

# “What Happened to Their Pets?”: Third Graders Encounter the Holocaust

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**Background/Context:** *Though widely believed to contain moral lessons of import for audiences of all ages, the Holocaust is often considered too complex, too appalling, too impentable, or too emotionally disturbing a subject to be taught to young children, even if taught only in its most “preparatory version,” to use Jerome Bruner’s famous phrasing. The subject matter, after all, deals at its core with human brutality, barbarous indifference, and industrialized mass murder. Nonetheless, a burgeoning market in materials designed to expose young children to the Holocaust implies that students are learning about the topic in earlier and earlier grades, a phenomenon that may be referred to as “curricular creep.” Such a trend raises the question of whether students should be exposed, purposefully and formally, to the horrors of the Holocaust, or, conversely, whether curricular creep should be somehow corralled. Although authors have weighed in on the ethics of Holocaust education, its history, practices, and materials, few have discussed its rightful place in the elementary school curriculum. Fewer still have empirically examined what the Holocaust looks like when taught to a young audience.*

**Focus of Study:** *To propose a policy answer to the question of how old is old enough to teach students about the Holocaust, this study attempted to determine what aspects of Holocaust history were taught in the third-grade classroom of a very experienced and well-respected teacher. Importantly, the study also proposed to examine how such teaching affected students, emotionally and intellectually.*

**Research Design/Data Generation:** *Data for the qualitative case study were generated through observations of this teacher’s class sessions on the Holocaust, interviews with the teacher and a select group of students and their parents, and the collection of all class materials and student work. The interviews were transcribed, the field notes were doctored, and all the documents were coded iteratively and written up as a portrait of the unit.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *The article concludes by considering third graders to be too young, as a group, to be taught about the Holocaust, thus recommending that curricular*

*creep be reigned in for this topic. That said, the competing interpretations of the teacher, parents, and some of the students are included for consideration as well.*

There is an appropriate version of any skill or knowledge that may be imparted at whatever age one wishes to begin teaching—however preparatory the version may be.  
Jerome Bruner, 1968, p. 35

Here's an implication of the Holocaust: that adults don't protect innocent children, and...*that* is a major reason why you don't teach this to young kids.  
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum education staff member,  
personal communication, 2000

My friend's daughter had an unsettling experience on a playground in second grade. A classmate wanted to "play Holocaust" and asked if she wanted to play along. My friend's child didn't know how to respond (though her parents wryly joked later that she should have said, "OK, but *you* be the Jews"). Because of family connections to the period, my friend's daughter already knew something about the Holocaust. Though she didn't have a wealth of historical information, she did know enough of its general outlines to recognize the strangeness of the other child's invitation. She knew that playing "Holocaust" should not be synonymous with playing games, ball, or house.

I don't know enough about the other child to know if the request was insidious or innocent, bogus or benign, but it almost doesn't matter. For my purposes, what matters is the typicality of the situation. I suspect that most kids in the United States first learn about the Holocaust, slavery, and other atrocities in history accidentally, randomly, because they happened to be standing by the monkey bars in the school playground on a Thursday morning.<sup>1</sup> I share this anecdote not because I approve of or condemn the serendipity of kids' exposure to scary concepts and events, but because it illustrates a pillar of the logic that motivates teachers to teach about the Holocaust to young children. Isn't it better, such teachers ask, for kids to learn about the Holocaust formally rather than informally, carefully rather than haphazardly, fully rather than piecemeal, and from a wise teacher rather than a random playmate? Embracing some variant of this logic, teachers are teaching about the Holocaust to stu-

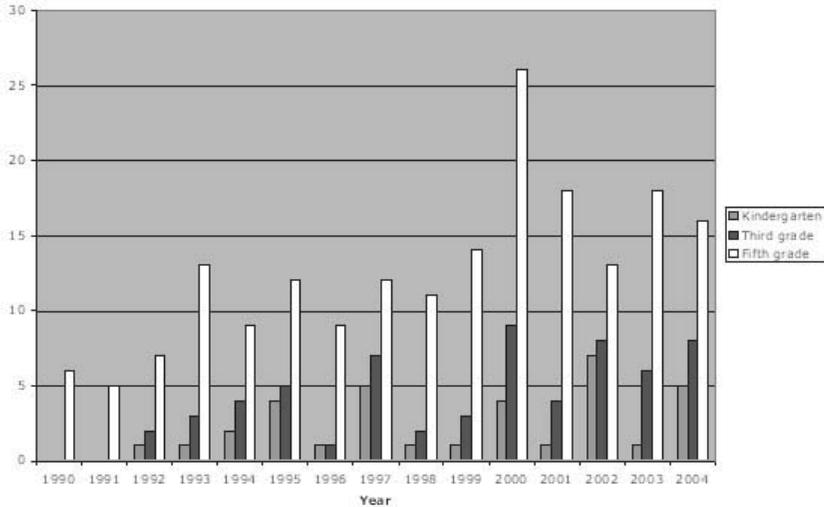
dents in younger and younger grade levels, a trend I call “curricular creep.”

In this article, I first describe curricular creep, attempting to explain its occurrence. I then position this trend amid the long-standing debates over whether young children should be exposed to the Holocaust as a formal part of the school curriculum. Third, I present a case study that examines the questions involved, analyzing what was taught about the Holocaust to a third-grade class at a public elementary school, how the students reacted, and what their parents thought about its age appropriateness. Though hardly conclusive, the case provides a preliminary answer to the perennial question of how old is old enough for youngsters to be taught about the Holocaust.

### CURRICULAR CREEP

Curricular creep can be imagined as the mirror opposite of teacher gatekeeping (Coburn, 2001). Whereas in gatekeeping, teachers wield their professional discretion to keep mandated reforms out of their classrooms, in curricular creep, they seek out personally meaningful topics to include. The creep occurs as teachers of younger and younger grades choose to cover the same event or topic,<sup>2</sup> creating a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) at which occurrence moves from isolated to commonplace.<sup>3</sup>

Although no direct evidence buttresses the claim that Holocaust education exemplifies curricular creep, much indirect evidence can be marshaled to support it. In the last 15 years, for example, Holocaust picture books specifically geared toward early- or nonreaders have emerged as a new niche market. (See Figure 1 for a chart of their numbers published *each year*.)<sup>4</sup> In addition, Holocaust educational materials and films targeted at elementary-age children and Holocaust professional development programs designed for elementary school teachers have multiplied (Baron, 2005; Kertzer, 2002; Shawn, 1995).<sup>5</sup> This proliferation indicates that Holocaust coverage is likely occurring at the younger grades, posing serious challenges for teachers of older students who will have encountered Holocaust material repeatedly by the time they reach high school. Although curricular creep and its attendant challenges for such teachers demand more study, my interests lie in investigating its consequences for students in the early grades. Thus, I turn now to the specific debates over Holocaust education for young children.

**Figure 1: Holocaust Books for Children**

### HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AGE-APPROPRIATENESS DEBATES

Though widely believed to contain moral lessons of import for audiences of all ages (Novick, 1999), the Holocaust is often considered too complex, too appalling, too impenetrable, or too emotionally disturbing a subject to be taught to young children, even if taught only in its most “preparatory version,” to use Jerome Bruner’s famous phrasing. The subject matter, after all, deals at its core with human brutality, barbarous indifference, and industrialized mass murder. The question at the heart of the endeavor has thus been, “Should young people be exposed, purposefully and formally, to such horrors?” Although authors have weighed in on the ethics of Holocaust education (Gourevitch, 1999) and its history (Fallace, 2004), practices (Schweber, 2004; Spector, 2005), and materials for young audiences (Baron, 2003; Kertzer, 2000), few have discussed its rightful place in the elementary school curriculum. Harriet Sepinwall (1999) and Samuel Totten (1999) are notable exceptions.

Responding to a 1994 New Jersey state mandate requiring teachers to teach about the Holocaust in grades K–12, Harriet Sepinwall (1999) encouraged teachers to do so carefully. For Sepinwall, the themes that the Holocaust encompasses are important enough to warrant coverage early on. Although cautioning that students in the early grades ought not be intentionally frightened and that teachers therefore ought to avoid excessively graphic materials, Sepinwall saw a significant convergence

between the “goals” of early childhood education writ large and the “hopes for using Holocaust education” in particular; both can “help build a world in which all children and adults feel safe and valued” (p. 8). Sepinwall thus recommended materials designed to help students identify and combat prejudice, negotiate conflict, and achieve resolution. Underpinning her arguments is a belief that early childhood education should expose students gently to the disappointments of the world, scaffolding their eventually complex understandings of atrocity. For Sepinwall, then, primary schooling should teach students about the human terrain they inhabit and their role in it, and their capacities to transform or perpetuate injustice. The Holocaust, as part of a larger developmental program, provides a venue for such education.

As the title of his article states, Samuel Totten (1999) argued that in answer to the question, “Should there be Holocaust education for K–4 students? The answer is no.” Responding to Sepinwall (1999), Totten claimed that the content of Holocaust coverage must be so “watered down” to be taught at the elementary level as not to justify its teaching at all; that is, what passes for Holocaust education in the early grades is either mislabeled as such or simply inappropriate. On the one hand, when watered down—in the form of sugar-coated, happily ending stories or thematic antiprejudice exercises—the “preparatory version” of Holocaust education is historically misleading or so generalized as to more accurately be called “civil education,” “prejudice reduction education” or “conflict resolution” (p. 39). If, on the other hand, the Holocaust is taught in its full historicity, it is simply too horrific for youngsters. Even the most sanitized versions, Totten claimed, eventually lead to the “obscenely inappropriate” because “teachers are almost forced to enter the horrific aspects of the Holocaust” (p. 38). Totten asked rhetorically, “What is the point of ever subjecting such young and tender minds and hearts to such atrocities?” (p. 37). He answered, “Not only are they unable to place such horrors in context, but learning such information is likely to result in nightmares and other psychological distress” (p. 37). Moreover, for Totten, “Many high school students at the junior and senior levels have great difficulty understanding that torturous history, so how can anyone expect a K–4 student to do so?” (p. 38).

Totten (1999) thus argued against Holocaust education in the early grades for two main reasons. Because the Holocaust itself, as subject matter, is “tortuously complex” (p. 36), its representation in classrooms is too sophisticated for young children to process intellectually. Second, the subject matter is too frightening for young children to handle psychologically, and thus if taught about in its appropriate fullness, it would cause distress. As a result, Totten argued that rather than confronting the

Holocaust directly, teachers should teach about themes related to the Holocaust, such as prejudice, discrimination, and anti-Semitism, which ought not be called “Holocaust education” but rather “pre-Holocaust education” (p. 39).

