A Case for Holocaust Education in Alberta Schools Through the Lens of Citizenship Education

Jennifer Magalnick

The Holocaust is a difficult-to-comprehend moment in history that warrants both learning about and remembering. The inclusion of the Holocaust in K–12 education has been a topic of discussion worldwide for many years. Education departments struggle with where to place it in the curriculum, teachers struggle with how to teach it, and students struggle with how to comprehend it. Yet, "excluding the Holocaust from the history curricula distorts history, leaving a critical absence in studies of the twentieth century and a lack of awareness about the world in which we live" (Davis and Rubinstein-Avila 2013, 162).

This literature review looks at Holocaust education through the lens of citizenship education, with the goal of making recommendations for practice in Alberta schools.

Background

Although Holocaust education has a long history worldwide, there is continual discussion in the field around content, purpose, methodology and rationale for inclusion in the curriculum (Chapman and Hale 2017; Cowan and Maitles 2016; Levy and Sheppard 2018; Lindquist 2011; Mihr 2015; Moisan, Hirsch and Audet 2015; Nesfield 2015; Pearce 2017; Starratt et al 2017; Wogenstein 2015).

Even with the strongest case for including Holocaust education in high school, there is limited bandwidth for it in an already crowded curriculum. In practice, Holocaust education is often positioned in the realm of citizenship education (Alberta Education 2005; Cowan and Maitles 2016; Eckmann 2010; Moisan, Hirsch and Audet 2015). Alberta's K–12 social studies curriculum is fundamentally based on citizenship education, as citizenship is one of the curriculum's two core concepts.

This literature review aims to explore the connection between Holocaust education and citizenship education, as well as the current positioning of Holocaust education in the Alberta curriculum, endeavouring to understand the applicability of Holocaust education in Alberta schools in the context of a curriculum framed by citizenship education. This debate has been more active outside of Alberta, particularly in places where Holocaust education is mandated, such as in England and in 20 states in the United States (Cowan and Maitles 2016).[1] However, it is essential that students in Alberta learn about the Holocaust in the context of public education. For if they do not, we risk raising future generations of Canadians with a gaping hole in their understanding of modern history.

Why Should Students Learn About the Holocaust?

Holocaust denial is alive and well (Greenblatt 2018), and the Holocaust has been wrongly used as an analogy for oppression of all kinds, including equating persecution of the Jews during the Holocaust with public health restrictions during a pandemic (Perry 2021). A recent survey revealed a lack of factual knowledge about the Holocaust among teens and found that many teens are getting information about the Holocaust from unreliable sources (such as social media and other entertainment venues) (Lerner 2021).

Antisemitism is at record-high levels even in Canada (Canadian Press 2022), and many antisemitic incidents involve Holocaust denial or distortion (Anti-Defamation League 2020).

This social context brings new urgency to the long-standing question of the positioning of Holocaust education in school curricula. Additionally, as time goes on, memories fade and eyewitnesses to the Holocaust become scarce.

Taken together, the importance of awareness of this watershed event in modern history and the current rise in Holocaust denial and antisemitism make the case for Holocaust education in Alberta schools.

Research Questions

This literature review explores the following research questions:

- What does research say about Holocaust education as citizenship education?
- How does this research apply to the endeavour of Holocaust education in Alberta schools?

Definitions

Important terms to define for this literature review are *citizenship education, the Holocaust* and *Holocaust education*.

This review looks at both global and local perspectives on citizenship education, as it applies research conducted in various countries to a local context. Therefore, definitions of *citizenship education* from both local and global sources were considered.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Clearinghouse on Global Citizenship Education provides the following definition of *global citizenship education*:

> Global Citizenship Education (GCED) aims to equip learners of all ages with those values, knowledge and skills that are based on and instil respect for human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability and that empower learners to be responsible global citizens.[2]

A more local perspective on citizenship education can be found in the definition provided by the Concentus Citizenship Education Foundation, a Saskatchewan-based foundation dedicated to human rights education:

> Citizenship education empowers individuals to understand their rights and to be responsible, respectful, and participatory citizens committed to justice in a pluralistic Canadian democracy.[3]

Several definitions of *the Holocaust* are used in the field of Holocaust education, originating in the United Kingdom, Israel and the United States. While all three definitions are respected, this article will use the definition put forth by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as it comes from the context most closely related to the Canadian context:

> The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.
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> During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals. (Anti-Defamation League, USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem 2014, 31)

Holocaust education is difficult to define succinctly. For the purpose of this literature review, the term is used to represent teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

Methodology

This research takes the form of a traditional (or narrative) literature review, as it aims to explore existing knowledge in a particular content area in an attempt to understand the scholarly landscape of the topic and use that understanding to inform practice (Efron and Ravid 2018).

