



The Risks When Connecting Bullying to the Holocaust

The Holocaust should be studied as a significant event in human history, an event that allows students to recognize the complexity of choices made by individuals and as an opportunity to define the roles and responsibilities of the individual to uphold the principles of democracy. Studying the Holocaust can certainly help students consider the consequences of their actions or inactions in situations, including bullying, but bullying prevention is never the main purpose of Holocaust education. A well-developed course of study about the Holocaust can, however, help support students in the development of skills needed to examine the effects of stereotyping, prejudice, and bigotry, which can in turn lead them to think more carefully about their choice to participate in any negative or biased behavior toward others, including bullying behavior.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Holocaust was “the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.” Bullying, as defined by the Anti-Defamation League, is “the repeated actions or threats of action directed toward a person by one or more people who have or are perceived to have more power or status than their target in order to cause fear, distress, or harm.”

While bullying behavior certainly took place before and during the Holocaust, the Holocaust cannot be simplified or explained only as bullying behavior. Bullying, like propaganda, was a tool used by the Nazis; however, bullying was neither the goal nor the reason for the Holocaust.

The context of the Holocaust is much broader and its roots go far back into the Common Era. Additionally, the Nazi dictatorship controlled all aspects of media and culture, democratic freedoms were abolished, and the Nazi Party replaced or overtook existing organizations and institutions. As stated by Wendy Lower, author of *Hitler’s Furies, German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, “The history of the Holocaust is wrapped up in the Nazi imperial conquest of eastern Europe, which mobilized all Germans.”

Individuals certainly had the choice whether or not to stand up for their neighbors, and history shows that most did not, whether out of fear, conformity, or ideology. Others took advantage of the circumstances to act out long-held antisemitic prejudices or for their own personal gain. Within individual experiences during the Holocaust there are many examples of bullying but that is only part of the larger story that must be told within the larger context.

Individuals choose to engage in bullying behavior for any number of psychological or sociological reasons, and such behavior can take place even in seemingly supportive and positive environments. Such behaviors certainly have a cost to individuals and society, but these costs are different and distinct from the impact of genocide. Likewise, both ally behavior, and the choice to engage in ally behavior in bullying situations are specific and related to the circumstances. In fact, connecting the Holocaust to bullying could actually dissuade students from engaging in ally behavior as the choices and the cost of being an ally during that time period were very different and often extremely difficult.

Today’s students should certainly learn about both the Holocaust (and other genocides) and modern-day bullying; however, using the Holocaust as a way to address bullying, or bullying as a way to comprehend the Holocaust, runs the risk of trivializing the Holocaust and does not do justice to either important topic.