Despite the heat of the debate laid out forcefully by Sepinwall (1999) and Totten (1999), and despite its relevance for the burgeoning market in Holocaust-related children’s books and films, to date, very little empirical research exists that might shed light on the significant questions involved (Maitles & Cowen, 1999):<sup>6</sup> What can Holocaust education at the early grades accomplish, in what ways, and with what results? Put differently, what can young students learn about the Holocaust and with what consequences? Even the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, widely considered the national authority on Holocaust education, has no guidelines on the question, “How old is old enough?” or, conversely, “How young is too young?”<sup>7</sup> The study reported on here begins to fill that gap.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN: CONCEPTUAL FRAME AND METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS

The purpose of the research was twofold: to determine what aspects of Holocaust history were taught in the third-grade classroom of a very experienced and well-respected teacher and to examine how such teaching affected students. In terms of the representation of the Holocaust, I was interested in its narrativization—that is, the way in which this history was “storied.” As Peter Novick (1999) has noted, “on some level for all Americans—the Holocaust has become a moral reference point” (p. 13), its meaning clearly beholden to its context. What Novick means is that the Holocaust has become something of a metaphorical Rorschach test, whereby the meanings imputed to it reveal more about its meaning makers than about the event itself. For this project, the Holocaust’s plasticity was taken as a given and exploited as a benefit; its malleability highlighted the form considered suitable for young children.

Alongside these representational dimensions of the subject matter, I was concerned with the consequential aspects of the case: whether teaching about the Holocaust would cause psychological or emotional harm. Would engagement with Holocaust history “initiate depression and nightmares and/or reactivate trauma memories” (Simon & Armitage Simon, 1999, p. 264)? Of course, I was also curious as to whether third graders had the intellectual capacity, generally speaking, to understand the concepts involved in Holocaust history. Therefore, the three criteria I used to judge the case converged as (1) the students’ psychological and

emotional well-being—whether it was harmed in some way by their learning about the Holocaust; (2) the students’ intellectual capacities—whether they were robust enough to make sense of their learning; and (3) the representation of the subject matter itself—whether it was so “watered down” as to be considered, in Totten’s (1999) wording, “pre-Holocaust education” only.

To generate data for this study, I interviewed the teacher five times: twice before the unit began, once during the unit, and twice after it had concluded. I observed all the class sessions in the unit, collecting all the classroom materials.<sup>8</sup> In collaboration with the teacher, I also chose 4 students to “follow” through the unit. I specifically sought students who might not be intimidated by the idea of talking to a stranger and who would represent an ethnic, religious, and academic range. Stevie was the son of Cuban immigrants who performed well in school; Emmeline lived only with her mother, was Bahai, and had been identified as learning disabled earlier that year; Amanda was White, Protestant, and an average student; and Lila, the only Jewish student in the class, was White and excelled academically. I interviewed each student three times over the course of the unit to assess what he or she knew before the unit began and to gauge his or her reactions and learning during the unit. I made copies of the in-class work of all the students in the class to provide a contextual backdrop against which to evaluate the work of the 4 focus students. I interviewed the students’ parents in single extended semistructured interviews lasting between 1 and 3 hours.<sup>9</sup> All the class sessions and interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To analyze this voluminous data, I iteratively coded all the transcriptions, along with the students’ work, using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory. Particular codes (like “evidence of engagement” and “moments of confusion”) were brought to the texts, whereas other codes (like “historical empathy” and “explanations of behavior”) were generated from them. I triangulated the data across document types (looking for consistencies across student remarks, teacher interviews, and curricular materials) and within document types (e.g., across class sessions and across student interviews) to check for reliability. I then constructed what Stake (2005) has termed an intrinsic case study, primarily using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s notions of portraiture (1997). Finally, I checked the portrait that I had constructed with the teacher and two sets of parents to make sure that my representations matched their recollections, even if we disagreed over my conclusions.

The portrait is not generalizable in any statistical sense insofar as it is unclear how many early elementary school classrooms include intensive Holocaust units. That said, the themes and issues raised in this portrait

are *imaginatively* generalizable. That is, they apply not only to other instances of Holocaust teaching, but also may be important in the teaching of other atrocities at the early grades as well. The single case study, in other words, though singular, is nonetheless illustrative.

A critically important aspect of this study was to locate a well-respected, highly experienced teacher teaching this subject to young students.<sup>10</sup> Abe Kupnich<sup>11</sup> fit the bill both because of the recognition he had garnered for excellence in teaching and because he was particularly sensitive to the issues involved in Holocaust education.

### EMBEDDED CONTEXTS: TEACHER, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY

Mr. Kupnich had taught public school for over 25 years and had collected numerous teaching awards. Jewish, politically left-leaning, middle-aged, and bearish, he described himself as a “rusting idealist” whose teaching always involved issues of justice. In his words,

I pretty much, no matter what I’ve been teaching, either kindergarten or high school, I’ve always tried to infuse my teaching with themes of the importance of learning about intolerance and discrimination, be it social, economic, racial. I think that’s kind of the key point to any sort of education. . . . If we’re going to survive in this world, we have to get along. And if we’re going to get along, we have to get past our differences.

Mr. Kupnich had taught third and fourth graders for the previous 9 years, all of which had included units on slavery, the “genocide of Native Americans,” the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Holocaust. When asked why he began teaching such serious subject matter to such young students, he explained that though there are students who are “more mature than others, no matter what age,” he considered the majority of his third graders to be “ready to handle those issues.”

I often have kids who come back to me, years later, . . . saying, “Wow, you’re the first one to really teach me about those sorts of issues in the world.” I think that’s great. . . . I want to shake up their world a little bit. I don’t want to scare the heck out of them or anything like that, but I want them to also learn that it’s . . . it’s not a fair world here. There’s an awful lot of unfairness and intolerance and you can’t change it unless you’re aware of it. [So,] start early.

By “starting early,” Mr. Kupnich believed that he could frame students’ first understandings of the Holocaust, positioning them well to fight injustice later in their lives. As he elaborated, “if you start early enough, . . . then all of a sudden it’s not this foreign concept that’s just dropped on them in high school. . . . At least they’ll have the foundation.”

Mr. Kupnich’s dedication to social justice fit well within his school’s community. Lakeside Elementary was a K–5 school located in a historically liberal township in the Midwestern part of the United States. With roughly 300 students, it catered mostly to students whose parents were involved in the local university or worked in the state government. As such, most of the students were White and middle to upper middle class. A substantial portion of the student population, 20%–25%, were English language learners—roughly half of whom belonged to a large refugee community, the other half of whom came from all over the world. These students Mr. Kupnich liked to call the “temporarily poor”; they qualified for reduced lunch, but many of their parents were working on graduate degrees and would likely be well employed in a matter of years. Another 15% of the students in the school had special needs.

Mr. Kupnich’s class of 24 reflected those demographics: seven of his students were from countries other than the United States; six were learning English; and four had special needs from sources as diverse as autism, dyslexia, and parental substance abuse. Most of the students’ parents were college educated. Six of the students, one quarter of the class, did not live with two parents.

Walking into Mr. Kupnich’s class, one could see that not only had he taught for years but also that he had done so in the same classroom. Student work adorned the blackboards and posters, materials from years past covered the space around them, and every corner of the room contained ongoing projects or learning areas. Though the school library was directly across the hall, Mr. Kupnich had his own in-class library with a few hundred books. The students’ desks were arranged in six pods of four, and the students themselves were talkative and joyful. By mid-spring, when their Holocaust unit began, they knew Mr. Kupnich and each other well and felt thoroughly at home in his room.

## UNIT ENACTMENT

### *The beginning*

The Holocaust unit lasted 3 weeks and was literature based. Each day, just after midmorning snack, Mr. Kupnich would read a storybook aloud, discussing it with his students to check for understanding. Then, at the

conclusion of reading time, he would engage the kids in an activity meant to extend the themes of the story. On the first day of the unit, for example, Mr. Kupnich read aloud Eve Bunting's (1993) "allegory of the Holocaust," *The Terrible Things*. Loosely based on Pastor Martin Niemoller's famous quotation,<sup>12</sup> the story recounts an imaginary forest where groups of animals are taken away by the so-called terrible things. The white rabbits watch as each group is deported, dismissing the possibility that the terrible things will come for them until they, too, are taken. Only one young rabbit remains, thinking, "If only we creatures had stuck together, it probably could have been different." Unlike the "forward-looking" or hopeful frames typical of children's literature (Kertzer, 2000), Bunting's story is sober, somber even.

When he had concluded reading, Mr. Kupnich had his students imagine ways that they, as animal groups, could have resisted "the terrible things." The frog group, for example, imagined jumping to hypnotize the terrible things and hurling lily pads at them. The porcupine table predictably strategized poking the terrible things, and the rabbits, amusingly, considered nibbling them. When all the student groups had shared their plans, Mr. Kupnich explained what an allegory is and what this one referred to. He read aloud from the book's epilogue:

In Europe, during WWII, many people looked the other way while terrible things were happening. They pretended not to know that their neighbors were being taken away and locked into concentration camps. They pretended not to hear their cries for help. . . . What do you think the terrible things stood for, Lila? [The only Jewish student in the room, Lila was the only one to raise her hand.]

Lila: The Nazis.

Teacher: The Nazis, very good. The Nazis came and took away millions and millions of people, not only Jewish people but also Christians and . . . many, many other people. They took them away, and they never, never returned to their home. . . . Here's my question: If when this was going on, if everyone had stood together at the first sign of these terrible things that the Nazis were doing, would things have been different? [The students respond with cascading "yah's."]

Before he released the students for lunch, Mr. Kupnich had them participate in another activity. The students were asked to jump up from

their seats, point their thumbs at their chests and proclaim loudly, “That’s me!” if the trait Mr. Kupnich announced applied to them—for example, “I’m a boy!” “I love broccoli!” “I have a friend who has a different color skin than I do!” The students loved this activity, especially when they supplied their own proclamations (“I have crooked teeth!”). Emmeline told me almost a full month later that it had been her favorite activity of the unit. Mr. Kupnich ended by cleverly announcing, “I’m ready to go to lunch!” and all the kids rocketed out of their seats, thumbed their chests and yelled in unison, “That’s me!” Although the content of this activity showed off the students’ differences, the exuberance with which they participated was uniform; their cohesiveness as a community overshadowed their distinctions.