The relationship between Holocaust education and citizenship education is a key feature of the scholarly literature on Holocaust education. For the scope of this review, citizenship education is explored specifically in relation to Holocaust education, and scholarly literature on citizenship education alone has not been reviewed. Moreover, many facets of Holocaust education are not explored, as this review focuses on the connection between the two fields.

The articles included in this review come from both qualitative and theoretical perspectives. Primarily, literature related to the research questions offers a synthesis of thinking that builds on a relatively long history of scholarly research.

The ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and the Education Research Complete databases, through the University of Calgary library, were searched using keywords in the following combinations:

Holocaust	AND	"social studies"
	OR	"social studies education"
	OR	"social studies curriculum"
	OR	"grade 11"
	OR	"high school"
	OR	"secondary education"
	AND	"citizenship education"
	OR	"human rights"
	OR	"moral education"
	OR	"ethics education"

The search was limited to studies published in English and published after the year 2000.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review were determined using Efron and Ravid's (2018) considerations:

- Topicality
- Relevance
- Currency
- Authority
- Availability

A surprising consideration was geography (in relation to the consideration of relevance). Since Holocaust education focuses on a specific historical event in a particular place (although widespread) and a particular time, nations have varying connections to this history. Although national history is not the focus of this research, it does influence how history is presented to students and, thus, was an important consideration. Therefore, this review is limited to research coming out of Western European Allied countries and North America. The United Kingdom is included because of the depth and breadth of scholarship there, and North America because of the applicability to Canadian classrooms. Although the American and Canadian education systems differ, there is minimal Canadian scholarship on this topic; the literature coming out of the United States is much more prolific and relatively applicable to the Canadian context.

In considering currency, the most recent literature was used. However, literature with the lens of citizenship education was most frequently published between 2010 and 2017, with a few key sources from as early as 2000. For example, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust (or Stockholm Declaration) in 2000 was a watershed moment for Holocaust education worldwide.[4] Thus, this literature review goes back to the year 2000, with a focus forward to 2022.

The considerations of authority and availability were addressed by type of source and author. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included, and those made up the bulk of the material reviewed, which provided confidence in the academic quality of the research. *Authority*, as defined by Efron and Ravid (2018, 80), means that the study was "written by . . . a seminal theoretician or researcher in [the] field," which was evident in the breadth and depth of scholarship and the repeated citation of certain scholars by others. A small number of book chapters were also included, with an eye toward topicality, relevance and authority.

In addition to keyword searching, reference tracing was used (Efron and Ravid 2018). The review yielded repeated citations of certain sources; thus, it seemed important to explore those sources directly. At times, researchers seemed to be in dialogue with each other on specific points, and reading each scholar's text directly helped to elucidate the perspectives involved.

Finally, some curriculum documents were reviewed to shed light on the practical side of the research. To evaluate how the scholarly research might be applied in Alberta schools, it seemed important to look at the resources that schools use to guide them in this content area.

Findings

From the research, three common themes were distilled through which to explore the connection between citizenship education and Holocaust education.

Cowan and Maitles's (2016) model describes three components of citizenship education common in democracies:

- Political literacy
- The development of positive values
- Community involvement

These themes are echoed in the practical definitions of *citizenship education*, such as those put forward by UNESCO and Concentus, as

- knowledge (political literacy),
- values (the development of positive values) and
- activism or empowerment (community involvement).

Further, both UNESCO and Concentus identify Holocaust education as essential in the endeavour of citizenship education. UNESCO names "education about the Holocaust and genocide" as one of the themes of global

citizenship education.[5] Claypool et al (2016), in a report published by Concentus, put forth the Holocaust as the first of six topics to launch courageous conversations for developing understanding of the meaning of citizenship.

