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Haleigh Jacocks

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Augustana College

Teaching Our Past to Preserve Our Future

Ignorance and the Insurrection

Haleigh Jacocks

Geifman Prize in Holocaust Studies Submission

March 12, 2021

A popular saying associated with tragic events in global history is “Never Forget”. This phrase has been connected to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, school shootings, and other international tragedies. Most notably though, after the events of World War II, the phrase first came into use at an Austrian exhibition in 1946 titled “”Never Forget”. In the decades that followed, that remembrance was a solemn task, a vow that citizens of the international community made to move forward, and not forget those lives lost. Yet in recent years, it seems as though the Holocaust and its horrors are in fact being forgotten. On January 6th, 2021 the United States Capitol was breached in an insurrection that will certainly go down in history. While watching news feeds during that day, and the days that followed, I felt an overwhelming sense of dread for the attack on American democratic processes, but even more so, I felt anger. Anger when I looked at the images of extreme antisemitism from some who partook in the riots. Shirts declaring “Camp Auschwitz”, “Staff”, and “6MWE” (6 Million Weren’t Enough), made national headlines. I could not believe what I saw, could not believe that people were ignorant enough to wear shirts so harmful. I then began to wonder where it all went wrong.

When I look back upon my own formative education, I remember my first real instruction on the events of the Holocaust in 6th grade. At the time, I could not fathom the horrors that took place and struggled to wrap my mind around the idea that people stood by and allowed those tragedies to occur. From that point on, the historical implications of the Holocaust took root in my mind. Every year I read more and more on the war, the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party, and the events that proved instrumental in the genocide of nearly 6 million people. I remember almost not believing the atrocities, but I let my history books sway me into thinking that it was something that happened so long ago, and could not happen again. My sophomore year of high school, my outlook changed even further, when I read Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. In connection to our

reading, we were expected to do our own independent research on other genocides in the past and present, then give a presentation on our findings. All of the sudden, I was confronted with so many more instances of mass murder, and I came to the horrible realization that the Holocaust was not that far in the past. Genocide is not an easy topic for any grade, but it is important to instruct nonetheless. As a future educator, I know the impact I can have on my students' understanding of the world around them, and I believe that it would be a disservice and a crime to let future generations become ignorant of the tragedies of our past.

I began my research by looking into the Illinois State Standards for Holocaust and genocide instruction, and what I found surprised me. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, "Every public elementary school and high school shall include in its curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of the Nazi atrocities of 1933 to 1945... To reinforce that lesson, such curriculum shall include an additional unit of instruction studying other acts of genocide across the globe. This unit shall include, but not be limited to, the Armenian Genocide, the Famine-Genocide in Ukraine, and more recent atrocities in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan." (ISBE 2017). This mandated curriculum matched exactly with my sophomore year unit, but I could not find its parallel in my elementary school experiences. While many elementary schools are doing away with outright social studies instruction in favor of coverage through *ELA* (English/Language Arts) instruction, I believe that there are resources that can safely and comfortably begin to ease upper elementary students into the more difficult topics of genocide and the Holocaust without becoming traumatic. Children's books including *The Whispering Town*, and *I Will Come Back for You: A Family In Hiding During World War II*, provide insight into some of the experiences and stories of those living during the Holocaust while keeping the level accessible for younger students. Though I have my own opinions and ideas on the

implementation of Holocaust education in my own classroom, I am still a college student, with no experience in a classroom that is all my own. I reached out to members of the Augustana Department of Education faculty, as I trust their wisdom and time in the field of education. I sent some interview questions, and the responses I received helped me further understand the merit and disadvantages of Illinois and United States social studies instruction in regard to the Holocaust and genocide.

