“Good things came out of it” The implications of choosing a pedagogy of redemption over a pedagogy of emancipation in teaching the Holocaust with marginalized students

**Abstract**:

This study explores issues related to teaching about the Holocaust to racial and ethnic marginalized students. We conducted in-depth interviews with teachers to examine their educational choices when teaching students who frequently experience prejudice and discrimination in their own lives. We found that teachers manage their students’ experiences of marginalization by acknowledging their pain yet obfuscating its political implications. These teachers mobilize teaching about the Holocaust to reinforce the ethos of personal choice, redemption and equality undergirding the American dream. In an attempt to offer hope to their disenfranchised students, they present them with a Holocaust narrative of redemption and triumph. We recommend that histories of persecution be taught by complexifying historical narratives and by calling out injustice to mobilize social change and suggest replacing the prevalent pedagogy of redemption in TLH with a pedagogy of emancipation.

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 century coined the phrase ‘Americanization of the Holocaust,’ to refer to the ways in which the Holocaust has been moulded 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 sites of memory (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). Others contended that it was necessary for making the Holocaust relevant to diverse audiences (Levy & Sznaider, 2002), and argued 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 is the educational arena, termed ‘Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust’ (TLH). Americanization of the Holocaust impacts curricular decisions when teaching about the Holocaust, such as which groups of victims are highlighted, or to what degree the U.S. is portrayed as being responsible for refusing refugees entrance. Curricular considerations both shape and are shaped by collective memory, rendering the teaching of the past a political act (Harris & Clarke, 2011). Americanization of the Holocaust also guides pedagogical choices. For example, American teachers downplay the atrocities of the Holocaust in favour of focusing on the positive power of the individual (Bromley & Gamett Russell, 2015; Samuels, 2007; Schweber, 2008). This corresponds to two quintessential American tendencies: “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), favouring what McAdams (2012) calls 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, who 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), over whom the teacher’s authority and influence can be tremendous. Teaching these students about the Holocaust through a pedagogy of redemption serves as a case study in the consequences and prices of enculturating marginalized students to adopt mainstream American values.

# TLH with marginalized students

Much educational research has been conducted on Holocaust education around the world with the recurrent finding that most eeducators who engage in TLH are highly committed to the topic (Eckmann, Stevick, & Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2017; Foster, 2013; Gross & Stevick, 2015 ) yet simultaneously are often challenged by emotional difficulty, 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 lower-SES students. On top of knowledge gaps, language barriers and social problems (including poverty, gang violence and domestic breakdown), these students are likely to have experienced social discrimination, marginalization, prejudice and unequal opportunities in their own lives (Larson, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Warikoo & Carter, 2009), making TLH play out somewhat differently for them. These students are by no means characterized primarily by their experiences of discrimination and injustice. The many subgroups we will here collectively refer to as ‘marginalized students' each have rich subcultures, hopes and dreams, incredible potential and myriad achievements. However, it is a different experience to learn and to teach about the Holocaust to students to whom many of the underlying concepts at play in the history of the Holocaust, such as racism, prejudice and persecution, are part of daily reality. At the risk of oversimplifying the students' lives, this study will focus on their perception in the eyes of their teachers, while noting that a full picture would need to include the complex experiences of the students themselves as well.

 How can TLH be adapted to marginalized students? One strategy is *‘business as usual’* based on the assumption that the makeup of the class needn’t or shouldn’t affect the way a topic is taught (Short, 2000). Other teachers might opt for the opposite strategy of *skirting the topic*. Weighing the atrocities of long-ago against students’ (posited or real) sense of competitive victimhood 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 believes that the Holocaust happened (Oster, 2019).

