

Teaching About the Holocaust: Why Simulation Activities Should Not Be Used

Recently a Holocaust simulation activity at a Florida Middle School upset students, parents and community members by selecting children to be exposed to “persecution.” Without announcing or explaining the specific purpose of the activity in advance, eighth-grade students whose last names started with the letters L-Z were given yellow five-pointed stars and designated the “persecuted”, while their peers received “privileged” treatment. Throughout the activity the star-wearing students were subjected to enforced rules which ranged from forcing them to stand at the back of the class or the end of long lunch lines, to barring them from using some bathrooms and preventing them from using school drinking fountains. At the end of the day, many children were distressed, and one child even went home crying, telling his parents, “The only thing I found out today is that I don’t want to be Jewish.”

While empathy-building activities in the classroom may be compelling and a popular technique for engaging young people in the history of the Holocaust, the Anti-Defamation League and other institutions with expertise in teaching the Holocaust strongly caution against using simulation activities for the following reasons:

- They are **pedagogically unsound** because they **trivialize the experience of victims** and can leave students with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they actually know what it was like during the Holocaust
- They **stereotype group behavior** and **distort historical reality** by reducing groups of people and their experiences and actions to one-dimensional representations
- They can **reinforce negative views** of the victims
- They **impede critical analysis** by **oversimplifying complex historical events** and **human behavior**, leaving students with a skewed view of history
- They **disconnect** the Holocaust **from the context of European and global history**

There are numerous effective and pedagogically sound methods that can be used to achieve these goals. Students can develop empathy and understanding with the experiences and explore the motivation, thoughts, feelings and actions of those who lived through the Holocaust era by:

- **Drawing on primary source materials**, such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, and visual history testimony
- **Assigning reflective writing exercises** or **leading in-class discussions** that explore various aspects of human behavior such as scapegoating or making difficult moral choices
- **Inviting survivors and other eyewitnesses** to share their stories

Recommended Resources:

For more information on teaching about the Holocaust, consult *Teaching about the Holocaust: A Resource Book for Educators*, a free resource from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available in PDF-format at: http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/teaching_holocaust.pdf

Echoes and Reflections – A Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust. This standards-based, interdisciplinary multimedia curriculum includes primary source materials such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, poems, maps and government documents as well as 2 ½ hours of visual history testimony by Holocaust survivors, rescuers and other eyewitnesses. Created by ADL, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and Yad Vashem. Visit www.echoesandreflections.org for a sample lesson, visual history testimony, supporting materials, additional resources, and order information.