Dr. Michael Scarlett is the department chair, with specializations in social studies and American Indian education. His was a perspective I was most intrigued about, as I found out that his first graduate school publication focused about teaching topics related to genocide. Holocaust instruction is strongly connected to historical instruction, and due to budget cuts, schools are removing more structured social studies education in favor of coverage in literature in order to focus on language arts instruction. I asked Dr. Scarlett if the lack of structured historical education in their formative years is disadvantageous to American students' worldwide perspective. He responded enthusiastically, saying "While I think that there are some excellent opportunities for students to develop literacy skills while reading non-fiction, I think that social studies as a discipline needs to be valued as a stand-alone subject for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is to develop worldwide perspectives" (2021). In my own experiences in the classroom, I have seen first-hand the drawbacks that come with the loss of historical instruction in primary education. Units that use to span weeks may now be covered in the course of a few days. Topics are no longer able to become fleshed out, instead events can only be touched at surface level, while the focus is instead on reading strategies. I agree completely with Dr. Scarlett's point of view, yes the reading of nonfiction texts can have a great impact on student development in reading and writing, but it takes away the opportunity for those students to be

confronted by the complex issues that they may be reading about. Without further instruction and elaboration, children will not be able to broaden their worldview past the communities in which they are a part of. School is the first chance that some students have to begin to explore the world around them that they might not have had access to before. Withholding historical education and instruction will only serve to prevent those children from beginning to understand the greater connection of their own lives to the world around them.

As I researched Illinois Standards for instruction, I was struck with the noticeable absence of a genocide that occurred in our own history; that of indigenous populations. As I will be a general classroom teacher, and not one of a specific focus, I asked Dr. Scarlett of his opinions of American history textbooks, and whether he believed that some of the textbooks in circulation serve to gloss over, or erase the United States' history of genocide. He agreed with my assessment saying; “Generally, yes. I think it is a fairly recent development (post 1960's) that scholars and historians have started to frame the history of the United States in those terms and textbooks tend to be pretty bland to begin with, so while I think they have gotten better at telling the truth about what has happened, especially in terms of indigenous histories, there is still room to grow. Also, the nature of history textbooks written for K-12 schools is to gloss over history, in general” (2021). Not only are many schools doing away with structured history curriculum, but those students K-12 who are receiving some form of history instruction are getting a simplified version, that may not truly allow students to participate in historical inquiry. Dr. Scarlett’s opinions were reflected in another interviewee. Dr. Mike Egan, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Augustana said “My sense is that the history curriculum tends to tell a story of continual progress as a nation. It does not tell a more accurate story which would be more akin to "1 step forward, 2 steps back, 4 steps forward, 3 steps back, a sideways step, 2 steps forward,

etc." That is, my perception of the school-based narrative of American history is that it does not engage aspects of our history that we should find shameful and, hence, try to work together so as to avoid returning to such shameful moments in the future" (2021). History can be shaped by whoever's voices can carry the farthest, even when some of those stories might not necessarily be true. Why is it that the United States' focus on genocide does not confront its own past? By refusing to acknowledge some of the more painful aspects of our own past, we allow ignorance to take root and fester. Once there, ignorance can be blissful, easier to understand. Can U.S. historical education cover everything? No, of course not. But we can notice where some of our failings in instruction have led to the breeding of ignorant and harmful stereotypes and ideals. We saw these ideals on full display this January, and many were asking "How could it come to this?" How can we as a nation, try to prevent future displays of ignorance and insurrection? My answer is education.

A mandate for Holocaust education without many real parameters is simply not enough. In looking at the fine print of Illinois standards, I noticed that under many of the mandates; "Each school board shall itself determine the minimum amount of instruction time which shall qualify as a unit of instruction satisfying the requirements of this Section" (ISBE 2017). Depending on the community, instruction of the Holocaust, slavery, and other difficult topics could be cut down through their own determination. When does that instruction begin? How in-depth should it go? How should educators introduce these difficult topics? Both Dr. Scarlett and Dr. Egan agree that Holocaust instruction should begin in upper elementary school with sensitivity and mindfulness. Dr. Egan said; "Children will see parallel events in modern times (modern-day genocide; modern-day violence) via various media (news reports that they may see with parents at home, etc.), and providing children with a framework to think about these things

in school would help them engage their parents on these issues (as well as their peers and teachers at school)” (2021). Children are remarkably perceptive, and as he described, fostering an understanding of events of the past can help students make sense of the present. Every year, the events of the Holocaust move further into the past, but its importance on history must be maintained. Students must understand that the atrocities of that past event are reflected in much more recent ideologies.

