

Holocaust Education and English Language Learner Students:
Reflections on Teaching the Shoah

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Introduction

Teaching the Holocaust involves confronting many challenges regardless of the setting involved. The complex nature of Holocaust history demands that students and teachers function at high intellectual levels as they study that history, and the need to determine how sensitive topics should be approached challenges educators in ways that are not present when teaching most other topics. Thus, any teaching of the Shoah places significant demands on teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical expertise.

These demands increase when educators teach students whose backgrounds differ from those of the general population. Specifically, students whose language skills limit their understanding of texts and classroom dialogue face multiple challenges as they seek to learn within new school environments. Moreover, the distinctive cultural milieu and life experiences that form the frames of references from which these students approach the study of all social studies topics make it imperative that teachers build curricula that include culturally relevant perspectives in order to ensure that students are provided an opportunity to learn material at sophisticated levels.

This paper considers how these factors influence the teaching of the Shoah in a Roman Catholic high school located in a major city in the western United States. More

than 80% of the school's students are either immigrants to the United States or members of the first generation of their families to be born in this country; thus, most students have been identified as English Language Learners (ELLs), a category used to determine if special language services should be provided to them. This paper overviews English language learning in the United States and teaching social studies to ELL students before discussing teaching the Holocaust in a parochial school whose primary focus is on teaching ELL students.

English Language Learner Education in the United States

Cruz and Thornton (2008) hold that most teachers do not feel qualified to work effectively with ELL students. While a high percentage of teachers in many regions of the United States have ELLs in their general education classrooms, fewer than 30% of all teachers have received any ELL training. Less than 3% of teachers are certified in ELL education, and no more than 1% of texts frequently used in teacher education programs include substantial coverage of ELL theory and practice.

This situation must be set within the framework of contemporary education in the United States. While total student enrollment in American schools grew 12% from 1990-2001, the ELL population expanded by 105% during those years. More than 10 million students in American schools are classified as English language learners, and ELLs represent more than 50% of the students in many urban school districts. In 2008, 1 in 9 K-12 students in American schools was an ELL; that figure is forecast to be 1 in 4 by 2030 (Cruz and Thornton, 2008).

Given these factors, teachers must consider the presence of ELL students in their classrooms as they plan and implement curricula. This requirement assumes special

significance in schools in which ELLs comprise a majority of the student body.

Teaching Social Studies to ELL Students

For several reasons, social studies teachers face many challenges as they prepare lessons for presentation to classes that include ELL students. Vocabulary must be a focus when preparing lessons for ELLs because social studies terminology is abstract and is used in sentences whose syntax is often complex and not easily recognizable (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).

In addition, much social studies vocabulary is culturally derived and subject to subtle interpretations, thus causing even native English speakers to experience difficulties of analysis and implication (Freedle, 2003). For ELL students, such cultural implications provide significant barriers to the development of their understanding of social studies topics. In addition, students from diverse cultural backgrounds often view historical situations in markedly different ways (Seixas, 1993).

Moreover, ELLs frequently do not bring background knowledge about the American context of historical events to their studies. Conversely, native English speakers in the United States have often been introduced to such information in non-school settings prior to studying such topics in the classroom, thus aiding their comprehension of the topics being studied (Cho and Reich, 2008).

Personal variables affecting ELL students in social studies classrooms also complicate the teaching/learning process. Collier (1987, 1989) notes that such factors as age, length of time in the United States, grade level at the time of matriculation in American schools, family educational attainment and socio-economic status, and how closely previous experiences are situated within the general Western cultural experience

all delineate the situations of ELL students from different backgrounds. These factors are particularly relevant with regard to social studies topics.

Despite having received little or no training in language assessment techniques and acquisition strategies and pedagogies, social studies teachers are often required to make critical decisions regarding the language skills of their ELL students (Case and Obenchain, 2006). Such teachers must: 1) determine the language levels of their students; 2) associate content standards and activities with language; and 3) select or create assessment instruments to be used. This process occurs within the already hectic context of social studies classrooms in which teachers must contend with all of the other duties and activities involved in the everyday teaching/learning process.