Between these two poles lie other strategies, among them -

1. *Emphasizing shared values.* Teachers may mobilize TLH to socialize marginalized students towards a shared and consensual set of national values. As a ‘common denominator’ tactic, this may hasten acculturation and mainstreaming, but may come at the price of minimizing value-diversity.
2. *Making space for additional histories of persecution.* Teachers wishing to avoid alienation on the part of students from other cultures may encourage students to share their own personal or group-heritage experiences of persecution and prejudice, in the hopes that once the tragedies of ‘their people’ are addressed, students will become more receptive to those of others (Gryglewski, 2010).Some 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 education towards a ‘politics of identity’ (Taylor & Guttmann, 1994). The Holocaust in this case serves to empower students' ethnic self-expression and to sensitize them to the consequences of attempts to racially and culturally homogenize society. Depending on the ideological and personal tendencies of the teacher, this might take the shape of a critical pedagogy, such as Freire's (2007; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Gover, 2008) pedagogy of emancipation which calls for oppressed people to become aware of oppression and take action against it, or a pedagogy of difference (Alexander, 2018) which promotes value pluralism and multiculturalism.

Which of these approaches is used by teachers and under what circumstances? Data on this question is sparse. Some studies indicate apprehension among teachers when teaching about the Holocaust to predominantly Muslim or ethnic minority classes. For example, in one study, Australian educators reported apprehension concern when teaching about 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, UK educators reported ambivalent feelings and discomfort when teaching about the Holocaust to immigrant students (Short & Reed, 2004). In South Africa, teachers in training workshops on the Holocaust tended to compare their suffering during Apartheid to the Holocaust, arguing that Apartheid is also genocide (Nates, 2010).

Other studies focuses on the techniques and efforts made by teachers to draw non-Jewish students of color, immigrants and other marginalized groups into the topic of the Holocaust, which is not part of their own heritage and can even be framed as the competing history of a powerful group of whites, the Jews. Through these studies we learn that the challenges involved are quite formidable and require every kind of creative effort 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. Using detailed class ethnographies, she described for example, a teacher who devised an elaborate simulation game which lasted for the entire course, 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 biggest challenges when teaching about the heritage of one group's suffering to another.

 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 UK found high levels of interest in learning about the Holocaust among participants, who were as positive about TLH as 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 who teach in classes of predominantly marginalized students in order to engage their students with the topic of the Holocaust, this study posed the following questions:

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

# Method

We conducted in-depth interviews with 28 committed Holocaust educators in South Florida, all of whom chose to devote time to attending a workshop on teaching the Holocaust, where they were recruited for this study. We do not presume to generalize from this sample to American teachers in general but rather hope to provide a nuanced and contextualized analysis of one such set of teachers (Polit & Beck, 2010).

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

All teachers who participated in this study reported that 80-100% of the student body in their classes were first or second-generation immigrants (mostly from Cuba, Mexico, the Bahamas and Haiti) and black students. Most of the teachers work in inner-city schools, others work in rural locations. Some teach in special schools for immigrant children who entered illegally, and others teach in adult education programs for immigrants. On average, the teachers estimated that 46% of their students come from low SES background, as attested by qualifying for a free school lunch.

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

Fifty percent of the teachers we interviewed reported being ethnic minorities 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 intimately and personally acquainted with stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice in their own lives.

Interviews lasted 1-2.5 hours each and took place in a quiet, off-school setting. The interviews were constructed as informal conversations, following participants along their professional and personal life track and then focusing on their TLH in marginalized classrooms.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants also completed surveys eliciting attitudes towards TLH, demographic and professional information.

As part of a constructivist research framework, we acknowledge our subjectivities as researchers. One of us live in the US; three of us do not. Two of us are Holocaust educators; two are not. Culturally and professionally, these emic and etic perspectives interacted when analysing the material. To manage this interpretive diversity, we analysed the data using the Consensual Qualitative Research method (Hill, et al., 2005), which involves each researcher scrutinizing the interviews separately to develop a holistic understanding of each, then comparing our understandings of each interview to identify shared themes and narrative structures. We analysed the educators' narratives for underlying social assumptions and decoded them through the lens of critical discourse theory and cultural analysis. Inevitably, this analysis reflects our own interpretive lens, and is but one possible way of interpreting these narratives.

# Findings

An in-depth analysis of the interviews elicited five shared themes. We present them in the order of a typical process a teacher may 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 evoking their marginalized status (theme 3) to transmitting the material (theme 4, with two sub-themes), and finally, evaluating the success of their endeavours (theme 5).