If asked to comment, I suspect that Samuel Totten would consider this first class session “pre-Holocaust education” because it touched on the Holocaust, but did so gingerly; the Holocaust itself only appeared in summary, abstracted and redemptive in form. The allegory of the “terrible things” was revised by the class context so that rather than focusing on tragedy, the students imagined triumph (Berenbaum, 1990). Though the storybook ended with a lone unhappy rabbit in an eviscerated forest and a caution not to be a bystander to injustice, the class session ended with students (as animals) helping each other, victoriously ousting their captors, and the moral import of seeing difference as part and parcel of communal fabric. Thus, Mr. Kupnich’s unit began by overriding the bleakness of the Holocaust, its tragedy trumped by the multicultural goals of encouraging students to accept difference and fight injustice. The picture books that Mr. Kupnich read thereafter progressed in intensity, both in their historical coverage and in their pictorial representations. Over the next weeks, the books became more informationally loaded, more specifically about the Holocaust, and more graphically illustrated.

Mr. Kupnich read *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* (Hoestlandt, 1995) next, a story narrated by Helen, a non-Jewish girl who remembers the Nazi invasion of France in 1942. Her best friend, a Jewish girl named Lydia, had come for a sleepover the night Jews in her town were rounded up for deportation. When Lydia decides to go home rather than stay over, Helen yells that Lydia is no longer her best friend. Lydia disappears, presumably dying at Auschwitz, but this “ending” is only implied because the story is told through the voice of Helen, a naïve 9-year-old who cannot comprehend these events.

The children in Mr. Kupnich’s room had little background knowledge to bring to bear in making sense of the book, especially in bridging the gaps in Helen’s narration. When in the story, Lydia’s mother sews a yellow star onto Lydia’s jacket, for example, no one except Lila knew what

to make of it. Mr. Kupnich held up a six-pointed star cut from yellow construction paper to make the symbol tangible. Recognizing it as her own, Lila yelled out excitedly, "It's a Jewish Star!" When Mr. Kupnich asked why Lydia's mother sewed the shape on her jacket, the other students' lack of knowledge surfaced. "Maybe Hitler was Jewish and wanted everyone else to be Jewish?" one student hazarded. Amanda suggested, "I think she was just putting the star on to show that she was Jewish and she was proud of it." "That way, when they tried to mock it, they couldn't," another student explained. As another student made a comment along the same lines, Lila interrupted,

Hitler didn't like Jewish people so he would make them put these stars on them . . . so *he* could tell which ones were Jewish . . . and take them to concentration camps.

Mr. Kupnich: Okay. Hold your thought there. Yes.

Lila: [can't restrain herself, says something like "It wasn't to show] I'm Jewish and I'm proud of it." Some people here have not heard about this . . . Hitler *didn't* like the Jewish people.

Not all the students were wholly ignorant of the Holocaust at the beginning of the unit. Some had heard the term, and others knew that Jews were victims, but mostly these students had stray wisps of information rather than a coherent picture of the events. As indicated above, too, most couldn't imagine that identity symbols might not be pride packed. As the next part of the conversation showed, though some had heard of the concentration camps, they certainly didn't understand what they were.

When Mr. Kupnich asked what the students thought happened to Lydia at the end of the story and whether Helen ever heard from her again, Thomas answered first: "I don't think Lydia got in contact with Helen again because she probably died . . . [in a] concentration camp." Another student elaborated, "I think the same thing as Thomas but also I think maybe she didn't call because she didn't think Helen liked her anymore." (In her mind, you could potentially make a phone call while being an inmate in a concentration camp.) Amanda thought that she was clarifying the confusion when she explained, "I think Lydia died in a concentration camp because, when they were taking a shower in the morning, I think they used to spray gas on them." Mr. Kupnich wisely did not correct these students' misconceptions, letting the unit's unfolding do so instead.

Like the activity that followed *The Terrible Things*, the one that followed *Star of Fear* redeemed the book's tragic dimensions, although this time, in a more tempered fashion. For homework, the students had written letters from Helen to Lydia, an assignment that provided a kind of closure that both the true story and book's storyline lacked. The students read their letters aloud in class the next day, almost all of which expressed contrition:

Dear Lydia, I am so sorry I was mean to you. I did not know why you left but now I know. I would have helped you if I knew that you were leaving but not on purpose. I hope you forgive me. You are still my best friend, at least I hope so. Someone else lives in your house now. Do you still like me? Please right [sic] me back. I hope those people did not hurt you. There was no reason to. You, along with all those people, did not commit a crime. Your friend, Helen.

Lila's letter, in its present tense, indeed the structure of the assignment itself, insisted on Lydia's continued presence in the world, a goal the book sought to fulfill by commemorating her absence. Despite the up-lift of the assignment, though, Mr. Kupnich reminded students as they read their letters that Helen never saw Lydia again.

In sum, the first part of Mr. Kupnich's unit exposed students to the Holocaust as a catastrophe but did so by giving them opportunities to avoid its emotional weight. They could rewrite the victimization of animals into the heroism of resisters, and they could wonder what happened to those who were taken away rather than knowing conclusively. It was during the second stage of the unit that Mr. Kupnich's students confronted tragedy head-on.

### *The middle*

Mr. Kupnich next read *Hiding From the Nazis* (Adler, 1997) to his students.<sup>13</sup> Also based on a true story, this picture book contained much more historical information than the previous books. The students used their atlases to accompany his reading. They located Germany on a map of Europe and followed the events on the continent in the late 1930s. They saw which countries Germany annexed and learned about the proliferation of anti-Jewish legislation. They discussed World War II, which countries fought for whom and why. And, importantly, they followed the central storyline of two Jewish families' sagas through this period. In the book, the Baer parents hide their 4 1/2-year-old daughter, Laurie, with a

Christian family, telling her that she will be staying with friends for a short time but not explaining why. By this point in the unit, though, the students had learned enough to venture well-informed guesses. William, for example, proposed, “Maybe the word [i.e., the name] Baer was Jewish and they don’t want to tell anyone that, if [in case] someone was a Nazi.” In the story, Laurie is hidden in multiple homes, finally staying on a farm in the Dutch countryside for 2 years. Mr. Kupnich read,

“Well, one day when Laurie was at home with Cornelia on the farm, suddenly they heard that the Nazis were coming. There was not enough time to prop her up on the bicycle and race her over to the next town.” What do you think they did? What would you do?

Student: Go up to the attic.

Student: I would hide in the house, like in the basement.

William: Dig a hole in the ground and put yourself in it.

Teacher: You better be a fast digger because they’re in the driveway in a minute.

[Continuing to read:] “Laurie was quickly taken into a closet. Underneath the floorboards in the back of the closet was a secret tunnel . . . It led to a large box inside the barn underneath the hay loft.” Let’s see if you can picture this. [Mr. Kupnich turned the book around to show the students a diagram of the hiding place.]

Students: Cool. . . Whoah. . .

When I heard these reactions, I couldn’t help thinking that the students had lost sight of the larger story’s narrative—the hardships of hiding amid persecution. Their widened eyes and un-self-conscious smiles indicated that they were thrilled by the technical wizardry involved in disappearing. As Stevie explained to me much later, of the books Mr. Kupnich read, he had liked this one the most: “I liked the trap door part.” When I asked him to elaborate, he told me, “I like secret places. I like secret stuff. So, I liked that part.”

Seeing the students’ excitement, I bumped up against my own preconceptions of what learning about the Holocaust should look like. The students, I felt, weren’t reacting “appropriately” in the moment. They were

enthralled by the “secret stuff” rather than offended by the obvious suffering. They didn’t seem affected by the seriousness of the material. But then again, how could they be? They didn’t yet have the heavy emotional apparatus of what it means to behave appropriately in the face of atrocity because they didn’t yet fully understand what this atrocity was or what atrocity is generally. They didn’t yet know the “ending” to the historical narrative, much less to the book’s story.

In *Hiding From the Nazis*, Laurie’s parents survive and come to collect her at the end of the war, though the book is careful not to gloss over the traumatic scars of having been hidden. Laurie does not remember her parents and hides from them when they arrive. Moreover, once the family has immigrated to the United States, Laurie’s mother is still terrified of losing her daughter when Laurie goes off to school every day. The book concludes by saying, “It took Laurie many years to learn to trust and love her parents again, but at least she was safe. She was one of the few children who had survived the Holocaust.” As Mr. Kupnich finished, a student’s hand shot up. “What is the Holocaust?” she asked. Other students piped in answers, “It’s war!” “It’s what we’re talking about!” Mr. Kupnich harnessed the squabbling.

Teacher: That’s a very good question. What exactly. . . What part of the war is the Holocaust?

Student: The ending?

Teacher: No, it’s not the ending.

Lila: It’s the part in Germany with the Jewish people and taking them away. That was the part called the Holocaust.

Teacher: The Holocaust is the part where 6 million Jews, and Gypsies, and Romanians [sic<sup>14</sup>] and Christians were taken away, sent to those camps and basically murdered. That part of the war is called the Holocaust.

Mr. Kupnich’s answer subtly expanded on Lila’s by including other Nazi victims, such as the Sinti and Roma (formerly known as Gypsies), and by implication, other non-Jewish groups. This inclusion was typical of Mr. Kupnich’s stance. He wanted his students not to think of the Holocaust as an isolated event specific to Germany or only about Jews.

To close the day’s class, Mr. Kupnich had the students participate in a brief simulation of hiding. Reminding them that Laurie sometimes had

to hide for more than an hour at a time throughout a span of years, Mr. Kupnich turned off the lights and challenged the kids to sit at their desks for 5 full minutes “without [making] a sound.” The students needed no prodding to take the activity seriously. Though there were occasional noises and small involuntary infractions—from nine students, according to Mr. Kupnich’s count—all participated earnestly, exhaling exuberantly when the 5 minutes were up. “Oh my gosh!” one student exclaimed, “It felt like 15 [not 5]!” “I know,” another commiserated, “I couldn’t have done it for an hour!” When the students begged Mr. Kupnich to tell them who had “[made] noises enough to maybe be heard if the Nazis were searching your home,” he declined, explaining that that wasn’t the point of the activity; getting a sense of just how difficult it was to hide had been.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Kupnich began reading David Adler’s (1994) book, *Hilde and Eli: Children of the Holocaust* the next day. Recommended for Grades 3–7, the book follows the experiences of two victims—Hilde Rosensweig, a German shopkeeper’s daughter, and Eli Lax, a Czechoslovakian rabbi’s son—tracing their experiences against the backdrop of the rise of the Nazis, the laws against Jews, the establishment of ghettos, and conditions in Auschwitz concentration camp, where both characters are eventually murdered. The narration is “incredibly bleak” (Silverman, 2002). The prose is stark, the content starker. “One night in July, 1941, Eli’s cousin, Enzarick was taken away [from the ghetto]. Eli heard the screams, and after that, Eli was too frightened to sleep at night,” Mr. Kupnich read. The students sat in rapt attention, interjecting questions when they couldn’t interpret Adler’s oblique references. (“Do you mean that [he] got taken away and killed?”—“They never saw them again, so yes, most likely, they were killed.”)