Finally, the selection of pedagogical approaches that reflect the backgrounds and needs of ELL students who are enrolled in mainstream social studies classrooms must be considered. Thus, Janzen (2008) stresses that teachers must consider linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects as they determine how best to present social studies lessons to ELL students. The presence of ELLs from many diverse backgrounds complicates what is already a multi-layered, highly nuanced process.

The fact that approaches used in teaching ELL students enrolled in American schools have changed dramatically in recent years complicates this process. Thus, Cruz, et al., (2003) note that “At the turn of the twentieth century, the goal of education was to ‘Americanize’ immigrant children and in many cases erase all vestiges of their native cultures, including their home languages. ... But by the latter part of the twentieth century, educators began to question the educational soundness and equity of merely ‘Americanizing’ students” (p. 3). In the new model that developed in response to this

critique of existing practices, the concept that ELL students had to conform to pre-existing academic, behavioral, cultural, and social expectations was replaced with an approach in which diversity was to be allowed, encouraged, and even valued.

This paradigm shift was particularly relevant in social studies classrooms for two reasons. First, classroom approaches had to be altered to allow for language divergence, a pattern that exists in classrooms in all disciplines but which is especially significant in vocabulary rich social studies courses. Second, the nature of the content involved in the social studies means that the topics covered and the perspectives taken on those topics would move through an evolutionary, if not revolutionary, process. Controversies involving such topics as centric-focused history courses and ethnic studies thus moved to the center of debate within the social studies community.

Introduction to the Reflections

During the academic years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, a teacher at a parochial high school located in a Western state integrated two Holocaust units into the school's curriculum. One unit was placed into an English 11 course, and the other was included in a United States history course. Each unit culminated with students participating in the local Yom HaShoah (Day of Remembrance) observance held in April of the year. This paper now discusses the approaches taken in developing and presenting the history units taught at Mount Carmel High School.

Overview of Mount Carmel High School¹

Mount Carmel High School (MCHS) is located in a city of 480,000 that is at the center of a metropolitan region with more than two million residents. New immigrants have been primarily responsible for the nearly 20% population increase that the city has

experienced in recent years, with most new residents being Roman Catholics from Latin America.

Opened in 2006, the school focuses on meeting the academic needs of a growing, underserved Catholic secondary school student population. Approximately 75% of MCHS’s students qualify for the federal free or reduced school lunch program, the primary statistic used to determine the socio-economic status of American students. Thus, most of the school’s students come from homes whose incomes are at or below the poverty level. The school’s mission statement focuses on this situation by stating that the school’s goal is to provide a Catholic, college preparatory education to motivated students with limited financial means.

Student Population Demographics at Mount Carmel High School

	<u>2006-07</u>	<u>2007-08</u>	<u>2008-09</u>	<u>2009-10</u>
Multi-racial	0.00 %	1.0 %	5.7 %	4.3 %
Black/African American	0.99 %	4.8 %	3.9 %	3.3 %
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.95 %	1.6 %	4.4 %	5.8 %
Caucasian	4.96 %	4.3 %	3.5 %	3.9 %
Hispanic/Latino	88.1 %	88.3 %	82.5 %	82.7 %
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
Other	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %

The overwhelming majority of MCHS’s students come from immigrant families, with most having emigrated from various regions of Mexico. The diversity of economic status, experiences, and cultural patterns present in these migration patterns has created many issues within the communities in which the students live. A high level of crime, ranging from graffiti to serious, violent situations, exists in the city. Gang violence, often marked on the basis of students’ geographic and cultural backgrounds in their places of prior residence, is also a major concern in the city. These issues are also in evidence at the school. In response to this reality, MCHS’s personnel have confronted these issues

aggressively. For example, gang intervention specialists are on campus regularly, and a pro-active drug interdiction program is also in place.

MCHS's Philosophical Approach to Education

In response to the fact that many MCHS students come from homes of poverty, the school's staff has researched educational philosophies that focus on the unique needs and circumstances that affect such students. Based on this study, the Ruby Payne model for teaching students of poverty (2005) is used in all classroom activities and related aspects of the school's program.

