is eagerly welcomed. This explanation is supported by previous studies (Foster, 2013) showing that Holocaust education is often equated with value education.

However, we believe that the main reason for these Florida teachers’ enthusiasm for teaching the Holocaust lies in the connection between TLH and socialization. Teachers view TLH as an opportunity to impart norms and values to marginalized students, acculturating them to the mainstream American ethos. This attitude among teachers raises several questions.

First, why would teachers choose the topic of the Holocaust, a European event, from all possible topics, to enculturate students into accepting American values? One possibility is that precisely *because* the Holocaust did not take place on American soil, it is free of the complex and guilt-laden narrative surrounding slavery and the mistreatment (or genocide) of Native Americans. Furthermore, teachers may feel they have the moral high ground for shaping the collective memory of this period in world history, as Americans played the honourable role of rescuers in the Holocaust. In short, teachers may feel that they can present a better image of the United States to students through TLH, who may not yet feel a part of the country.

Second, why teach the Holocaust to marginalized students using the language of redemption, choice-making, and overcoming obstacles? Bear in mind that this is one possible TLH choice among many (for different sets of goals, see Cohen and Bar-On, 2009; Foster, 2013; and Gross, 2010, and Authors et al. 2018). It is not difficult to see the attraction in an ethos of hope, redemption and happy endings, as it is optimistic, positive and uplifting. The centrality of redemption narratives in American culture may be a means of social sense-making (McAdams, 2006; Zerubavel, 2012). By molding their teaching to fit this structure, teachers tell their students that they may expect a bright and positive future, despite current adversities. Worthy as this goal may seem, we would like to argue that this teaching goal is problematic:

First, it is historically inaccurate and philosophically superficial to present the Holocaust as a paradigm of hope and redemption. As most historians, philosophers, and theologians would probably argue, the Holocaust is a ‘dark place’ indeed, and it is highly debatable whether it resulted in much good. The history of the Holocaust presents fewer positive lessons than it does negative insights about human nature, far fewer happy endings than tragic ones, and precious few redeeming features to mitigate its grisly outcomes. In addition to the fact that most Holocaust victims did not survive, most people in the Holocaust had scant choice, including not only the victims, but even some of the Germans, who lived in a totalitarian state under a regime of terror. As Gray (2014) has noted, TLH deals mostly with death, destruction, and annihilation. It is accompanied by a broad range of emotions such as shock, guilt, sadness, and stress. Mythologizing deflects potentially difficult emotional reactions, but it comes at a price. Ethically and psychologically, the Holocaust should leave us with more questions than answers. We found little indication of such a perspective among our participants.

Our second concern with teaching the Holocaust for its purportedly redeeming message is that this approach does nothing to encourage social criticism or to support social change. The teachers we met acknowledged that American society was racist, and that they and their students suffered prejudice and marginalization. Yet they rarely raised questions about the current system and its values in class. Rather, the teachers conveyed messages of redemption, free choice, and equal opportunities to students whose experiences may not have reflected these values and for whom these ideals might be unattainable. Delivering a message of redemption to marginalized students may leave little space for alternative goals outlined earlier in this paper, such as pedagogies of emancipation or of difference.

A comparison of TLH to Ethnicity Studies programs in this context is instructive. These programs utilize a culturally relevant pedagogy based on the argument that instruction is “substantially more effective when differentiated to align with the distinctive cultural priors that individual students experience outside of school and when they also affirm both cultural identity and critical social engagement” (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 128). Such programs aim to utilize critical pedagogies to motivate students to act against systemic racism and institutional oppression as well as to call upon students to recognize injustice in their own system, name it, and aim for emancipation.

In sum, we argue that TLH with marginalized students presents far more complex issues than may appear on the surface. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