Applying the themes of knowledge, values and activism, a concept map (Figure 1) was developed that overlays the endeavours of citizenship education and Holocaust education, showing the relationships and connections between them. From an exploration of the scholarship, components of Holocaust education were identified that fit into each theme, including benefits, cautions and important considerations. Ultimately, these findings led to recommendations for teachers to consider when teaching about the Holocaust within the framework of citizenship education.

Knowledge

A consistent tension runs through the literature on Holocaust education between learning *about* and learning *from* the Holocaust (Cowan and Maitles 2016; Eckmann 2010; Lindquist 2011; Rich 2020; Totten and Feinberg 2016). Learning about the Holocaust, a complex historical event, carries a body of factual knowledge (Short and Reed 2004). As an unprecedented genocide, the Holocaust also holds moral and ethical lessons (Bowen and Kisida 2020; Cowan and Maitles 2007, 2016; Hale 2020; Mihr 2015; Moisan, Hirsch and Audet 2015; Salmons 2003).

While there is debate as to what content should be emphasized in teaching about the Holocaust, researchers agree that factual knowledge and moral lessons are inextricably linked. In other words, to take lessons from the Holocaust that meet the aims of citizenship education, students must also learn an accurate history of the Holocaust (Eckmann 2010; Hale 2020; Jedwab 2010; Mihr 2015; Rich 2020; Stevick 2018).

Cautions to consider in teaching about the Holocaust revolve around the scope and content of information shared with students. No matter the gravity of the material, it must compete in a crowded curricular landscape. Therefore, decisions must be made as to which topics to focus on.

Scholars of Holocaust education recommend including the perspectives of multiple identities involved in the Holocaust and caution against casting too narrow a scope. For example, instead of focusing solely on the construct of victims (primarily Jews) and perpetrators (Nazis), it is important to also include other identities (Eckmann 2010; Short and Reed 2004; Totten and Feinberg 2016). If teachers present Jews only as victims of Nazi persecution, without including information about their lives before and after the Holocaust, stereotypes of Jews as victims can be reinforced. It is important to present Jews as full, contributing members of society, as real people with lives and livelihoods, as survivors and resistors who suffered inhumane persecution and great loss but also showed incredible resilience as individuals and as a community. The identities and actions of those who were not Nazi soldiers or informers were also complex, as seen in the differences between

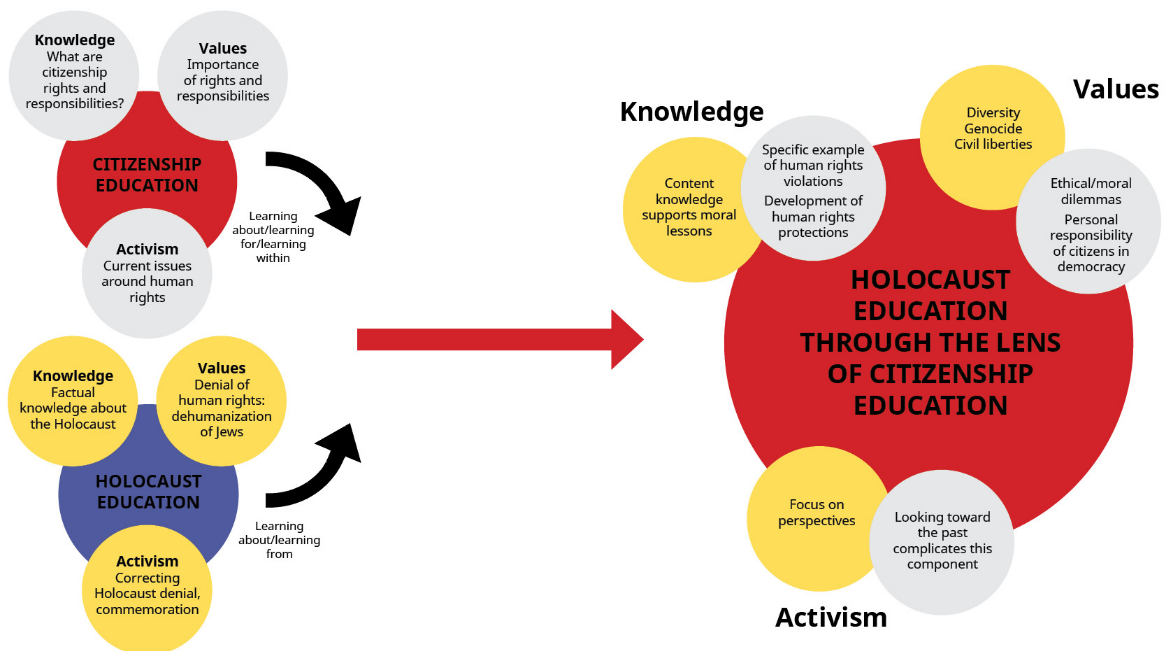

FIGURE 1. Concept map of the relationship between citizenship education and Holocaust education.