Mayli had been sitting with a creased forehead for a few minutes, seemingly both confused and upset, when she finally blurted out a question, “Were the Nazis all mean?” Mr. Kupnich replied, “The Nazis were pretty much not very nice people.” He was quick to add, though, that not all Germans were Nazis, asking his students to complete his statement: “There were lots of German people who were not Nazis because some of the German people were—” “Helpers of the Jews,” one student supplied. “Jewish people,” another mentioned.

To me, this exchange was somewhat disheartening. Mayli’s query targeted a core issue of the Holocaust, and it had arisen spontaneously. I wished that her question had been opened up and discussed rather than closed down and answered (Simon, 2001). Although I appreciated Mr. Kupnich’s insistence on the expansiveness of the category of Germans, I lamented the missed opportunity to discuss the humanity of Nazi perpe-

trators and of the German people. I knew, though, that Mr. Kupnich's wanted the students to reach "Auschwitz" (in the book) before heading to recess in just a few minutes. Before dismissing the students, Mr. Kupnich asked them to write down any questions they had about the Holocaust so far.

A long weekend later, Mr. Kupnich prepared the students to learn about the concentration camps, the topic of nine students' questions. He explained that sometimes kids get nervous when they hear about them, and sometimes they laugh as a result of that nervousness. If that happened, he wanted the students not to interpret it as a sign of insensitivity. "What do you do when you're nervous?" Mr. Kupnich asked to launch the discussion.

Emmeline: When I get nervous, my tummy, like has butterflies . . . and my head is sweaty, and I'm all kind of shaky. [Emmeline shakes her head in a goofy way to illustrate.]

Lila: Sometimes I cry, especially when I'm with somebody, because the stories are about people who could have been MY relatives!

Amad: Throw up?

The students giggled at Amad's suggestion, but the mood changed as Mr. Kupnich reviewed where they were in the story. He showed drawings from Adler's (1994) book that evoked the horrid conditions in the cattle cars. And he explained that sometimes, when people died from the heat, "It was so crowded, the bodies could not even fall to the ground."

Examining the pictures, Emmeline's mouth and eyes hung open, Stevie shivered, and Lila's head was on her desk. Mr. Kupnich resumed reading. He read about Eli, who, along with his family, was "chased with clubs and pushed onto a train" (Adler, 1994), but still had a "little bit of hope," dreaming of owning a bicycle one day. Stevie, looking worried, needed that last point clarified. "They were chased with clubs?" he asked. Mr. Kupnich nodded in assent and seemed about to explain further when Lila cried out, "Hurry up!" She was unable to bear the suspense of waiting for the story to resume. Mr. Kupnich read the few short lines detailing Eli's horrific journey on the train, and Stevie interrupted again. "No food?" he asked. "No food. No drink. Three days. Having to stand up, no bathroom," Mr. Kupnich responded. "Isn't that impossible?" Mayli queried and a host of other related questions tumbled into discussion. "Could you sleep?" Stevie asked. "If you could sleep standing up," Mr.

Kupnich responded. Hearing that, Stevie's body stiffened and he pretended to sleep as a toy soldier might. "The train stopped after three days. They were now at a place called Auschwitz, which was a concentration camp in Poland," Mr. Kupnich read.

Lila's head was down on her desk, cradled in her arm, but she was obviously listening. Stevie's eyes were wide open and fearful. Mr. Kupnich read quietly about Eli, his father and brother being separated from his mother and sisters. "Here's the Nazis separating the families, and most of these families never, never got to see each other again," Mr. Kupnich explained. Stevie, upset and shocked, gripped his temples with his palms, his elbows and bottom lip jutting outward. "Why did they do that?" he asked incredulously. "Keep that in mind as we continue," Mr. Kupnich answered gently, reading onward. "The Nazis told Eli . . . and the others that they needed to take a shower before they went into the camps. They were told to take off their clothes," he read.

Lila's head remained on her desk, and several students' faces seemed locked in dreaded anticipation, Stevie's and Emmeline's among them. They knew what the showers meant, but they had not heard about them in the context of individual, lived lives. Mr. Kupnich continued reading,

Then, . . . the doors were locked. Instead of water coming out of the shower heads, poison pellets were dropped in through an opening in the ceiling, and soon, in a matter of minutes, young Eli, his brother, his father and all his neighbors, were killed from the gas. Later the Nazis took their bodies out of the bathhouse and burned them in a big, mass grave.

. . . By May 8th, 1945, the day the war in Europe ended, over 6 million Jewish people had been murdered by the Nazis. One and a half million of them were your age or younger. Among those killed of course, were Hilde Rosensweig and Eli Lax. (Adler, 1994)

Mr. Kupnich held up the picture at the back of the book. "The photograph on this page was taken in 1940 when Eli was only 8 years old," he said. "How is that compared to you guys?" he asked. Several voices groaned, whimpered, and whispered in awkward chorus, "Same age."

Mr. Kupnich had brought in photographs for the students to view, but before showing them, he invited questions. "If like their mom was dead or something, umm, and their dad had to take care of a baby or something, would they separate the baby from the dad?" Stevie asked, his interest prompted by having a newborn sibling at home. "Very often, they

would just kill the babies,” Mr. Kupnich replied. Mayli’s face seemed ready to crumble. Lisa, who sat beside her, looked shocked. Other questions followed: “What if the dad wasn’t strong enough to work?” “What kinds of torture were people subjected to?” “Why do they call it a concentration camp?”

Mr. Kupnich replied to each question patiently, answering the last question in a roundabout fashion by reminding students of a science experiment they had completed earlier in the month. Grabbing a test tube filled with water to serve as a visual prompt, he talked about sediment being all mixed up in a solution, falling to the bottom and “concentrating” in the jar overnight. He then asked, “What does concentrate mean?” “Is it falling to the ground?” Emmeline guessed. “Killed, tortured?” Christian volunteered. “No, it’s all concentrated on the bottom of the jar, here. Lila?” Mr. Kupnich called on Lila because her head was still down on her desk, but she didn’t respond. Mr. Kupnich answered for the students: “All the sediment and rock is *concentrated* into one area, which means it’s all pushed into one area.” Emmeline now understood. She explained to me later with a sheepish smile, “When I first heard it, I thought it meant like concentrate on your work,” a phrase she associated with the attention deficit disorder she had been diagnosed with earlier that year.

I have to admit that I was put off by this pedagogy. Mr. Kupnich was obviously technically right, but the juxtaposition was ungainly. The equation stripped the atrocity of its human dimensions. And yet Mr. Kupnich’s choice illuminates the specific work of teaching young children this topic; Mr. Kupnich had to scaffold their learning constantly. Not only was he teaching that the Holocaust happened and what was involved but also the very terminology used to explain it.

“We’ve read lots of stories where we’ve had drawings. I think at this point you are ready to see some photographs,” Mr. Kupnich said. Stevie, seeming anxious, muttered a few “No’s,” while other children exchanged nervous glances with overly expressive faces. “These are real photographs here of people who were in those concentrations camps, [people] like Eli, like Hilde, and later we will find out, like Anne Frank.” Mr. Kupnich held up the cover of a (Lace, 1998) book entitled *The Death Camps*, which contained an iconic photograph of 10 children in oversized concentration camp uniforms peering out from behind layers of barbed wire. One pulls up her sleeve to show a tattooed forearm. “That’s all of them?” Emmeline asked, unsure of how many people survived the concentration camps. “Does this look like 6 million people?” Mr. Kupnich replied, confusing the point of her question and, as he explained to me later,

attempting to “lighten the moment” with a rare sarcastic remark. As he walked from pod to pod, the students strained and stood to get a better look.

Next, he showed photographs of the wooden bunks on which victims slept, a gargantuan pile of children’s clothing, and a pile of human corpses. Stevie, who had emitted soft squeals at each picture, gasped loudly upon seeing the last image. The other students looked shocked as they pushed out their chairs and craned their necks to see. Someone exclaimed, “Oh my God!” “Now you do not have to look at this picture if you do not want to,” Mr. Kupnich told the students, continuing,

This is a mass grave. I’ll tell you, the picture is so far away that you really can’t see individual corpses, so to speak. This is just people who were killed that week, that day. Now picture that this was happening week after week after week after month after month—

Lila: After year!

Lila had raised her head to see the pictures and couldn’t restrain herself from interrupting.

Mr. Kupnich then showed a picture of the ovens, explaining that they were used to burn the bodies. Joe echoed Mr. Kupnich’s word, forming it into a question; “Ovens?” he asked. At the next photograph, Mr. Kupnich explained, “Most of these people did survive, but I want you to see what starving does. . . . These are people who haven’t eaten in months, people [who] were considered to be living skeletons.” At this point, everyone in the class stood to look at the emaciated survivors. “Oh my Go-oo—d,” “Oooh” “Look at his bones!” and other expressions bubbled up from around the room. Stevie asked, “Is that a real picture?” Mr. Kupnich had to count out loud to get the students settled in their seats again. “So when the allies arrived, that’s what they saw, . . . hundreds of bodies, thousands of bodies . . . crematoria where they burned the bodies. They saw these people starving to death, and they also saw piles and piles of clothing.” Stevie, in an exaggerated motion, pressed his cheeks with his hands and let out a soft, high-pitched screech as Mr. Kupnich held up a new photograph, this one of an enormous pile of shoes. Amad, examining the picture, blurted out, “Penny loafers!” Clay, sitting beside him, replied, “Whoa, if those were pennies, we would be rich!” Whether interpreted as a mark of immaturity or simply of a developmentally appropriate concrete focus, these students’ remarks showcased their deep engagement in their learning.

Mr. Kupnich read *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* (Adler, 1987) next. In this story, a roughly 6-year-old girl sees the number tattooed on her grandfather's forearm as he washes dishes, and asks him about it. Importantly, the grandfather had managed to conceal it from her until that moment. Though he is hesitant about sharing his story or telling too much, his daughter, the girl's mother, prods him. With parental approval firmly in place, the grandfather gently discloses the circumstances of his tattooing. In class, Mr. Kupnich elaborated on the dehumanization of numbering "people." Stevie and his tablemates joked about this briefly, referring to each other as numbers—"Hey, number 73!" Their silliness subsided as Mr. Kupnich read about the grandfather's personal losses. "The Nazis killed six million Jewish men, women and children—innocent people. Some were my friends, my family" (p. 20), the grandfather says, before the book concludes on a redemptive note. "You shouldn't be ashamed to let people see your number," the child-narrator proclaims to her grandfather, adding, "You didn't do anything wrong. It's the Nazis who should be ashamed" (p. 22). The two characters hug and finish doing the dishes together, smiling.