### **1. Consider Offering Compelling Detail and Nuanced Complexity Rooted in Historical Context**

When teaching students whose cultural heritage is not directly connected to the events of the Holocaust, the challenge of drawing them into the topic may be daunting. However, when the historical facts of the Holocaust are shared with students using sufficient age appropriate context and detail, and when the topic is presented in all of its inherent complexity, students become engaged, and comparisons to students’ personal experiences become less necessary (Avraham, 2010; Author et al., 2018).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Curricular decisions in history can have a powerful effect on building the identities of ethnic minority students (Harris & Clarke, 2011). Educators personal cultural lenses can be overpowering, and awareness of their implications can help educators make more mindful teaching decisions, especially when working with students from minority groups. For this reason, too, it is advisable to focus on the historical context, events, causes, and consequences of the Holocaust rather than to use the bulk of the lesson time as a value education opportunity. However, as Schweber has noted, ultimately it is the *consequential* curriculum rather than the *symbolic* curriculum which reveals the actual human impact, or transformative power of the program. Transformation can occur by encouraging action and by modelling the desired values in one’s own teaching. If our goals include combatting racism and calling for social action, we must strive to make the class as egalitarian and action-oriented as possible. This objective is addressed in our second recommendation.

**2. Help Identify Injustice Rather than Emphasize Redemption**.

Teachers should carefully consider to what extent choice, redemption and positive meaning were truly representative of the Holocaust. Senior high school students should be able to face the reality of a senseless tragedy that, ultimately, lacks purpose or meaning, even if its causes can be understood. This recognition is all the more important for minority and immigrant students, who, instead of being encouraged to believe that the United States today is the land of equal opportunity for all or the antidote to world racism, could be empowered by TLH to identify and combat injustice in American society and to embrace their cultural identity and heritage.

Two alternatives to pedagogies of redemption to consider are Alexander’s (2018) “pedagogy of difference” which is grounded in diversity liberalism and dialogical philosophy and which emphasizes a pluralistic view of diversity explored from the vantage point of belonging to specific traditions, as well as Freire’s (2007) “pedagogy of emancipation.”

Freire’s pedagogy of emancipation (Freire, 2007; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Gover, 2008) posits that emancipation from oppression is made possible by an awakening of critical consciousness. The question then arises as to how this approach could inform TLH and mobilized it to empower marginalized students.

Freire emphasized the importance of situating educational activity in the actual experiences of the students and bridging the gap between teacher and students by promoting dialogue. He also stressed the importance of informed action, based both on theory and praxis, and on the underlying process of awakening the social consciousness of oppressed students for the purpose of transforming reality.

For TLH with marginalized students, Freire’s ideas could mean encouraging students to explore social problems affecting their lives and surroundings, searching for some of these problems’ sources and drawing on the Holocaust as a key historical period providing insights into destructive social processes. A historical study of events leading up to, during, and after the Holocaust could be mobilized not only to explore the roles and choices of individuals in the Holocaust (e.g., perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators, etc.) but also to recognize and identify the power of national culture, racist norms, systemic and institutional violence, corrupt leadership and class power struggles in shaping the history of the Holocaust. Questions about the role of democracy, laws, human rights, and other methods of combatting racism and protecting individuals could be discussed. The concepts of pluralism and solidarity could be introduced as antidotes to absolutism, intolerance, racism, and dehumanization. Following these lessons, students could engage in discussions about possible ways of transforming the balances of power, racism, and marginalization in their own surroundings, and then identify a potential field of action, engage in proactive social action, and, finally, mindfully reflect on the effects of their actions.

In a paper on unacknowledged racism, Stevick (2019, p. 6) describes his relinquishing a long-held belief that racism was other people’s problem, disclosing that: “I had my views for a reason: they were not unique or special. They were products of a system that erased and concealed and separated history and social realities selectively.” We propose that good TLH do the exact opposite by linking and drawing parallels between history and social realities, and it should do so all the more avidly when targeting marginalized populations.

# Concluding Observations

We embarked on this study as ‘outsiders looking in,’ in the hope that this perspective would help us uncover assumptions and practices among Holocaust educators of which they themselves might not be aware. As the study unfolded, we realized how challenging it was to recognize our own Holocaust beliefs. Three of us live in Israel, where Jews are a majority and where we have witnessed the perils of harnessing ethnic tragedies to bolster nationalist identity. The resulting wariness toward this approach may have guided our critical analysis of American teachers. We acknowledge the commitment, dedication**,** and devotion of these teachers to their students, as they use every opportunity to offer hope to their students, regardless of whether or not we endorse their means of achieving this goal.

Future studies should explore and compare additional cultural lenses that shape TLH both within and outside the United. This will enable educational researchers to consider points of convergence among the political, cultural, and historical arenas for TLH in a multicultural world.

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1. All names and identifying details have been changed to preserve participant anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Full author details will be provided after the anonymous review process. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)