In order to confront and combat ignorance in our society, we must start with the next generation. We must change the way that we teach difficult topics. If we do not teach our past, we will stand to lose some of the things that we hold dear. A lack of understanding of our democratic processes, and a targeted campaign of misinformation lead to the events that unfolded at the Capitol, and continuing down this path we have set out on will only end in more pain. How can we implement change? How can we leave this path? I believe that we can start at the very beginning, in making sure that we as a population always remember. In our own history, and that of the world around us. So many American families have been impacted by the Holocaust, that instruction is not in vain. Continual education ensures that the next generation understands the transgressions of those that came before it, and perhaps in the future we can try to heal and learn from the sins of the past. But none of this can happen in a world without proper historical education. What can we do to change the current Holocaust education? Dr. Scarlett explained that the focus should be on “ primary historical accounts, including high impact videos and images (age appropriate, of course). I would also teach it in a way that does not inspire cynicism because I think that we need to find a way out. This is one reason I wrote the article I did on transitional justice. I think that by looking at how societies heal in the aftermath of genocide can be a hopeful way to address the topic. I also think it's important to make sure to

teach students that genocide can and does still happen and that it isn't ancient history. This is a major dilemma when studying history in general” (2021). To learn about our past is to actively work toward healing, to try and forget injustice will only serve ignorance. It is never easy to learn or talk about the darker parts of global history, but if we can work together to let those voices be heard, it will only benefit our children, and our future.

So how can we continue to educate ourselves after our formal education is complete? How do we ensure that we have not, and will not forget the events of the Holocaust? Appeal to your own humanity. Follow *@AuschwitzMuseum* on Twitter, it is the official Twitter page of the Auschwitz Memorial, and since following it, I have not looked back. Oftentimes, 6 million can be an unfathomable number. Even with the growing death toll of the coronavirus pandemic, it is hard to put the sheer magnitude of human loss to the numbers we see daily. The Auschwitz Memorial seeks to change that, and add faces to the numbers of those lost. Each day, the page tweets pictures of those imprisoned or murdered within the camps on their birthdates. Every day, I read their names and look at their faces. It is never easy, but instead of trying to think of how many lives were lost, I see the people, not the number. Those posted each day are from the records of the camp itself, so even it cannot cover every life lost to the Holocaust, or every life touched by it. Aside from those history immortalizes, it can be hard to reconcile the humanity with the events that occurred, but by remembering faces, watching eyewitness accounts, and actively working to educate yourself, I believe that we can continue to grow as a society.

Humanity has not and will not ever be perfect, but we can learn from our mistakes, and learn what we can do to prevent them from happening. Hate crimes against minorities are rising, and now more than ever I can connect my own life to those during the period of time that gave rise to the Holocaust. What are you willing to do? Will you stand by and allow a neighbor spout

harmful rhetoric when young ears are listening? Can we continue to perpetuate the harmful stereotypes of those who came before us or will we speak up and allow those who are being silenced a space to speak. I believe that as an educator, I will have the power to make a difference in the lives of the students I teach. But it cannot begin and end with one person. To create long-lasting change, we as a country must begin to work as one to improve the education of our children and ourselves. In teaching our past, both as a nation and an international community, we will preserve our future. We will build, heal, and emerge stronger and better than before. We must never forget. We must allow the voices of those impacted by tragedy to ring out the loudest. We can no longer sit idly, we can no longer pretend we understand. We must make a change, a vow to learn and to listen. Only through listening will we progress. Only through learning can we leave behind the dangers of ignorance.

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