Payne's model seeks to reverse the long-standing perspective that students from diverse backgrounds and limited financial situations suffer from "the deficit model," an approach in which students are viewed as being limited academically and socially by their backgrounds. Payne's alternative view holds that the diverse experiences students bring to schools should be seen as a strength, an approach that can be utilized only after school personnel adopt strategies supporting such an atypical viewpoint.² Coupled with Cline and Nocochea's (2007) "Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English" model (SDAIE), Payne's approach attempts to provide experiences that enhance learning while giving students safe, productive, and challenging environments that value their life experiences. MCHS's use of these approaches implies that students are valued for what they bring to school instead of being judged negatively based on what they don't bring to MCHS. Thus, expectations for student success are high, and an evaluation of the school's graduation requirements reveals an emphasis on college preparatory work that covers a broad spectrum from the traditional academic disciplines to the fine arts and theology. The approaches used in teaching the Shoah to MCHS's ELL students implement this

philosophical approach.

MCHS Students' Prior Knowledge of Jews and Holocaust History

In most school settings and across all student populations, much of the prior information students bring to their first classroom study of the Holocaust is flawed (Totten, 2002). For example, many students have viewed documentaries about the Nazi Era and the Holocaust, but such works often present factual inaccuracies and questionable interpretations. Complicating this situation is the fact that students have often viewed dramatic films (e.g., *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*) that present inaccurate, and even implausible, accounts of the Shoah and related events. For this reason, it is vital that any prior information that students bring to their first classroom study of the event be deconstructed before any formal study of the topic can begin.

The deconstruction process should include activities that expose any biases that students bring to their study of the Shoah in addition to analyzing what they know and don't know about it historically. This imperative assumes special importance when teaching students in unique settings such as those found at MCHS. Perhaps not surprisingly given the students' backgrounds at MCHS, the most common misconception is that the Jews collectively are guilty of deicide, a belief that may be rooted in a subtle religious bias. This erroneous assertion is coupled with the fact that most students know little about Judaism in general. In many cases, the only thing that students know about Judaism is that Jesus was a Jew, a fact that is often obscured by the bias noted above.

For this reason, MCHS's Holocaust units begin by discussing Judaism and Jewish culture apart from the Shoah. When possible, a rabbi speaks to the students, who study both traditional and contemporary Jewish topics. In addition, students attend local Jewish

cultural observances, and some pupils observe Jewish religious services. Adopting this culturally inclusive approach is necessary if students are to avoid the tendency to depict Jews as perpetual victims, an unwanted side effect that may occur if students study Jews only within the context of the Holocaust. The potentially biased cultural perspective from which MCHS students view other groups could exacerbate this general problem with regard to Jews if it were not confronted as the unit is beginning.

Curricular Decisions with Relevance to the ELL Component of the Student Body

All MCHS teachers focus on “meeting the students where there are,” that is, they acknowledge the academic, cultural, and social strengths and limitations that students bring to school and develop lessons that reflect these factors. In this regard, reading skill and verbal acuity are of particular importance when designing programs of study for ELL students. For example, it is not unusual for 11th graders to have reading levels that range from primary grade to college level proficiencies. While this circumstance is not unusual in contemporary American high schools, the fact that the students attend school in an environment that is not native to their linguistic experiences complicates the dynamic of planning Holocaust units (as well as all other units taught in the school).

Thus, language considerations present a unique challenge in teaching the Shoah at MCHS. For this reason, vocabulary studies are emphasized. Students keep logs of terms they have not experienced previously and are encouraged to build personal definitions through both written and visual depictions. Holocaust-specific terms, many of which were originally in German or Polish, are translated into Spanish and then into English. Students quickly become comfortable with this approach and are able to work efficiently with many concepts in several languages by the end of the unit. Because most students

are bilingual (or in the process of becoming bilingual), this process aids the development of both historical content and linguistic skills, thus helping students adjust to life in a society that may remain unfamiliar and challenging to them.