Mr. Kupnich had waited to read this book because it contained actual photographs. As he had explained to me, he purposefully progresses in his unit from showing drawings of animals (in *The Terrible Things*) to showing drawings of people (in *Hilde and Eli*), and only thereafter to showing actual photographs. Mr. Kupnich felt that this progression corresponded to the students' growing awareness of the "reality" of the Holocaust. Just as the pictures they were exposed to became more "photographic," so the Holocaust, to them became more "real," its reality more tangible. Mr. Kupnich seemed to subscribe to the "epistemological status of photographs" that "supports our conviction that photographs provide a knowledge that illustrations cannot" (Kertzer, 2002, p. 247).

Despite being illustrated photographically, however, the touching story in *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* seemed to mitigate the horror of the photographs that the students had just examined. It corralled their study of the Holocaust into the safer realms of survivorship rather than murder, home rather than the concentration camps, pride rather than horror, the mundane rather than the extreme, the individual rather than the mass, and family continuity over obliteration and loss. In multiple senses, then, the book provided students with a respite even as it furthered their understandings of the Holocaust, answering their many questions about tattoos. Mr. Kupnich assigned homework to write letters to "Grandpa" about whether he should have "kept that number hidden," and then released his students to recess.

The next day, the students read their letters aloud. Most reiterated the

granddaughter's sentiments, encouraging the grandfather to show his number unabashedly. As Amanda wrote, in an oft-repeated sentiment, "You should show your numbers to tell other people that you are Jewish and darn proud of it!" She elaborated, "You should be grateful that you survived." Many others wrote that by showing his number, the grand-father would provide a public service, helping to teach inquirers about what he endured. Emmeline emphasized the practicality of wearing short-sleeved shirts on hot days, which prompted Stevie to clap in agreement.

Billy was the eighth child in the class to read his essay. Before he began, he whispered to Mr. Kupnich somewhat urgently. He was worried because his would be the first letter to argue that the grandfather should keep his number hidden, and he wanted to make sure that was all right. After Mr. Kupnich assured him it was, Billy read. His missive advised the grandfather to keep his number a secret, to only show it to members of his family. "We will not tell our friends," Billy had written. When Mr. Kupnich tenderly probed his stance, Billy explained that people might "put him back in a concentration camp or like put him in jail." "There aren't any more concentration camps here in the United States," Mr. Kupnich cajoled, but Billy was unflappable. "Well, somewhere else," Billy protested. Mayli asked not to read her letter aloud after this exchange, and it turned out that her letter too encouraged the grandfather "to cover it if the Nazis come buy [sic] you." Despite Mr. Kupnich's clarifications, both students seemed to think that the threat of present-day Nazis lingered.

Before moving to the next activity, Mr. K. invited questions again. Lila raised her hand. "I actually have a comment," she prefaced.

It's just my opinion. I think for the people who said about being proud of your religion, I don't think that he [the grandfather] is not proud of his religion. I think a lot of his friends *do know* that he's Jewish. They just don't know that he was actually in the Holocaust.

I was pleased that Lila had mentioned this because many of the students' letters and comments conflated the two categories of being Jewish and surviving the Holocaust.

Dex entered the classroom just then to read his letter. Because he had forgotten to write his the night before, he had been sent across the hall to work on it while the other students read theirs aloud. Dex's letter posed questions that revealed how little he had understood from the

book. “Why are you sad about it?” Dex had written to the grandfather. Lila, who couldn’t wait for Dex to finish reading, whispered loudly through her hands, “He had relatives who *died* in it!” Mr. Kupnich shushed her with a stern glance, and Lila’s hand shot up. As soon as Dex sat down, Lila nearly burst, practically yelling, “I have an answer to one of his questions!” Mr. Kupnich seemed almost resigned when he called on her. Assertively, Lila proclaimed, “[Dex] asked like, why the girl’s grandpa was so sad about it, and I think I have an answer to that. [It’s] because his friends, his family, and his relatives, all those people, he must be so sad because he lost so many people in it!” Mr. Kupnich checked with Dex to make sure he understood, and Dex replied in the affirmative.

*How old is old enough?*

Another question that Dex raised in his letter provoked heated discussion exactly on the topic I was researching. Dex had asked why the grandfather didn’t inform his granddaughter about the Holocaust earlier in her life, and Mr. Kupnich repositioned the question as, “How old do you think you need to be to learn about the Holocaust?” Joe, whom Mr. Kupnich referred to privately as one of the “tougher” kids in the class, by which he meant that Joe was often involved in fistfights and had seen lots of gory movies, weighed in first.

Joe: Fifth grade

Teacher: . . . So you think right now you shouldn’t be learning about it?

[Joe nods his head yes.]

Teacher: OK. That’s fine. I just want to hear your opinions. Dylan?

Dylan: I think we should be learning it in first or second grade.

Teacher: So you think even earlier; Joe thinks a little bit later, why Joe?

Joe: Um . . . you’re showing pictures of dead bodies. . .

Teacher: So, that sometimes is hard for kids to see? Have you ever seen that on TV before?

[“Yah,” “A lot,” “In cartoons,” came answers from around the room.]

Joe: But not like *real* ones.

These comments attested to Joe’s capacity to distinguish between “real” and fictitious violence (Applebee, 1975). In his mind, the Holocaust was not appropriate for children his age, whereas fictitious violence—as depicted on television and in movies and video games—was. A number of other students joined the discussion and claimed that first graders were too young because, as Emmeline put it, “We hardly even know how to read” then. Lila countered,

Well, I think that there’s not really a limit. You can start as young as you can like listen to people. As long as you can sit down for 15 minutes and listen to a story, that’s when you should start, as young as you can, because *then* you have time to get it into your mind. If you have questions when you’re little, then you’ve got your whole life to answer them. [As Lila speaks, Ricardo, sitting next to her, pulls his shirt over his head; Mr. Kupnich walks over and pulls it off his face as Lila continues] . . . So I think it’s OK for us to be learning now, but it’s best if you start as young as possible.

Student: Lila, you sound like a teacher.

Kaylee: Because she’s Jewish!

Whether Kaylee thought Jews sound like teachers generally or whether Kaylee thought Lila sounded like Mr. Kupnich because both were Jews is uncertain. Either way, Mr. Kupnich refused to allow the conversation to derail. “Lila is very passionate about this, and you can understand why,” he said, skillfully reorienting students back to his original question by repeating it. The students weighed in, arguing for their proposed “right age” and contrasting it with younger grades, for which the material might be too scary or, as Cade put it, “if you were Jewish, . . . you might have felt bad.” Lila interjected,

I have something to say to Cade and everyone who talks about crying. I have to tell you this. Sometimes I almost cry because I’m a Jew. And kids—people, older, when they’re out of college, they are crying too. . . . I just want you to know that a lot of people, they cry, even when they’re *so* much older, even when they’re about to die and learning about this.

Mr. Kupnich: . . . Even as an adult, I sometimes cry because you hear the horror of [survivors'] stories. I mean, imagine having your entire family murdered, sometimes right in front of you. . .

Lila [interrupting]: And especially when you're a Jew like me, I'm thinking that it's some of *my* relatives, or some of my relative's friends. It *really*, I mean, I can—Sometimes I don't feel real well because, I just . . . feel so uncomfortable at times.

I couldn't help but interpret Lila's reference to mere discomfort as something more serious. In an interview, she had explained, "I get really sad, and I just . . . get all depressed and stuff, hearing about these people who, I mean, if I were born 50 years ago, this could have been me!" When I asked Lila if she had had the same feelings when learning about the decimation of the Arawak Indians or about the struggle for civil rights, she didn't think so. "I mean, if I were Black, I'm sure I would . . . [But], basically, it wasn't me. Like, even if I was born 50 years ago, . . . it wouldn't be me."

Amanda later pointed out that kindergarteners were much too young to learn about the Holocaust because, if they were to learn what really happened to the people who got taken away, "that could give them nightmares for life!" When Lila heard this, she exclaimed, "It could give nightmares to kids *this* age, nightmares for life, too!" Her tone was impassioned, but it struck me as a little desperate, too. It was hard not to think that learning this material was especially hard on her—not only because she was Jewish or because she was the only Jewish student in the class, but also because she understood the human dimensions of the atrocity, something that some of her peers were still struggling to fathom.

### *The end of the unit*

The remainder of the Holocaust unit focused almost exclusively on Anne Frank. To begin their study, Mr. Kupnich posted a chart on the board with two columns: "What you already know about Anne Frank" and "What you would like to learn." The students took turns posting their questions and ideas. Emmeline was first:

I was wondering like, why do like all Jews usually have black, dark hair?

[Someone yells out, "They don't"]

Emmeline: Well, I mean, all the ones I've seen always have dark hair, and Chinese and Japanese people all have dark hair, too. . .

Lila: I know somebody Jewish who has blond hair.

Emmeline: Well, not everyone but. . .

Mr. Kupnich explained to Emmeline that not all Jews have black hair, but that many do, and the generalization derives from the origins of the Jewish people. "Lots of these Jewish people's families came from a part of the world," Mr. Kupnich began, pulling down the world map at the front of the room to illustrate. "Israel! Israel!" someone yelled, gleeful to know an answer. "Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union," Mr. Kupnich finished his sentence and launched into a brief explanation of gene pools, race, ethnicity, and peoplehood.

Most of the students' posts revealed how new this subject was for them and unearthed misconceptions about what they had already learned. Alongside questions like, "Did she survive?" and "How did she die?" were questions like, "Did she get, ummm, sprayed?" (meaning with gas) and "I want to know if she went to school." In the column of "What you already know about Anne Frank," Joe exclaimed with certainty, "I can tell you how she died—She died of polio." Emmeline added that Anne Frank "had like a diary and it was a friend to her because she didn't have very much friends."

To introduce Anne's story, Mr. Kupnich read *Anne Frank*, by Yona Zeldis McDonough (1997), whose brilliant illustrations caused Emmeline to think that Anne Frank had had a gorgeous bedroom in the annex. "These pictures . . . make it look a lot more colorful and nice than it really was," Mr. Kupnich corrected. Importantly, the book covered what happened to Anne and her family after they left the attic. "They were sent to a place called Auschwitz," Mr. Kupnich read. "That's where a lot of the people go that we read about," Lila said, discouraged, while a few of her classmates sighed, "Oh no. . ." When Mr. Kupnich showed an illustration of three women with their heads shaved as part of their entry to the concentration camp, someone asked, "How come they did that?" Mr. Kupnich volleyed the question back, "Anybody know why?" Stevie intoned seriously, "For when they came, they looked all shiny?" Mr. Kupnich explained the fear of disease and the dehumanization of victims. The students then read about Anne's death in Bergen-Belsen, the subsequent finding of her diary, its publication in over 40 languages and her posthumous widespread fame.

