

War, genocide 'difficult knowledge' to teach younger students

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Education professor Brenda M. Trofanenko says the study of genocide and "difficult knowledge" of historical events is best left to high school students. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Whether they're found in a museum or a textbook, historical narratives about traumatic events such as war and genocide are better left to older students, who have typically developed a more refined historical consciousness, says a University of Illinois professor who studies and teaches historical instruction.

According to Brenda M. Trofanenko, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the College of Education at Illinois, the "difficult knowledge" of such events as the Holocaust, the Ukrainian Holodomor and the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica should be the province of [high school history](#) classes, not elementary and upper-elementary classes.

"It's curricular creep in the sense that subjects that were once considered

relevant only to high school kids previously are now filtering down to elementary and upper-elementary school students," Trofanenko said.

In public schools in California, Illinois and Massachusetts, the study of genocide is a mandatory unit of instruction in every elementary and high school.

Although those states are "quite forward-thinking" in mandating genocide education as a distinct subject, Trofanenko believes [elementary school](#) is too young to begin a serious discussion about such a weighty historical topic.

"I've heard of children as young as grade three are being taught about the Holocaust," she said. "That's far too young, to my mind."

Trofanenko, who presented a paper about teaching difficult knowledge at the Curating Difficult Knowledge conference at Concordia University in Montreal last April, says elementary school students lack the baseline historical knowledge and critical sensibility necessary to understand the various implications of state-sponsored mass murder.

"Younger students don't have the ability to capture all the information and knowledge necessary to understand both the historical and emotional context of difficult knowledge like genocide. They don't understand the big picture yet. Once they have an understanding of concepts such as significance, continuity and change, cause and consequence, and moral judgment, students can logically think through and ask questions about why events have happened."

To critics who would argue that educators can't shield younger students from the difficult topics of history, Trofanenko says that high school students are better equipped, both emotionally and intellectually, to deal with [traumatic events](#) in world history.

"It's called 'difficult knowledge' by educators and historians for a reason," Trofanenko said. "How do you portray death and dying to a 12-year-old? How do you properly convey the gravity of certain historical situations to a sixth- or seventh-grader? In order to deal with the emotional aspects of it, students have to be able to logically understand what was happening at the time. Elementary school students aren't ready for that yet. It's easier to talk to a 16-year-old about how people died because of their religious or political beliefs than it is a sixth grader."

A fact-based, fill-in-the-blank approach to learning about genocide - a teaching staple of virtually all elementary school history classes - isn't the best pedagogical approach to teaching historically difficult subjects, Trofanenko says.

"When you do that, when you turn the [Holocaust](#) or the Holodomar into a "Jeopardy!"-type game in order to drill facts into students' heads, you trivialize it," she said. "Looking only at facts or the raw data of how many people were killed discounts a lot of significant aspects, including the emotional toll. This is not to say that [students](#) don't need to know the extent of genocide, but it's not the only element within the larger picture."

Teaching difficult knowledge not only requires educators to think carefully about their own theories of learning, but it also necessitates a pedagogical willingness to approach the limits of a young learner's knowledge of history.

"This requires more than satisfying standards," she said. "It means a better understanding of how young people deal with emotion and emotional issues associated with world events."

Trofanenko says teachers need to get back to engaging in historical

inquiry - asking questions about what genocide is, why it was allowed to happen, and how it's occurred even during their lifetime.

"Teachers need to look at genocide generally and not treat it as an isolated, discrete event," she said. "It needs to be taught as something that has happened during our students' lifetimes. They need to know why these terrible events occurs, not just the information that results from it."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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