The SDAIE technique is used in teaching both history and English at MCHS. As noted above, this means that a focus on vocabulary is central to the students' work with the Shoah. Students study a pre-determined glossary each week while developing individual subject-specific vocabulary lists, an approach that focuses on developing historical knowledge while enhancing language breadth and acuity in general. Special attention is given to promoting students' understanding of vocabulary specificity, thus implementing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's (USHMM) (n.d.) teaching guideline that teachers should "strive for precision of language." As such, the power of language in terms of both Holocaust history and general usage is emphasized. While experience and facility with this idea is a critical concept that all students should develop, it is especially vital that ELL students do so if their use of English is to advance beyond marginal proficiency levels.

Cultural Implications of Teaching the Holocaust to ELL Students at MCHS

Several cultural issues must be considered in teaching the Holocaust at MCHS. The most vital issue involves antisemitism, a topic that must be considered if Holocaust units are to set the event's antecedent historical context accurately. However, teaching about antisemitism is problematic and potentially controversial in American schools because a majority of students in the United States come from backgrounds that are at least nominally Christian. Thus, teachers in most American schools must be aware of potential problems that may arise when religiously-based antisemitism is discussed

because “Trying to teach adolescents about the roots of anti-Semitism in Christianity, however, even in the secular schools of a secular state, is like leading a tourist party across crocodile territory” (Dawidowicz, 1990, p. 27). This problem is accentuated at MCHS because the school is operated by a Catholic foundation, with most of the students coming from homes in which Catholicism serves as the basic social and moral foundation. In addition, many students first experienced Catholicism in their home countries mainly through Sunday masses and family interaction, meaning that they had little opportunity to discuss, analyze, and question their church’s history. Thus, many MCHS students are hesitant to discuss church-engendered antisemitism. For this reason, discussions regarding antisemitism are usually less comprehensive and insightful than others that occur during the Holocaust units, confirming the supposition that students remain apprehensive and unsure about Catholicism’s connection to antisemitism before, during, and after the Shoah.

Second, in addition to this religious component, MCHS students are often wary of discussing instances in which labels and sweeping identifications and generalizations are made. Because of conditions that permeate the social milieu in which they live, students are aware on intensely personal levels of the implications of labeling based on color, ethnic identity, and other similar factors. This personal connection is particularly acute when laws imposed on Jews during the Nazi Era are considered. For example, some students become upset and agitated when “Yellow Star” situations are discussed because they view examples of physical labeling with hostility and relate personally to the idea of being labeled negatively by authority figures. During this part of the Holocaust unit, photographs that show people with Stars of David attached to their clothing are analyzed.

Students deconstruct these images, with powerful reactions often occurring as students identify with both victims and perpetrators because being labeled and labeling others is often central to their daily lives.

Third, studying the emigration/immigration process that occurred during the Nazi Era is especially palpable for students at MCHS. Many students are in the process of acquiring legal residency and/or citizenship, while others are not eligible to establish any legal status within the United States. As such, the complexity of the time consuming, bureaucratic, and often unfulfilled process that German Jews experienced in trying to emigrate in the late 1930s and early 1940s is personally comprehensible to students. For example, the mass of paperwork that German Jews had to complete in order to leave Germany and enter the United States has parallels in the personal experiences of many students. As a result, they understand that German Jews could not "just get up and leave" when their situations became tenuous, thus empathizing with the fears and frustrations felt by potential émigrés from Nazi Germany.³

Affect of the Study of the Holocaust on MCHS High School

The educator who teaches the Shoah at MCHS had taught the topic in public schools for ten years before joining the school's faculty. Even with this experience, many doubts about implementing Holocaust education at the school were present as planning for the first MCHS unit evolved. The implications of teaching the topic to a primarily immigrant and ELL student body was a critical factor that influenced planning. However, the initial experience of teaching that unit at MCHS was very positive, and the reception given the unit energized an ongoing desire to increase both the scope and the depth of her proficiency as a Holocaust educator. One example from the experience of teaching the

Shoah at MCHS illustrates this dynamic.

The school's administration supported the implementation of Holocaust education and urged that school-wide recognition of the Holocaust be developed. As such, the entire student body participated in a Yom HaShoah observance. The school's parochial context allowed the observance to include religious music, readings, and prayers. Individuals from the community-at-large attended, and a Holocaust survivor was the keynote speaker. While such an observance in an American school is not unusual, its setting in a Catholic school with MCHS's demographics was unique. In addition, students in the Holocaust classes designed memory bands that were distributed to the student body as a whole, and faculty and students attended movie screenings, lectures, and exhibits during lunch periods and free times, thus broadening the scope of the study to include reflective experiences based on artistic interpretations of the event.