bystanders and rescuers. Additionally, the historical context of antisemitism and the Nazi campaigns to spread antisemitism among the population are key elements that must be addressed (Short and Reed 2004; Totten and Feinberg 2016).

Scholars have also explored the question of how learning about the Holocaust affects knowledge in the realm of citizenship—especially in the key area of human rights. Holocaust education can increase students' knowledge about human rights (Cowan and Maitles 2007; Eckmann 2010; Mihr 2015), specifically in relation to learning about the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)[6] and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (or Genocide Convention),[7] as well as the importance of citizenship for the protection of human rights (such as the right to own property and the right to freedom of movement) (Eckmann 2010). Learnings also include "the concepts of stereotyping and scapegoating and general political literacy, such as the exercise of power in local, national and global contexts" (Cowan and Maitles 2007, 119).

Values

Holocaust education has the potential to support student learning in the values component of citizenship education. As a case study, "the Holocaust provides unique opportunities to study complex moral and ethical problems that play a fundamental role in understanding the world in which we live" (Lindquist 2011, 26).

The literature identifies specific citizenship values that can be influenced by Holocaust education, such as tolerance for diversity, concerns about genocide and support for civil liberties (Bowen and Kisida 2020; Cowan and Maitles 2007; Jedwab 2010; Salmons 2003).

Additionally, students can grapple with their understanding of personal responsibility in the context of democratic citizenship as they learn about the factors involved in the Holocaust (Salmons 2003; Totten and Feinberg 2016).

Moisan, Hirsch and Audet (2015) and van Driel (2003) emphasize the common assumption among teachers that simply learning about the Holocaust will increase students' tolerance and teach them to value human rights—that, somehow, the sheer horror of the facts will produce translatable understandings that will affect students' values in a positive way.

As mentioned earlier, however, focusing on the moral lessons without providing enough historical background is also problematic (Eckmann 2010). Without robust historical context, the lessons may be oversimplified and may have unintended consequences, such as seeming to blame the victims (Eckmann 2010; Salmons 2003; Short and Reed 2004). Presenting the humanity (both good and bad) of the victims and the perpetrators, of those who stood by, and of those who rescued can protect against this vulnerability (Salmons 2003).

Activism

The third component of citizenship education is community involvement (Cowan and Maitles 2016), or participation or empowerment (as put forward by UNESCO and Concentus). This is where students apply the knowledge they have acquired and the values they have developed in order to take action.

Activism is a distinct feature of human rights education, and some scholars maintain that, because of this, Holocaust education does not fit neatly within the framework of human rights education. Specifically, the key feature of looking toward the past rather than the future separates Holocaust education from human rights education (Eckmann 2010; Mihr 2015).

Again, the tension between learning *about* and learning *from* the Holocaust arises. The action component of citizenship education relies on learning *from*—taking the lessons of history and applying them to the future.

Eckmann (2010) identifies three components of human rights education:

- Learning *about* human rights
- Learning *for* human rights
- Learning *within a framework of* human rights

This idea fits with the learning *from* goal of Holocaust education. Eckmann maintains that Holocaust education can involve learning *for* human rights if teachers focus on the perspectives of the groups or identities involved in the Holocaust—"perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers and resisters" (p 13)—and the dilemmas they faced in the political sphere at the time.

Researchers have found evidence that Holocaust education has a positive impact on students' active citizenship and increases the likelihood they will support human rights causes (Bowen and Kisida 2020; Cowan and Maitles 2007; Jedwab 2010). However, measuring the impact of Holocaust education on students is very difficult. As Hale (2020) asserts, the research has been mainly based on intuition, which is not hard evidence.

Implications

The purpose of this research is to inform recommendations for high school teachers in Alberta. Thus, it is important to connect these findings to the Alberta curriculum and to understand the current placement of Holocaust education in the Alberta context.