## Connecting to the Holocaust: “I started to see parallels between my life and that of survivors”

Before making 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 late in their lives. 15 of the teachers connected to the topic by identifying parallels between their own experiences and those of the Jews during the Holocaust. Connecting to the vulnerability of being a persecuted minority member and a victim of prejudice generated passion and commitment toward the topic. Mateo[[1]](#footnote-1), who escaped as a small child from Cuba, leaving his mother behind, offers 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, said that she experienced prejudice all her life. Her recurring experiences became 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'.

Alvina does not demonstrate difficulty with comparing her own experience as a Black American to that of the Jews in Europe, perhaps because she draws parallels not with what was *done* to those persecuted, but with how it *felt*. She identifies with how she imagines it must have felt like to be percieved as "less than" and uses her own experience to create that sense of empathy for the Jews.

## Setting goals for TLH: "There is a bigger character goal than just the Holocaust"

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

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

22 of the teachers we 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 this 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, uses the story of the Holocaust to teach about character traits such as honesty and loyalty. Martin, a white teacher, describes himself as being raised in extreme poverty and neglect, and when teaching about the Holocaust, he focuses on life skills such as respect for others and for one’s self, and practical "techniques for dealing with the anger boiling up inside before it turns into violence." He says he speaks from experience when he translates 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 seem more like facts than values to us, but in reality, they 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 into these values at school and through the media. TLH plays an important role in such socialization processes. The teachers considered TLH to be an opportunity to ‘produce citizens.’ This entailed 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 speaks 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 tells 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 notes: “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.”

In these quotes we note how the Holocaust is removed from the realm of historical facts and figures to that of values, prescribed behaviors and moral messages. This 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 we interviewed chose to emphasize common values and remind students that regardless of where they came from, they were now all-American and had a responsibility toward their country.

## 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 in making the Holocaust relevant for their students. The first challenge was the 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 constricted worldviews and high levels of ignorance. As a result, historical events held little interest to them. A third challenge was the students’ academic disengagement as a result of poverty, fragile family environments, threat of deportation, 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 create a two-way interface between the Holocaust and the minority status of their students. Twenty-one of the teachers that we 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 said: “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 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. It is not so much a conversation about the injustice of immigration laws as a means to draw the students into the subject matter that she is after. Other teachers sought different themes of ‘otherness’ in their efforts to make the Holocaust relevant to their students. Emma, for example, opens 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 is tied to her desire to create a bond of those who have been discriminated against, with her students. "Don't see me as one of the privileged ones," she seems to be saying, "I am no different than you."

## Transmitting the material through a pedagogy of redemption: “This is the land of opportunity”

15 of the teachers used the Holocaust to acculturate their marginalized students to 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 US 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 sense of unquestioning sense of American values being 'the right ones' might explain why, among a majority of the teachers we interviewed, TLH was considered 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 we interviewed encouraged their students to believe in their ability to change their situation, and to use 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 introduces 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, in presenting the Holocaust as redemptive is evinced by his repetition of key words: Good, continue, survived, prosper. The story of the Holocaust, in a sense, draws it educational legitimacy by virtue of its end: "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 they deserve.

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 who are settled in the US. They 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 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, surviveNote also the way Mercedes' narrative shifts between European and American soil, setting them on par with each other: "The Holocaust really is a story ... this is the land of opportunity." Perhaps this attests to the powerful role of narrative framing in educatio.

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

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 relate not only to individuals. On a group-level, some teachers regard the Holocaust as a reflection of the victory of the Jewish people, and of its incredible resiliency. For example, Zoe said:

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 to their students the message that anyone, in any given situation, has a choice. Emma conveyed the message 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 tells 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 shares 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 ended up reaffirming 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 noting how briefly Valerie touches upon systemic, societal forces which forced individuals to roles, behaviors and even beliefs. It is more comfortable, more culturally congruent, to highlight "personal choices." In the process, protesting the Nazi regime becomes as obvious an option as not standing up for bullying.