Notably, the impetus for these projects came from the students themselves. Four students organized the school's week-long Holocaust commemoration by composing prayers, organizing the creation and distribution of the memory bands and visiting classrooms to explain their significance, presenting daily reflections over the school public address system, and selecting and arranging the music that was sung during the Yom HaShoah commemorative service.

As a result, the school's observance of the Shoah gave students, administration, faculty, and staff a far-reaching educational and cultural experience. The teacher's classroom was filled in the weeks prior to the commemoration as students devoted their personal time to ensure that the observance would be successful. A suggestion box outside the classroom was provided so that students could reflect on their experiences,

and the box was often filled with positive comments that emphasized the depth of meaning that was central to the commemoration.

Evaluation and Outcomes of Student Work during the Holocaust Unit

Students were asked exit questions at the end of each class session, and short quizzes that covered lectures and discussions were also administered, thus providing an evolving formative assessment for the unit. In keeping with curricular decisions that formed the unit's foundation, these evaluations stress the development of vocabulary skill. Essays based on writing prompts and "free write" assignments were also assigned. In addition, the students developed research papers, adding visual representations that depicted key aspects considered in their papers as a final assessment.

While formal assessments of students' work gave quantifiable evidence of their academic growth, less formal measures of the units' impact on students provides a more meaningful, albeit subjective, evaluation tool. Student interest remained high throughout the units, and the intensity, depth, complexity, and sophistication of their conversations increased substantially as the units progressed. In addition, most students indicated that the Holocaust units highlighted the academic year. Students appreciated the fact that they were encouraged to engage in self-reflection in choosing their research topics and, more vitally, with regard to what implications would be drawn from the units themselves. Beyond that, student evaluations supported the contention that studying the Shoah is a captivating, compelling experience for many students, especially as that study centers on the experiences of individuals whose lives were affected by the Holocaust. As such, the teaching guideline that the study of the Shoah should move beyond a focus on large scale events and numbers and toward a study of the event's personal aspects was well

supported (USHMM, n.d.).

Conclusion

The approaches taken in teaching the Holocaust at MCHS are consistent with current theory that relates to teaching history and the social studies to English language learners. Four specific examples of the attention given to contemporary research may be noted in the development and implementation of MCHS's units on the Shoah. First, the focus placed on vocabulary development is supported by Short, Vogt, and Echevarria (2011), who note that "Since proficiency in English is the best predictor of academic success, it seems reasonable that teachers of English learners should spend a significant amount of time teaching the vocabulary required to understand the lesson's topic" (p. 12). Second, the emphasis given to involving students in varied activities inside and outside the classroom correlates with Short, et al. (1990), who state that many ELLs have never experienced collaborative learning in working toward the creation of a project.

Third, the development of a structured research paper is supported by Short, et al., (2011), who contend that "Academic writing is an area that is affected significantly by limited English proficiency" (p. 7); the research project assigned in MCHS's Holocaust units is designed to address this issue directly. Fourth, and perhaps most critically, the approach used in teaching the Holocaust at MCHS is consistent with Lemke (1990), who contends that effective content area learning must be centered on understanding the conventions used in the classroom in addition to learning the subject matter involved.

The Holocaust units at MCHS may be seen as an exemplar in promoting both content area learning in history and the social studies in addition to advancing the facility with which English language learners function within the contemporary American

educational environment. As such, the units successfully merge academic learning with cultural acclimation, thus achieving the goals that are central to the mission of Mount Carmel High School.

Notes

¹ Mount Carmel High School (MCHS) is a pseudonym.

² Payne rejects the thesis that her approach is based on “the deficit model.” For a critique of her work, see Paul Gorski’s “Savage unrealities: Uncovering classism in Ruby Payne’s framework (http://www.edchange.org/publications/Savage_Unrealities.pdf).

³ See the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (www.ushmm.org) for an interesting lesson that deals with the complexity of the emigration/immigration process during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

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