Coincidentally, that night, ABC aired the television miniseries, *Anne*

*Frank: The Whole Story* (Dornhelm, 2001), which Mr. Kupnich encouraged his students to watch with their parents. “Now you guys know so much about it maybe *you* can answer questions for your parents,” he told them. Based on the biography by Melissa Müller (2001), the miniseries carried a rating of TV-14; that is, it was not recommended for children under 14 years of age. Most of the students in Mr. Kupnich’s class were 8 years old. Nonetheless, many watched the miniseries and reported on the experience the next day. “It was really sad to see them taken away,” said Cade, who watched the entire show with her parents. For Joe, it was “scary . . . [and] like . . . hard to watch.” Mayli said that she “thought it was kind of scary and sad when the Nazis busted into their house and started ripping up everything.” Emmeline had only watched “five minutes about it because [her] mom thought it would be too scary for [her].” And Stevie’s mother had been willing to watch the whole film with him, but he had told her to turn it off after a few minutes because he had been scared.

For homework that night, Mr. Kupnich assigned two tasks. In the first, students were to list what they would choose to take from their homes if they had to leave in a hurry. They had read an excerpt from Anne Frank’s diary in which she wrote, “Memories are more precious to me than dresses,” and Mr. Kupnich wanted the students to consider what was most precious to them. In the second part of the assignment, they were to design their own secret annex. They could draw or build it, color it or not, and it could be anywhere they chose. (“On a mountain?” “Yes.” “In an animal?” “Hmmm”).

When, the following day, Mr. Kupnich asked the students to share just one item from their lists of what to take into hiding, many students struggled because their lists were extensive. “My stuffed animals,” proclaimed Emmeline, “because no one would come over to my place to hide with me so then I’d have [them] to play with.” Dex wanted to take his “sports basket with [his] sports stuff in it so [he] could have fun playing with [his] baseball bat and stuff.” When the other kids protested and told Dex he couldn’t go outside, he revised his choice slightly, saying that he would take his *indoor* basketball and basketball hoop instead. “You better hope that you have a big secret annex with high ceilings,” Mr. Kupnich teased. Other students’ answers included a toad, a rat, a science kit, and a PlayStation (video game). The most popular answer by far, though, was “my blankie.” Seven students opted to take baby blankets, almost a full third of the class.

The next class session was devoted almost wholly to students sharing their secret annex designs. They had worked hard on them and were excited to share them with their classmates. As usual, they took turns politely, this time standing at the front of the room to show off their

creations. Some of the more elaborate designs included annexes off annexes, trapdoors over trapdoors, entryways within trees, near water-slides, and under sand dunes. Lila's was located in Hawaii and housed an underground indoor pool for entertaining while in hiding. As the students lined up to leave the classroom for lunch, Christian called out, "I was thinking, . . . if we had time, we could like do a bigger annex, with all of our ideas . . . put together." "It could be in Hawaii," Lila volunteered. "And we could hide in it, and we'd never have to go to fourth grade. We could all stay in third grade!" Emmeline shouted. The kids cheered as they filed out, a mark of how much they loved Mr. Kupnich.

On the final day of the unit, Mr. Kupnich showed a few clips from the miniseries, which he had videotaped. I was surprised by this choice, especially given that he knew that some of the students' parents had decided, purposefully, not to let their children see the docudrama. At first, though, Mr. Kupnich showed only clips from the beginning of the film, in which Anne describes Amsterdam, the experience of hiding, the attic itself, and its other inhabitants. The children were enraptured. Mr. Kupnich then fast-forwarded the videotape to the scene in which the Nazis stormed the secret annex. The students watched, shocked, as Nazis arrested the Franks and interrogated Miep Giess, their famous rescuer. Mr. Kupnich turned off the television as the Franks were led away, the music swelling. Only a few minutes were left before gym class. Mr. Kupnich solicited questions. "Does she go into a concentration camp?" asked one student. "Yes, she ends up going to a concentration camp, . . . dying in the camp," he answered.

The students returned from gym to view a few final excerpts, a part that Mr. Kupnich described as "brutal." Though he offered to send out anyone who didn't want to watch, no one took him up on it. The video started up amid barking dogs, shouting people, and syrupy music. Anne and her sister were clad in the gray-and-white-striped uniforms of the camps. Both looked malnourished and pale. Mr. Kupnich narrated what was happening on screen and answered the questions that popped up. "Is that Anne?" someone asked. "Yes, and those are the people who died, who starved to death or by diseases, killed sometimes by the Nazis just for fun." "Just for fun?" someone echoed. "What's that?" a student asked about scabies being portrayed up close. "Why are they saying those words?" asked Lila. "It's German, German words," Mr. Kupnich explained. "They're deciding who is going to be in the work group." "Where are they going?" "Why are they taking them?" The students' questions proliferated in the room as the video images outpaced their background knowledge. Mr. Kupnich patiently explained and explained. "How about the dogs?" Stevie asked about the German shepherds bark-

ing at Anne's mother as she collapsed. "Do they get food?" he asked.

In the next scene, Anne and Margot are lying in a tent, bone thin, practically naked, and Margot is dying. Not-too-distant screams punctuate Anne's narration. "Why is there screaming?" one student asked, and Lila shushed him angrily. A rat scurries over the sisters' toes as they sleep, and the students in Mr. Kupnich's room are repulsed. "Oh my god, that's gross!" someone exclaims. "Poor rat!" Christian muttered. "Is Margot dead?" Stevie asks, and Mayli wonders aloud about the corpses on screen, "Could they sleep longer?"

The next few scenes pass slowly. Anne is lying by her sister, trying to convince her to tell a story, trying to convince her to live when the music swells, marking Margot's death. Thankfully, the black-and-white film turns to color a few moments later, signifying the return to a "normal," postwar world. The video shows Otto Frank, diary in hand, slowly climbing the stairs to the attic he once inhabited. "It looks like they took everything!" Lila gasps as a slow pan showcases the destruction. Otto collapses on the floor. "Did he die?" someone asks. "No, he's just overcome," Mr. Kupnich explains. "What about the cat? Did the cat die?" someone asks. "What happened to their pets?"

Mr. Kupnich needed to release the students to recess in a minute. They looked tired. Emmeline's and Lila's heads were down on their desks. Mr. Kupnich turned off the VCR.

Some people believe that the passage of time has a way of healing the sorrow. In the long history of the Jewish people, and for many, many people, there are lots of terrible events, sorrowful events. We know about that by going back to the days of Columbus. We know about what the Arawak Indians had to endure. We know about what the African Americans went through with slavery and later on through the civil rights time. . . . Why do you think that it's important for people not to forget what happened in the Holocaust, [and] for that matter, not to forget the days of slavery, . . . the days of Columbus? Why is it so important not to forget those things?

Lila, Emmeline, Amanda, Stevie, Kaylee, and three other students raised their hands, waving them eagerly, when Mr. Kupnich released them to recess.

I happened to notice that Lila was dragging her feet and moving slowly as she left class. The other kids had already buzzed out of the building by the time I caught up to her in the hall. Having interviewed her, I felt close enough to ask if I could give her a hug. She nodded and sniffled as I

bundled her up in my arms. “I just feel so sad,” she said, exhaling before hurrying outside to play in the incongruous sunshine. Later that night, in a journal entry, Lila wrote about the film’s impact on her. “You know, it’s so hard to learn about this subject,” she began.

When we watched the movie, I felt horrible. But I can’t describe my feelings. When people were laughing or saying it was “sick,” I just got so mad. Someone said, “Poor rats.” Well, think about how much worse it was for the people. Sometimes I just got so scared, mad and sad, all at the same time. It’s so scary [sic] to think how many people were killed. Also it’s hard to believe that some of my relatives could have been in the Holocaust. . . . I don’t like to think about it. It seems like when you were in the camps you were in a lot of pain. Every minute you had something to worry about. It’s painful to think about.

Lila, it seems, had understood both her own emotions in learning this subject and what the Holocaust involved for its victims.

When the kids returned, Mr. Kupnich handed out the journals from which this entry was excerpted. The journals contained lined paper, and each had a red-checkered construction paper cover mimicking Anne Frank’s diary. Mr. Kupnich asked the students to address the questions that he had posed before recess, after which they could write whatever they wanted. Written on the board was a reminder: “Do you think only Jewish people should learn about the Holocaust? Should only African Americans learn about slavery, and only Spanish people learn about the Arawak Indians? Or, should we all learn about everyone?” The students got to work and wrote busily for a full 15 minutes, taking their journals home to finish.

Mr. Kupnich closed the unit by reviewing the questions posed in the Anne Frank chart, the one that they had filled out earlier in the week. The students answered all the questions easily, even the mundane ones, about what Anne Frank’s friends had been like and what kind of clothes she had worn. Lila interjected answers for each question until Mr. Kupnich scolded her, reminding her to let those who posed the questions have a first shot at answering them. A few last questions were added—“How many concentration camps did she go to, two or three?” “What happened to babies?”—and answered.

Finally, the school day was over. The students packed up their journals, their math worksheets and lunchboxes, and headed out of the classroom, their Holocaust unit concluded. They wouldn’t be sharing their journal writings because the next day, they were headed to the zoo for a fieldtrip.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE

In considering Mr. Kupnich's class, I revisited three dimensions of the unit: what happened to the subject matter in being taught to a young audience, what the students learned and didn't learn from the unit, and how they were affected emotionally. In terms of the subject matter, Mr. Kupnich's unit was hardly "preparatory," in Bruner's famous phrasing. As I see it, Mr. Kupnich taught about the Holocaust fully, in as much detail as many middle and high school treatments. Though at first he shielded his students from the Holocaust's harder images and truths, he certainly exposed his students fully to them by the end of the unit. The students saw vivid photographs and learned about the concentration camps, the symbolic center of the Holocaust universe.

Relatedly, Mr. Kupnich's "emplotment" (White, 1992) of the Holocaust—the storyline his unit constructed—wasn't sugar-coated for easy ingestion; it didn't end in an uplifting manner, nor did it focus heavily on rescue and resistance, patterns that middle and high school educators sometimes follow to counteract the material's depressing nature (Schweber, 2004; Spector, 2005). Though his unit ended with Anne Frank, she wasn't mythologized as an icon or stripped of her actual brutalized ending (Ozick, 1996; Rosenfeld, 2004). Instead, Mr. Kupnich made sure to show, and not only tell, that Anne Frank was murdered. In short, Mr. Kupnich's narrativization of the Holocaust authentically mimicked its tragedy, exposing his young students to the subject's dreadfulness.