## Perceiving TLH to be effective: “It makes a difference in their lives”

A final shared theme was the excitement, even eagerness, of teachers to teach about the Holocaust in their multicultural classes. They welcome what they consider to be a huge responsibility, especially since most of their students are 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 quiet down when the Holocaust is 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 about the Holocaust come off as supernatural: "hypnotic," "amazed," and "pivotal" are used to describe the change. In expressing her true rationale for teaching about the Holocaust, she shares that even siblings get along better following this course.

None of the teachers we interviewed were apprehensive about teaching about 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 faraway continent 70 years ago. They were eager to teach about the Holocaust to any age group and at any level or mental capacity, including students in special education classes, adult education programs, and even immigrants who had recently crossed the border. A handful of them 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 have endured in their own lives 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’.

Here is another testimony of the perceived transformative power of the Holocaust. As in Zoe's description of siblings (unnaturally) getting along, here too the mythical battle of 'good versus evil lying at the of the Holocaust is portrayed as having extreme educational effects, which overwhelm even the most challenging of students.

# Discussion

In April 2018, the Claims Conference ran a representative survey among American adults. This survey found critical gaps in awareness of basic facts and in detailed knowledge of the Holocaust. For example, 49% of the surveyed Millennials could not name a single one of 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. In this paper, we do not ask *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. In the introduction, we suggested possible strategies of TLH with marginalized students: business as usual; skirting the topic; emphasizing cultural values; encouraging personal narratives and emphasizing difference. Most of the teachers we interviewed chose to emphasize cultural values. They manage their students’ lived experiences of marginalization by acknowledging their pain yet obfuscating its political implications. Teachers mobilized TLH to reinforce the ethos that underlies the ‘American dream’; that responsibility for change lies with the individual, that all can be redeemed.

Contrary to our expectations, teaching about the Holocaust to marginalized minority students was not threatening by these teachers. They did not report competitive victimhood struggles among their students, nor did they experience hostility among students towards the topic. Rather than minimizing the topic, these teachers *expanded* 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 US, who found apprehension, concern, and ambivalence among teachers of the Holocaust in classes of minority students (e.g. Rutland, 2015; Short and Reed, 2004). Why were these teachers in South Florida so eager to teach about the Holocaust in their classrooms?

One reason may be class management: The Holocaust is a fascinating topic and a it turns out to be a powerful means of sustaining the students’ attention and minimizing behavior problems. Another reason is that in an era of standardised tests there is little space for value-education so when Holocaust offers such a space, it is taken up eagerly. This explanation resonates with previous studies (Foster, 2013) which show that Holocaust education is often equated with value education.

However, the main reason, we believe, lies in the connection between TLH and socialization: Teachers see it as an opportunity to impart norms and values to marginalized students, acculturating them to the mainstream American ethos. This raises several questions:

First, why would teachers choose the topic of the Holocaust, a European event, from all possible topics, to socialize students towards 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 affect surrounding slavery and the mistreatment (or genocide) of Native Americans. Furthermore, since Americans held the honourable role of rescuers in the Holocaust, teachers may feel they have the moral high ground for shaping the collective memory of this period in world history. In short, teachers may feel that they can present a better face of the US through TLH to students, who may not yet feel a part of this nation.

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 (see Cohen and Bar-On, 2009; Foster, 2013; Gross, 2010, and Authors et al. 2018, for different sets of goals). It is not difficult to see the attraction in an ethos of hope, redemption and happy endings. 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 this structure, teachers tell their students that they may expect a bright and positive future, despite current adversities. Worthy as it may seem, we would like to argue that this teaching goal is problematic:

First, it is historically inaccurate and philosophically superficial. As most historians, philosophers and theologians would probably argue, the Holocaust is a ‘dark place’ indeed; whether much meaning "good came out of it" is contended. There are fewer positive lessons to be learned from the Holocaust than negative insights about human nature, far fewer happy endings than tragic ones, and precious little redeeming features to append to its grisly outcomes. In addition to the fact that most Holocaust victims did not survive, most people in the Holocaust had scant choice, certainly the victims, but even some of Germans, who lived in a totalitarian state under a regime of terror. As Gray (2014) 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 in our interviews.

