

Guiding Principles for Effective Teaching with Testimony in the Primary Classroom

Grounded in the universality of story, USC Shoah Foundation approaches the teaching and learning process through an equity lens that encompasses the social, emotional, and cognitive domains for introducing Holocaust education at the primary level. We see the social, emotional and cognitive domains as the means for championing the whole child in becoming more socially aware and sensitive to the feeling of others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. With testimony as the fundamental teaching tool, the interconnected domains provide students with varying perspectives that is integral to academic learning and success as well as fostering lessons of inclusion and acceptance that are central to strengthening our classroom communities and collective well-being.

USC Shoah Foundation has developed a variety of innovative digital resources that are standards-based and suitable to the emotional and developmental needs of young learners in raising awareness to appreciate cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. This document is intended to help educators to teach with testimony responsibly and effectively in their classrooms using the IWitness (iwitness.usc.edu) testimony-based lessons, activities, resources and guiding principles for introducing young learners to Holocaust/genocide education and holding meaningful conversations with children about hard topics as part of our shared human story.

- 1. Ensure a safe and supportive learning environment:** Create a safe and supportive learning environment that considers the social-emotional needs of individual students to engage in brave conversations.¹ Establish classroom norms that value equity, diversity, justice, and student voice intended to move students “safely in and safely out” of each learning experience.²
- 2. Use an age-appropriate approach:** Learners of different education levels can be introduced to aspects of the history of the Holocaust when methods and content are age appropriate, sensitive and relevant to students’ developmental level.³ Focusing on the use of survivor testimony that emphasize the stories of daily life from the perspective of a child that focus on aspects of family, culture, music, hope, and survival that makes the content accessible, applicable, and appropriate for this age group.
- 3. Be mindful of the developmental considerations significant to this age group:** It is best to draw upon a variety of primary sources and provide survivor testimony when teaching about the Holocaust. The curated clips of testimony and testimony-based resources provided by USC Shoah Foundation have been vetted using selected stories that are well suited for the primary grade levels. It is important to refrain from using any visual images or texts that are graphic that could cause distress or trauma to students. Also, avoid any simulations or games about the Holocaust which are pedagogically unsound.⁴
- 4. Employ a thematic or multidisciplinary approach:** Integrate anti-bias topics across the curriculum using a combination of testimony, literature, drama, music, art, history, civics, and ethnic studies to support student learning across multiple experiences, modalities, and disciplines. Exploring social issues in different ways can help young learners to develop empathy and perspective taking as they begin to identify examples of social exclusion and unfair treatment in their own lives and the world around them.

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5. **Instill the broader lessons of justice and respect:** At this age, everyday activities in the classroom offer opportunities to discuss fairness and kindness that builds upon their innate interest for what is “fair” and “not fair.” The use of testimony can also spark discussions about topics and relevant issues that help children identify unfair experiences for understanding the consequences of injustice that can be directed toward themselves or others. Teaching with testimony can also be a tool to broaden children’s awareness around the concept of inclusion and acceptance and developing empathy and respect for the points of view and perspectives of others that may be different from their own.⁵
6. **Use personal stories to contextualize the history:** Research shows using testimony is appropriate for elementary learners and increases student understanding of prejudice and stereotypes and fostering their appreciation for personal stories, history, and diversity. Testimony is also one of the best ways to approach the topic of the Holocaust at this age level by using the individual stories told by survivors and witnesses from their perspective as children. These first-person accounts help contextualize the history as students cultivate their historical and critical thinking as they encounter the stories of those who resisted injustice. Using testimony focused on prewar life inherently draws upon universal themes and topics related to the human experience such as identity, courage, and resilience that can introduce students to the historical context leading up to the Holocaust, making learning more accessible and applicable to their own experience.⁶
7. **Promote inquiry based learning and critical literacy:** Using the personal stories from genocide survivors to teach difficult topics of hate, racism and intolerance provide many opportunities to engage students with inquiry-based learning and critical thinking through the analysis of age-appropriate primary source documents and texts. Our testimony-based content and teaching strategies center learners and invite them to construct their own meaning within a particular context to recognize the power they hold in creating social change that counters the narratives of hate and intolerance in a society.
8. **Provide scaffolded instruction:** USC Shoah Foundation’s testimony-based resources are designed to address varying learning styles and competencies using a scaffolded approach to make a complex topic such as Holocaust education accessible to a primary age audience that ensures they are successful in meeting their developmental level of understanding. To accomplish this, learners require a sliding scale of scaffolds and supports to help build their background knowledge, vocabularies, and interest around a particular topic. Some examples of scaffolded instruction in our testimony-based resources includes activation of prior knowledge, front loading concept-specific vocabulary, teacher modeling, use of sentence frames, guided questioning and discussions.
9. **Foster student agency through the use of authentic story:** Authentic stories serve as a developmentally appropriate way to cultivate and nurture agency in children as they think about the experiences and perspectives of others, particularly of those marginalized in society.⁷ Testimony is an effective tool for teaching students’ personal responsibility and standing up for others in their role as active citizens as they see people like themselves in the history they study.⁸
10. **Communicate with your administrators and families:** Keep your school administrators and families informed about lessons or activities you plan to teach in advance, so they are aware of the topics and themes being covered as well as the age-appropriate resources and methodology you are using to teach this topic. This provides the trust and transparency necessary to actively engage families and school leaders in the learning process between home and school.

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