Although his coverage of the Holocaust's horror was unabridged, Mr. Kupnich's explanations for its occurrence were somewhat impoverished. "The Nazis were pretty much not very nice people," he had said. This understated remark encapsulated his teaching about the perpetrators, simplifying and essentializing their all-too-human behavior. He thus presented Nazis neither as "ordinary men" (Browning, 1993) nor as rabid anti-Semites (Goldhagen, 1996), two of the most widely circulated academic theories of perpetrator behavior. Instead, the Nazis were "pretty much not very nice," which the students easily understood as implying something much harsher. As one of the third graders wrote in her journal, "They were very bad people I think." Many students echoed this sentiment, writing statements like Dex's: "Me and Jackie Chan will punch the bad guys."

One price of Mr. Kupnich's cursory treatment of the Nazis was exacted in the students' incomprehension. Although all the students had learned that the Nazis persecuted and murdered Jews and others, none ultimately understood *why*, a confusion evidenced in many of their journals. "Why

did they take the Jews?" one girl's journal questioned, continuing, "They could've done it to some other people." The interviews, too, revealed that none of the focus 4 students knew about the history of anti-Semitism or understood Hitler's racialized hatred generally. Following Mr. Kupnich's lead, they resorted to explanations that centered on being "mean." Emmeline, for example, wrote in her journal, "I wonder if hitler [sic] was mean when he was little?"

If the Nazis were represented basically as unidimensional "bad guys," the Jews were represented in much more complicated hues, not least because of the presence in the class of Mr. Kupnich and Lila. On the one hand, their presence offset the image of Jews as otherwise utterly victimized. After all, both Mr. Kupnich and Lila were living, breathing, vocal members of the class community. On the other hand, the intensity of Lila's reactions to the unit may have added to the image of Jewish victimization. Lila was understandably shaken by learning about the Holocaust, and visibly so. As her mother told me, the unit had depressed Lila so much that she visited the school counselor to help her handle the emotions, the nightmares, and the "crunched up feeling in her stomach." I asked Lila's mother to explain what she meant when she described Lila as depressed.

It means that she was morose. She was quiet. She didn't fight with her brother. You know, she had no interest in things. *A real depression.* She didn't read, just, visibly was very quiet. I mean, she couldn't decide on things. Mainly, it just wasn't her usual demeanor. She didn't want to play with the cats. . .

In feeling and proclaiming her special attachment to the subject matter and in voicing the difficulties of learning about it, Lila also implicated herself as, in a sense, victimized by it. Many of the students in the class remarked on Lila's special status in their journals, writing that they felt sorry for Lila, that they were made uncomfortable by her reactions, or that they would try to be nice to her in light of learning about the Holocaust. I understand such reactions to indicate that the students who wrote them couldn't generalize from Lila's anguish. They could understand, as Emmeline wrote in her journal, "Lila is possible [sic] the most sad about the Holocaust because her relatives [sic] might have been killed during it." They could see, in other words, that Lila was very sad and that the Holocaust was "a bad, bad thing," but they weren't themselves touched by it. These students seemed to process the immediate rather than the abstract; they saw Lila's grief but did not personally share it.<sup>16</sup>

To my mind this divide characterized the class as a whole. There were basically two categories of students. There were those who, like Lila, became depressed in learning about the Holocaust. These were the students who wrote in their journals remarks like, "It makes me worry so much seeing those dying people," or "When I see those concentration [sic] camps I can't stop thinking about it." Because the material was "scary [sic]" at the least and "terrifying [sic]" at worst, these students had nightmares; one student wrote in his journal, "Sometimes I dream I am in a concentration [sic] camp." Fully one fifth of the students in the class wrote that they had had nightmares about the Holocaust. These students understood something of the horror they had learned about.

In the other group were the students, who, as Stevie's mother said about him, hadn't "got[ten] the whole concept enough" to be depressed by it. These students had learned a tremendous amount about the Holocaust but hadn't fully registered its human dimensions. Amanda, for example, wrote in her journal, "I think Anne was much happier and prettier before she went to the concentration [sic] camps." Although accurate, the statement betrays a lack of sensitivity to the profundity of what the camps meant, what mass murder entails, and what Anne Frank's experience symbolized.

Although Amanda's understandings perhaps exceeded her abilities to express them in writing, many of the students' journal writings expressed a lack of understanding directly, not only implicitly. As one student wrote, "I would like to learn more about the Holocaust. I watched the movie about it. I'll watch it almost every year of my life until I am 16 then I will probably understand . . . about it." In ironically sophisticated assessments of their own naïveté, these students recognized that they couldn't fully understand what they had learned in their Holocaust unit.

#### A PARTIAL ENDING

It is this simple divide that convinces me that the Holocaust should not be taught to third graders; this research reveals that such youngsters either do or do not understand the subject matter. When they do understand it, they become depressed, albeit appropriately. When they don't understand it, they recognize that absence. The situation poses "no wins."<sup>17</sup>

Of course, education about atrocity never poses "wins," if by wins we mean psychological uplift. If Holocaust education does, it is typically because the topic has been sweetened, warped, bastardized, Americanized, or in some other way inappropriately redeemed. But if teaching about atrocity yields either depression or incomprehension

among students, then the rationale for teaching about it to young children must be based on an answer to the question, "Why now?" Rather than asking, "How old is old enough to learn about the Holocaust?" we need to ask "Why should we teach the Holocaust to *third graders*?" Despite both Mr. Kupnich's eloquence on that very question and the parents' defense of their children's "occasional nightmares for the right reasons," I cannot find a compelling answer. For every answer as to why it's important to learn about the Holocaust, it seems reasonable to me to append, "in the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, or tenth grades." I can find no justification that applies aggressively and specifically to third graders.<sup>18</sup>

My challenge to find a specific rationale is predicated on a distinct distaste for some of the students' incomprehension rather than on the comprehending students' depression. Shouldn't the majority of our students be able to understand the subject matter that we choose to teach them? And yet, the counterargument also holds: Why should children understand atrocity the first time they learn about it? We don't ever expect students to *fully* understand any material the first time they encounter it. Indeed as Keith Barton has written, "For any worthwhile topic, and certainly any historical topic, people develop increasingly complex understandings through repeated exposure over the years" (personal communication, 2006). Barton's position accords with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, whose (1997) guidelines about what constitutes *developmentally appropriate practice* include the stipulation that children's "development proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity." Much research about the development of children's historical thinking in particular supports this position, notably that of VanSledright (2002), and Lee and Ashby (2001), who famously wrote that children's historical understanding "is not all or nothing" (p. 25). In this context, understanding Nazis as "pretty much not very nice" can be interpreted as a pretty good basis from which deeper understandings can later evolve.

In this regard, Mr. Kupnich was undeniably masterful. He, better than I, understood his students' various positions and could carefully structure learning opportunities and questioning venues, planned activities and impromptu openings. In a context of trust and care, in a classroom of diversely abled children, Mr. Kupnich piqued every single student's interest, even those who didn't understand the gravitas of their learning. These students, after all, professed a desire for continued exposure until their intellectual capacities could catch up to their content knowledge.

Also laudably, Mr. Kupnich's teaching confronted head-on what Jonathan Silin (1995) rightly critiqued in early childhood educators: their hesitancy to confront taboos. Discussing the importance of teaching

young children about AIDS, Silin eloquently argued that

too much of the contemporary curriculum brings a deathly silence of the being of childhood and not enough of it speaks to the things that really matter in children's lives or in the lives of those who care for them. I want to argue that the curriculum has too often become an injunction to desist rather than an invitation to explore our life worlds. . . . A commitment to the curriculum must entail a commitment to the world, and none of us inhabits a world without death. (p. 40)

Mr. Kupnich's mastery as a teacher enabled his students to confront death, specifically mass-produced death, and to understand it with varying degrees of sophistication. Even those who asked about Holocaust victims' pets and Nazi-owned German shepherds were engaging the subject matter sincerely, through things they hold dear.

But it is precisely Mr. Kupnich's expertise that calls into question the applicability of his case for setting policy. Mr. Kupnich was an unusually experienced teacher. He had taught for over 25 years and was well known in the community as an "extraordinary" teacher. Parents trusted him. As Lila's mother explained, "He's like larger than life, even to the parents, I think." And, as this portrait of his teaching reveals, his reputation was well deserved. I am quite certain that in the hands of a teacher with fewer years of experience, less subject matter expertise, less courage, or less pedagogical content knowledge, the results of teaching about the Holocaust to students of this age could be disastrous. I can't help but wonder, too, what would have happened in a classroom without living Jews present—where the living could offset the unavoidable impression of Jews as objects of, rather than agents in, this history. Or, what might have happened in a classroom in which Lila had been the only Jew in the room rather than the only Jewish student?

In a moving account of her own teaching, Kate Lyman (2004) recounted the impact of her choice to teach "past the platitudes of the Civil Rights Movement." Specifically, she described how her teaching about "the violence of racism" in the United States engaged and empowered her second- and third-grade students, particularly her African American students. Importantly, Lyman taught this period of American history despite the objections of one African American parent who wrote that, previous to this unit, her daughter "had 'no experience with police and guns, snarling dogs, hatred, people who spit and/or throw soup at others.'" Another parent had objected that this past "was too painful . . . [and] made them out to be victims." Although I can easily imagine Jewish

parents raising similar protests against a Holocaust unit, the historical events are different enough to forestall the parallel. Importantly, the African American students in Lyman's class who did engage her civil rights unit were empowered not only because it was "their history" but also because the period they were investigating offered up moral role models, heroes in the grandest sense, people who changed the course of history as African Americans. Regardless of their human failings, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges are unarguably real icons. The Holocaust offers Jewish children no such figures. Anne Frank, it might be remembered, is iconic not for fighting injustice but for falling victim to it. It is not surprising that for a girl like Lila, learning about Anne Frank was devastating.<sup>19</sup>

I interviewed Lila a final time during the second-to-last week of the school year. The Holocaust unit had concluded a week earlier, and, according to her parents, Lila's "real depression" had ended by then. I wanted to ask whether she still thought that kids her age and younger should learn about the Holocaust. (In an earlier class, it may be recalled, she had proclaimed assertively that even very young children should know about it.) I wondered if she would change her mind now that she understood what the topic actually encompassed. A few minutes into our interview, though, Lila began to cry. She felt "crummy," "sad," and "scared" while talking about the Holocaust. When I asked whether it was because of "this material or other stuff" that she was crying, she replied in a tiny voice that it was "this material." She didn't want to think about it any more, she told me, and we didn't finish the interview. She was simply too emotionally raw to revisit the Holocaust.