Our second concern with this rendering of the Holocaust is that it does nothing to encourage social criticism or to call for social change. The teachers we met acknowledged that American society was racist, and that they and their students suffer prejudice and marginalization. Yet they rarely raised questions about the current system and its values in class. Rather, they convey messages of redemption, free choice, and equal opportunities to students whose experience may not echo any of these and for whom this ideal might be unattainable. Delivering a message of redemption to marginalized students may leave little space for alternative goals which we outlined in the introduction 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 and call upon students to recognise injustice in their own system, name it, and aim for emancipation.

In sum, we argue that there is more than meets the eye in TLH with marginalized students. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

### 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 enough age-appropriate context and detail, and when the topic is presented in all of its inherent complexity, students are engaged, and comparisons to students’ lives become less necessary (Avraham, 2010; Author et al., 2018)[[2]](#footnote-2).

Curricular decisions in history are can have a powerful effect on the identities of ethnic minority students (Harris & Clarke, 2011). As educators, our own cultural lenses can be overpowering, and awareness of their implications can help make teaching decisions more mindful, 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 using the majority of the lesson time as a value education opportunity. However, as Schweber noted, ultimately it is the *consequential* curriculum which shows the actual human impact, or transformative power - of the program rather than the *symbolic* curriculum. Transformation can take place 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 make the class as egalitarian and action oriented as possible. This is taken up in our second recommendation.

1. Help call out injustice rather than emphasize redemption.

Teachers should carefully consider how much choice, redemption and positive meaning were truly involved in the Holocaust. Senior high school students should be able to face the reality of a senseless tragedy, not without causes, but possibly without purpose or meaning. This is all the more important for minority and immigrant students, who could be empowered by TLH to identify and combat injustice in American society and to embrace their cultural identity and heritage, rather than be encouraged to believe that US, as it currently stands, is the land of equal opportunity for all or the antidote to world racism.

Two alternatives to consider to pedagogies of redemption are Alexander's (2018) "Pedagogy of difference" which is grounded in diversity liberalism and in dialogical philosophy and emphasizes a pluralistic view of diversity explored from the vantage point of belonging to specific traditions and Freire's (2007) "Pedagogy of emancipation".

Let us consider Freire's pedagogy of emancipation ( (Freire, 2007; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Gover, 2008) in which emancipation from oppression becomes possible by an awakening of critical consciousness. How might it inform TLH and how could it be mobilized to empower marginalized students?

Freire emphasized the importance of situating educational activity in the lived experience 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 to transform reality.

For TLH with marginalized students, this could mean encouraging students to explore social problems affecting their lives and surroundings, searching for some of their sources and drawing on the Holocaust as a key historical period which could provide 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, helpers) but also to name and identify of the power of national culture, racist norms, systemic and institutional violence, corrupted 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 would be discussed. The twin concepts of pluralism and solidarity could be introduced as antidotes to absolutism, intolerance, racism and dehumanization. Following these lessons, students could dialogue about possible ways of transforming the balances of power, racism and marginalization in their own surroundings, identify a field of action, engage in proactive social action, and mindfully reflect on the effects of their actions.

In a paper on unacknowledged racism, Stevick ( (2019, p. 6) describes his disillusionment from a long-held belief that racism was 'other people's' problem, noting: "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: it should link and connect history and social realities, and it should do so all the more avidly when targeting marginalized populations.

 **Final remarks**

We embarked on this study as ‘outsiders looking in,’ in the hope that this status 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 is to recognize our own ‘Holocaust beliefs’. Three of us live in Israel, where Jews are a majority. We have experienced the perils of harnessing ethnic tragedies to bolster nationalist identity, and this wariness may have guided our critical analysis of American teachers. We acknowledge the commitment, dedication and care of these teachers to their students, as they use every opportunity to offer hope to their students, whether we endorse their means of achieving this goal, or not.

Future studies should explore and compare additional cultural lenses that shape TLH, within the U.S, and outside of it. This will allow educational researchers to consider points of convergence between the political, cultural, and historical 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)