The Holocaust is included in the Alberta curriculum primarily through social studies—specifically, the Social Studies 20 (Grade 11) curriculum (Alberta Education 2005). The core concepts of Alberta's K–12 social studies curriculum are citizenship and identity in the Canadian context. Specific goals related to citizenship education include "demonstrate a critical understanding of individual and collective rights" and "respect the dignity and support the equality of all human beings" (p 3). For Grade 11, the Holocaust is mentioned specifically in connection with the key issue "To what extent should we embrace nationalism?" (p 13). Under Knowledge and Understanding, the program of studies states that "students will . . . examine ultranationalism as a cause of genocide (the Holocaust, the 1932–1933 famine in Ukraine, contemporary examples)" (p 34).

While this positioning of the Holocaust in the curriculum is problematic for many reasons beyond the scope of this research, it also represents a missed opportunity for offering Holocaust education in the service of citizenship education, which is a pillar of the curriculum. Currently, teaching the Holocaust is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition for teachers in Alberta, as it is positioned merely as a suggestion in connection to a specific concept (genocide). With the focus on citizenship education in the social studies curriculum, there is wide applicability for Holocaust education.

Holocaust education can be approached and delivered in many ways, with a variety of goals and purposes. Citizenship education is only one pathway or framework (albeit a common one). Most often, citizenship education is used to justify including Holocaust education in high school curricula, and the official guidance ends there (Lindquist 2008; Nesfield 2015; Pearce 2017; Totten and Feinberg 2016).

Resources abound for delivering Holocaust education, but there is a gap between the time allotted for Holocaust education and the time needed for doing it well. If Alberta teachers are going to teach Holocaust education within the framework of citizenship education, the program of studies must include the topic as more than an option.

Recommendations

This research yielded several recommendations that should be considered for the implementation of Holocaust education in Alberta schools.

Recommendation 1

It is essential to develop and address specific goals for Holocaust education in the Alberta curriculum.

Simply mentioning that Holocaust education can be a tool for learning about nationalism, ultranationalism or human rights is not enough. There must be guidance as to how to meet these specific goals or other goals that are identified (Hale 2020; Moisan, Hirsch and Audet 2015), beginning with a rationale for including study of the Holocaust in the curriculum (Feinberg and Totten 2016).

Feinberg and Totten (2016, 9) offer potential rationales:

- To think about the use and abuse of power, and the implications for a society that violates civil and human rights.
- To consider the nature, structure, and purpose of governments.
- To study ethical issues involving the rights of governments and the rights of individuals.

Recommendation 2

When teaching for values, it is essential to connect accurate historical knowledge to values through explicit lessons.

Too often, teachers assume that sheer exposure to the horrors of the Holocaust will bring students to desired moral understandings (Gatens and Johnson 2011; Hale 2020; Levy and Sheppard 2018; Moisan, Hirsch and Audet 2015). With the aim of teaching for the values that support human rights, for example, a focus on action is necessary: What can students do to support human rights now? Providing an action framework, with projects for students that address current human rights issues, is essential (Eckmann 2010; Mihr 2015).

Recommendation 3

Teaching about the Holocaust should be delivered in a learner-centred model.

The topic of the Holocaust not only is difficult on a human level but also involves a complex interrelationship of identities for the learner. It is important to consider learners' specific contexts, including their personal, political and religious identities (Mihr 2015; Short and Reed 2004).

In Alberta, Holocaust content could include Canada's involvement in the Holocaust. Additionally, Alberta's classrooms are full of students with multicultural, multinational identities, and their family and religious histories could be linked to this historical content as well.

Teachers should review what they know about the religious, ethnic and national identities of the students in their classrooms and be sensitive to the connections they may have to the material.

Conclusion

Clearly, Holocaust education is a complex content area that requires a great deal of knowledge, planning and care. Although the subject matter can be fraught with difficulties, it is also rich with possibilities for learning lessons in history, morality and empowerment.

Citizenship education offers a lens for looking at the positioning of Holocaust education in high school curricula. To effectively use the study of the Holocaust to teach about citizenship education, teachers must consider the material deeply and pay attention to knowledge, values and activism. Then, they must explicitly connect the two areas of study.

Notes

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Jennifer Magalnick recently completed a master of education degree from the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She is the associate director of Holocaust Education and Community Engagement for the Jewish Federation of Edmonton.