Of the four students I followed in Mr. Kupnich's class, Stevie too felt overexposed to horror. In our final interview, he told me he thought he was too young to learn about the Holocaust, though "just a little too young." To him, the "dead people and stuff" were simply terrifying. The movie in particular "was bad and scary at the same time." He much preferred "the books with cartoons and not real photos," but even those, he thought, contained "just a little too much about the Holocaust." The unit, he felt, had aged him. As he wrote in his journal, "When I was little, I thought people didn't have a care in the world. Dear Bob,<sup>20</sup> but I was wrong. I never imagined that things that bad could happen."

As though responding directly to his disappointment in the world, Stevie's mother told me during an interview, "That's what school is for; it's not a playground, you know?" And, though I agree with her in principle, I'm not sure I agree in particular. This case convinces me, instead, that curricular creep ought to be curtailed vis-à-vis the Holocaust and

that third graders as a group are too young to learn about it in great detail.

I hold this view even as I believe that the same evidence I have marshaled to make my case could just as easily be read as supporting the opposite policy recommendation. Mr. Kupnich, having read this portrait and considered its representation of his practice to be reliable, rejects my conclusions, as do Lila's parents. And they are not wrong to do so. It may be, as Mr. Kupnich argued, that Nazis do not deserve to be represented multidimensionally, that they do not deserve ample classroom time, and that children do need to learn this history early on. Mr. Kupnich read the portrait that I constructed as supporting the claim that students can handle the intellectual and emotional work involved—because his students did. In considering the implications of this case, we simply bring to bear competing biases.

Mine formed the tendons of my methodology. When analyzing student understandings, for example, I considered one of the most important codes to be “moments of confusion”; indeed, I constructed the narrative of this case following the contours of that code. Perhaps had I been trained in early childhood education rather than secondary social studies, I would have labeled that code as “emergent understandings” instead. Perhaps, in other words, had I been a teacher of young students, I would better appreciate what Mr. Kupnich's third graders *could* comprehend rather than foregrounding what they seemed not to. Perhaps I would be able to see their understandings outside the shadow cast by knowing what older students' abilities enable.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, had I not been a Jewish parent of a pre-school-age child, a girl whom I imagined might grow up to be a bit like Lila, or had I been a parent of children older than the third grade at the time I conducted this research, as was Mr. Kupnich—of course, under any of these conditions, I might have come to a different conclusion.

Interestingly, I have written elsewhere in support of the Holocaust's ultimate universality, its deserving of comparison, indeed its likeness along historical dimensions to other instances of genocide.<sup>22</sup> This case, however, makes me consider its possible pedagogical uniqueness, for unlike the atrocity units that preceded it, the Holocaust unit alone scared some of Mr. Kupnich's third graders. It was the Holocaust unit, rather than the units on slavery, the genocide of the American Indians, the civil rights movement, or the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that prompted nightmares. What this means is unclear, though. Mr. Kupnich told me that his Holocaust unit wasn't longer than the prior units, nor was it substantively more graphic, despite there being, in his words, “very

little news footage left over from the Arawak Indians.” Whether the Holocaust unit wielded greater emotional impact on some of the students because it was about the Holocaust per se, because it employed a graphic feature film, or because it followed those other units sequentially is impossible to tease apart from this study’s design.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, if there is something pedagogically unique about the Holocaust, what constitutes that uniqueness is ambiguous. Mr. Kupnich mused that it might be “the immensity of the numbers [that has] a tendency of overwhelming people.” Regardless, such muddiness makes it difficult to draw clean implications for the teaching of other atrocities vis-à-vis age appropriateness.

That said, the themes that arose in Mr. Kupnich’s Holocaust unit, when considered at their grandest conceptual level, certainly apply to the teaching of other atrocities to young students. In terms of the representation of the subject matter, for instance, how victims are portrayed and how that portrayal maps onto the identities of the students in the classroom clearly matter. Had Lila not been Jewish, or had the unit not focused on Jewish victims’ experiences, the enacted and experienced curricula would have played out entirely differently. And the same applies to the portrayal of perpetrators and bystanders. Though there is no way to predict which students in an early grade will understand the human dimensions of atrocity or identify with the historical figures they are learning about, this case does enable us to imagine what that impact can look like—intellectually and emotionally—in learning about other atrocities.

To return to the opening quotation of this piece, one can treat Mr. Kupnich’s Holocaust unit as a test case for Bruner’s (1968) principle by asking, Can any subject area, even one as serious and complex as genocide, be taught to young children? And, here the answer is yes. Mr. Kupnich proves this. Does this mean we *should* teach the Holocaust to third graders? No, and here it is Mr. Kupnich’s students who provide the answer, both those who understood the material deeply and wished they hadn’t learned it just yet, and those who didn’t understand and who wondered, “What happened to their pets?” This case convinces me that the playground may not be such a bad place after all for children to be exposed for the first time, however briefly and absurdly, to the Holocaust, providing that these same children learn about it in seriousness and depth later in their lives, later than the third grade.

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## Notes

1 For the phrasing of this remark, I have followed the template set in the first section of Irena Klepfisz's (1991) marvelous poem, *Beshert*, in which Klepfisz underscores both the randomness and fatefulness of survival during the Holocaust.

2 Sex education might be considered in terms of curricular creep as well. As the physical maturation process of young girls has sped up and the average age of sexual activity among young Americans has dropped over the last decades, the age at which it is deemed appropriate to teach about sexual behaviors has been lowered in kind, or at least many scholars advocate that it be. A recent *New York Times* headline encapsulates the trend. Though advocating informal education rather than curricular coverage, "Sex Ed for the Stroller Set" (Kantor, 2005) easily applies to the classroom. In short, age appropriateness may well be considered in terms of tipping points, moments when public opinion shifts vis-à-vis particular educational domains.

3 Gladwell (2000) used the phrase *tipping point* to refer to the transition between a singular event's becoming epidemic. My usage of the term is somewhat less exuberant than Gladwell's. I don't believe, for example, that Holocaust education has reached epidemic proportions; I mean only that its acceptability has outweighed its unacceptability for this age range.

4 This chart is based on a year-by-year search of the Children's Literature Review database. I am indebted to Daniel Temkin, a hardworking and marvelously gifted Brandeis University undergraduate, for constructing this chart.

5 See, as examples, *A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust* (<http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/activity/Intermed.htm>), and the Florida Holocaust Museum's Teaching Trunks, for children as young as first grade ([http://www.flholocaust-museum.org/pdfs/trunks\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.flholocaust-museum.org/pdfs/trunks_brochure.pdf)).

6 A lovely exception to this generalization are the essays compiled in Judith P. Robertson's edited volume, *Teaching for a Tolerant World, Grades K–6: Essays and Resources*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English (1999). The focus in this volume, however, is on teaching about the Holocaust and genocide through literature rather than as history.

7 The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum does stipulate recommended ages for children to visit the museum's exhibits. It does not, however, promulgate age guidelines for public school instruction.

8 I wish to thank Rebekah Irwin, who worked as a research assistant on this project, observing and tape-recording the class sessions that I couldn't attend.

9 I interviewed Lila's parents twice, however, because she became such an important participant in the classroom, given that she was the only Jewish student.

10 Had this study not been designed as a "best case" scenario, regardless of how problematic that nomenclature is, the results would have been disastrous and theoretically uninteresting. Educators can imagine easily what the worst case scenarios potentially effect.

11 All pseudonyms in this study were chosen by the subjects themselves.

12 Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous quotation is sometimes rendered as follows: "In Germany they came first for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. . . ." However, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, the German theologian's original statement probably ought to be translated as follows: "When Hitler attacked the Jews, I was not a Jew. Therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic, and therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and the industrialists, I was not a member of the unions and I was not concerned. Then Hitler attacked me and the Protestant church, and there was nobody left to be concerned."

13 Because Hiding From the Nazis and Hilde and Eli are not paginated, the quotes taken from these books in this part of the discussion do not have page numbers.

14 I suspect Mr. Kupnich was referring to the Roma rather than to the Romanians.

15 For a fuller discussion of the debates over Holocaust simulations, see the chapter in my (2004) book, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons From Classroom Practice*, entitled "Simulating Survival."

16 It might be argued that even Lila herself seemed to have difficulty abstracting beyond the immediate, familial implications of the Holocaust because she tended, over and over again, to relate the events to herself.

17 AIDS education raises many of the same issues in that it defies the taboos of shielding young children from sex, fear, disease, and death. Nonetheless, AIDS education can be said to be preventative. That is, AIDS education provides behavioral injunctions that serve as a sort of inoculation against the disease. Atrocity education, by contrast, cannot be said, convincingly, to supply the same kind of benefits.

18 That said, there are many skills and concepts that we assign to be taught in each grade whose rationales for that particular placement cannot be articulated. Why teach children to write in script in the third grade, for example? Why teach American history for the first time only in fourth grade? I feel it incumbent to find a specific rationale in this instance, however, specifically because of the nature of the material. To learn about genocide is not akin to learning a skill set.

19 According to Erickson (1968), third grade is precisely the time at which children are learning to wield their own power and figure out how to act independently of adults. This accounts in part for the profusion of books aimed at this age reader featuring child protagonists who must figure their way out of danger on their own. Typical Holocaust narratives that center on the experience of victims, and importantly, often *girls* as victims, do not necessarily offer children role models to help them in this development.

20 Not being familiar with the typical format of journal writing, Stevie wrote "Dear Bob" at the top of every page rather than at the start of every entry. As a result, in this excerpt, he interjects a "Dear Bob" in the middle of his thought when the sentence continues on a new page. To me, this illustrated that even simple things we might expect third graders to be familiar with, like the format of journal entries, were strange and unfamiliar.

21 Hilary Conklin (2006) has illuminated the importance of these higher/lower perspectives as they apply to prospective teachers preparing to teach middle school social studies through secondary and elementary program pathways.

22 I have described my commitment to the latter pole in the false binary between uniqueness and universality in a piece entitled "Rejoinder to Miriam Ben-Peretz" (Schweber, 2003a) which appeared alongside "Simulating Survival" (Schweber, 2003b) in *Curriculum Inquiry*. In fact, this was one of the reasons that Mr. Kupnich so appealed (and still does appeal) to me. His astute comparisons, I believe, enriched his students' understandings.

23 Were I able to retroactively redesign the study so as to have observed and interviewed his students through the entirety of Mr. Kupnich's year, including all his social studies units, I certainly would.

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